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When Sammy came marching home

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WHEN SAMMY CAME MARCHING HOME

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature
San José State University

In Partial Fullfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

by

E. D. Schragg

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ABSTRACT

WHEN SAMMY CAME MARCHING HOME

by E. D. Schragg

This thesis is a novel set in Kalamazoo, Michigan, in the spring and summer of 1987. Having lost his job, his girlfriend, and his rock band, twenty-six-year old Sam Whittier has reluctantly returned home from Silicon Valley to rest and caretake the family home, built in 1890s by his great-grandfather Stanfield. In the attic, Sam literally stumbles on an old trunk of Stanfield's, which contains the archives of his attempts to create literature from the story of a Civil War cavalryman, Colonel Samuel Wagner.

Joining the latter-day Sam in his efforts to get his life back in order and confront his problems with alcohol are his boyhood friends Zoë, a high school teacher, and Don, an unemployed master of history, both of whom have been set to the task by Sam's vacationing mother. These three friends negotiate a love triangle, while Sam—eventually with Don's help—explores the cavalryman's story and its connection to his family history, all against the national backdrop of the Iran-Contra scandal.

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Sam Whittier's reliable, dented Datsun coughed to a halt in his parents' driveway, and to take advantage of the momentum gathered during his drive from California, he began unpacking immediately. He found the spare key to the side door right where it always had been, sitting on top of a four-by-four under the roof of the side porch. He unlocked and pushed open the door. The faux-marble floor was new, but the kitchen smells took him straight back to childhood.

He lugged his boxes of books and CDs and music memorabilia across the new floor, through the dining room and foyer, up the curved, red-carpeted "Scarlett-O'Hara" staircase, down the second-floor hallway, tall and narrow and dark, then up the attic stairway so steep it had to be illegal. In the shadows up there, in his rush to get the stashing over with, he whacked his knee and let loose a string of obscenities. It was his great-grandfather Stanfield's steamer trunk, something he hadn't thought about for years.

When the boxes were tucked away, he carried the rest of his things to his old second-story bedroom, which still looked like it did in 1978, Led Zeppelin on the wall, track trophies on the dresser. His two duffel bags of clothes landed on the floor underneath the window, and his guitars and amplifier went as far back into his closet as he could stuff them.

Back in the kitchen, he slumped onto a chair in the breakfast nook—his old chair—and he was relieved to be still at last. Here at the table he could take a moment to let his old home sink in a little. The kitchen was just like

he remembered it, a 1950s TV-show kitchen—except for the new floor. The window in the nook overlooked the backyard, opened out onto a familiar view, green and bright. A mess of grackles—their yellow eyes and beaks almost lurid next to their dark feathers—grazed on the lawn like a herd of cattle. Nothing else moved under the weight of the humid Kalamazoo air, such a nice contrast to the 2500-mile road flick he'd just spent four days watching through his windshield.

He daydreamed. Images of the Interstate persisted: the postcard sunsets in his rear view mirror, the *picka-ta-pock* of his tires rushing over the cracks in the concrete pavement, the semi trucks leaving his Datsun in their smelly diesel wakes. He thought about his previous car. The halfway-restored 1968 Volvo would have been passing the diesels instead of the other way around. But now it was totaled, and his mechanic was parting it out. Plowing it into the retaining wall had been the coup de théâtre—as Ethel would have put it, if she'd been there—of six months of careening between the ditch and the median, during which everyone else had had sense enough to bail out of the vehicle. This stuff was clear to him now. He ran his fingers over the bump, still there, hidden in the hair above his left temple.

Then his throbbing knee got him thinking about Stanfield's trunk. At the age of seven or eight, up in the attic rummaging around with his dad, he'd asked about it. The old man said not to touch, that it was full of important papers from his great-grandfather's job of helping people after the Civil War. But of course he touched, he got caught, and his dad put a padlock on it. Now it had been close to twenty years, and with his parents gone for the summer and Sam left in caretaking charge, he could touch it all he

wanted. It would be a welcome diversion. All he needed was the key to unlock it, and he was pretty sure he knew exactly that was.

He turned, anticipating Zoë's knock with a kind of ESP developed out of years of having people drop by the side door. She peeked through the window between the yellow curtains, the same ones hanging on the door when he'd left home seven years earlier. Pushing it open, casually, like they were both still in high school, she poked her head into the kitchen.

"Figured if I wanted to see you I'd better not wait around for you to call." She stepped in, smiling, her nylon knees peeking out from under the hem of her black, school-teacher dress. Her dark hair was short now, her lips red like candy. She looked more voluptuous than he remembered.

"Hey, Zoë," he said, getting up. She must have got word through his mother. They took each other in, then hugged like siblings.

"You okay?" she said. "You *look* okay."

"Long as the heroin holds out."

She shook her head and appraised him like an older sister. "How was the trip? Must've been a nice time to travel."

He wasn't sure what she meant.

"Not too hot? Not too crowded with tourists yet?"

"Yeah, I guess," he said. "I pretty much drove straight through on the Interstates."

"Well, listen," she said, "I've got to rush off to a meeting, but I came by to see if you're up for grabbing a beer later."

He hadn't had a beer in over six weeks. "Yeah, sure."

"Sevenish?"

"Wait," he said. "Can you give me a quick hand?"

He led her upstairs to Stanfield's trunk and had her take the far end.

She grabbed the handle with both hands and heaved it up between her knees.

"God, what's in here?" she said. "It weighs a ton."

"My great-grandfather's papers."

He led her back down to the first floor, setting the trunk down every so often to rest her arms, then through the downstairs hallway to the rear of the house where they put it in front of the bookcase in the reading room.

"God, I haven't been in this room for—since we were in high school," she said.

The smell in the room was unmistakable, a vintage mix of musty old leather book covers and stale cigar smoke that created an itch of curiosity in Sam—unscratchable as it was familiar. Zoë sat down on the arm of one of the chairs and traced her finger along the inside of her knee.

"Look at this," she said. "I must've snagged it on the trunk."

Sam looked instead at the bookshelf, one entire wall.

She said, "So many books, so little time."

He turned toward her. "I'll buy you new pair."

She smoothed her skirt down. "No, don't be silly." She crossed over to him and kissed him on the cheek. "So, pick you up around seven?"

"Call first."

"Shave first."

After he saw her to the side door, Sam plopped back down at the table and stared out the window, remembering a time when tomboy Zoë wouldn't have been caught dead wearing nylons.

The phone rang, and he dutifully picked it up.

"Heard you were due back." It was Don. If nothing else, Sam's mother was thorough.

"Yeah," Sam said, "caretaking the castle."

"What're you up to?"

"Nothing—I just got here."

"I'll be right over."

As he hung up the phone, Sam spotted a note calling out from under a configuration of refrigerator magnets:

Hi, Sam! There's casserole and spaghetti leftovers, don't let them spoil! Like I said on the phone, I left some signed checks in my desk for the utility bills and a credit card for emergencies. Remember, Tuesday is garbage night! Welcome home! Sorry we had to leave before you got here. Get some rest, okay?

It went on to give the phone numbers where his parents would be, some projected dates, and a promise they would check in on him in a few days. It ended with a picket fence of exclamation points. Sam felt like he'd regressed a few years.

He opened the refrigerator and found a stack of number-two plastic containers—the casserole and the spaghetti. There were rows of condiments and a quart of low-fat milk, a couple of cans of lite beer, a squishy apple rolling around in the crisper, and a pop-in-the-oven pizza sitting in the freezer next to ice cubes enough for a party. He found a can of decaf in the cabinet above the coffee maker next to the microwave. Decaf in the afternoon

sounded sensible, although he had to improvise. Single cups of coffee were apparently never made in his parents' kitchen, so he boiled water in a small saucepan he found in the bottom of the stove and poured it through the coffee-maker filter balanced over a broad cup emblazoned with dolphins. Drinkable with enough milk.

Not more than thirty seconds after he'd sat down with his coffee, the phone rang again. This time it was Jackie.

"Sammy—you made it."

"Yeah, small miracle."

"Everything's okay?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Mom asked me to check up on you."

Sam took in a breath and let it out slowly. "She has the whole town on high alert."

"Yeah, I don't know why she couldn't stick around herself a few extra days."

"Whatever." He heard a car engine out in the mansion's driveway.

"Do you need anything?" she said.

"I don't know—I haven't been here long enough."

"What're you doing tonight?"

"Zoë's taking me out for dinner."

"Oh, that's nice."

A car door slammed.

"Well, we should get together," she said, "play some euchre."

Don was knocking at the side door, peering through the window.

"Hey, Jackie, I got to go—someone's at the door."

"I'll come by this weekend," she said.

Coming by to check up on him—that was her assignment. He went to the door and let Don in. His shaggy friend was another familiar sight.

"Not watching the hearings?" Don said, extending his hand.

Sam shook it. "Nah."

"Not interested in the felonies that Ronnie has been committing in your name?"

Sam made his way back to his seat in the nook. "I've got better things to do than sit around in front of the tube."

"What—sit around in front of the back window?"

Sam looked at the peaceful scene outside the window. "Actually, yeah."

Don joined him. "Welcome back."

"Thanks."

"Had enough of California?" He pushed his fragile, wire-framed glasses up to the bridge of his nose and pulled a small pipe and a plastic film can out of his fanny pack.

"I hope not," Sam said.

Don gestured with the pipe. "Is it okay to smoke in here?"

"I'll open the windows."

He loaded the pipe and extended it to Sam. "So what's new?"

"No, thanks—I'm on a fast." He wasn't really, but it was easier to talk of a fast than try to explain why he wasn't smoking anymore. Don gave a shrug and sucked down the pipe load with a couple of long drags.

"I've been thinking of fasting myself," he said through the smoke.

"Yeah, right."

"No, really."

Sam looked back out the window. "Nothing much has changed back here—that's what's new."

"You know, if this shit ever gets legalized, it's going to be through the campaign contributions of the tobacco companies—they've already got the trademarks on all those pot names from the sixties—can you imagine what goes on in those corporate boardrooms?"

Sam took a sip of his decaf.

Don said, "Shit, don't get me started."

Sam was pretty sure he hadn't. In fact, he hadn't done much of anything, not even been much of a host. "You want some coffee? It's decaf."

Don waved his hand. "No, thanks—don't drink it—unhealthy."

"And the cannabis—"

"—provides benefits to my mental health that outweigh any detriments to my physical health."

"Then why fast?"

Don's face broke into a big smile. "Good point."

Sam set his cup down with a clunk. "I guess I no longer noticed the benefits."

"Well, you seem pretty healthy to me," Don said. "And to my way of thinking, if you have an aversion to corporations, that's a healthy sign."

It dawned on Sam, staying a couple steps ahead of his friend's hempen logic, that Don was trying to make him feel better about losing his job. He

was getting a clearer sense of the nature of the gossip his mother had been spreading around. From Zoë this sort of caretaking was not extraordinary, but from Don it was almost touching.

"Hey," Don said, "I've got a passel of new old vinyl you've got to check out."

Sam nodded his head.

"Some Dave Brubeck and Miles Davis, and you—guitarman—have got to check out the Wes Montgomery."

Sam turned to look back out the window. "I'm not the guitarman anymore."

Don didn't say anything.

"I haven't been playing at all," Sam added.

"Good for perspective," Don said. "You come back with revitalized ears."

"Actually, I'm thinking of selling my gear to get money for Europe."

"The Les Paul?"

"It's the one thing worth something."

"—made the year you were born?"

Neither one of them spoke for a moment, then Sam said, "I'm thinking about it."

When Don left, after an hour or so, Sam was relieved to be alone again, but he was certainly touched by his friend's awkward show of concern. And now he could look forward to an evening of Zoë taking her turn at trying to make him feel better about slinking back to his parents' house with his tail between his legs.

Sam had always thought that being by ten years the youngest—the afterthought, the accident—came with precious few advantages, but he figured that absentee parents and a large vacant house should certainly be three of them. On the other hand, he felt he was doing time. It was supposed to be a summer of rest and relaxation. His mother had made a convincing case that being back in Kalamazoo would be good for him, and he'd bought it. But he wasn't so sure that the old familiar was all that good. He could use a little strangeness.

Out the window, afternoon was making its glorious way into evening—the leafed-out maples fluttering in the lazy stir of air—tufts from the ancient cottonwood drifting down like sparse, puffed-up snowflakes on the leading edge of a late winter storm—birds cheeping up in the branches somewhere. Sam tried to imagine what the place had looked like right after Stanfield had it built, surries at the side door, the cottonwood just a sapling, the algae-coated bird bath a newly polished marble conversation piece.

When Zoë called, he was asleep on the TV-room couch, dreaming about Ethel.

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Zoë decided to take Sam to McCorkle's, a pub that had opened up after he went out West. With a beer and ale selection that spread across the top shelf from one end of the bar to the other, with a dozen tap handles that ran the length of the mirror, and nearly as many foreign brands as domestic, McCorkle's was Zoë's current favorite hangout. The fare relied on ground meat and chicken breasts, sandwiches and salads and skewers served on plates padded with more English-style chips than it would be wise to eat in one

sitting. A place Zoë was pretty sure Sam would like, and she did want to make a good impression. Not that she was getting her hopes up too high, but she felt it might be a good time for a fresh start. Seven years had passed. She wasn't quite sure what all had happened to him in California—lost his job, lost his girlfriend, something about needing rest and relaxation—but Sam's mother had hinted at things and suggested he could use her companionship. Despite being a little tattered around the edges, he looked good. California had put a few pounds on him and a little color into his face.

They sat across from one another in a booth. She tried to order them something dark to drink, but Sam was deciding among the three possible nonalcoholic beers.

"On the wagon?" she said.

"Something like that."

They perused the menu.

After a couple of minutes, she asked, "How is it being back home?"

"Weird."

She flipped her menu over. "It's pretty huge."

"Actually, it doesn't seem so huge to me now," he said. "Not like it used to."

"'Bloke's Polka,' she read, 'Kielbasa and chips, pierogi and coleslaw.'"

"It's almost claustrophobic."

"No respect for culinary borders."

"You think that's bad? Try Szechwan burrito."

She looked over at him, his nose buried in the menu, and concluded that he now had a California accent, something she would never have

expected. She liked its vowels. "You need a party to open it up," she said.

His expression turned sour. "I don't know enough people around here anymore."

"Oh, don't be silly—of course you do."

In silence they pondered their choices. "Well," he said finally, without much enthusiasm, "it'd probably be better if I didn't know anyone."

"Don't get morose on me."

He wasn't looking at her, just nodding his head. He seemed more tired around the eyes than he'd been back in the afternoon.

"I think I'll get the chicken skewers—what are you having?"

"That sounds good."

"No, get something else—we can share."

Sam flipped the menu over and back again. "Caesar salad?"

The server showed up with their drinks and took their orders. When he left them, they toasted one another. After an awkward moment of silence, Zoë said, "Your mom said you lost your job."

He pushed the fingers of his left hand through his sandy hair, shorter than he used to wear it. "Yeah," he said, "a blessing in disguise."

"What did you do, exactly?"

"Cracked up."

She was surprised at his cavalier answer, but it hadn't been what she was asking. "No, I mean what job."

"Human Resources Liaison," he said. "Glorified secretary to the human resources battle-ax."

"Excuse me? Battle-ax?" She couldn't help getting political about

things like that.

"Because she did all the firing."

Zoë let it go.

He looked up into her face and pursed his lips. "They gave me this writing assignment to put together a sort of handbook for the Operations Department."

"Operations?"

"The people who keep the place running—as in 'operating'?"

"Bean counters?"

"Yeah—those kind of people," he said. "So I made up something for the fun of it called 'Sucking at the Hind Tit of the Computer Industry' and e-mailed it around to some friends in the company."

"E-mail?"

"Electronic mail—computer mail."

Zoë nodded her head even though she didn't know exactly what he was talking about.

"It was a joke. Then the battle-ax got ahold of it, and the bigwigs—"

"Sucking at the Hind Tit of the Computer Industry," she said. "Seems pretty innocuous."

"That's what I thought, but they didn't have much of a sense of humor about it."

"They fired you because they didn't have a sense of humor?"

"Didn't show proper remorse," he said. "Yelling and throwing a few things."

"At them?"

"No—my desk, the wall."

"Wow."

"They escorted me out."

Zoë had nothing to say to that. To be honest, she could understand why they'd think his behavior was inappropriate. She loved his sense of humor, but she could see how other people, especially in business, might not. It was one of the endearing things about Sam—his kind of obliviousness to the conventions of it all. There he was in a job where he was supposed to be in the background, keeping things running smoothly, and he probably didn't even realize how much he stuck out.

"How about you?" Sam said. "Teaching Shakespeare to surly teens?"

"That's about it," she said.

Zoë had dispensed with college efficiently, she was proud to say, taken summer classes, earned her credential, and then her masters—finished it all by age twenty-five and went right into teaching. Meanwhile, according to his unhappy mother, Sam had experimented with three separate rock bands, four separate jobs, and five different majors.

He took a gulp of his nonalcoholic beer and set it back on the table with a *thunk*. "This is pretty bad—enough to make you want to drink alcohol."

"If it hadn't been for your mom," Zoë said, "we would have lost track of one another years ago."

"That's true."

"She said you were going to Europe."

"Yes, for the ophiolites."

"The what?" She remembered how much he liked to tease her.

"Rock formations that defy the principle of superposition—geology, my field."

"The principle of superposition," she said.

"The principle that the newest layer in a rock formation is on the surface and the layers get older the farther down you dig."

"Superposition," she said again.

"I'm just bullshitting," he said. "That's not why I'm going. My BS was geology because I had the most units in it—never did anything with it."

"BS—that's good." She took a sip. "But you *are* going to Europe."

"That's the plan—want to come along?"

"Yeah, I'll bring my freshmen."

They held one another's eyes for a moment. Zoë would love to go to Europe with Sam, but she was working hard to pay off her college debts and had already taken on a summer school course. On top of that, she wasn't sure how much fun she'd be able to have while nursing his broken heart.

"Your mom said you split up with Ethel."

Zoë had never actually talked with Sam about Ethel. She hadn't even seen him since he'd gotten together and then split up with her.

"Yeah, Ethel's history," he said and took a drink. "And how's your sex life?"

Not love life, sex life. She was surprised at his cynicism. They used to be able to confide easily in one another, but Sam didn't appear in any hurry to do any confiding about this. She could tell he thought she was prying, but she was just trying to understand where things were. She took a long swallow to finish her first pint and looked around for their server to order a refill. She

tapped his bottle. "You want another?"

He stared at it. "No, I'm okay."

Sam's mother hadn't told Zoë much about Ethel. From what she understood about his taste in women, she guessed he would have told her as little as he could get away with, because Ethel wouldn't be the type to bring home to Mom. Her real name was Nicole or Michelle or something more ordinary like that, and she changed it when she became the singer for Ethel and the Mermen. That's about all Zoë knew. She imagined a pair of creative egos trying to work and live and love together, a relationship on display in smoky nightclubs, the struggle of negotiating the balance in the spotlight and dividing up the housework the morning after. She figured she wouldn't like it.

She remembered his question. "Sex life? Oh, you know—still haven't found the key to the chastity belt."

Sam smiled. "Try underneath your parents' sofa cushions."

She felt her face redden. "Well, if anyone would know where to look," she said, "you'd be the one."

She thought back to his feverish maneuvering to get her naked, to get her interested in sex. But she'd been just a scrawny tomboy then. Her own interest in sex came later, when Sam was no longer so feverish, when he'd found plenty of other girls who'd respond easily to his guitar-playing hands. And now, there they were, she having fallen for a university classmate—an egotistical pretty boy she'd liked well enough for three comfortable years before moving through a succession of shorter-lived romances—and he having moved off to California to enjoy—presumably—lots of groupies until

settling down with Ethel and getting his heart broken.

Zoë thought how nice it would be to sit on the sofa and fool around with Sam again. She'd be a lot more receptive now than she'd been back in high school. "Seriously—about Ethel—" she said, "I'm not trying to be nosy, just trying to be a friend, that's all."

"It's a boring story—you don't want to hear it."

"How do you know?"

"Okay—it's a boring story, and *I* don't want to hear it."

She took a sip. No use cajoling him about Ethel. If and when he wanted to talk about her, then she'd get the story. "So, what are you really going to do in Europe?"

"Stay with friends in Barcelona—get a Eurail pass." His eyes avoided hers. "Whatever it is, it's got to be cheap."

"And what happens after?"

He managed another smile. "After a few Satanic rituals at Jim Morrison's grave site in Paris, I thought I'd head to Nicaragua to fight for the Sandinistas." He took a long slug from his bottle, then made a face. "Or if I can get my parents to keep driving around in their RV until they die, maybe I can keep house-sitting the mansion until I inherit it."

Sam was trying to be difficult, but Zoë wasn't going to let him get away with just smart answers. "Are you going back to California?"

He gave in. "I don't know—everything is so—"

She waited a moment, then filled in the blank. "Uncertain?"

He didn't answer.

"Futile?"

His eyes narrowed as he again avoided her gaze. He didn't appear to have heard her last comment. She looked him over. He could still use a shave. His earring was not the same one he wore for years after they'd gotten their ears pierced together at the Hairshirt Salon, the black-and-white yin-yang symbol. Instead, it was a gold eighth note just a little bit askew as if from a musical score done in italics. His black T-shirt—with its cracked and fading serigraph of an Afro-American man holding a guitar in his lap—was ripped along the seam on top of the left shoulder. She stared at a scar she didn't remember on his forearm just below the elbow, then at the prominent blood veins on the back of his hand, which he used to joke a junkie would kill for.

"You could always put these veins to use by picking up that heroin habit," she said, touching the back of his hand.

He seemed to perk up. "Yes, there is that."

A familiar sparkle had come to his eyes, one Zoë had not yet seen that evening, one she credited herself with having put there. She felt a little smug about it, too. "It would be so romantic."

"Then, after a couple years," he said, "you could save me and help me get a gig traveling around the state giving talks at high school assemblies about the dead end of drugs."

She kept going. "You'd have to get some righteous tattoos."

"And wear pastel, short-sleeve dress shirts to show them off—the kids would love them."

"Yes, the faded black would have to go."

At that point their server interrupted them, and they dropped their banter and settled into their entrées. When the cacophony of the patrons

overtook the cacophony of the in-house stereo system, Sam and Zoë left, headed out into the Kalamazoo evening.

They swayed along downtown avenues lined with run-down buildings patient for whatever attention redevelopment might bring. The dilapidated things had become almost invisible to Zoë, but the newly returned Sam said they looked pretty sad. She slipped her arm into the crook of his elbow and they strolled along as if a happily married couple.

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When she dropped him off at the mansion, Zoë reminded Sam about her party idea with the kind of enthusiasm he could only defer to. He took his seat in the breakfast nook in the darkness and sat there till his eyes got used to it. If only it was that easy to get used to being back in Kalamazoo. Wide awake now, too antsy to sit, he got up and wandered around the first floor of the mansion, feeling his way among the shadows, looking out the windows at the familiar streetlit scenes of his old neighborhood. He made a quick calculation of the time difference between California and Michigan. Just after ten in Kalamazoo, a bluish glow still sat on the northwestern horizon. The sun hadn't set yet on the Silicon Valley.

Remembering Stanfield's trunk, he made his way down the hallway to the reading room, where he turned on one of the antique Tiffany lamps, then to his parents' bedroom. He slid out the top drawer of their enormous oak chest, an antique heirloom of Stanfield's from the late 1800s that Sam had rifled many times as a child. Behind the cuff links and tie pins, behind the every-day jewelry his mother thought not valuable enough to store in the wall safe, he found the key ring. The odd key out, larger and blacker and

rougher than all the rest, fit the keyhole of the trunk's padlock and with a little work, he managed to get the thing open. He grabbed a dust rag from the hallway closet and wiped down the trunk, then for a moment looked over the olive-colored canvas and black leather and faded wood of its exterior before opening the lid.

The inside smelled just as he remembered it, the mustiness of old paper. On the right side, on top of a well-preserved Sears catalog with "1893" on the cover, sat a stiff leather quiver of pens—mostly the kind you dip into an inkwell, but also one old elegant fountain pen. He removed the pens and briefly thumbed through the catalog. Next came a couple of empty ledger books. At the bottom was a carrying case with a Remington logo tacked on loosely above the handle. It held a solid old typewriter, shiny and black as an antique car.

Several envelopes full of photographs were on top on the left side. He took them out and stacked them next to the typewriter case, looking at a few of the pictures, ancient black-and-white things, mostly of people he didn't recognize. One was remarkably clear and featured a man in what looked like a Civil War uniform. Others had his great-grandfather, whom Sam knew from photos displayed in the reading room. In one he was holding a child, in another sporting a fancy suit, champing on a cigar, sitting at a table of similar gentlemen.

The next layer down consisted of unopened boxes of stationery that looked like they were grabbed at a going-out-of-business sale in the 1920s. Then came a bundle of old, legal-size xerox copies. "INDEX TO SPECIAL EXAMINER'S REPORT" read the heading on top of the first page. Below

that—on a line next to the words "Claim of"—was handwritten the name "Samuel T. Wagner," the word "Insane," and a number. The rest of the page consisted of columns headed with the words "PAGES," "NAMES OF WITNESSES, ETC.," "EXHIBITS," "DEPOSITIONS," and "REPUTATION." These columns were filled in, all with the same flourished handwriting.

Sam pulled at the rubber band that held the bundle together and it broke apart in his hand. Behind the index page came a Department of the Interior form from the Office of Special Examiner of the U.S. Pension Bureau. "Philadelphia, Phila Co., Pa., May 5, 1886" was written at the top in the same handwriting that was on the first page. Sam's great-grandfather had signed it at the bottom, or at least the signature looked like "Stanfield Whittier." Next came several handwritten pages, again signed at the end by his great-grandfather, and then eighty-five pages—they were hand-numbered—each with "Deposition" at the top and Wagner's name and number. Sam tried to read a couple of the pages, but gave up. The handwriting looked hurried here, and it was too hard to decipher. He set the xeroxes on top of the typewriter case on the floor.

The rest of the stack on left side consisted of typewritten pages divided into sections by paper clips and brittle rubber bands. He removed the top layer and took a seat in one of the comfortable reupholstered leather chairs that dated back to Stanfield's early days in the house. The first page was spattered with a stain like coffee, and the whole thing was held together with a large paper clip that came off reluctantly and left a rusty imprint behind. He started reading.

I write these pages no one reads. We have too many other pressing things to read about. Negroes in the public high schools. Elvin Presley. Russian tanks in Budapest. I was read at one time, but who is it remembers him now? Even decades ago, just after he died, who knew? Who cared? The war had all become romance. But with its centennial just five years away, with Woolson's death, the last of them, there might come a renewed interest. Up until now I've had to look at the writing down as justification enough, and perhaps I should continue to do that. This much I know: Living requires a routine of the will I cannot keep up forever. Soon I will die too, and though someone will know, I don't know that they will care. My sons are dead. Surely his is too. A grandson's wife runs my house now, and I'm tucked away in this room up in the back writing pages no one reads.

Sam wondered if this "he" was the Civil War soldier in the photograph. He fetched it. The man was sitting in a parlor chair with fancy legs next to a small table covered by a cloth whose fringe almost reached the floor. He wore a dark coat, also hanging nearly to the floor, with a single row of breast buttons fastened from his waist to his chin, except for one about the level of his sternum, ready, it seemed, in case he had the inspiration to assume the classic Napoleonic pose of hand-tucked-inside-coat. He sat in a confident slouch, legs spread apart, gloved hands resting on his thighs. His hat lay on the table, narrow-brimmed with a tall crown that featured an emblem of crossed swords on the front. His entire face—eyes, cheeks, lips,

even mustache and small beard—appeared to be suppressing a smirk. It must have been early in the war, before he'd killed anybody or lost any friends to gunshot wounds and gangrene.

Sam read the paragraph again and smiled at the Presley reference—proof that there was a time when *Elvis* was not a household word, when the man had not yet become the commodity. He realized that the "grandson's wife" must be his mother, and he tried to remember what all she'd had to say about Stanfield. Nobody talked about him much while Sam was growing up, but Sam got the impression that his great-grandfather was kind of a pain-in-the-ass. Whatever he'd been, he was apparently lucid enough and fit enough to live in his own house until the day he died.

Sam went on.

I start at the beginning but find little information. And at the end, no more than a wimper, his number merely retired. I start in the middle and work backward, then forward. I realize these techniques are not new. Chronology has not been fashionable for years. Yet this is what I have to work with: The climax comes just one third into his story, two thirds of his life a denouement that everyone has managed to forget. I alone, it seems, remember. This denouement, or unknotting, or loosening of ends that refuse to be retied (or is it a catastrophe, because his life can be so easily cast as a tragedy?), this long resolution I still write about. At one time they paid me to write, paid me at least to begin it. I recorded the stories. I

collected the letters. I numbered everything and introduced the whole collection with a conclusion. Because no one had time to read more than a conclusion. And what I gave them was apparently satisfactory. No one questioned it. But they didn't pay me to embellish. They wouldn't have paid me to make it universal, nothing more than an individual history, and what I did was satisfactory, reaching conclusions where they were not easily reached. Eventually his story did reach a conclusion. He died. But they wanted one year earlier. They wanted something that could be expressed in dollars, and in that sense others were also paid for my work. My conclusion allowed others to tie up their loose ends, even while his life unraveled in its own inconclusiveness. His denouement, long as it was, never resolved.

Sam went over to the bookshelf, to the section with the more current books, and pulled down a dictionary—itsself not all that current—to look up the word *denouement*. It was a word he'd seen many times, but he'd never bothered to find out what it meant. Stanfield was obviously using his poetic license to describe two thirds of the guy's life as a denouement.

Sam took up the story again.

I was paid well enough to afford this house. Not for his story alone, of course. There were many others, and many interested parties, but I always did what I thought was right, not merely profitable. Still, after all these years, I have yet to

get his story right, the way I would want it. Sometimes I think I could have, if someone were to have come by every Sunday to collect the pages, to demand that I give them something every week. After I was paid, however, no more demands. No impulse to immortalize. Everyone just wanted to forget. And who is it makes demands on me now? Only a grandson's wife who begrudges me my share of coal.

And so I begin again from the middle. He had a wife and two children. He had several acquaintances. A popular man, despite it all, and everyone wanted to help. It was in his head. No one knew what, exactly, but everyone traced it back to the war, to an act of bravery (or maybe recklessness). He had been ordered or not ordered, depending on who told the story. Just showing his familiar initiative, depending on the story. But he never got the truce into his head, never fit in at reunions with his former comrades smoking cigars and scratching their pot bellies and showing their scars and reminiscing.

Other things had changed. His new comrades wore white. Only the Negro orderly dressed in indigo broadcloth, the man who led him around and told him stories. Because he needed stories. He could no longer keep track of his own. They belonged to others, taken down in the depositions of a wife, a sister, and a few comrades and friends. A bureaucracy keeps those stories now, bundled together and gathering dust in a warehouse. The one thing bureaucracies do well, holding on to our dusty stories. But if we want them told, we have to do the

telling ourselves. And so I try again.

Sam looked over at the xerox copies of the depositions. Eventually, he figured, he ought to put out the effort to read them.

Two years before I heard his story, his wife's home had become his billet. He kept a small arsenal, but one quite large enough to cause a neighborhood's worth of grief. The neighbors worried. Who were his enemies? No one could be sure that he knew himself. Might not one of their sons, swaggering into manhood the way that young men do, provoke him? He had been quick to respond to similar swaggers on the battlefield. Commanders mentioned as much in their official reports. His own reports reflect the ambition he had for his regiment and show that he earned its command because of what he learned in the field not in the classroom. Before the Rebellion he had studied briefly at the university, but it was Newton, not Napoleon. Then during the war, his aptitude earned him praise and more and more responsibility. But the war was a course of study that deprived him of the means of applying the lessons of his study. After, when his comrades concluded they would study war no more, something held him back. It was in his head.

Commerce was no match for the war. Peacetime: the blank space between chapters in a history book. He needed his daily routine to take on the tedious importance of riding pickets. Always on the lookout for a skirmish. Always trying

to gauge the sympathies of the local populace. He needed room, terrain over which to measure progress and advance, defeat and retreat. Land and buildings were only as valuable as they were useful to be his headquarters, which must be moved often. Moving often had gotten in his blood. And if business took him away to Pittsburgh or St. Louis or Virginia, his small arsenal went with him and neighborhood mothers could relax their vigilance, however briefly. But not his wife. His ventures were usually losing ventures.

Something held him back, and it was in his head. Not until ten years after he died, during the next great war, did doctors coin the neat, alliterative "shell shock." All they had to work with in his case was "mania." It became his mania only by degrees, headaches at first, and with each passing year some additional incompetence. His characteristic sanguine humor, maintained despite his bloody occupation, turned increasingly melancholy. His glory became his mania, and it used up all the respect people had for him: his former comrades, who once trusted him with their lives; his sister, who once thought of him as her hero; his wife, whom he had married seven years after the war's end.

She would have been shy, flattered, and demure when this handsome cavalier first showed an interest in her. She would write of the encounter on page after page of her diary, or maybe in letters to her cousin in New York. But she would see only his strong hands and the depth in his eyes (which had seen the likes

of hell), and hear only the certainty in his voice, tempered by three years of battle cries. She wouldn't sense the erosion. She wouldn't sense the mania. She would sense her future children.

Sam was drifting. He wasn't sleepy, but maybe he wasn't focused enough at this late hour to be reading about lengthy denouements. Stanfield was sounding a bit eroded himself.

Sam made his way to the refrigerator and grabbed one of the cans of lite beer. He opened it with a *woosh*. A little over six weeks since he'd checked himself into the program, and the reflex was still there. By moving back into his parents' house, he had in effect checked himself out of the program, but since banging on his guitar in nightclubs was no longer his occupation, things should be easier. Drinking was no longer an occupational hazard. Of course, he'd totalled his Volvo nearly six months after the Mermen's demise, so it hadn't exactly been an occupational hazard then either.

He sat at the table facing the window, dark like a turned-off television, offering only his reflection for entertainment. The opened can of beer sat on the table in front of him, and its reflection sat in the window with his own reflection. After a few minutes he stood up abruptly, poured the unsampled beer down the kitchen drain, and returned to the reading room. He was ready to give Stanfield another shot.

He looked over what he'd already read. Coming across the line about war being "a course of study that deprived him of the means of applying the lessons of his study," Sam stopped, then reread it aloud. He decided that it made sense.

I met her at the asylum, there to ascertain that he was, in fact, alive, and that he was the lunatic with such and such a number. He was there, where it might have been one further anticlimax on top of the anticlimaxes of commerce and marriage. But within the compass of his confinement he could move about as if in camp. The discipline at the asylum was that of a camp. They told me this. Order imposed from the top down, a clear chain of command. There was a cohesion of purpose. He and his comrades had responsibilities: digging in the garden; driving a wheelbarrow; building a retaining wall, much like the breastworks he'd once built for cover. With someone there to give direction to his actions he could be responsible, direction that had been missing from his civilian life. He fell back easily into the discipline of the camps. The Friends let him have a part in the chain of command, and he assumed it much on his own. It came to him naturally, as it had in the field, because of his bearing and his ability to fit into the established order. He was free to retreat into the familiar order inside his head in ways that had been impossible in civilian life. No one was there to act uncomfortable about it. There were no women.

Sam couldn't remember what he'd just read, couldn't stay focused any longer. Setting the story on the end table under the Tiffany lamp, he returned to the kitchen. He still wasn't tired. For four days he'd been sitting in a car, so he decided he could use a walk.

He checked his wallet and headed out the side door. On West Main there had been a liquor store—a party store they'd called it—Sparky's—with a good selection of all kinds of beverages. The mansion could use a good selection, something besides low-fat milk and lite beer.

In the darkness, he negotiated the cobblestones of the driveway, then took to the lighted, winding streets. He walked through the neighborhoods of West Main Hill, under the canopy of hundred-year old hardwoods, past other two- and three-story houses of earlier generations of wealthy Kalamazooans. Some of them had been divided into makeshift apartments for the students of nearby Western Michigan University, while some lived on in a kind of stubborn denial that would not grant the passing of the neighborhood's glory days—sort of like the Whittier mansion.

Sam was not used to the Kalamazoo humidity, which hung on to the heat long after the sun was down, but he remembered it well. The air was still comfortably warm, short-sleeve-shirt warm, even though it was approaching eleven o'clock. West Main was busy with Thursday night traffic gearing up for Friday, revving like race cars with one lap to go before they're given the green flag to start the race. It would soon be the longest day of year, too, so it stayed light late, and if a body didn't get quite enough sleep on a Thursday night, it could bluff its way through Friday in the run up to the weekend. There'd be plenty of time for napping on Sunday.

A carload of females zoomed by and mouthed off about something that Sam didn't quite catch, but he thought it sounded vaguely complimentary. Something about his ass, maybe. Whatever it was, it bouyed his spirits and left him with a pang of optimism, like maybe it would be okay, after all, being

stuck for a couple of months at his parents' house. Such optimism had been in short supply since leaving California—which he'd come to think of as his real home—since before that, actually, since losing his job, and even earlier, since splitting up with Ethel, all the way back to the disbanding of the Mermen.

Sam found Sparky's right where he'd remembered it, but Sparky was no longer open for business. The neon sign out front was dark, and in the glow of the nearby streetlight Sam could see that more rust than yellowing paint covered the neglected metal structure. Underneath his feet, grass poked up through the cracks in the asphalt of the small parking lot. He pressed his face into the large display window and took in the shadowy interior of the store, the empty cases and fixtures waiting for their retirement to the salvage yard. Back at the curb he looked down Main Street toward the city center and saw nothing that might carry beverages except the old dive, the West Main Lounge. In the opposite direction, across Main and couple of blocks up the hill he'd just come down, glowed a 24-hour convenience store, one of the big chains with a familiar plastic sign, bright and gaudy and unmistakable. Somehow he'd not even noticed it.

The glare of the lights seemed to attract teenagers like moths. The parking lot was filled with them, smoking cigarettes, drinking sodas, leaning against large American cars. Turning down a request to purchase beer for a couple of them, Sam made a quick sweep through the florescent ecosystem. He put together his own six-pack of various sodas and grabbed a half-gallon of orange juice and a quart of regular milk. On his way up to the cashier, he picked out a chocolate bar.

"I'm going to have to charge you separate for all these pops," the guy said through his braces.

"Separate?"

"They're not a six-pack."

"Well, yeah," Sam said, but his sarcasm didn't register on the guy's face.

Back out in the darkness, a plastic bag in each hand, he climbed up West Main Hill, feeling his earlier optimism slip away.

At the mansion he sat down in the kitchen and finished off the chocolate bar, washing it down with a glass of orange juice. Then he made his way upstairs, ready to try sleep. His cross-country routine had had him asleep every night before midnight, something that had rarely ever happened when he was out in California. Getting up early—six or six-thirty was early for him—he drank the free motel coffee and drove for a couple of hours before stopping for breakfast. That very morning he'd been up at six, so he climbed into his old twin bed a little after twelve, teeth brushed and face washed, expecting the day-ending half of the routine to follow as a matter of course.

Instead, he just lay there, staring at the patterns of cracks and plaster swirls on the ceiling, lit dimly by the streetlight out front. His inaugural night back where he'd spent the first nineteen years of his life, the green, green grass of home, and stretching out in front of him a summer of near-zero responsibility, all the shit in Silicon Gulch safely at a distance, but he couldn't relax. It was the noise inside his head. Ethel was in there. His mother was in there, too, asking him what he thought he was doing with his

life. The ceiling patterns were quiet, at least, but they were the ones he'd stared at for years, the cast of characters his mind's eye had created for his amusement as well as his anxiety: the eagle with the four sets of talons and the oversized beak; the old woman with the sagging breasts and the bundle of sticks on her back; the goblin with the crooked teeth and the haunted, beady eyes. As he stared, he replayed the incident that had landed him back in Kalamazoo, the boom of the impact, the shatter of the glass, the taunt of the spinning hubcap after everything else had grown quiet. But his replay was sketchy and splotchy like a nightmare, because the blackout obscured so much of the memory. He slipped his hand out from under the covers and felt around for the bump on his head, the hidden badge of stupidity.

Ethel had been one of the causes for the stupidity, or maybe "excuses" was a better word. It wasn't that she'd left him for a woman. Somebody had made a joke about it, but that didn't bother him. As far as Sam was concerned, there was precious little love in the world, and wherever somebody found it was okay with him. It was the abruptness of Ethel's change of heart that still messed with him. At least it seemed abrupt. For all Sam knew, she could've been planning it for months. Thinking back on it, he'd come to doubt his perceptions of things.

Eventually his mind wore itself out and he dozed off. He woke up late. Afternoon late. His room didn't get the morning sun. He rationalized that it was still morning in California. He poured himself full of decaf, such being a hazard of making it by the pot, and when he wasn't as lucid as he felt he should be with a belly full of coffee, he started a shopping list with the item "caffeine." A shower did more to wake him than all the coffee, and shaving

woke him still further.

He emerged from the bathroom to face his first full day of caretaking the mansion—his first full day of having absolutely nothing he had to do, except finish off his mother's casserole. Besides the casserole, only Stanfield's story nagged at him. He vowed to make sense of it. He sat in one of the leather chairs with the final cup of decaf and reread the story from the beginning. When he made it as far as he had the night before—and felt he was following it okay—he kept going.

Within the month I met her again to hear her story. Her stories, plural. Hers were just a few out of the many I took down. They spoke of his bouts of anxiousness that had no apparent cause, for he was agitated much of the time. They spoke of his fascination with thunderstorms, the way the rumbling and flashing filled him with a child's delight. They spoke of money that was lost. Old friends told of his cleverness before the war and his change after. Many were convinced that they knew the exact moment the change took place, but I could not confirm this without some doubt, of course, and he was no help, unable to speak on his own behalf, reduced to a kind of babble, like that of a man who has for too many years been given to too much drinking. But she would not have stood for it. She did not need him around in the way that many women need a man around and would not have tolerated him around if he had been a drinker. A high-minded woman who, had she

lived another ten or fifteen years, would have been a suffragette, all the while considering the term "suffragette" demeaning.

So I determined it was not drinking that caused it. His comrades pointed to a specific moment during the war, but there was no official record of it. He never reported that he suffered from any sort of injury. He was not listed on the casualty rolls and never convalesced. He commanded his regiment as if nothing had ever happened. All of which could be explained, of course, but not fully. Despite the consensus among his comrades, some doubt remained. And though each one swore to have no pecuniary interest in his claim (and I was able to determine that they did not), they all had personal interests: to see that his wife and children did not become destitute; to honor his memory, because although he was still alive, the man they knew was just a memory; to ease their consciences about not having done enough, perhaps. They wanted to be able to live with themselves. I had to weigh all these things and keep the emotions out of the facts, even as I too did not want to see her and her children become destitute. I too wanted to be able to live with myself.

Sam heard his name being called. It was Don. He marked his place with his finger, called back, and waited for his friend to poke his head through the doorway. So close to the end of the story. He looked ahead. Only a couple of pages left, and his great-grandfather was starting to sound

like a decent guy.

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When Don knocked at the side door, it wasn't even pulled shut, so he pushed it open and let himself in. He hadn't seen the depths of the Whittier house for years. In fact, the previous time had been in 1980 on the day Sam left for California. He called out Sam's name and walked through the kitchen and the dining room into the foyer at the front of the house. To the rear of the foyer was the infamous "Scarlett-O'Hara" staircase, up which Sam had carried Zoë one night while his parents were out—or so the story went—back when she still spelled her name "Zoey." His seduction attempt, however, didn't quite work out the way it did in the movies.

Don called again, "Sam, you here?"

From the bowels of the mansion he heard Sam's voice.

He skirted the landing at the bottom of the staircase, navigated the hallway past the TV room—which used to be a refuge for him—and found Sam in the library, a manuscript in hand. "What's up?"

Sam said, "Just reading."

"You're missing out—today, we've heard testimony from Albert Hakim, war profiteer and member of our extra-constitutional government."

Sam obviously had no clue who Albert Hakim was. "And how is that 'missing out'?"

"You're missing out on all that fuel for our 'enlightened outrage.'"

"You've got to be a masochist." Sam didn't seem to remember the phrase he and Don had coined together.

"Only if I were a pessimist would I be," Don said. "I consider it

surreal."

"Because you're high on weed all the time."

"Ooo, cheap shot," Don said. "You know, I can be stoned and outraged at the same time—you didn't see Eliot Abrams, did you?"

"No."

"That guy is the devolutionary reincarnation of Joseph Goebbels."

Sam sat there hanging on to his manuscript as if it was going to get away from him.

"And doesn't Casey's demise seem a little fishy?"

"Convenient?" Sam said.

"Exactly." Don had his own theories. "Things get hot, and he swallows his cyanide capsule to avoid torture and interrogation like a good little spy."

"I thought it was a brain tumor."

Don was pleased. "You *are* paying attention."

Sam shrugged.

"As you say," Don said, "'convenient.'"

"But wouldn't a brain tumor be a reasonable excuse for loss of judgment?"

"Exactly—a great excuse." Don was happy that Sam was engaged with the topic, even if he was sounding a little bit like an administration apologist.

"Casey knew exactly what he was doing."

"Well, don't let me stop you if you want to watch it," Sam said. "You know where the TV is."

"What are you up to?"

"I want to finish this thing I'm reading." He shook the papers in his

hand.

"Okay," Don said, "I can take a hint."

∞

She continued to visit him, though she couldn't be sure that he even recognized her. And when I saw her, she would tell me things.

She said she could never quite be sure which man she would find during her visits. Would he be the desperate misanthrope who sat on the edge of his cot rocking back and forth, rubbing his temples bald? Barking orders that could not be followed because they made no sense to anyone outside his head. Keening (yes there was no other word for that sound) some loss or some emptiness that could not be gotten over in a life time of mourning. Smelling of perspiration and urine, a terrified soldier running headlong into an enemy countercharge, watching comrades fall around him. Recoiling from the touch of a wife's hand as if it were the caress of death.

Or would he be the simple placid man of the earth, digging around the nannyberry bushes, raking leaves into a pile, dreaming, saying little? Piling dirt, packing it down to form a wall he might sit behind to munch an apple. Whistling as he leaned on his shovel, smiling and winking at the woman he seemed to recognize but wouldn't call by name.

Or would he be the startled visionary, telling of things he saw, using words deceptively clear even as they appeared to be

without context? Cocking his head to a killdeer's call. Staring into the distance, peering under a nannyberry bush.

Or would he be the Promethean antihero, delighted in his bondage, slipped away from the Society of Friends at the first hint of a thunderstorm, taking up his eternal post on the promontory, the roof of the asylum, his outpost? Confusing god's thunder with mankind's thievery of it. Never protesting his fate, though doomed ever to repeat it.

And time did not stand still. His mania took up more and more space inside his head, pushing other things out because there was not enough room for them. It robbed him of more and more of his competence. He would stash things for safekeeping where they would not at all be safe, where they wouldn't be found for weeks, like tools left to rust behind a nannyberry bush. He would take on a task, willing, for all they could tell, to follow his orders precisely, but then he'd turn the task into something of his own liking. The only thing the mania didn't push out of his head, rather pushed to the foreground, it seemed, was his stubbornness, admirable in the war, meaning the difference between victory and defeat, perhaps, but disruptive among the Friends. He wasn't a violent man, and they were lucky it didn't cause him to turn violent, but it robbed them of his willingness to cooperate. And his ability to concentrate, once measured in hours, was reduced to minutes.

Eventually he came to lose interest in nearly everything except his daily ration of coffee. A habit he picked up in the

war, she said, something she never served in their home where everyone drank tea, and he had seemed to be happy with tea. I offered her tea, which she took, graciously. They told her that the exact moment the morning coffee began brewing in the pot, he'd show up at the kitchen door and wait there till they served him a cup. It gave him consistent joy and put him in the mood to shuffle around for hours. He still had the run of the grounds then, unless he had one of his headaches, in which case his mood could not be elevated, even with coffee. They would wrap his head in compresses and confine him to the dark and quiet of his room. More and more he had to be confined to his room.

When the government approved my recommendation and started her monthly payments, she stopped coming by to visit

That was it, ending without a period like Stanfield had stopped typing midthought. Sam imagined him collapsing and dying right there at the Remington. The piece was obviously written at the very end of his life. Sam peeked into the trunk to see if there were any additional pages that had become separated from the story, but a quick look through the next group of pages on the pile showed them to be just an earlier, edited draft of the same story.

He looked at the ending again and wondered who it was that "she stopped coming by to visit," the cavalier or his great-grandfather. Then he noticed the odor of cannabis, and from down the hall, Don's histrionic groaning. Sam slipped the paper clip back on the story and headed to the TV room. Don sat on the edge of the couch and tugged at his long tangled hair.

"This fucking Hakim was an independent foreign policy subcontractor," Don said, "made himself a ton of money in the process, of course—his own words, in essence."

"Don—"

"North left him in charge of dealing with the Iranians for release of the hostages in Lebanon—on behalf of the US government—and he gave away the fucking store."

"Don!" The watchdog looked over. "No more smoking dope in the house, okay? Use the backyard."

"Sure, man, no problem. But check this out—they were trying to consummate the arms-for-hostages swap before election day, to benefit Republican Congressional candidates—that's what North told Hakim."

Sam looked over at the television, at the microphones lined up in front of the nervous face.

"Can you fucking believe it?"

Sam said that he could, as a matter of fact, pretty easily, then he heard Zoë's voice calling out, "Knock, knock—anybody home?"

"In the TV room," he called back.

As she came through the doorway, she said, "Smells like the Jimmy Carter Years." She was dressed to teach—a conservative dress, nylons, and red lipstick.

"Wow, haven't seen you in a while," Don said.

"'Legalize it'," she sang.

"The Shakespeare aficionado."

Sam said, "Teaching him to impressionable freshman."

"I remember listening to your record—" Zoë said, "and this must have been 1977—the Lenny Bruce record, where he predicted that marijuana would be legal within ten years because all the law students were smoking it."

"And he said that in like '67," Sam said.

"It is legal," Don said. "Isn't it?"

"Not at my high school."

"I'd forgotten all about that record."

"I wish I'd had someone as sexy as you for high school English."

Zoë didn't appreciate Don's comment.

"You wouldn't have known what to do about it," Sam said.

"Yeah, but I could've learned."

"Not from me," Zoë said.

Don thought her response was hilarious. He picked up the remote and made the senator on television relinquish the floor.

"Well, I'm glad you find me so amusing," she said.

Presently, as they stood there saying nothing, their six eyes were drawn to the hearings. Then Zoë flopped herself down on the couch and flipped off her shoes.

"What a week," she said. "What've you guys been up to? Besides the Iran-Contra Show."

"Waiting for you," Don said.

"Hey, Zoë," Sam said, "can you take look at something for me?"

"Sure," she said, and in her stockinged feet she followed him to the reading room, Don right behind her.

Sam handed her Stanfield's story. "What do you think of this?"

She read aloud, "I write these pages no one reads" She had an expression on her face that Sam could only characterize as English-teacherly.

"Well, right off, there's the irony—because we're reading it."

"Yeah," Sam said. "I got the irony part."

She slipped off the paper clip and laughed. "Elvin Presley?"

Don poked around among the contents of Stanfield's trunk. "Where'd this come from?"

"The attic," Sam said. "It was my great-grandfather's."

He drew back the curtains on two of the four large matching windows that dominated the exterior walls of the room, the two with southern exposure and a view of the backyard. Looking through the hundred-year old glass was like looking through water, and at this hour the direct glare of the sun had moved past. He and Zoë settled into the leather chairs. Don knelt down in front of the trunk like it was some kind of altar. Out back the chattering birds seemed now amplified with the quiet of Zoë's concentration.

Sam watched her eyes—this afternoon the color of the Pacific Ocean off the Golden Gate on a foggy summer day—as they scanned the lines of Stanfield's story. He loved her eyes. Now that her skinny body had filled out and developed curves in all the usual places, now that she wasn't as attractive to him as she'd been when she had the small breasts of a dancer and the boyish posture of a punk-rock musician, still those eyes did something. In the middle of the second page, they abruptly stopped scanning, and she went back to reexamine something on the first page.

"Don," Sam said, "how much do you know about the Civil War?"

"A fair amount—what do you want to know?"

He handed him the photo of the Civil War soldier. "What do you think of this?"

Don studied it. "He looks cavalry—these crossed swords on his hat are a cavalry insignia."

While his friends examined his attic treasures, Sam went over to stand in front of the distorted glass of one of the windows. Outside the sun shone from behind a thin layer of clouds. The cottonwood appeared to be at the peak of its shedding. A breeze carried the tufted seeds, which through the rippled antique glass looked like they were bobbing on the surface of a rocky-bottomed creek as they drifted to the ground. His mother hated that tree—and the snowy drifts it created on the lawn—but his father wouldn't let her cut it down. Apparently Stanfield's wife had loved it.

"This is interesting," Zoë said after a couple of pages. "Looks as if the old guy was into those dreadful existentialists."

"Interesting?"

"Well, yeah, but kind of self indulgent."

The depositions were interesting to Don. "These are cool," he said, holding them up.

"You want to read them?" Sam said.

"Actually, yeah."

"But not now," Zoë said. "It's Friday—let's do something fun."

The boys deferred to her, and after she fetched a change of clothes from her car and made herself over in the downstairs bathroom, they all piled into the Oldsmobile, the most comfortable of their three choices. They headed out from the mansion without a definite destination, more or less as they used to

do in high school whenever somebody could get a parent's car. Sam rode shotgun, as they used to call it. For a while they just drove around, Zoë pointing out things that were new to Kalamazoo since Sam had gone and other things that were from their shared memories, like the old skating rink they'd gone to once or twice, the park where they'd picnicked during the summer between their sophomore and junior years. She made a side trip through the university campus and reminisced about the night she'd helped him walk off a drunk around the softball field before taking him home to his parents.

They rode around with the windows down, elbows poking out into the heavy air. Sam felt aimless as a teenager. It was Zoë's idea to stop by the Gourmet Burger, a place where they all would have gone when they were teenagers—if only it had been around then—because it was unique, a one-location rarity in a landscape of fast-food sameness. They ate quickly, like teenagers, and took their to-go packaged beverages along for the ride.

It was Sam's idea to take a drive out in the country, out among the fields of sprouting corn, and back past West and Austin Lakes, scenes of summer idleness back when idleness and summer comprised two halves of the same thought. The sun went down and twilight lingered as the three made their way back into Kalamazoo and into the Friday-night traffic of teenagers warming up for summer vacation. Sam felt right at home as part of the traffic. The feeling might seem silly later on when he was back at the mansion, trying to quell the noise in his head, but now it offered a kind of refuge.

They stopped by a 24-hour supermarket so Sam could get a few things

and wandered around the store like stoned adolescents, the indecisive Sam in the lead.

"A couple bags of candied figs?" Don said, holding them up.

"Don, you're not making it any easier for him."

He finally settled on coffee with caffeine in it, some apples, some chips.

When they made it back to the mansion, Don took off immediately, and Zoë sat with Sam in her car in his driveway talking in the dark. "Feels as if we're still in high school."

Sam squirmed. "Yeah, any minute your dad is going to come out and drag you out of the car—except it's your car."

"And it's your house."

Sam's house. The mansion *could* be his, probably, if he wanted it. His older brother Jerry was off in Ohio somewhere, working in a bank, living in his own mansion. Jackie had her own place, too, something smaller that suited her unrelenting spinsterhood. Sam would have to buy out their shares, certainly. Given its old-fashioned craftsmanship and antique appointments—as some snooty realtor might say—he should be able to appreciate it. It had character when so many contemporary houses had a kind of anti-character. The only problem was that having been raised in the museum, he felt that by coming home he was taking several steps backward.

They sat quiet for a few minutes. Sam stared out the windshield of the Oldsmobile until Zoë said, "It's really nice having you back here."

She was looking at him in a way that made him uncomfortable, made him think about marriage and a life full of kids and mansion-improvement projects. "I wish I thought it was nice being here."

"You know," Zoë said, "any time you want to talk about what happened out there, I'll be happy to listen."

He looked back out the windshield. "I don't think that'll do any good."

"Well," she said, "it's an offer."

He picked his bag of groceries up off the floor. "I've got to go to bed—I'm fried."

"It's finally caught up with you—the car-lag." She kissed him on the cheek.

He climbed out and stood at the side door watching her back out of the driveway. He waved, and after she was gone, he scanned the night sky for stars. There weren't any. Inside, the groceries landed on the kitchen table, and he in his old bed. Staring at the cracks in the ceiling plaster, he listened to the wind. It sounded like a storm coming on.

Hi, Sam! Guess you're out—what is it, ten-thirty back there? We're down here in Kansas City with the Clarks. The number's on the list—so call us, okay? We're staying through the weekend. It's just beautiful out here, it's not too hot yet, and we've got all the comforts of home. This thing is great! Well, I just wanted to check in with you, make sure everything was okay. Oh, I forgot to tell you about Willis in the note—I already paid him for this month, but you'll have to pay him at the beginning of July. He still comes on Mondays. And Jenny's the girl who cleans the house every other Saturday, but I had her over a couple of days early to clean it up for you. She won't be back until the 20th—there's envelopes with cash for her in the desk. Well, that's about all, I guess. We'll be here through the weekend. Yeah, I already said that. So call us, okay? Bye bye."

Sam had slept late again, not heard the phone. The answering machine—his parents' small concession to modern-day communication—signed off with its five beeps in a row, pulsing like the back-up warning signal of a garbage truck. The tape rewound and clicked and clacked, and the light stopped blinking. He pushed the button to hear the outgoing message.

"Hi. You've reached Ernie and Dotty Whittier. We'll be on vacation until July 24th, so please leave a message for Sam. He's back. Thanks."

After the rewind, Sam held the button down and spoke into the machine. "You have reached the Whittier Museum of the Evolution of American Interior Design. Para español, marke ocho. The Museum is open

to the public between the hours of twelve noon and four p.m. Tuesdays through Saturdays. We are closed Sundays and Mondays. For directions to the Museum push one. To arrange tours for parties of twenty or more push two. For all other inquiries, push zero for the next available docent. Or leave a message at the beep. Thank you."

Now he was back.

But what a difference having been away had made. When Sam had been small the Museum fed a curiosity that prompted his mother to speak in clichés about the killing of cats. He had the run of the place then—disappearing into the dank basement or the musty attic—sliding down the mahogany banister of the curved staircase that his mom had dubbed the "Scarlett-O'Hara staircase"—scaling the wall of old books in the reading room—climbing up the exterior plumbing of the second floor bathroom and water closet, the retrofitted indoor "outhouse." His mother was too far past her prime of chasing down youngsters when Sam came along for it to be otherwise. Besides the house was too big. Two high-ceiling stories with three fireplaces, five bedrooms, and large dining, reading, and TV rooms, the latter with a 1970s' dull-brown shag carpet little things could get lost in. The carpet was a perfect example of the way something new and fashionable was always covering up something old at the Museum—in this case the worn but beautiful oak flooring—as American tastes in interior design just kept evolving. A hundred years of fixing up had created a showcase that was now showcasing its age. And the only thing left for Sam to be curious about was his great-grandfather's trunk.

He called the Clarks and got their answering machine. "Hi. This

message is for the Whittiers, from their son. Everything is fine up here. The ghosts are behaving and the casserole tasted just like homemade. Thanks. I'll talk to you soon."

Sam sat down with his first cup of real coffee since his return. Not of the fussily high quality he was used to in California, because that was not available at the 24-hour supermarket on the outskirts of Kalamazoo, but it was a vast improvement over his mom's decaf. He sipped and waited for the caffeine to seep into his brain. Out the window, the sky was overcast, the wind was blustery, and one of the neighborhood cats was slinking along on its belly through the grass toward a scattering of sparrows. They pecked and hopped, hyper but nonchalant, until their stalker could no longer restrain itself and lunged at them. They lifted off as one. The cat slid to a stop and buried its face in its belly, like the entire process had been designed to chase down a particular, persistent flea. When it got back up on its four paws again, it looked this way and that, a purposeful kind of scrutiny, then slowly walked away from the house to the back of the yard.

Sam heard the coowaah of a mourning dove, reminding him of California where they proliferated like rabbits around the backyard bird feeder. He located the solitary dove on the backyard's remaining, obsolete clothesline pole and watched it for a while. As it prepared to let out one of those melancholy calls that gives the cartoonish thing its name, it heaved its breast like it was convulsing with grief. What came out of its beak was something between a sob and a sigh.

Sounds just like it had been a staple of Ethel's vocal style. On one extreme she would coo like an overgrown infant, and on the other she would

wail like a tormented madwoman—more imaginary torment than real, Sam figured, because she had it pretty good with her cheap suburban-stucco rent and her tips at the Downtowner, where they indulged all her little quirks. But wherever she got it, it gave the Mermen a range. In an underground-music landscape overpopulated with bands that knew one level of intensity—extremely loud and fast—Ethel and the Mermen prided themselves in having actual dynamics.

A range of dynamics was not, of course, a ticket to success. Neither was the band's collective songwriting. When he listened to the so-called underground groups who were enjoying record label support, Sam couldn't see that their lyrics were any more compelling than Ethel's, or that their riffs were any more catchy than his. But these signed bands had something the Mermen never found: brand-name recognition. There in the breakfast nook, in the flush of caffeine, it made so much sense that it was depressing.

They'd put a lot of work into their eclectic sound. For over a year they'd rehearsed three nights a week. The urgency of Ethel's voice still echoed around in his head—they had to write more songs, they had to get their music out, they had to live a life committed to their art, to go out—if they must—in a blaze, not a fizzle. And for a year they thought they were making some kind of progress. But toward the end, when the progress didn't materialize, the rehearsals got to be a grind.

Sam and Dave the bass player showed up half an hour late to one of those rehearsals, having started drinking in the middle of the afternoon because they were both otherwise unemployed at the time, and quickly there was a disagreement over the tempo of one of the songs. Sam thought it was

too fast. Ethel said it was dragging because he and Dave were too fucked up to play it right. When she left in a huff, Sam kicked the door shut and sprained his toe. Mostly she was mad, she told him later, because she thought he wasn't taking rehearsal seriously enough, being that drunk, and she just about quit the band then and would have if he hadn't apologized up and down like he did. For a while after that he completely laid off alcohol during rehearsals and gigs, sometimes going for a week or more without touching it, but then came the party thrown by the software millionaire who was rumored to have record label people on his guest list.

That night Sam was more nervous than he'd ever been at a performance, even more than he'd been when the Mermen were the opening act at one of the big San Francisco clubs. The alcohol was flowing like an artesian well. A number of illegal substances were passed around freely. As it turned out, the rumored record label people never showed up, and by the time Ethel and the Mermen played, everyone was so high that nobody was in any shape to critique the band's performance. But Ethel knew it wasn't right. Sam knew it, too, and not long after, the band was history.

Sam stood up abruptly in the nook and took his cup of coffee to the reading room. Rehashing these depressing memories was not what he needed. His great-grandfather's memories, captured in the envelopes full of photos, brought him out of it.

By the flat light of the gray morning sky, he looked through portrait after portrait of stiffly posed men, women, and children, out of whom Sam only recognized his great-grandfather. He came across one with Stanfield in a dapper suit in front of the Museum during its construction. Alongside him

stood a child of five, maybe, who looked dressed for church. Sam assumed the kid was his grandfather Samuel, whom he was named after. He separated the photo from the rest and propped it up against the base of the Tiffany lamp.

He routinely flipped the photos over, looking for names or dates, but few had anything written on them. An exception was one obviously snipped off a larger photo—it was tall and thin with an uneven edge on the left—and it featured a somber woman in a simple dress. Sam didn't recognize her, but she was beautiful, her light-colored wavy hair fastened behind her head. She had prominent cheekbones, a wide unsmiling mouth, and sad eyes that stared directly into the camera. On the back of the photo was a date, written in a feminine hand: December 1882. He propped it up next to the photo of Stanfield and the kid.

The final envelope contained old family photos, some that he recognized, like the one of his grandfather standing at attention in a doughboy's uniform next to his grandmother Catherine. A copy of this photo stood on the reading-room mantle. It must have been taken a short time before Samuel went off to Europe and his death in World War I. Stanfield's entire family—except for Samuel—appeared in a formal studio shot that featured Stanfield and his wife Constance, Sam's great-grandmother—step-great-grandmother, actually—seated primly on Chippendale chairs surrounded by their children, Sam's great-aunts and great-uncle. He knew the aunts from family reunions: Esther who'd always smothered him with hugs and smelled of lavender; Greta who'd been confined to a wheelchair because of polio for as long as he knew her; and Annie who'd been quick to

laugh and once accompanied Sam and some of his cousins up into the hay loft of a barn. He knew his great-aunts in their later years, but he couldn't tell who was who in the photo. His great-uncle James, the oldest, a bachelor and career sailor whom he'd never met, had lived and died in San Diego before Sam was born. Now they were all dead.

He tucked the photos back into their envelopes and headed back out to the kitchen for a refill of coffee. He sat in front of the window again. This being on retreat was getting old already.

With a rattle of the side door, Jackie pushed her way into the kitchen.

"Sammy!"

"Hey, Jackie."

"You're sitting in the exact same seat you used to sit in every school day for breakfast."

They embraced. She held him at arm's length. "You look good," she said. "You look thinner."

Sam took her comment as a cue to say something in kind. "You're looking pretty fit yourself."

"You can never be too thin or too rich," she said and went to pour herself a cup of coffee. "What're you up to?"

"Nothing much—sitting here, watching the birds, enjoying some real coffee for a change."

"I see," she said, tapping her finger on the coffee can. She sat down across the table from him. "So you're adjusting okay?"

"I guess."

"Pretty selfish of Mom and Dad to leave before you got home."

He shrugged and looked out the window.

"Well, they could've stuck around for a week or so to make sure everything was okay. It's not like they have some schedule they've got to stick to these days."

"I'm enjoying the solitude," he said. It was a lie. He missed his social life in California. But he did prefer solitude over having his mother around trying to help him rest and relax.

Jackie sipped her coffee. "Just sitting here watching that damn cottonwood litter up the yard?"

"I kind of like the old thing." A flash of lightning came out of the southwest. "Finally," he said. Within a few seconds the thunder rumbled.

"So—you know what you're going to do next?"

He ran his hand over his hair, felt the bump. "Go to Europe."

"I mean after that."

"Not really."

"You're not going back to playing that god-awful music again, are you? It's amazing you're not deaf yet."

He turned to look at her across the table. She was thirty-seven going on fifty-seven in her prim polyester blouse and owl-eye photo-sensitive lenses. It was Saturday afternoon, and not a hair was out of place on her head.

Outside, the intervals of time between the flashes of lightning and the rumbles of thunder were growing shorter.

"I'm working on a set of polka favorites," he said.

She made a big deal out of sighing. "Always the smart ass."

"Well, what am I supposed to say to a question like that—I've got a job lined up at Microsoft?"

"See?" she said.

Sam didn't like the look of big-sisterly condescension on her face.

"Excuse me for worrying about you," she said, "but Mom paints this sorry picture, then takes off in the RV and leaves me in charge."

"I thought she was leaving me in charge," Sam said.

"Same thing."

"Me being in charge is the same as you being in charge?"

"She made it clear I ought to keep an eye on you."

Sam drummed his fingers on the tabletop. "You and the rest of Kalamazoo." Lightning flashed, and within a split second thunder cracked.

"Sammy, you did have a breakdown or something."

"I did not have a breakdown."

"Well, what was it then? Were you depressed again?"

He wasn't quick to answer. "I just got pissed off and fed up, that's all."

"Same thing," Jackie said.

"The fuck it is."

She said nothing, just sat there oozing her condescension.

"Too bad you don't have any kids to lavish all this worry on," he said.

"Oh, screw you."

It had been a cheap way to bring her down a notch. Outside the rain came on in earnest. They sipped their coffee in silence, until Sam said, "Look, I appreciate your concern, but you should know better than to take Mom too seriously."

"That's easy for you to say—you're not the big sister."

He felt a sermon coming on.

"If you only knew how much Mom used to expect of me—" A long sigh of thunder punctuated her comment. "I mean, not that you weren't a God-send to me with that snot Jerry around."

Sam saw an opening. "He's still moving other people's money around in Ohio?"

"Yeah."

The sermon ended as abruptly as it had started.

"You'll get a chance to see him, though," she said. "He's been coming up like clockwork every July with his tribe. Even with Mom and Dad out of town this year he's coming—his twentieth high-school reunion."

"Does he stay here?"

"Oh, yeah—I don't know how they can stand it."

Sam tried to imagine how he would stand it. He could barricade himself in the reading room with Stanfield's ghost.

"How old were you when great-grandpa Stanfield died?" he asked.

She thought for a second, swirling the last bit of coffee around in her cup. "Six—no, seven."

"What was he like?"

"He was old."

Sam knew that part already. "Was he nuts?"

"No—eccentric."

"Did you ever talk to him?"

She finished her coffee. "Sure."

"And he made sense?"

"I think so—I was only seven." She looked out at the rain. "I have this vivid memory of his wastebasket overflowing with balls and balls of crumpled up paper."

"Did he ever talk about our grandpa?"

She thought about it. "You know, I can't remember."

"Check this out." He got up and motioned for her to follow.

They made their way to the reading room where Sam handed her the photo of Stanfield standing with the child in front of the brand-new Museum. Jackie looked over toward the open trunk.

"Is that grandpa?" Sam said.

"Great-grandpa," she said.

Sam pointed at the child. "No, the kid."

"You didn't break into this, did you?"

"No, I found the key."

She looked at the photo again. "I don't know—"

"Who else could it be?"

She walked over and peered in the trunk, then pointed at the Remington case sitting on the floor. "There's the old typewriter—he used to sit in front of that thing all afternoon."

Sam had the image of a frustrated writer, a wanna-be author hoping that one more revision would lead to the renown he thought he deserved. Like the endless and ultimately futile rehearsing of Ethel and Mermen.

It was approaching two, and Jackie had to go. "I want to come back and look at this stuff sometime," she said.

She and Sam were like kids from two different generations, but when she left, their prickly detente was firmly reestablished. She made him promise he'd let her know if he needed anything and told him she'd keep in touch. She reiterated her suggestion of a euchre game, which Sam went along with, just to make her happy. When she walked out the side door, she left behind the same perfume scent Sam's nose associated with his mother.

With the house to himself again, Sam retreated back into his thoughts. The rain put him in the frame of mind to read, like it used to when he was young. He'd routinely hung out in the reading room with Stanfield's books when the weather went bad. But before he could indulge his whim, he knew he had to eat. He'd had nothing since the burger with Don and Zoë, and the coffee was starting to upset his internal ecology. He started in on an apple and drank a glass of milk. Standing in front of the open refrigerator, looking for something more substantial to eat, he poked at the plastic containers. The pizza in the freezer was starting to sound good.

With a knock at the side door, Don popped in. "Wet out there."

"Welcome to Grand Central Station," Sam said. "Make yourself comfortable."

Don closed his bent, blue umbrella and dribbled water onto the faux marble floor. He wiped his feet on the rug.

"Why don't you leave that on the porch?"

He reached out the doorway, left the umbrella outside, and like a magician brought in a ratty briefcase.

Sam said. "So, who've we had today?"

"Huh?"

"The hearings."

Don gave him a dirty look. "Nobody—it's Saturday."

"Of course," Sam said and closed the refrigerator.

"I thought we could watch your window," Don said. "Maybe you could help me understand the complexities of nature's unfolding drama."

"What's in the briefcase?"

"Here, check these out." He pulled out a pair of thick hardbacks with matching blue-and-gray dust jackets. "You were asking about the Civil War? I found these books on the cavalry—see the crossed swords on the cover?"

Sam took them and looked them over.

"If you want to borrow them—"

"Sure," Sam said and checked out the blurbs on the back covers.

"Anyway, I've got to run," Don said. "I have a job."

"A job?"

"Tutoring a couple of junior high school kids. They're from India—their mother teaches British lit at Western. She wants them to get a crash course in US history over the summer."

"You might want to comb your hair," Sam said.

After Don ducked out the side door, Sam broke down and threw the frozen pizza into the oven. If only the inflexible natural food addict Ethel could see him now. As the dubious thing baked, he took the apple and Don's cavalry books to the reading room. He paged through them, looking at the battlefield maps and the etchings of Civil War scenes and the photos of dour-looking generals. As the rain splattered against the old windows, he read how the Northern states struggled to put their volunteer cavalry regiments

together.

The smell of burning pizza startled Sam out of his reading. He ran to the kitchen, threw open the oven, and staggered back a couple of steps in the smoke. Luckily, there was no fire, just a charred crust covered with blackened cheese and pepperoni chips. He grabbed the pan and tossed the smoky mess out onto the side porch. He opened all the nearby windows and plopped down on a chair at the table, more disappointed than he would have imagined. Despite the fact that this particular frozen pizza was nothing special, merely the least of all evils that the refrigerator had to offer—so unspecial, in fact, that its smoking there inedible on the side porch didn't upset him, even made him laugh at himself—he still had his heart set on pizza.

He found the phone book in its assigned place, the drawer beneath the telephone niche, and went to the yellow pages to see if The Bigga Wan was still in business. His family used to get pizza there after little league games or on Friday nights when Dotty didn't feel like cooking. It was still in business at the same old location.

He called and ordered the Special, the one with everything on it. The guy said twenty minutes. By then the charcoal on the porch had stopped smoking, so with a potholder in one hand and a spatula in the other, he dashed it through the rain out to the trash can on the edge of the driveway. Returning the cookware to the kitchen, he decided to leave the windows open, and then he headed out to his car. He hadn't driven it since he'd arrived.

The Datsun started with a wheeze, reminding him of its overdue tune-

up, and settled quickly into a familiar pattern of squeaks and rattles. He cracked open the driver's window and backed out into the street. Crawling along the empty residential streets of West Main Hill, he sniffed the aromas carried on the damp air, the smell of potential.

He turned out into the traffic of West Main, heading east, then south when he hit the heart of downtown. The businesses were a mix of retail, mostly small, some local businesses like restaurants and video stores and neighborhood markets in old brick buildings, plus national chains like auto parts stores and sandwich joints and anglofied ethnic joints with too-colorful plastic signs and aluminum frames around the windows. LA's aesthetic was taking over the world.

The Bigga Wan looked a little tattered. Paint peeled off the bricks on the wall adjacent to the parking lot. The place came off as a little dingy, especially next to the gaudiness that now lined so much of the avenue. Sam thought it was refreshingly dingy. Inside, the wooden floors were worn from years of traffic, and the counters were covered with a formica that was decades out of style. The baking smells were exactly as Sam remembered them, and he recognized the cashier behind the counter, too, a stout guy about thirty. He was one of the owner's sons. Or maybe he was the owner now. Sam remembered him being skinny and speckled with acne. He'd filled out and cleared up—grown up, in other words—but he was definitely the same guy. He didn't recognize Sam.

The place had gone down, and the prices had gone up. The pizza wouldn't be ready for a couple of minutes, so Sam took a seat in an empty booth, where something about the naugahyde looked different, definitely

new. The red was a little too red for the rest of the old muted interior decor. Looking around the dining area, Sam noticed that clientele occupied less than half of the available seating on this, a late Saturday afternoon. Maybe it was the rain.

Pizza in tow, he continued on to his favorite liquor store from his high school days, where the cashier would sell to you and ask no questions. Back then, when the place was empty, he would stand out in front leaning against the wall, chain smoking and watching the cars and people go by. But when you were in the store, he'd stand behind the counter and watch you like a prison guard. Aromatic Mike, they called him, because he always reeked of cologne like a lot of smokers whose noses have apparently stopped functioning.

Some other guy was behind the counter now. The beer selection that had looked so vast when he was in high school now looked sadly provincial. Not provincial because of its regional offerings, but precisely because of its lack of anything that might represent a local culture. Everything had a major brand-name. Sam bought a liter of flavored mineral water.

When he returned to the Museum, the kitchen still smelled like the pizza disaster. He figured he'd have to leave the windows open all night. He dug into the Bigga Wan Special, which didn't taste as great as he'd remembered, so he ate only a couple of slices. It was okay, it approximated the thing he'd had his heart set on—it was better than the frozen thing ever could have been—but Sam's memory had made it into something extraordinary. Maybe the quality had gone to hell, but he suspected that his naïveté had gone to hell instead.

Back in the reading room, he stood at the window moving his head up and down, back and forth, so the sights of the backyard rippled in the distortion of the glass. If he positioned his head just right, he could make the birdbath look like something out of a Salvador Dali painting.

The rain had stopped, but the sky was still heavily overcast, so the late afternoon settled into a premature dusk. It looked like winter in California, green and gray, except it was warm and muggy. He slid open one of the side windows to let in some air, and the pungence of the soggy soil hit him with eighteen-years worth of layered springtime memories. It smelled like the promise of better things to come, like sex on a camping trip, like the giddiness of teenage love, like the relief of a cancelled, hopeless little league game, like the fading importance of a school year. It didn't smell at all like California.

He sat in one of Stanfield's reading chairs, slouched like a teenager, and just like a teenager, he thought about sex. He thought about sex and Zoë, but once he visualized her breasts, reclaimed them from one remarkably vivid high school memory, he had to make himself stop. They wouldn't look that way anymore anyway, he told himself, and besides, the best way to insure that he did not have a restful summer was to entertain thoughts of fooling around with Zoë. It wouldn't be fooling around to Zoë.

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On Sunday, Don showed up at Sam's around two and found his friends sunning in the backyard. Zoë sat on a beach towel draped over one of the scallop-backed metal lawn chairs that had been herded around the Whittier's backyard since the time when Don was first getting to know Sam. The two of them had smoked weed in these chairs on more than one occasion. Of

indeterminate age, and having been painted at least twice that he could remember, the rugged, ergonomically incorrect fixtures were covered with a chalky turquoise patina and remarkably little rust. They still had bounce in their tubular framing.

"Don," Zoë said, "don't you think Sam should have a party here?"

He didn't answer the question immediately. Incognito behind his prescription sunglasses, he was paying more attention to her bare knees than her conversation. He sat down in one of the lawn chairs. "Long as it's not a costume party."

"In June?"

It was true that his stipulation did not make a lot of sense. But he had his reasons. Despite what he often referred to as his vampire tan—because of his sensitive skin he moved his chair to a spot in the shade of the maple tree—he hated Halloween and Halloween-type parties. The whole idea of little kids running around like princesses and superheroes demanding candy annoyed him. Adults acted worse. Even adherents to the more ghoulish and traditional Catholic or pagan roots of the holiday exhibited little of the complex awe that the ideas of death and rebirth should evoke in them. Frivolous, all this dressing up and parading around, and the idea of having a summertime masque or something like that was just a little too close.

"Just want to be sure," he said.

"Who said anything about costumes?" Zoë said, her red lips in a frown. "Just a simple welcome-home party—a couple of kegs and a stereo blasting in the dining room for dancing, Japanese lanterns in the backyard, intelligent conversation—that kind of thing."

"The intelligence of the conversation would depend on the couple of kegs," Don said.

Sam said, "There's no stereo on the premises that could remotely approach blasting."

"We can use mine—and maybe you could even play your guitar."

"No."

She looked over at Don, as if looking for his support, but he wasn't about to get in the middle of it. She extended her legs out in front of her and shrugged up her shoulders in a stretch that made Don think of lazing lions on the Serengeti Plain, though he knew he was conflating his astrology and zoology. Her belly button peeked out between her shorts and her short-sleeve top.

"Okay, fine," she said. "No guitar, then—just a nice homecoming sort of thing."

Sam fidgeted. "The prodigal son returns."

"Come on, Sam, that's not what I mean."

"Then why does it seem like everybody just wants all the gory details about my wasted life in California?"

She looked over toward Don again. "Why do I get the feeling that 'everybody' means 'Zoë'?"

She removed her feet from her slip-on sandals, and resting her heels on the empty shoes, flexed her toes, then unflexed them. Tarsal perfection, Don was thinking, when Sam said, "I don't really feel like this is my home anymore."

"Don't be silly," Zoë said. "This'll always be your home."

"It may be, but if it doesn't feel like it, then it doesn't feel right to me to have a homecoming party, that's all."

"How about a summer solstice party?" Don offered as a compromise. "That's coming up."

"But what does the solstice have to do with Sam's being back?"

Don didn't think that it had much of *anything* to do with it. That was why he thought Sam might be receptive to the idea. "Well," he said, "the summer solstice marks the beginning of the seventh sign of the zodiac to come after the winter solstice—seven being the number signifying 'return' in the hexagrams of the I-Ching—and the summer solstice marks the turning point when the days start growing shorter again, in effect 'returning' to winter."

Zoë looked over at Sam. "So—which one of you guys is really from California?" She looked back at Don.

"Not me," he said. Out of reflex, his eyes—fixed on her breasts that were tucked into her folded arms—had jumped up to meet hers. He'd forgotten for a moment that they were hidden behind his sunglasses.

"I don't know," Zoë said, pointing at the white legs sticking out of Sam's khaki shorts. "For someone who's supposedly spent seven years out in California, he doesn't have much of a tan to show for it."

"Why can't it just be a party?" Sam said. "Why does it have to have a title?"

Zoë was pouting a little. "I just thought it would be nice to have a party in your honor."

"But what if I don't want all the attention?"

"What do you think, Don?" she said. "Isn't Sam being a just little too oversensitive?"

He didn't think anything about Sam's recalcitrance. He did, however, think that the idea of having a party was a good one. Zoë spread her knees a little to scratch the inside of her thigh.

"If Sam is gracious enough to let us use the mansion for a party," Don said, "I think we shouldn't split hairs over its official designation. Everyone will know that Sam has been gone, and that he's back, without having to draw any attention to it."

Sam folded his arms across his chest and leaned back into his lawn chair.

"Solstice party," Don said, "with Samuel Whittier as guest of honor."

Zoë's eyes jumped from Don to Sam and back again. "Sam?"

"Sounds better than a homecoming party."

And so it was decided. The first day of summer was two weeks away, and the party would be on Solstice Eve, Saturday, details to be worked out later.

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Monday came full of excitement. Zoë began her last week of school before summer vacation. Fawn Hall began her testimony in the Iran-Contra hearings—Don had prepped his friends for the significance of that fact. And Sam woke up earlier than usual, around ten, to the rousing sounds of the Museum's gardener, Willis Hawly, whom his parents had used ever since Sam could remember.

Sam liked Willis. He still had his old gray Chevy pickup, which sat out

in the driveway. It had plywood extensions on the sides of the bed so he could pile up yard clippings and tree prunings and haul them off to the dump. Stenciled on each side was "Hawling and Yard Service." Willis had come up with the pun. He had a casual attitude toward his day job, not working too hard to expand the business, nor caring to add employees or partners, just doing a meticulous job with the clients he had, keeping them satisfied. He covered his personal essentials like food and mortgage—he had his own small place on the north side in Douglas, the traditional black section of town—plus the upkeep on his two vehicles. Besides the pickup, Willis had a '67 Belair, which he babied around town and drove to places as far away as Benton Harbor and Lansing for his night and weekend job as a guitarist and singer. With his four-piece group, the Kayzoo Kings, he played weddings and parties and clubs, specializing in tunes by the likes of Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon. They could also play a little bluesed-up version of a Hank Williams tune or some white-kid rock and roll if somebody requested it. Sam knew all this about Willis from talking to him and from seeing him around town, though he'd never actually seen him up on stage.

Sam made his way downstairs and put on water for coffee. Out the nook window he could see Willis pushing around his noisy power mower. He'd already finished the frontyard and would soon move on to raking and edging the backyard and blowing the sidewalks clean with one of those over-the-shoulder devices that made push brooms obsolete.

When the coffee was steaming in the cup, Willis was finished with everything except blowing off the sidewalks. Sam stepped out the side door.

"Willis."

Willis looked up and nodded his head. He finished bungy-cording the edger onto the back of his pickup and grabbed the blower. Sam stood on the porch and sipped his coffee.

"Your mama said you was coming home," Willis said.

"Yeah," Sam said, still resisting the notion that this was home.

Willis was a tall man, trim despite his fifty-some years, and he strode up to the porch extending his long-fingered ebony hand. "Have a little trouble out there in Frisco?"

Sam wondered if anyone in Kalamazoo had escaped his mother's briefings. "Yeah, I guess—time for a little change of scene."

"Still playing that guitar?"

Willis pronounced it "GIT-tar," and Sam smiled with his memories of that pronunciation. "Taking a break from it," he said.

When he was a teenager, he used to practice out in the garage—so he could crank it up and not drive his mother crazy—and on more than one occasion, Willis had stuck his head in the side door to tease Sam about his incompetence. "What y'all want that GIT-tar to sound like a Harley Davidson for?" he'd say, or something like that, although underneath the kidding he was obviously pleased to hear that Sam was playing something like the blues he loved, despite—Sam realized later—its heavy metal sheen and teenage excess.

Willis strapped on the leaf blower.

"Yeah," Sam said, "I was in kind of a rut."

"Best time to pick it up," Willis said, "when some woman's give you the blues."

Sam didn't want to hear anything more about his guitar or woman-induced blues. He offered Willis some coffee.

"No, thanks," he said. "I can't drink that stuff—anyways, I got to get on with this yard."

They shook hands again and said their goodbyes. Sam took his coffee to the reading room. Coffee in the reading room had become part of his wake-up routine.

Sitting in one of the leather chairs, he sipped his coffee and stared at Stanfield's trunk. It was weird to think that his great-grandfather's creative output, the sum-total of which fit in that trunk, was a trunkful more than any of the rest of his relatives had. Sam thought of his own modest box of output up in the attic, the band promo posters he and Ethel had created, the band's only CD, self-produced and paid for, and the cassette tapes of songs he had co-written with Ethel and the rest of the Mermen, tapes that they'd recorded at rehearsals and club gigs. He thought of his attempts at musical notation, the chord progressions and melodies sketched out on staff paper, his Romantic-sounding poetry—as Ethel called it—which never found its way into the songs the band composed.

His stare drifted up to Stanfield's mammoth bookcase. Nobody else in his family—besides Stanfield—had ever shown much interest in those books as far as Sam could tell. At first, the books had just been bricks in a boyhood scaling wall for Sam. Later his curiosity drove him to haul down some of those bricks, crinkly paged and gilded, classics from the likes of Chaucer, Homer, Shakespeare, Milton, and Dante, and others from American writers that were popular during Stanfield's lifetime: Melville, James, Hemingway,

Faulkner, Steinbeck. Sam remembered an illustrated *Alice in Wonderland* with pictures of Alice's elongated neck and the caterpillar sitting on the mushroom, smoking the hookah. It was still up there. On the top bookshelf was an enormous multi-volume set called *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. It had no pictures, as he remembered, just interminable battle descriptions. There was also a hefty King James Version of the Bible that did have pictures. Sam got up to pull it down from the shelf.

The spine of the Bible blended into all that dark leather binding and didn't appear to hold any special prominence among the bricks. His parents were officially Lutherans, but they weren't the practicing kind. As a child, Sam hadn't attended Sunday school, and the only times he'd set foot inside a church were for his brother's wedding—wife Carol's family was responsible—and a couple of funerals of his parents' friends. As religion did not have much of a presence at the Museum, the Bible had been a kind of serendipity when he first stumbled across it. Presently he sat down with it and thumbed through the pictures he remembered from years ago—Joseph being sold into slavery, David being anointed king, Jesus suffering the children to come unto him—almost lurid scenes in that Mexican calendar-art way that was popular in California. The last few pages consisted of maps of Palestine, the "Graeco-Roman World," Egypt, Jerusalem, the missionary journeys of Paul. Between the Old and New Testaments was the Family Record section.

The pages of this section were designed to look like certificates with flowery borders and Old English-style script. The first page even used the

word *certifies*, "This certifies that," followed by the names of his great-grandparents, Constance Mary Schwentner and Stanfield Abraham Whittier, in a precise scribal hand. Next came "were united in" and in much larger script "Holy Matrimony." The particulars of date, solemnizer, and witnesses were last: June 12, 1898, and in different hands, surprisingly legible signatures of people whose names Sam didn't recognize.

The next page was headed "Births." Written on the first four lines were the names James Madison, Esther May, Margareta Lynn, and Mary Anne, each followed by a date of birth. Sam's grandfather Samuel wasn't on the list. Sam knew that he'd had a different mother, but that was about all he knew, except for the family story about his blood great-grandmother having died before Stanfield settled in Kalamazoo at the turn-of-the-century. Sam's father always referred to Constance as his grandmother.

Pages followed with the headings "Marriages" and "Deaths," neither of which had any entries on its lines, and the final page of the Family Record featured the "Family Tree." On the "Mother" and "Father" lines were the names of Stanfield and Constance, each with siblings listed underneath, and then going back two generations were the parents and grandparents and their siblings. Almost all of the entries were on her side. It was quite a branchy specimen. The handwriting on the tree page was the same as the handwriting on the birth page, precise, not overly ornate but certainly feminine. It must have belonged to Constance.

There was no information anywhere in the Family Record about Sam's grandfather or his grandfather's mother. It was like Constance had felt no obligation to include them in the family story. Maybe there was another Bible

somewhere with them in it. Maybe his blood great-grandmother's family had it in some similar museum.

Sam closed the Bible and stared at the cover. Running his fingers over the words "Holy Bible" embossed on the front, he was struck by the obviousness of the thing he had been sensing for a couple of days: Sam wasn't much like anybody in his family—except Stanfield.

∞

Don called Sam around noon and got his taped greeting. "Sam—Don here. 'Museum of the Evolution of American Interior Design'—good, I like that. Hey, I've got some background music for the '60s room—what would that be, the TV room? Wait—the shag carpet was the '70s. Well, anyway, I've got some Bill Evans and Cannonball Adderly I want you to hear, so give me call."

Sam didn't call. Late afternoon, acting on intuition, Don came over and found him in the Museum's kitchen staring out the back window again. "Ah, another acolyte of Sedentarianism."

Sam looked up with a blank face.

"That's my religion, too," Don said.

Still no sign of recognition from Sam. His funk seemed worse now than when he'd first arrived, fresh from his—whatever it was that had gotten him fired and made him want to move back.

"You okay?" Don said.

Sam changed the subject. "What happened to the hearings—Bambi—whatever her name is?"

"Fawn Hall—don't get me started."

Sam made a gesture like a traffic cop, palm held up to signal STOP.

"But you know," Don said, "if you're going to make it very far as a Sedentarianist, you'll have to think about these things a little more seriously."

Sam made some disagreeing and disagreeable noises. When he and Don had been younger, they'd found comradeship in their political outrage, but apparently Sam had since been overwhelmed by cynicism, a cop out, as far as Don was concerned, something that he was not about to entertain. Sarcasm, yes. Sarcasm was a weapon to be wielded for progressive change. Cynicism was self-indulgence.

"Come on," Don said, "let's check out this record."

Sam was reluctant, but relented. They made their way to the TV room, where the twenty-five-year old, underpowered hi-fi stereo lived. The bulky maple console contained an AM/FM radio and a turntable with one of those spindles for stacking up records for successive play—including an adaptor for 45s—plus a pair of anemic speakers behind gold-flecked grill cloths. In the storage area underneath the turntable were stacks of Jackie's 45s and albums from the 1960s, her teenage years. Sam's albums from the 1970s had accompanied him to California where they'd disappeared. His current modest record collection consisted of CDs, which were stashed up in the attic, because there was nowhere to play them.

Despite the stereo's budget-quality components, it was an authentic period device for listening to Don's '60s jazz on vinyl. In the cool darkness of the TV room, Sam sat down on the couch and let Don put on the album. It started off with a solo piano playing a waltz that changed into a bouncy swing format when the saxophone restated the theme and rhythm section joined in.

Sam closed his eyes and leaned back. He heard Don say, "I'm heading out to the backyard for a bowl—it's a sacrament of Sedentarianism."

Sam tried to pick up the thread of his earlier reverie, the one that had snapped with Don's arrival, but he couldn't find its fraying end. Instead, the jazz on the turntable reminded him of the background music that used to play on the stereo at the Downtowner where Ethel worked. That connection led to a brief pang of missing her, something that lately had been like a musical passage from a skipping record, repeating ad nauseum, but the pang this time was surprisingly brief because he didn't get stuck there. Quickly he moved on to thoughts of music and Willis Hawly's simple advice: Pick up the guitar when you get the blues. Sam wasn't so sure what worked for Willis would work for him. His guitars seemed right where they should be. Before Don returned, Sam's thoughts moved from his guitars to Zoë's party. The idea was starting to grow on him.

"What do you think?" Don said. His tortoise-shell prescription sunglasses were riding low on the bridge of his nose.

"Sweet," Sam said. "Adderly is really lyrical."

Don joined him on the couch. "And Evans," he said. "Man, I love his quirky rhythm."

Slouching on the couch, not talking, they listened to the rest of side one. Don wiggled his extended fingers over the keys of his air piano whenever Evans played a particularly tasty passage—he knew right when they were coming. His own aborted piano playing career—or dalliance was maybe a better word—had ended when he became old enough to refuse any more lessons. If he'd only known at nine the regret he would feel now for

that abortion, maybe he would have been able to slog through the tedium of practice and get past the uncoolness of it all.

"This riff coming up—right . . . here—" Evans moved in fits and starts up the keyboard and back down again, shadowed by Don's wanna-be fingers. "That's so great."

Don turned toward Sam, the reluctant guitarist, the one who'd kept up with his instrument throughout the difficult teen years because it *was* cool, and who now wanted to have nothing to do with it. Sam sat still with his eyes closed. Don couldn't tell if he was even awake.

Sam wasn't thinking about the music at all. Zoë's comment of the previous day—"This will always be your home"—had been echoing around inside his head more loudly than the music. He tried to imagine living in the Museum, the man of the house, married to Zoë, of course. They would be the new curators, turning one of the rooms into the 90s Room—when the 90s arrived—eventually one into the Millenium Room, on and on. They'd have to do something with Ernie and Dotty—stash them up in Stanfield's room, let them write their own memoirs. Sam would have to find a job, maybe at the university—a groundskeeper like Willis—take it easy, have a decent health plan, job security, a pension fund, avoid the cubicle existence of his job in California. Like Willis, too, he could put together a little group and gig on the weekends, mix in his own tunes with the classics, produce his own CDs to sell out of a suitcase. Zoë would teach high school, of course, and they'd have a couple of kids.

Why did it all sound so awful?

When the first side of the record ended, Sam opened his eyes and

looked over at Don. "Nice."

Don, still wearing his sunglasses, got up and flipped the record over. "This next one cooks," he said.

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Dotty called on Thursday afternoon. Sam was out. He'd started the work week resolving to get out of the Museum at least a couple of times a day because it was good for his mental health. He'd figured out that much, anyway. Mostly he just walked around the neighborhood. By Wednesday he ranged out across West Main onto familiar streets of two-story, boxy houses, plainer than the Museum, but some equally old. He walked to a stationery store and bought some black ink, which he managed to get into the reservoir of Stanfield's fountain pen after some serious cleaning—the thing worked well considering how old it had to be. On Thursday, he pulled his old ten-speed bike out of the back of the garage, and finding it in need of just a few squirts of oil, he took off riding it through the university. That was when Dotty called and left a message.

"Hi, Sam! Museum? Well, that's different. I hope it doesn't confuse people. So, guess where we are—Santa Fe! You would not believe the Pickerings' Mexican house. They've got a painting on their bathroom door—Ernie, who is that painting by? He can't hear me—he's in the shower—anyway, it's by this famous American painter from the 1930s who lived here and just painted it on the door. It's neat! So, how's everything back there? Did you remember to take out the trash? Nag, nag, nag—I know. Well, I hope you're having fun being back home—having the house all to yourself. So call us at the Pickerings'—we'll be here till Sunday. And sorry I didn't call

you back from the Clarks'—long story. Bye!"

Sam had to laugh at the suggestion he was having the Museum all to himself. He waited until evening to call his mother back and talked to Mattie Pickering. She told him that his parents were out with her husband and she'd let them know he called. Dotty hadn't gotten back to him when Jackie called around nine.

"How about tomorrow night for euchre?" Jackie asked.

Sam was lukewarm to the idea. He suspected she was trying to trick him into some lightweight socializing with a bunch of people he didn't know and didn't care to know. "Tomorrow night, huh?" He drummed his fingers on the table.

"Be careful of that runaway enthusiasm, Sam—you're sounding like Dad."

"Who do we get for a third and a fourth?"

"How about Don and Zoë?"

This surprised him. "You want to spend Friday night hanging out with us kids?"

"Why not—they're your best friends, aren't they?"

She got him to call them, and he called her right back. "Zoë's all for it—she said she'd chop up some carrots and celery and whip up some dip."

"And Don?"

"He asked if we could play bridge instead."

"He was kidding, right?"

"He'll bring some chips."

"Good, we're on then."

On Friday evening, Sam sat at the kitchen table looking out on the peaceful, golden backyard when Jackie popped in the side door. She waved a twelve-pack in his direction. "Have you moved at all since I was here last?"

"Nature called once."

Jackie pulled a can of beer out of the package and held it up. Lite, just like his mother's. Sam shook his head. She stashed the other eleven in the refrigerator and slipped a fingernail under the pop-top and pulled. "No word from the others?"

"They'll be here."

Jackie came close and ran a finger over Sam's cheek. "Are these pillow lines?" She sipped on her beer. "You just get up from a nap?" She took a seat across from him.

"Remember? I haven't moved since you were here last."

"You're incorrigible." She took another drink and looked out the window. The sun had set, but darkness was nearly an hour off in the lengthy dusk of a mid-June day.

Don appeared at the side door. "Potato chips," he said, holding up the corn-chip bag, "and corn chips," he said, holding up the other.

His eyes were squinty, like he was stoned. Sam wondered if Jackie could tell. She acted polite, and Don came over to shake her hand.

"Haven't seen you in quite a while," she said.

He nodded his head and averted his eyes. "Really."

Sam went over to the refrigerator and stood there with the door open, staring in.

"Sure you don't want a beer?" Jackie said.

"No." He brought out the mineral water.

Jackie stood up. "So, let's play on the dining room table," she said.

"Sam, get some bowls for the chips—I'll get the cards."

Sam did as he was told. He filled the bowls at the kitchen table, and Don came up to him.

"I'm too buzzed," he whispered.

Sam crumpled down the top of the half-empty potato-chip bag.

"I got this *Indica* from California."

"Here," Sam said, "take a bowl."

"Is Jackie being weird?"

"No more than usual."

They carried the bowls out to the dining room where Jackie sat in Dotty's traditional chair, the one closest to the kitchen door. Sorting the deck, keeping out the fives for scoring, she placed the unneeded low cards on top of the hutch.

"You should leave the chips out in the nook," she said, "otherwise we'll get grease and salt all over the cards."

Zoë arrived at the side door and called, "I'm here!"

They carried the bowls back to the kitchen, where Don ducked into the refrigerator. Jackie gave Zoë a sisterly hug.

"Well, you've certainly grown-up," Jackie said.

Zoë didn't seem to know what to say to that.

Don pulled out a beer. He showed it to Sam and made a face. "Are these for general consumption?" he asked Jackie.

"Please," she said. "Help yourself, everyone."

They stood around the kitchen table for fifteen minutes or so and snacked. Zoë was talkative, happy, she said, because school was finally out. "Cards are the perfect way to celebrate the fizzling away of another school year."

"What are you doing this summer?" Jackie said.

"Teaching." She laughed. "I have to—I'm poor."

Jackie laughed along with her, and Sam and Don took synchronized sips of their beverages.

"I'll visit my family," Zoë said. "But I'd like to take a real vacation, too—it's been years."

"I hear you," Jackie said.

"I was thinking about Stratford, Connecticut to see some Shakespeare—but I don't know—I don't even know what's playing this summer."

Sam thought about the trip he'd taken with Ethel to see Shakespeare in Ashland, Oregon. She'd always thought of herself as "theater." She'd acted a little in high school and junior college. That was long dispensed with when she and Sam met—she was more than five years older than he—but it stuck with her. She always brought a bit of theatrics to the band's performances, always a flamboyant outfit or a little prop like a cane or a big coat to dance around with. The trip to Ashland was her idea, of course. Sam had never heard of it—he saw more Shakespeare in that one trip than he'd seen his entire life, before and since.

"You ever been to Ashland?" he asked.

Zoë hadn't, but she'd heard of it. "Let's go," she said, "we can take my car."

She was kidding, of course. She didn't have the time. But Sam knew she wasn't kidding, too.

Jackie washed her hands and started talking about euchre partners. It was decided that she and Zoë would take on Sam and Don—the girls vs. the boys. Everyone was slow to settle in around the heirloom dining-room table except Jackie, who retook her seat and dealt the first hand. Using the euchre method—two or three cards at a time instead of the usual one, a bit of the protocol that Sam might have forgotten if he'd dealt first—she spread the hands around the table and flipped up the nine of diamonds.

"You never go euchre on a nine," she said.

Sam's dad used to say that. It was one of the countless bits of table patter that caromed around a typical Whittier euchre game. It was all coming back to him.

"Pass," Don said.

Zoë hesitated. Jackie cleared her throat.

"Hey, come on," Don said. "We just started."

"Don't be paranoid," Jackie said.

Zoë passed, and Sam said, "Pick it up."

Jackie slapped down her discard and slipped the nine into her hand.

"You're not going to believe this."

"Did Sam tell you about the party?" Zoë said.

"Diamonds, right?" Don said.

"Yes," the women said in unison.

Don led the ace of clubs, and Zoë followed suit with the nine.

Jackie said, "What party?"

Sam didn't have any clubs—his hand was all red—so he sloughed off his only heart.

"Jesus," Jackie said and tossed in the jack.

"Don't take it personal," Sam said. "I haven't told anybody—by the way, Mom called."

"That was nice of her."

Don was taking his time figuring out what to lead.

"Don," Jackie said, "it's you."

For all his hesitation, Don seemed to have picked up Sam's signal. He led a heart.

"They're in Santa Fe at the Pickerings."

"The bickering Pickerings," Jackie said.

Zoë tossed on the ace.

"Atta girl," Jackie said. "So they're doing okay?"

"I guess—we haven't actually conversed yet."

"Anyway," Zoë said, "we're having a welcome-home-Sam party."

"Solstice party," Don said.

Sam trumped her.

"Like we didn't see that coming," Jackie said and tossed on the jack of spades.

"See you, raise you one," Don said, and Jackie gave him a look like it was he who was her younger brother.

"You had both bowers," Zoë said.

"Wait till you see the rest," Jackie said.

Sam ignored the talk of the party and threw his remaining cards on the

table. "I think these are all good."

As the others tossed their cards into the center of the table, Jackie made sure they were all aware of the hand she'd had, much like Sam's, only in black.

"The party's a week from Saturday," Zoë told her. "You should come."

Sam looked over at his sister and drummed his fingers on the table. "If you can stand the 'god-awful music.'"

Jackie didn't say yes and she didn't say no, just "Oh, screw you."

They settled into the stuttering rhythm of the game, the shorthand and shortcuts, playing out a hand only when the outcome wasn't obvious. The table talk became routine, and the patter clichés. When Don and Sam won the first game with a euchre on the final hand, Sam said, "That's the name of the game." He'd fallen back into it like he hadn't been away at all.

They took a break in the kitchen, opening new beers and picking at more snacks. There was talk of changing partners for the second game, but Jackie said, "No way—we're out for revenge, right Zoë?"

Zoë agreed, but presently wanted to fraternize with the enemy. "Let me brush your hair, Sam."

Sam was easy, like a housecat. She sat him down on one of the kitchen chairs and fetched her brush. When she pulled the first stroke through his thick short hair, he said, "Don's the one that needs it."

"Doesn't Don have someone to brush his hair?"

"Next," he said.

"Come on," Jackie said, "what is this, a beauty parlor? I thought we were here to play some cards."

So the fraternizing ended before it even got started, and they reoccupied the same seats. Zoë dealt. Sam took a while to pass, but Jackie immediately slapped a palm on the table top.

"Christ," Sam said. "Just like Dad."

"From the master."

Don pointed to Zoë and said, "These cards belong in Fawn Hall's paper shredder."

Zoë discarded and picked up the turned-up ace. "Yeah, that instilled a lot of trust in the government, didn't it?"

Jackie laid her cards face down, saying, "You're planning a loner, right?"

Zoë looked up and shrugged. "Always count on my partner for one trick."

"Well, I'm afraid this'll be the exception that proves the rule."

"Sometimes you have to go above the written law," Don said.

Jackie looked over at him. "Excuse me?"

"Exact quote," Don said. "Fawn Hall."

"Bambi," Sam said and led an ace.

Jackie shook her head. "I heard the congressmen were kind of mean to her." She threw down a card.

"She was covering up the facts—distorting the record." Don couldn't follow suit.

Zoë took the trick with the ace she'd picked up and led the left bower. Sam overtrumped it with the right, and Jackie said, "Oh, damn."

Don said, "Sending out a boy to do a man's job."

Jackie said, "Well, anyway, she was just doing her job."

In a bad German accent, Don said, "Just followink orders."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Don—"

Zoë threw down the next two highest trump and said, "I think these are good."

"She had on some underpants."

Despite Zoë's masterful play in the first hand, Sam and Don won the second game, too. Then they switched partners. Jackie wanted to play with her brother, and though nobody else cared much about it, she also wanted to determine a clear champion of the world at the end of the night. She found a piece of paper in the hutch and wrote everybody's name across the top, spelling Zoë's name "Zoey."

"How many games are we playing?" Sam asked.

"Whatever it takes."

"My name's wrong," Zoë said.

"Wrong?"

"Diaeresis," Don said.

Jackie just looked at him.

"Don's got it," Zoë said. She took the paper and pen, crossed out "Zoey," and wrote "Zoë." Jackie scrutinized the new spelling.

"It hasn't always been that way," Don said.

"I was named after the Salinger character—my mom's idea."

"Wasn't that Z-o-o-e-y?" Don said.

"I decided I didn't like it."

However it was spelled, Zoë didn't turn out to be the champion. By

the time Jackie put the cards back in the box, Sam clearly ruled the euchre universe. He did well no matter who his partner was. Zoë said it was because he was back in his hometown groove.

∞

On Saturday, Sam realized that he'd been in Kalamazoo for a week and two days: Nine days that hadn't shaken the world. Of course, they weren't supposed to shake the world, not even Sam's small part of it. That was the point. But the problem with this whole idea of being on retreat—a word that came to mind when he tried to qualify his time here, a word Ethel might come up with—was that being back at the Museum didn't make him think about things in fresh new ways. No doors were opening up to things he would otherwise not consider because of routines that kept him closed off to his possibilities—again, Ethelese. He'd come closest to that kind of freedom during his drive across the country. He could pull over anywhere, anytime he liked, following any whim that sent him down any two-lane road off the Interstate. Not that he'd done that. Almost exclusively, he'd just ignored everything except his final destination and followed his nose like a homing pigeon.

Final destination. The Final Solution. Here at the Museum all of Sam's options were clearly laid out. They were the same options he'd had seven years earlier when he struck out for California at age nineteen, and they all involved settling—settling down, settling with, settling for. Settling in much the way muck settles to form sedimentary rock. In his parents' house—where the pots and pans and dishes and soda crackers were in the same cabinets they'd always been, where the rooms smelled the same and the

furniture sat in the same places, where his bedroom was its own museum within a museum, a sort of shrine to teenagehood, where everything reminded him of the past not the future—it was like he could feel himself calcifying.

In the past, there had always been a bright optimism he'd associated with those first few days of summer vacation, like Zoë seemed to be feeling with the end of her school year. Sam looked out the window at the brightness of the backyard and tried to think optimistically. Tangible things existed out in California. He had friends. He could easily find another place to work and new place to live if he wanted to. But finding a house, finding a straight job—even in California—all of it sounded, right now, like just another form of settling.

In the 1890s his great-grandfather built the Museum. He had left the well-established East for the opportunities of the West—Midwest, anyway—and made a life for himself. Sam had left the well-established Midwest and gone to the well-established West, ending up in the Silicon Valley gold rush. Whatever Stanfield had done to make the money to build his house—and Sam realized he wasn't at all clear about what that had been—he wasn't just a settler. He didn't just calcify. Even at the age of ninety-something he was still laboring away at the typewriter and trying to create something new. He might have had trouble finishing things, but at least he kept trying. There was a kind of crazy courage in that.

During the week since he'd first gotten into Stanfield's trunk, Sam had dug farther down in the pile of stories and found fragments of things, much of it material that had ended up in the first story he read. Other stuff was

sketchy and incoherent. Facing a bit of free time—nobody was stopping by for a change—and buzzing with caffeinated curiosity, Sam picked off the next distinct story from Stanfield's pile. It was just a few pages long, stapled together at the top right-hand corner and titled "At the Society of Friends Asylum."

Coffee hot today—dry wood on the mess fire?—"Barn wood and fence railings."

"And good mornin' to you, too, Co'nel Wagner," says Nance. "Careful, or you be scaldin' your tongue."

Coffee black as old Nance's face—steam like gunpowder smoke—"Let the cup cool a minute here on the mess table."

"On the mess table," says Nance, smiling. "You do that, Co'nel Wagner."

Warm breeze—smells like the countryside in bloom—wet breeze—

"The weathervane pointin' south this mornin'," Nance says. "Wind from the south gots rain in its mouth, so don't you be gettin' no ideas, Co'nel."

Strong breeze—feels good in this heat—strong coffee like the whole day's ration—good and strong—

"Look a' that smile."

Old Nance's smile like a mouthful of piano keys—Bea singing in Washington—"His terrible swift sword"—'Glory, glory hallelujah'—"Bea—Bea—Bea—"

"What you tryin' a say, Co'nel?" Nance says. "Don't forget your coffee there."

Coffee warm all the way down—"Keeps us riding these pickets day after day."

"Uh huh."

Day after day after day—waiting and waiting and waiting to fight—mud and flies and campfire smoke—"Coffee tastes like civilization."

Sam looked up from the document and over at his coffee cup. "I like that, Stanfield."

"Tha's right, Co'nel Wagner," says Nance, "but don't you wander off, hear? Your missus comin' for a visit today, an' we gots to get you cleaned up."

Little Mac's coming—we'll make it out of Fredericksburg yet—we'll ride through the gates of Richmond—"We'll smell the sweetbay blooming."

"I wish they was sweetbay, 'stead of these nannyberries."

Nannyberry blossoms like plumes on a regiment of dragoons—

"Come on, Co'nel," Nance says. "Let's get you a shave."

"Lather it up good and hot, Joey, strop that razor good and sharp, don't want my face nicked up when Little Mac comes to review the cavalry."

"Oh, sit still now, an' help ol' Nance out."

Nance—Nance—Nance—

"Sometimes, Co'nel Wagner, you reminds me a that pistol Gen'ral Henzel I used to look after down in Virginny."

"Army of Virginia."

"Yessir, he had four thousand troops a Pennsylvania infantrymens, an' they all loved him an' would a followed him into hellfire if he akst 'em to—I remember, it was Bull Run, when Robert E. an' Stonewall was makin' a fool a Gen'ral Pope, an' makin' a mess a the Union boys in Deep Cut, they called it, an' it was a slaughter—Sit still, Co'nel, you don't wants me to cut your throat now, does you?—Anyway, like I was sayin', it was a slaughter, troops was mowed down like they was hay, an' we was movin' here an' there an' back again, an' in spite the slaughter, his boys kep' aksin', 'Gen'ral, when we get to go in, when we get to go in?'—they would a followed him right in that Deep Cut to their deaths if he'd akst them to, but then Gen'ral Pope kep' 'em in support all day, so's they never—Hold on now, we's almos' done—Yup, ol' Gen'ral Henzel he was a lot like you, the mens loved him an' trusted him, but he had a dreamy side—not when they was fightin', no sir, but when we was camped aroun' the fire waitin' for the nex' big fight, an' I used a take care of 'im jus' like I do with you, Co'nel Wagner, an' he might get to talkin' about the damn'es' things."

The Army of Virginia—

"Now, there you be," says Nance. "Ain't you lookin' dignified? Hair all combed, face all clean. I'm gone let Dr.

Riley know you ready for your missus. Whyn't you get yourself another cup of coffee?"

Coffee—coffee, but no hardtack for breakfast—plumes on a regiment of dragoons—what's the word, Captain? "'The moment for action has arrived'—to the gates of Richmond!"

"No, Co'nel Wagner, no diggin' this mornin', your missus be here any minute. Wait here whiles I tell Dr. Riley. Have some more coffee."

Dr. Riley—Riley—Captain Riley—'when this sad war is over we will all return to our homes'—Mother, when this sad war is over—Saunders won't return—Dawes and—red hair, bushy mustache, Major—Major Potts, Ira Potts won't—General Bayard returned in a box—a shot from Marye's Heights—you who fight and run away do live to fight another day—for them who've fallen—'bring you now face to face with the rebels'—shell exploding with the force of lightning and your tattered coat and this ringing, ringing, ringing, and no hat—no hat—plumes on a regiment of dragoons—pick them all off with your Enfield as fast as the bolt can fly—a small wager on it, Wyn?—'when this sad—'

Still I can see him. He shuffles across the grounds, past the nannyberry bushes that stir in the breeze blowing out of the southeast. It disturbs, too, the thin auburn hair sticking out at his temples. As if picking up a scent he looks into the wind. A torpor lifts. A slight smile rearranges the wrinkles on his face.

He feels instinctively for the hilt of the saber that once rode on his left hip. He paces along the flowerbed to the benches lined up next to a thicket of sassafras, then back again. The wind picks up, and the nannyberries become more agitated. He becomes more agitated. Thunderclouds billow on the horizon, the smoke of a depot fire to him or, with the faint rumble of the approaching front, more likely the smoke of an artillery barrage. He moves to the edge of the grounds, searching for a better vantage. Limbered up, the horse artillery comes closer and renews its barrage. Flashes are visible now. He needs to know more, to see more, and since he is still in good physical shape, he strides in through the back doors and heads for the rooftop before any of the white coats notice he's gone.

Napoleons!—Napoleons not ten miles away—a fight on our hands—mount up—wait—'the moment for action has arrived'—wait—all quiet now, but for the breeze—smells like the countryside in bloom—over miles and miles of countryside—four hell-bent days to the Valley—'the wildest march I ever'—'a question of legs'—through the mountains, past the clear, clean waters, the smell of clover in the rain—cold and rain—through this pass to the Valley—'gonna tear down the Stonewall'—closing in, closing, closing—'face to face with the—'

Napoleons—no!—twenty-pounder Parrotts, less than five miles—'Wagner, see what you can see'—get a look out—get a look—get a look—get a look—

Someone says, "Where art thou going in such the hurry,
Colonel?"

"Look out."

"Look out," he says, scratching testicles through baggy
white pajamas. "Dost not think I'll be fooled by subterfuge and
lies—children are simple things—by the riverbank—the
riverbank, Colonel!"

Riverbank—twenty guns across the river—get a message
to Shimmel—downstream—"Downstream!"

"The glory of God," he says.

A message to—

There!—twenty-pounders—'Wagner, see what you can
see'—the roof—to the roof—clear way to the roof—from the
south, the sound of the three-inch Ordnance—hell's fireworks—
'see what you can see'—

Someone else says, "Watch your step, slow down—you'll
knock us down the stairs."

Clear way to the roof—"Clear way to the roof!"

"Slow down," he says.

Napoleons—Napoleons—Ordnance—I hear the sound of
Ordnance rifles!—tear us to shreds—Twenty guns across the
river—stop the murderous fire—downstream—"live to fight
another day"—'see what you can see'—

Sam stopped reading for a peek in the dictionary to confirm that
Napoleons were artillery pieces. Other things were not at all clear—this

second piece made the first one seem absolutely lucid. Stanfield was sounding quite politically incorrect with this "old" Nance, somebody that Hollywood would have created about 1930. And there was this guy and his testicles.

A Negro says, "You's in a mighty big hurry, ain't you?"

"Clear way—"

"Clear way your own self," he says. "I gots to mop this floor—don't you be runnin' here. You let that floor dry now."

"This house is a Federal billet—stand clear to the roof."

"Sho' it is," he says. "Where's ol' Nance?"

"Unhand me—you're free now, make your way behind the lines."

"Alright, alright," he says. "I be gettin' Nance. You go break yo' neck, lunatic."

Through the dormer—'gettin' Nance'—Nance—Nance—
Napoleons—limbered up—closer—barrage of guns across the
river—flashes visible now—wind—lean into the wind—'break
your neck, lunatic'—where're the horses?—to the roof ridge—
'see what you can see'—the roof ridge—lean into—all fours like
a tomcat—flashes like lightning—

"Co'nel Wagner!" It's Nance saying, "What you see up there?"

The wind gets brisker. The nannyberry branches jump, pinnate

leaves flipped up, white flower clusters shaken loose. Up on the roof ridge near the lightning rods he crouches, his hair swept back and whipped in the gusts. Quiet, he watches the front come closer, now raging along the tree line about a mile to the south. It pushes across the open meadow empty of grazing horses. Old Nance shouts up to him, something about what does he see out there, and he points off toward the southwest. When the first pellets begin to rain down on him, he makes a hat brim with his right hand to keep them out of his eyes. In the wind, the pellets sting the skin. The lightning gets so close that the crack of thunder comes only a split second behind, and the white coats finally send Old Nance to get him down, back inside through the dormer window before he gets hurt.

Flashes like lightning—'lightning, Sammy, God's fireworks, then comes thunder, "The tuneful voice was heard from high: What passion cannot Music raise or quell! Music shall untune the sky." It's beautiful, Sammy, don't be scared.'—"I'm not scared, Mama."—Not scared—I'm not scared—not—"The Trumpet's loud clangor excites us to arms"—where're the horses?—not scared—not scared—God's fireworks—now the cool, cool rain—cool in the heat—cool pellets of rain against the skin—drumming on the roof—"Then cold, and hot, and moist, and dry, in order to their stations leap and Music's power obey"—lean—lean into the wind—

"Co'nel Wagner!" Nance at the dormer saying, "You gone be struck dead by lightnin'—come on in now."

Excites us to arms—Mother, when this sad war is over—
"General Bayard gone home in a box."

"What's that? I can't hear you, Co'nel."

Not scared—what passion cannot Music—Bea singing,
'He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored.'

"Co'nel Wagner, your missus is here," says Nance. "Come down and see your missus."

'See what you can see'—God's fireworks—ooooo—
'untune the sky'—God's artillery—horses pell-mell—'Is this how we drilled the wheel and retrograde?'—"Bring the horses back to the right about."

"Come inside, Co'nel Wagner," says Nance, "so's I can hear you."

Wheel and retrograde—

"Y'all want some coffee, Co'nel?"

Wheel and retrograde—

He seems concerned about the chaos of white coats down below rounding up his comrades who've scattered during this surprise attack. And what's in the distance comes closer and closer until the storm is on us. As the flashes crack all around, he jerks his head toward each new bolt. He looks in this direction, to the north. His face is more obvious with excitement than ever,

obvious even from three stories up. His arms flutter as if charged with the energy to perform a task they're restrained from doing. The gusty wind makes him dance to keep his balance. The sky has opened up, raining down on him, yet he stands without a hat, facing each crash and rumble of the battle music. The wind is steady now, stiff from the southeast. He leans in. Old Nance appears at the dormer, leans out to catch sight of him. Nance yells but gets no response. The lookout's baggy shirt, nearly soaked, clings to his torso. He faces north where the flashes and crashes have continued their assault. For two full seconds an exceptional bolt lights up the charcoal sky, and a rumble builds from it, crackles and pops, then a boom that rattles the windows. Everyone pauses in a collective gasp. At the dormer Nance yells again, sounding official, knowing what to say to get him to pay attention.

"Co'nel Wagner, we have a courier from General Sheridan."

Sheridan— "Give him some coffee sergeant—I'll be there directly."

He strides down the slope of shingles and folds himself into the window.

It was another weird ending to an even weirder story. Sam drifted out to the kitchen, put his coffee cup in the sink, and sat down at the table. He'd

read other screwy things like this, although he couldn't quite remember what and he didn't remember enjoying *them* either. With a sharp knock at the side door, Don let himself in.

"Always with the window."

"Hey, Don."

"What're you up to?"

Sam disentangled his fingers from the telephone cord. "Not much now."

"World Euchre Champ Basks in Glory," Don said.

Sam didn't want to encourage him with a response.

"Front page—below the fold, but definitely front page."

"I see you've had your daily ration of weed."

Don held up his hands. "Nope—taking a break."

Sam was skeptical.

"It was unpleasant last night with Jackie."

Sam shrugged his shoulders. "She seemed all right."

"Yeah, but there's always that—" Don sat down across from Sam. "—that disapproval she lays on you."

"I didn't realize you were so sensitive."

"Maybe it was the *Indica*."

"I guess I've had years of practice," Sam said.

The phone rang and Sam picked it up before it finished the first ring. "Hello." He looked over at Don. "Hi, Jackie." Don sat there for a moment, until Sam said, "Yeah, but they were out, according to Mattie—she said she'd tell them I called."

Uncomfortable with eavesdropping, Don left Sam alone and made his way to the library. He hadn't heard a thing about Sam's attic artifacts since he'd lent him the books on the cavalry. The trunk stood open and several pages of manuscript sat on the end table. He found the xeroxes of the depositions on top of the typewriter case and started working his way through the hurried handwriting.

To conclude my examination of the claim of Colonel Samuel T. Wagner, I offer this summary:

I approached the case with a prudent kind of skepticism that I believed to be entirely warranted. Mental disturbances, it is well documented, may be the result of any of a number of exciting causes, not necessarily a presumed cause, and therefore I directed my examination towards determining whether there might not be another likely to have produced his insanity besides the one that so many have alleged. I find that he was not a drinker of alcohol, that he had no family history of mental disturbances, and that his own occupations after the war presented no physical risks known to be associated with the onset of mental incompetency. On the contrary, I find that he suffered from and complained of severe head pains immediately from the time of the alleged injury he received to his person in October 1863 at the engagement at Buelee's Ford, Virginia.

"I forgot you wanted to read those." Sam stood in the doorway.

Don held up the page. "This is a primary source."

"How about you read it later this evening?"

"Why?"

"Jackie wants me to help her with her washing machine."

"Trying to keep you busy?"

Sam tossed his head toward the door. "Come on—keep me company."

They took Don's car. As they were climbing into the mid-1970s box of a Chevrolet, Sam said, "Your mom still has this thing."

"It's my gas-guzzlin' Caprice now."

They headed out across town. Jackie lived in a 1960s tract of ranch-style homes, of which Don had seen too many. Using maybe four different floor plans, each of which had been flipped over to create its mirror-image and make for eight possibilities, the developers had depended on their wealth of inexpensive facia—eave lines, porch fixtures, shutter variations, garage-door choices—to make the houses appear individual. Over the years the homes were further individualized with landscaping—meaning grass and deciduous trees, mostly—and personalized mailboxes and a wide variety of picket-fence treatments.

The neighborhood reflected the range of socio-economic levels and cultural values that make up what is generally and imprecisely referred to as middle class: Some homes had neatly trimmed lawns and late model American cars in their driveways and new paint jobs and automatic garage-door openers—actually most of them had the door openers—but some had

wild lawns and dead cars up on blocks and trashcans sitting in plain view of passers-by. And there was everything in-between. No neighborhood association enforced any strict adherence to codes. Surely the inhabitants wouldn't stand for that sort of overt meddling in their personal freedoms of choice, preferring their conformity to sneak up on them when they weren't paying attention.

"Who does Jackie usually get to do these sorts of things?" Don said.

"No idea," Sam said. "But like you said, I get the distinct impression she's trying to keep me occupied."

They pulled into her driveway, and Jackie stood up and stretched. She'd been crouching over her garage-wall flower bed. "Oh, I'm glad you brought Don. I was hoping you could move the freezer, too." She slipped off her gardening gloves and reached inside the driver's side window of her car to activate the switch for the garage-door opener.

"Where do you want it?" Sam said.

"Just down the wall a couple feet," she said. "It's heavy, though."

First they addressed the freezer issue. Jackie was right. It was formidable.

"What's in here, anyway, a side of buffalo?"

"Just food."

Sam opened the door, and he and Don perused the discount-store, economy-size packages of everything from waffles to hamburger patties, from sacks of French fries to tubs of ice cream. "Guess you're ready for the big one," Sam said.

"The big one?"

"In California it's earthquakes—I guess it's tornadoes back here, whatever."

"That'd be canned goods," Don said. "If the electricity went off, you wouldn't want a mountain of food thawing in the freezer."

"I just hate grocery shopping," Jackie said.

Sam and Don rocked the freezer back and forth to start it walking across the concrete floor. Jackie hovered around nervously. "Careful." They rotated it on its feet, ninety degrees one way, ninety degrees back, until they managed to waddle the behemoth to where Jackie wanted it.

The washing machine required more plumber's finesse than brawn, and despite their notable lack of brawn, they were worse off in the finesse department. The PVC pipe that ran up the wall for the washer's drain hose needed to be replaced. They were intimidated by the task, and after jerryrigging the old pipe with duct tape and wire, Sam told Jackie to spring for a professional.

On the way back to the Museum, Don opted for a detour on I-94. In high school, he and Sam had often cruised the Interstate when they were stoned. Now they were both abstaining. Sam was avoiding alcohol as well. He hadn't drunk a drop the entire euchre game, and that was unusual. In fact, Don hadn't seen him drink any alcohol since he'd been back. He thought about the depositions, the comment about Wagner being a teetotaler.

"I noticed you weren't drinking last night."

Sam muttered something.

Don drove on and didn't push it.

Eventually Sam said, "I've been trying to lay off."

"Weed and alcohol both?"

"Yeah, my body—the temple."

Don eased into the left lane to pass a semi truck. "What used to merely be our shrines to Dionysus."

They stared out the windshield, riding along in silence for a few miles, then Don took an off-ramp and doubled back toward Kalamazoo.

After a mile or so Sam said, "I almost fucking killed myself."

Don just listened, again said nothing.

"I crashed my fucking car into a retaining wall," Sam added finally.

"Nobody else back here knows."

The Occurrence at Buelee's Ford

From a hill south of the river came a barrage of cannon. Samuel Wagner counted two dozen guns. A brigade of horse took cover in a stand of Virginia pines, unable to cross to the slope of farmland to the north because of the cannonade. The farmland lay fallow, as it had for two seasons with the constant movement of the armies. The river ran deep and muddy green through these rolling hills, but here was Buelee's Ford.

The stranded brigade had forded the river early in the morning to hold the crossing for Augustus Bramble's Federal cavalry. At that time the main force of Southern infantry moved west, farther upstream. Bramble thought it was trying to turn his flank. His cavalry was guarding the right flank of the Northern army as it retreated back towards Washington. He sent his first brigade upstream along the north side of the river to keep an eye on the Southerners. Then the enemy changed direction and advanced on Buelee's Ford.

It was fall. The battle fought that summer at Gettysburg had not gone well for the Southerners. Now they were back on Virginia soil, but they were not beaten. They would not let the Union press an advantage. Soon winter would hamper both

armies, enemies settled on opposite sides of the river in a stalemate much like those of the previous two winters. The infrequent skirmishes, the partisan raids and Federal roundups of partisans, the constant scour of the countryside for spoils to feed the men, the miserable camps with their smoldering fires, their air of anxious boredom, and the weariness of all (soldiers and populace alike, old farmers unable to plan for spring, merchants with no reliable sources of goods, wives who slept alone), only these things would remind everyone that peace was a long way off, that despite the lack of cannon fire and mass movements of men and goods and piles of the dead and dying, the war dragged on. But now the armies fought openly. There was an urgency to take advantage of the remaining good weather. And here the battle raged the hottest.

Samuel Wagner sat astride his horse holding the Tenth Pennsylvania Cavalry in position. His regiment guarded the southern perimeter of Bramble's hilltop headquarters, well beyond the range of the Rebel guns. Southern infantrymen pushed toward the riverbank beneath the volley of shot. They threatened to cross when the shelling stopped. The stranded brigade, too, was out of range of the guns. But it was cut off from the ford by the bursting shells and would soon be surrounded by the infantry. Wagner considered its commander Herrick Shimmel his friend. He was anxious to do something. He wanted to help, but the Tenth had its orders.

Wagner was the name of the colonel in the depositions and the second screwy story. Sam set "The Occurrence at Buelee's Ford" aside and searched around the room for Don's cavalry books, which he found under the depositions on the end table. The index at the end of the second volume listed a single entry for Lieutenant Colonel Samuel T. Wagner:

Officers' field reports were meant as much for the purpose of army record keeping as for the purpose of public relations with state politicians, who had to sustain public support and morale on the home front even as the war dragged on longer than anyone could have predicted in 1861. In his report on an engagement in the run-up to the Battle of Spottsylvania Courthouse in May 1864, Lieutenant Colonel Samuel T. Wagner of the Tenth Pennsylvania writes: "I regrouped my men after we were pushed back by an enemy force of superior number, and we countercharged. We caught them unawares and drove them back five hundred yards to the other side of the Ny River.

Captain Pennelroy's company secured the bridge. A squadron under the command of Sergeant Mountz captured the enemy's guidon much to the delight of the regiment. We held the bridge until morning when Meade's infantry crossed amid cries of Remember Gettysburg!" The call to remember Gettysburg had as much emotional impact in the Pennsylvania statehouse as it did on the battlefield.

For four days, Sam had read nothing out of Stanfield's trunk. His great-grandfather wasn't exactly creating page-turners. Sam had even stopped

spending much time in the reading room. The weather was nice, not too hot, and it bolstered his resolve to spend more time out of the house. It brought out a healthy sort of sociability in him, and with the steady parade of Museum visitors, he needed to be sociable. But on Wednesday he woke up early, and enjoying the solitude, he took his second cup of coffee into the reading room and plucked the next group of pages off Stanfield's pile. To his surprise, the third story was easy to read. And with the reference in Don's book, it was all starting to seem very real.

Kennard McHenery stood with the staff officers gathered around Bramble. He was an aide de camp. Confederate shells tore up the slope far below them. In the smoke and the dust, the brigade trapped in the stand of Virginia pines was no longer visible.

"Get word to Wagner to position his regiment one hundred yards to the right," the general shouted to McHenery. "Then to hold there until Ewell makes a move across the ford and to be prepared for hell to break loose. Then get word to Davenport's battery to occupy Wagner's current position and stand by for orders to fire."

McHenery took off down the slope. Within minutes a courier arrived to tell Bramble of a ford farther downstream where Shimmel might cross to safety. It was news Bramble had been waiting for. But to get word to Shimmel he needed to send someone through the cannon fire and across the river at

Buelee's Ford. McHenery was the obvious man. Bramble ordered the courier to catch up to his aide and relay the orders, then to return directly to take a reply back to the cavalry corps headquarters.

Wagner welcomed McHenery's message to move his regiment. It gave him relief to be doing something, though he knew it would not last. When the courier came looking for McHenery, Wagner hoped it was with orders to advance. He left his second-in-command John Simpkins to complete the redeployment as he spoke with the courier.

"What's the word?"

"Is McHenery gone?"

"Yes."

Wagner pointed off in the direction of Davenport's battery, but neither McHenery nor the battery was visible from their vantage. The smoke was too thick.

The courier told Wagner of the nature of his message to McHenery and of the urgency of his own orders. He did not know how he might perform both tasks at once. Wagner stared down the slope and strained to see across the river through gaps in the smoke. He felt confined in his saddle.

"How far off is the ford?" Wagner said.

"Maybe two-and-a-half miles."

"You have directions?"

The courier held up a folded sheet of brown paper.

"Everything is in this note."

"I'll deliver it," Wagner said. "You can tell General Bramble."

The courier hesitated. Wagner outranked him, but the lieutenant colonel was countermanding the general's orders. He looked down at the note.

"We haven't time to follow orders to the letter," Wagner said. "What's important is that they be carried out efficiently."

He handed him the note. "Godspeed, Colonel Wagner."

Sam heard the telephone ringing. After the second ring, he got up. He carried the story with him to the kitchen and kept reading.

As the courier rode back up the slope, Wagner called to Simpkins, "Major, I'm taking orders to Shimmel. Take charge here until I get back."

"Let me go, Colonel," Simpkins said. "You're more important here."

"I won't be long," Wagner said. "I'll be back before we're called upon to act."

He urged his horse down the slope. Within fifty yards he could hear nothing but the boom of the cannons and the crack of exploding shells. But he felt good to be moving forward. Exhilarated, he pressed on toward the ford. When he lost sight of it, he kept moving until he glimpsed it again, and then made whatever adjustments he needed in his bearing.

By the time Sam got to the phone, the machine had already picked up the call, and his mother started talking.

"Hi, Sam! Darn, I keep calling at different times of the day thinking I'll catch you, but I guess you're not keeping a very regular schedule—Ernie, I know there's a two-hour time difference—your father thinks I can't tell time." Sam was about to answer it, then hesitated. "Anyway, I'm not surprised you're on the go, there's a lot to catch up on. So, we're at the Grand Canyon now! Sorry, I didn't call you back from the Pickerings'—Mattie forgot to tell me until the morning we were leaving, and it was too early to call you, even with the two-hour difference, but now that we're at this fancy campground—it's got everything, you wouldn't believe it—" Sam tuned his mother out and looked down at Stanfield's story.

He came within range of the Confederate cannon fire. Cannisters exploded off to his right. Spherical case landed to his left. A cluster of shells created such a cloud of dust between him and the river that he had to cover his eyes and nose to keep his head clear. His horse jerked away from each explosion. Torn between its instincts and its training, it reared. Wagner nearly fell off.

Sam tuned back in as Dotty was saying goodbye. "—in LA next with the Kishiros—they're on the list. So, I'll call you again, or you can call us, you know. Bye, Sam! We love you!"

The Kishiros—Denise's parents. He and Denise had had a short-lived

fling—clandestine and nasty—that ended when her family moved west at the end of his junior year of high school. The whole time he was in California, he'd never thought to look her up. He'd call his parents at the Kishiros'. Maybe he'd get a chance to talk to Denise.

He headed back to the reading room.

A cannister burst in front of him. Then he was on the ground. His hat was missing and his uniform splattered with blood. He was unsure at first where he was, and once he realized where, unsure how long he had been unconscious. But he was sure of one thing, that he had to get across the ford.

His trusted horse lay twisted and dead. It had taken the force of the blast in its neck and chest and shielded him, keeping him alive. But he had no time to be sentimental. He crawled on his hands and knees as the shells continued to explode around him. His progress was frustrating and slow. Between the heavy clouds of smoke and dust he caught glimpses of the river and Buelee's Ford. The noise was incessant, the cannons firing and the shells exploding, but also a hum that he realized was inside his head, droning and throbbing as if trying to get his attention. Once it had his attention, he was unable to fathom what it meant, why he was supposed to pay attention to it. So he struggled to ignore it, to keep his mind on the river that continually disappeared in the smoke.

Then he reached a point on the slope after which the river

stayed within his view. He was close now. A shell struck the water and sent a geyser up into the air and across his body. The water was warmer than he expected, but it cleared his head. It fixed his mind upon the small plank-of-wood sign at the edge of the gravel roadway. "Buelee's Ford," it read. The wood was grainy and weathered. The writing was a faded black,. The letters were uneven and uncentered across the plank. The post on which the plank was nailed leaned toward the roadway. Yet it seemed in no danger of toppling to the ground.

There was a lull in the cannon fire. The image of the plank-of-wood sign remained, even after he had waded thigh-deep into the muddy green river and fixed his eyes upon the opposite bank. The river was broad here at the ford, nearly fifty yards across. The water moved slowly. It clung to his legs and tugged at him. The current urged him to give in, to let it carry him back to his childhood when he floated with his friends in Sandy Creek. But the hum in his head was more insistent. It was like the urgent murmurs of an army of prisoners who buzzed with rumors of release. He leaned into the current as the little plank-of-wood sign leaned into the roadway. When the firing began again, another shell hit the water. He felt a familiar excitement and had no desire to contain it. Then the water grew shallow again, and he was across. He ran into a tangle of willows.

He passed a corpse, twisted among smoldering splinters. The man's horse was not all there, but its eye stood open and

aware. It breathed in short, raspy bursts. Stumbling, Wagner struggled over the uneven ground. Willow boughs slapped his face. The sweet stink of gunpowder floated upon the dankness of the riverbank.

Out in the river a tree trunk floated by. The willows along the north bank blocked his view of the slope he had just come down. A shell landed across the river opposite his position, where he clutched a willow branch and caught his breath. The blast sent a plume of water up into the air. A glob of his horse's blood now formed a scab among the hairs of his left temple. It pulled at his scalp as he turned his head from side to side. His eyes grasped what they could beyond the confetti of wood splinters and leaves floating with the mist across the river. His regiment was up there somewhere.

He struggled on. With another lull in the cannon fire, he was again aware of the din inside his head. When he reached the open land between the river willows and the stand of Virginia pines, he hesitated. He would have to run across it. To his right, more than half a mile away and up the hill, sensed, remembered, but no longer seen, sat the cannon. Beneath them came the Rebel foot soldiers. They would not be able to see him any more than he could see them. If a sharpshooter killed him, he would not do so deliberately. It would be Wagner's fate. He headed out across the field as quickly as he could.

As he came within shouting distance of the stranded brigade, one of the horsemen fired at him. He heard an anxious

voice cry out, "Hold your fire—he's one of us."

The trapped men received Wagner as if he needed their help, not the other way around. He explained who he was. He told them he had a message from Bramble about a safe line of retreat. Quickly they put him up on a horse behind a young lieutenant. The two maneuvered through the huddled brigade, deeper into the thicket. The lieutenant found the brigade commander with his color guard. Shimmel welcomed Wagner with the anxiousness of a condemned man.

"There's a ford two-and-a-half miles downstream," Wagner said. He handed over the message. His hands fluttered and pointed. He pressed at his temples.

Shimmel read the brief note. "The Johnnies are getting ready to charge," he said. "Will the general be able to hold on?"

"The first brigade is pulling back," Wagner said. "We'll all be pulling back by sundown."

"Yes."

"And you'd best pull back downstream before they get in behind you."

"We," Shimmel said. "You're not going back across at Buelee's."

The third story ended there, and Sam became aware of the fact he was fooling with the bump on the side of his head. He wanted more of Buelee's Ford, but found none. He dug through the pile of paper in the trunk, and though there were other pages related to this story—as there had been with

the first and second stories—they appeared to be earlier drafts of the same material. Stanfield just couldn't seem to finish anything.

Over the next couple of days before the party, Sam had some occasion to read more, and he went back to look at the first two pieces. They made more sense in the context of "The Occurrence at Buellee's Ford." It seemed to him that the three stories had been written years apart, though he couldn't pinpoint why he thought so. Stanfield had written the first one around 1956, but the second and third ones weren't at all obvious. Without the same kind of clear chronological markers in them, they could have been written just as easily in 1950 as in 1900.

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When Zoë arrived at the Whittier's house on the day of the party, Sam was out in the backyard, lining a couple of trashcans with plastic bags. He looked cute in his khaki shorts, ped socks, and sneakers. "Just in time for the beer," she yelled.

He waved. "How about back here on the grass?"

She was fine with that. "Put them in the shade so the ice will last longer."

"By these yardlights," he said, pointing to the floods on the side of the garage, "so people can see what they're doing when it gets dark."

She asked about a dolly to ferry the kegs from her trunk, and he produced a rusty metal thing from the garage. Together they loaded just one keg at a time onto the dolly, and even then she was surprised the rickety thing didn't collapse. She carried the bags of ice, which they packed into the trashcans around the kegs.

While Sam stayed to tap them, Zoë went inside to stash the pile of burger patties in the refrigerator and see how well the dining room was shaping up as a dancing room. It hadn't shaped up at all. The table and chairs still sat in the middle of the room. The Amish girl who cleaned the Whittier's house appeared. Jenny was about sixteen, smooth-faced and sturdy, with a long braid hanging down the middle of her back. Zoë introduced herself and enlisted Jenny's help with the stereo.

They each took an end of one of the speaker towers, and as they waddled with it through the kitchen into the dining room, Jenny explained that her boyfriend had the same exact speakers, adding that he lived in town and wasn't Amish. Then, despite her seeming to be quiet and modest in her plain dress and organdy haircovering, not at all the type to renege on her anabaptism, she made a point to say that she was not planning to be some Amishman's brood sow.

"Are you going to marry your boyfriend?" Zoë asked.

"If he asks me," Jenny said.

"And if he doesn't?"

"Then who needs him?"

Zoë didn't have a ready answer for that. On their way back out to the car she said, "Well, he'd be a fool if he didn't."

Jenny just smiled.

They brought in the second speaker and the console, then Sam joined them.

"The kegs are tapped," he said.

Zoë leaned against him. "We need to figure out where to put the

stereo."

Jenny said, "The cleaning's done, Mr. Whittier—I'll see you in two weeks."

"Sam," he said, "call me Sam—here, let me get your money."

Sam went off to the back of the house leaving Zoë and Jenny to think about the stereo. Jenny pointed to the hutch. "Put it over there and point it across the room long ways—that's what I'd do, anyway."

Sam came back and handed Jenny a small envelope with her name handwritten across the front, his mother's handwriting.

"Oh, one more thing," Zoë said. "Maybe you can help us lug this table out into the foyer."

She and Jenny took one end and Sam grabbed the other. They walked the hunk of oak through the double-door opening that led from the dining room to the foyer and tucked it up against the wall below the staircase. "If anyone needs a place to toss their coat," Zoë said.

When Jenny rode off on her black, wide-tire bicycle, Zoë said, "Smart girl—I'd like to have her in my class."

"Don't imagine that's ever going to happen," Sam said.

For the next couple of hours, they had the place to themselves. Sam went out to string up lights in the backyard. Zoë put up party decorations, little glittery things she hung from light fixtures and wove into the stairway banister and tucked like bunting into the corners of the dining-room doorway. Back in high school, she'd imagined living with Sam in the Whittier house, imagined a couple of kids running around—not a bunch, just a couple—and amused herself with the fantasy of entertaining guests,

filling up the rooms with interesting people. All that seemed silly now. She remembered that she'd even talked with Sam about it once, when they were more or less a couple, but he hadn't been very enthusiastic. He said something about rug rats breaking all the antiques and pissing his mother off, and Zoë thought maybe she'd scared him with that kind of talk. Later she decided his problem was with the house itself. But she didn't understand it.

After putting up the lights, Sam came back in and started moving the dining-room chairs into places along the walls of the parlor. She had always loved the Whittier's parlor. She followed him in and looked up at the chandelier light fixture with little dangling crystals, down at the suite of matching sofas and chairs that Sam's mother had reupholstered, and over at the antique mantelpiece knickknacks from his great-grandmother's era.

She scanned the busy wallpaper pattern of perwinkle flowers. "You weren't going to let people in here, were you?"

"Wasn't planning on it—Dotty'd have a fit if something broke."

"But people should be able to sit in those chairs."

Sam stood in the doorway with one in his hands. "Just tell me where you want me to put them."

"Don't get mad," she said. She walked out into the foyer. "A couple'll fit out here. How about the TV room? Drunks won't be able to hurt much in there—the pukey shag carpet?"

He took the chair down the hallway.

"We should close this off," she called after him, "and put a sign on the door."

She fetched a piece of paper and pen from underneath the phone in the

kitchen and wrote "Private" on it. He drew the sliding doors together and latched them, then found some scotch tape to attach the sign.

"I want to close off the reading room, too," Sam said.

"Here, give me that," she said and took the roll of tape. "I'll make the sign—you move the rest of the chairs."

She went off, and Sam arranged the chairs around the TV room. Back in the dining room he sized up the bay-window table with its lamp and doilies and porcelain. It didn't look like the kind of thing to leave in the proximity of a dance floor. As he stashed the little things he'd gathered from the table into the foyer closet, Zoë came in from the dining room carrying a change of clothes.

"The sign's up," she said. "I'm going to jump in the shower now, okay? You don't need me for anything else, do you?"

"No, I'm just going to move this other table and set up the grill."

"You haven't set up the grill, yet?"

"No—the lights took forever."

"Can you hook up the stereo, too?" she sang on her way down the hallway toward the bathroom. "You're so good with plugs and wires."

He thought about the modular stereo hulking in the corner of the dining room. There were probably three wires total.

"Hey, maybe you should use the upstairs bathroom—the one down here is cleaned up."

Zoë immediately came back through the foyer and tossed her clothes on the table. "Forgot my shampoo."

Sam carried the bay window table into the foyer and stowed it under

the dining table. Zoë's bright dress with its pattern of red tropical flowers lay there under a pair of red panties and matching brassiere. Along the waistband of the panties, right in the middle of the front, was a tiny bow. The bra had the same bow in between the cups.

Ethel often didn't wear panties, and she had little bitty breasts, almost all nipple, so she hadn't even owned a real bra. Sam stared at Zoë's underwear, unsure which was sexier—with or without. Then he heard Zoë back in the house, and she bounced into the foyer. He had a new-found awareness of the breasts under her baggy T-shirt. They'd been quite a bit smaller when she'd let him unhook her bra in high school.

She picked up her clothes and headed off down the hall. "Fifteen minutes and I'll be a new woman."

Ethel had dumped Sam for a woman just before Thanksgiving, then she moved back to Portland where she'd come from. He remembered distinctly the last time they'd had sex. The Mermen had disbanded in September, and it was a Saturday night when he and Ethel were both missing the attention they'd gotten used to up on stage. They went to a small club where they'd been regulars the previous summer, and already Sam felt like a has-been. He drank mineral water because he didn't want to get started. Ethel drank bourbon. He sat at the bar and engaged in small talk with other nonworking musicians. She ranged over the entire dance floor and seemed to be competing with the band for the crowd's attention. A couple of guys followed her around like hounds.

Sam took her home when he convinced her that the after-hours party would be a depressing affair, but she wanted to crank up the stereo and keep

dancing with him in the living room. They descended into their own private mosh pit, crashing into one another, then tussled themselves to the couch, where Ethel fought her way on top—Sam didn't try too hard—and wrestled themselves through the act. She didn't even take off her skirt, just hiked it up and climbed on. He slipped his hands underneath her shirt to play with her nipples the way she liked, and they banged it out to the tempo on the stereo. The smell of the bourbon and cigarettes was all the smell there was, except for the smell of her sweat, which was like nobody else's.

It was seven months now. The shower started up, and he pictured himself in there with Zoë. He shook the image out of his head and went straight to the backyard to set up the grill. As he rolled the underused gas-fired thing out of the garage and over to the grass just opposite the beer kegs, he took a fresh look at himself. He was wearing the yuppie shorts that he'd worn on the company picnic out in Silicon Valley. He could imagine Ethel laughing at them. His T-shirt was branded above the pocket with the name of his former employer—pretty natty. His sneakers were made in Asian sweatshops by women and children who worked for pennies a day. Ethel used to wear specially made hemp sneakers, earth-friendly, no guilt attached. Sam felt like a traitor to his own social and political awareness. Or at least to Ethel's. He was the picture of success, standing out there on a Saturday afternoon prepping the grill in the plush backyard of the Museum. All that was missing was the six-figure job and the SUV and the wifey. Not to mention the six-figure operation to remove the cynical lobe of his brain.

Steam from the shower rose out of the open bathroom window. Sam turned his attention back to the grill and was scraping off the grease when

Don called out a greeting from the driveway. "Am I the first one here?"

Sam didn't look up. "Zoë's in the shower," he said, and when he sensed that Don had come up behind him, he added, "It's still early."

"Too early for beer?"

Sam saw him, peripherally, over by the kegs. "No, they're tapped—go ahead, the cups are right there."

Don busied himself with the keg pump and filled up his cup before Sam turned around and took a look at him.

"What the hell," he said. "I thought this wasn't going to be a costume party." Don's spiky hair made him look like he was from yet another era that wasn't quite the current era. Sam couldn't remember the last time it was possible to see Don's chin and his ears and the back of his neck—all of it. And the sunglasses—they were new, too. "You're only about ten years out of date now—what came over you?"

Don shrugged and said, "Actually I've been thinking about it for a long time."

"For ten years?" Sam said. "You've never said anything."

"Well, you haven't been around here, either."

Sam put the grill back in place.

Don took a sip of the beer. "I was getting sick of the upkeep."

Sam laid the grilling utensils on top of the cutting board. "The way your hair used to look took a lot of upkeep?"

"It was a hassle sometimes." Sam walked around him and checked him out. "Besides, it was getting thin," Don said. "It was too obvious."

"It looks good," Sam said.

Don was happy to hear that. He was acting nonchalant, but he was feeling a bit conspicuous. He hadn't given the fourth reason: Zoë. And there was a fifth. "I figured the solstice was a good time for a change."

"Good as any."

Indicating the grill, Don said, "You need some help with that?"

"No, it's ready—I'm going in for a shower myself."

"I'll stay out here and check IDs."

Sam headed off toward the side door. "Zoë'll be out soon."

Don found his way to one of the lawn chairs and had a pang of an urge to torch one up. It had been a week without weed. A week without weed, gainfully employed—after a fashion—and now the hair cut and the face shaved. It had been twelve years since that combination of modifiers had all applied to him at once.

"Don." It was Zoë calling out from the driveway.

He sat up straight in the lawn chair. "Back here."

"Sam said I ought to get a peek at you." She was looking exceptionally gorgeous in her flower dress. "Oh, my God—what came over you?"

Don was a little uncomfortable with her attention, though he expected it. "Time for a change, I guess."

"I forgot you had a chin."

"Yeah, zits and all." He was feeling naked, actually, and took a gulp of beer.

"No," she said. "It looks good."

Don could feel himself relax a little with that assessment. "So, when are people supposed to get here?"

"I told everybody seven."

"So that means 7:30 or 8:00," he said.

She walked up next to his chair and ran the palm of her hand across the sticking-up ends of his hair. "What's in it?"

"Something the barber put in—I don't plan to replicate it in the future."

"I can't get over how different you look."

It was an additional assessment, a *different* that Don took to mean *good-different*. "You look pretty good yourself," he said.

"Well, thank you." Her bright red lips formed that big smile of hers, and she fluffed her hair in a spoofed-up, glamour-queen sort of way. She took the lawn chair just opposite Don, crossed her legs, and smoothed down her skirt. "Guess I ought to take a break while I can."

The sun now shone down at an angle that cleared the lower branches of the cottonwood tree. Still bright, it was nevertheless low enough in the western sky so that its tempered warmth felt good on his skin rather than causing it to itch. Zoë's hair seemed to glow in the light. Behind his new sunglasses, through his rarely worn contacts, Don's eyes appraised her as they might a stranger on the street. "Can I get you a beer?" he said.

Her big smile again. "Why, thank you."

"Have a preference?" he said as he got up.

"I'll start with the amber."

They sat in the waning sunlight in the run up to the shortest night of year and didn't say much. Don thought about the significance of the solstice, how the ancients thought it was the height of summer—midsummer—not

the beginning. Then it was thought to possess the maximum of summer's power—the heat and the dryness, the choler and the brightness—characteristics that he associated more with August, or the Dog Days, the "Canicular Days," as he liked to call them.

"Midsummer's eve," he said.

Zoë smiled. "A little western flower, and maidens call it love-in-idleness."

"Where is everybody?" Sam called out from the driveway.

"Just us," Don answered.

Sam joined them, fresh from the shower, shaved, combed, dressed in long khakis and a Hawaiian shirt.

"Don't you guys both look nice," Zoë said.

"This shirt isn't too much?"

"Well, yeah," Don said.

"No, it's perfect," Zoë said. "Almost matches my dress."

"I bought it for this weird luau gig last summer—haven't worn it since."

"Too bad we don't have any tiki lamps," Don said.

"It's not too wrinkled?"

Zoë jumped up. "Where's your mom's iron? I'll iron it for you." She took hold of Sam's elbow. "Come on, before people start showing up." She tugged at it. "You'll watch for the early birds, won't you, Don?"

Sam followed her into the house, then she let him lead her upstairs to his mother's room—originally a bedroom, now a clutter of mom stuff. An ironing board stood prominently in the corner, apparently always set up, and

nearby a treadle sewing machine that Zoë remembered hearing was a fixture in the house from Sam's great-grandfather's days. She flipped on the iron and turned to Sam.

"Shirt, please."

He acted like a guy embarrassed to take his shirt off in front of a female doctor. She enjoyed watching him remove it. His torso muscles were not as defined as his leg muscles. His distance running in high school was probably responsible for the legs. The only things well developed on his upper body were his hands and his forearms, the guitar-playing parts. They were also the only parts that had any color to speak of—besides his face—all of which apparently got some sun. The shoulders and chest—and the back, she noticed, when he turned around—were as white as his legs. She wanted to put him on a daily regimen of sunbathing, preferably naked, in his backyard. He certainly didn't have anything else he had to do.

She zipped through the ironing and enjoyed watching him put the shirt back on. "There, now you look ready for a party."

In the backyard, Don was where they'd left him, the solo party-goer, cup of beer in hand.

"I still can't get over how different you look," Zoë said.

Soon the guests began to show up, largely people Sam didn't recognize, Zoë's fellow employees or old university friends or friends of friends, but there were also those that Sam knew from high school, some looking more or less the same as they always had, others with more of a settled-in and settled-down look, more girthy than they'd been during their high school years. The chit chat he exchanged with exclassmates was the kind he

imagined would fill up a high school reunion, the updates of spouses, kids, jobs, and hobbies. He kept his own updates vague. With the guests he didn't know, the talk was less predictable, and there was less of it, too, but Sam's role as reluctant cohost and Museum curator had him interacting with just about everybody at one time or another.

Despite her agreement to downplay the homecoming aspect of the party, Zoë introduced Sam to almost everybody he didn't know as the recently returned guest of honor. But he forgave her when she introduced him to Josie, the former music writer for the university newspaper, with whom she was sure Sam would find something to talk about.

Josie seemed younger than Zoë. Her black hair was dyed, and she wore a black top that hugged her small breasts. Above the left one, she'd attached a red and white lapel pin that read "Eschew obfuscation." Later he found her in front of the breakfast table, which had been transformed into a no-host bar with a little bit of everything and a lot of some things, like the vodka Josie was mixing with cranberry juice. Sam freshened up his tumbler of soda water and ice.

"Everyone out in California keeps the vodka in the freezer," he said.

Josie gave him a little smile. "And the soda water in spritzer bottles?"

He looked into his tumbler, then back into Josie's appraising stare.

"I'm giving my liver a vacation."

"Mine's got its work cut out for it."

He raised his tumbler in a toast. "No rest for the wicked."

She gave him another little smile and raised her glass in response.

"We've already been reduced to speaking in clichés."

A group of guests out in the yard laughed, and Josie's eyes drifted over to the open window. Sam said, "Actually, doesn't it usually take a while just to get past the clichés?"

Her eyes drifted back. "Zoë tells me you used to play guitar in a San Francisco band that was on the verge of making the jump to a major label."

"We were doing pretty well," he said, not actually confirming her impression of him—it wasn't exactly true—but not discouraging it either. "Close, but—" He stopped himself before resorting to the full cliché.

Josie seemed to have switched into her journalist mode. "Ever record any CDs?"

"Just one," he said, "and half of a second."

"Self produced?"

"Yeah, with the inefficient democratic method."

"How would you characterize your sound?"

He messed with his hair, felt the bump. "Is this on the record, or off?"

That little smile again. "I'm no longer in the business."

Sam smiled back. "We always hated answering that one."

"Danceable?"

"Definitely danceable."

"What was the configuration?"

"Guitar—obviously—bass, and drums with a female singer and lyricist."

They sipped in unison. She said, "Sounds underground."

"Sort of like that."

"Do you have the CD here?"

He thought of the box of them up in the attic. "Yeah."

"You should put it on the stereo."

The last thing Sam felt like hearing was Ethel and the Mermen.

"Maybe some time when there's not a party going on," he said, realizing immediately that he'd implied some future rendezvous.

Sam ran into Josie several more times throughout the party. She sat smoking in one of the scallop-back chairs in the backyard. They had become the designated smoking area. She leaned against the doorjamb between the foyer and the dining room and watched the crush of dancers. It was more pleasant to wiggle on the periphery. She stood refilling her drink in a crowd at the kitchen table, and then chatting with others all dressed in black at the bottom of the Scarlett-O'Hara staircase. Later, apparently after several vodkas, she emerged from the downstairs bathroom just as Sam was heading down the hallway toward it.

She wasn't speaking like a journalist anymore. She mumbled something, then leaned into him, even though he was at that moment a moving target, slipping an arm around his neck and offering him her mouth. She tasted like he expected, all vodka and cigarettes, but she felt good. She pressed into him.

When they came up for air, she took hold of his hand and tugged, trying to lead him back toward the foyer and the dining room. He planted his feet and caused her to stumble, caught her and led her through the reading room door marked "Private" with Zoë's handwritten sign. The room was stuffy and warm, the closed windows keeping in residual heat of the afternoon sun.

Josie's step was wobbly, and her speech was thick. "I can't see."

"Right here," he said. "There's a chair."

They squeezed into one of the reading chairs and tangled themselves together. Their kissing was clumsy and fierce. They knocked teeth, and she bit his tongue a little too hard, then shoved hers to the back of his mouth. It wasn't long before the tastes of tobacco and vodka faded in the wash of saliva. She fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. When she slipped her hands in, she was so abrupt, he flinched. He tried to find a nipple through her clothing, and as he groped, she removed her hands from his body to undo her own buttons. She had one of those bras that clasped in the front, which she unfastened with a sleight of hand to expose her breasts for him.

Sam was used to the faint light coming in from the backyard by then, so he could see Josie's closed eyelids and her smooth bare breasts and her stiff nipples. She leaned back into the arm of the leather chair. Sam was also aware of the noises again, the loud talk and laughter in the yard, the indistinct thumping of the bass lines from the speakers in the dining room catty-corner across the house. As he sucked one nipple into his mouth, then the other, she grasped his forearms like they were handles. She was a moaner.

They'd been in the reading room all of five minutes when the pressure of her hand made him come in his pants. She made a little noise of disappointment.

"Sorry," he said. "It's been a while."

She made another sound then, not exactly words, maybe something like *hmmm*. He took one of her nipples between his thumb and index finger,

and she squirmed.

"Kiss me here," she said.

She was pointing at the hollow spot just above the top of her low-slung slacks between her navel and the jut of her hipbone. He bent over and brushed his lips there. She inhaled and made the *hmmm* noise again. Her eyes were still closed.

"And kiss me here," she said, pointing to the same place on the opposite side of her abdomen.

Sam brushed his lips there, too, then pressed them into her skin and touched it with his tongue. There was a faint smell of perfume. Her skin tasted sweet. When he raised his head to look into her face again, her eyes were still closed, and she began to unzip her slacks.

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Sam wasn't around when the police came, so Zoë met them at the front door and assured them that everything was winding down. She explained that it was a welcome-home party for the son of the owners, that he'd been away at school, that he was around somewhere, and that everyone was definitely of drinking age. Luckily the weed was all stashed at the moment and didn't need explaining away. The taller of the two cops, the one who seemed to be the spokesman, was nice about it and told her that some neighbors had called in, concerned about the unusual goings-on. He suggested she turn down the music, but seemed to imply the neighbors were being overly sensitive. She got them to leave by agreeing with everything he said.

She closed the front door and the dining-room windows, then turned down the stereo. Next she went to the kitchen fired up the coffee maker. She

found Sam with Don out by the lawn chairs and came up behind them.

Don was slurring his words. "Get too warm in those long pants?"

Sam wore his khaki shorts again, and his Hawaiian shirt was untucked. "Right, and you—manage to get up out of this lawn chair yet?"

Don raised his cup of beer and belched. "Pardon the eructation."

"Have you seen Zoë?" Sam asked.

"Yes, I have, and Christ, does she look great tonight or what?"

"I'm right here," she said. "Don, I hope you're not planning to drive home."

"There you are," Sam said.

"Yeah, I was just dealing with the cops."

"The cops?"

"But they went away happy."

"Is it time to turn up the lights?"

"I put some coffee on—appears our drunken friend can use a little."

Sam turned to him. "Don, Zoë's making coffee—why don't you come in have some."

Don only grumbled. "I don't want any fucking coffee."

"Did you get anything to eat?" she asked.

He only sputtered.

"Don, come on in and have some coffee," she said.

He rose to his wobbly legs and started toward the driveway.

"See?" Sam said. "He'll listen to you."

She put a hand on his shoulder. "Did you forget to eat something?"

"A Dionysian requirement," Don said, "on this most abbreviated night

of the year." He raised an index finger, professorially, and added, "This most inebriated night of the year."

His tongue was as wobbly as his legs, but he was still thinking in twenty-dollar words.

In the kitchen, she directed him to sit down at the table. Then she busied herself putting caps on and corks in the bottles with booze still in them. She segregated the empty ones and cleared a space in front of Don. For as drunk as he was, he must have dipped into one or more of these bottles himself. He sat there saying nothing, until slurring, "I'm thirsty—where's my beer?"

"Here, Don," Zoë said and held up a bottle of soda water. "Why don't you have some of this?"

She searched the tabletop for an unused plastic cup and poured a little soda into one that seemed clean enough. When she handed it to Don, he sniffed it and made a face and set it back on the table. The smell of coffee wafted across the kitchen.

"Sam," she said, "how's the coffee coming?"

Sam wasn't there. The pot was half full, and the maker was gurgling and growling, in the midst of doing its job. She found a coffee cup for Don and slipped it under the spout in place of the pot. As it trickled full, she wondered if Sam was off with Josie. Earlier, standing with her at the edge of the dance floor just before the cops arrived, Zoë had talked briefly with Josie, who was considerably screwed up herself, and she intimated that she'd had some encounter with Sam. It wasn't what she said, so much, as the way she said it, mooning almost, a sheepish grin creeping over her face as she said

something about being played by a lead guitarist. And her blouse was buttoned up wrong.

When Zoë slipped the pot back into the coffee maker, its digital clock was pushing 1:00. The music coming from the dining room was subdued, something she didn't recognize, something like cocktail jazz. She turned to take the cup over to Don, but now he was gone too. She peeked through the doorway into the dining room. A few couples were hanging all over one another in an approximation of ballroom dancing. The crowd was getting thin. A trio of guys Zoë didn't recognize stood in the foyer doorway holding cups of beer. They seemed young, probably crashers from one of the neighborhood student mansions, university guys who'd stayed on in Kalamazoo to work summer jobs after school let out. They were behaving.

But Don wasn't there, and neither was Sam. Maybe Sam and Josie were upstairs pawing each other in his bedroom. Zoë's imagination was getting a little out of control. It was her own fault for introducing them. In vain, she looked for him out in the backyard. She picked at one of cold, cooked burgers sitting next to the grill on a card table with the buns and the condiments.

"There's coffee," she said, gesturing with Don's cup to a couple of smokers in the lawn chairs.

She went back into the kitchen and added a dash of milk to the cup and sat at the table to drink it herself. She shouldn't have gotten her hopes up again with Sam. It seemed whenever one of them was ready, the other one had something else going on. First she wasn't ready, and when she was, he'd found the field. She could have been played as part of all that and almost

was, but she didn't want to be played. Then briefly, just before he went out to California, he seemed interested and serious again, but Zoë was in love with Wally.

Wally had been a mistake. He was handsome, and his arms felt nice, and he smelled good—that's when she learned about pheromones in biology—and the sex was the first real sex she'd ever had, but he was so self-centered. The two and a half years of catering to Wally—until he dumped her—and the nothing she had to show for it made her realize what an idiot she'd been for not giving Sam another chance back then. She could have played them both—should have played them both.

Not that she would have. She knew herself that well at least.

Sam was gone when she and Wally split up, and even if he'd been around they probably wouldn't have connected. Her heart was broken, and her mind was running toward the cynical. Not until she'd finished with her master's degree did men start to look good again. Then dabbling in the social activities of a singles' club—the mixers, the ballroom dance classes, the trip to a Chicago Cubs' game—and responding to a couple of romance ads in the weekly giveaway newspaper, even running one of her own—all of it just made her feel like a bigger loser. And here she was, deluding herself about Sam again.

She took a sip of coffee and realized her heart was pounding. Caffeine was the last thing she needed.

"What happened to Don?" Zoë started. It was Sam, coming into the kitchen from the hallway.

"I don't know—I was wondering what happened to you."

"Somebody threw up in the bathroom—didn't get it all in the toilet."

"Oh, my God."

Sam took a swig out of the bottle of soda water. "But Don's a big boy—he can take care of himself."

"I wouldn't worry if he'd just smoked too much weed," she said.

"Good point—he never could hold his alcohol."

"I'm worried he's going to try to drive."

Zoë went out to the street to see if Don's car was still there, and it was, right in front. He'd been the first arrival. Empty and unlocked, it showed no signs of an attempted getaway. Other guests were streaming down the driveway, climbing into their cars and heading off.

Back in the house, she'd lost Sam again. She checked the dining room, empty now. All the lights on the stereo were lit, but no music played. The foyer was empty. She peeked into the parlor, which was dark—except for the glow of the streetlight—and empty. Her sign had worked. Down the hall, wedged onto the couch in front of the TV sat a group that included one of Sam and Zoë's high-school stoner friends—he hadn't progressed much in the intervening years—plus four people she didn't recognize. A space drama flashed on the television.

She finally found Don in the glow of one of the reading-room lamps. He snored lightly. Slouched in one of the leather reading chairs, a pile of papers out of Sam's great-grandfather's trunk in his lap, he looked uncomfortable. A couple of pages had fallen to the floor. Zoë picked them up and put them with the pages from his lap and set them all on the end table next to a picture of the Whittier mansion taken back in the good old days.

She looked at Don. His newly cut hair still stood up spiky with the hair products. His slack-jawed expression had the funniest baby-face quality, smooth-skinned after his makeover. She shook his knee.

"Don?" She shook it again. "Don't you want to climb in the guest bed?"

He stirred, barely, and she headed off to find Sam. Together they could steer him to the guest room. At the foot of the staircase, she called out Sam's name. There was no response. Climbing up the stairs, she heard a door close, and at the second-floor landing, she saw him coming down the hallway.

"I found him," she said, "in the reading room."

"Duh," Sam said. "We should've figured that out."

Back downstairs, Zoë pointed to the papers on the end table. "He was trying to read these."

"Yeah, he took the depositions."

"Should we put him in the guest room?"

Sam cleared his throat and looked over at the doorway. "I don't want to lug him up there—he'll be fine on the couch in the TV room."

They each took an arm and pulled Don up onto his feet. He let out a groan. Zoë wedged a shoulder under his arm to support his weight, and Sam held onto his opposite bicep as they worked him out the door and down the hall and into the now-empty TV room. He held Don up in front of the couch while she removed a plastic plate from one of the cushions. Guided by his friends, Don collapsed onto the couch.

Sam went off to get a pillow and blanket—Zoë's idea—and she removed Don's ratty tennis shoes. As she rearranged his legs on the couch,

the old floorboards murmured down the second-floor hallway. She studied Don's face a moment, then pecked a kiss on his smooth cheek.

"Sweet dreams," she said.

After they tucked him in and closed the TV room door behind them, they moved out to the kitchen. Zoë stood by the table in the nook and watched Sam tidy up. He turned off the coffee maker. He put the soda water in the fridge. He tossed a few plastic cups in the trash. Zoë thought about her earlier hopes for something to click between them after everyone else went home. She sensed that wasn't going to happen.

She reached over to hug him goodnight. "Welcome home," she said, "even though you don't think it is."

"Thanks."

She held onto his body a little longer than she should have. Then she kissed him on the cheek and smelled something that took a second to register, something that made her back away.

She stared at him. "Sam, you ought to wash your face."

∞

Sam lay awake in the predawn light and stared at the ceiling. Josie's bare backside was pressed up against him, her body having taken every inch of territory that he'd yielded. She'd almost pushed him out of his great-grandfather's antique bed.

Stanfield's old room usually smelled like furniture polish. Back when Sam lived at the Museum, this supposed guest room was rarely used for its intended purpose. Really just an exhibit, it functioned as a memorial to the guy who had the place built. Sam looked across the room at Stanfield's desk

under the west-facing window. Directly below them in the reading room were the remnants of what Stanfield had produced at that desk.

This morning Stanfield's room smelled lived in, like morning in a motel room after a long, sweaty gig. Josie stirred. She gave off the distinct odor of someone who'd drunk too much hard liquor. He thought about Zoë and her parting words, her parting shot. He'd been hoping she wouldn't realize that he'd stashed the drunken, puking Josie in Stanfield's room. Maybe she hadn't, but unlikely. She knew what had gone on in the reading room.

He'd slept poorly. Having a naked twenty-two-year old conked out next to him guaranteed that, especially after months of sleeping alone. And here he was, the sober one, imagining what might be in store when she woke back up. If he'd had a bunch of alcohol, he could sleep, too.

He wondered what time it was. The curtain on the south-facing window glowed with the orange of sunrise. The longest day of the year, as Don had pointed out again and again. He was probably still snoring peacefully in the cool darkness of the TV room.

Josie turned over and reached a hand across his chest, and he slipped his arm around her so she could nestle in and rest her head on his shoulder. He brushed his lips over her hair, which smelled of cigarettes. Across the room the door had swung open as it always did when not pulled shut tight.

She stirred again. "Kiss me."

He scanned the outline of her body under the sheet. "Where?"

"Here," she said, offering her lips.

She tasted like all the things that had gone into her lungs and down

her throat and back up her esophagus.

You need to scour that mouth out with soap, he was thinking, saying, "We should brush our teeth first."

So they brushed their teeth and climbed into the shower and sudsed each other up and down, took a half hour almost, using up all the hot water. When they made their way back to Stanfield's room, Sam was in a state of heightened anticipation.

"Where would you like me to kiss you?" Josie said.

∞

Don woke up to a clunking sound. He lifted his head and blinked a few tears into his dried-up, stuck-on contact lenses and scanned the shadows of the room to get his bearings: TV, shag carpet, the Museum. The clunking subsided. His anxious heartbeat was lub-dubbing in his ears. His breathing was raspy through his dried-out sinuses, and his stomach kicked in, grumbling. He was like a one-man rhythm section. He synchronized his inhalation with the diastole of his heart so that one cycle of breathing in and out covered five lub-dubs. Like Paul Desmond's "Take Five." Sort of—but not really. Then, in some time other than the one kept by his rasping and lub-dubbing and grumbling, the clunking came back. It was upstairs, and it sounded like the clunking of a bed against the wall, like Sam was up there screwing somebody—Zoë.

A perverse kind of curiosity drove Don up the stairs toward Sam's room. He wanted to see it with his own eyes, see if his infatuation with Zoë was as much a waste of energy as he was afraid it was. Sam and Zoë had been doing this push-me-pull-you, stop-it-some-more thing forever, and it was

probably about time that they actually connected, just as everybody seemed to hope they would.

The noise was not coming from Sam's room, so Don tip-toed toward the back of the house. The floorboards squeaked. He stopped and listened to the pounding of his heart, momentarily in sync with the clunking. Zoë was a moaner. Nobody'd noticed the squeak.

Don moved up against the wall and stepped lightly within inches of the baseboard. No squeaks. The door he approached was wide open, the room one of the spare ones in the back. He worked his way slowly, and when he'd come within a couple of feet of the opening, the clunking stopped. There was the sound of a mattress groaning under the weight of shifting bodies, then a voice.

"Kiss me here." A female voice, but it didn't sound like Zoë's, unless her voice got husky like that when she was working her mojo. Then she said, "Let me get on top."

The mattress groaned again as they apparently rearranged themselves, and the clunking noise began again, quieter this time. Don neared the door, to where he could see the foot of the bed, then craned his neck around the doorjamb to catch sight of the bunched up bedclothes. Leaning still farther, he saw their legs and the sole of Zoë's foot, the back of Sam's hand grasping her naked derrière, the small of her back, her hair down to her shoulder blades. But it was too dark for Zoë's hair. It wasn't Zoë's breasts hanging down either—not nearly big enough. Don leaned the last bit so he could get a look at her face. It was someone he remembered from the backyard, one of the smokers who'd joined him out by the lawn chairs.

Quickly Don retreated down the hallway, no longer worried about a floor squeak or two. He swooped down the stairs and back into the TV room, where he found his shoes sitting neatly together at the end of the couch. Putting them on, he felt his breathing slow, and his mind rehearsed vague memories of walking with his arm around Zoë, of her fussing with his shoes.

On the table in the foyer he found his jacket, wet with beer. The entryway was a mess of discarded party items. The dining room was worse, and the kitchen looked as if the Huns had paid a visit. He stepped out onto the side porch and despite the early hour had the immediate need for his sunglasses. They were tucked in one of the jacket pockets, smeared with beer.

On his way down the driveway near the front of the house, he found Zoë on her way in. "I thought you'd be sleeping till noon," she said.

Don was so surprised to see her, that he had to ponder what she'd said for a moment. "I slept pretty well."

"Yeah, drunken stupor, I think they call it."

He was too hungover to be embarrassed.

"Your hair's looking nice."

He felt around his new cut. It was sticking out in newer directions. He draped his jacket over his forearm. "What are *you* doing here so early—what time is it, anyway?"

"It's about 7:30," she said. "I couldn't sleep—thought I'd come over and start cleaning up."

Don looked back toward the side door.

Zoë said, "I don't suppose Sam is up yet."

"Actually—" Don stopped himself. "He's still in bed, I think—"

"I won't make much noise."

"Why don't you let him sleep?" Don said. "You had breakfast yet?"

She picked up a plastic cup somebody had left on a window sill. "Some coffee—I'm not too hungry." She dumped the beer into a bush. "Besides, I want to get this over with—get on with it."

"I'll buy," he said.

"I can afford breakfast, Don." She started to head down the driveway. "You go eat—you forgot to last night."

"I don't think you should, Zoë—you should let him sleep."

"I'm not going wake him up," she said. "But if he does wake up, it's not going to kill him."

"Zoë—"

She turned around. When he didn't say anything, she said, "What?"

"You don't—"

She stood there looking at him.

"Come on, let's get breakfast." She continued to stand there and stare at him. "You don't want to go in there," he said. "Sam's up in bed with someone."

∞

Finally Sam was able to fall asleep, and when he woke up Josie was gone. Naked, he strolled down the hall to his room. Birds were singing out the window. It was almost eleven o'clock.

He dressed, descended the stairs, and passed through the disaster of the foyer to the TV room. Don was gone, too. Making his way around the room, Sam picked up plastic cups—some with more flat beer in them than could be

characterized as dregs—then carried them down the hall to the bathroom where he emptied them into the toilet. There was a cup on the back of the toilet. In the kitchen he pulled out a plastic garbage bag and started tossing the used plates and cups and other trash into it. He examined the bottles on the table. Somebody had moved all the empty ones off to one side and put the tops back on the ones with anything still left in them. He looked out the window. The sun was high and bright, and the beer kegs sat there in the heat of it. In the phone niche, the light on the answering machine was blinking. He pushed the play button.

"Hi, Sam! Happy summer! We're out here where you used to live, and you're back there. Ernie, what's this place called? Not the town, the hotel. Right, I know—bed and breakfast. It's the Mendocino Bed and Breakfast. The Kishiros recommended it—there's a jacuzzi in the room! By the way, the Kishiros say hi—I meant to call, sorry. Denise—you remember her—she's almost a Ph.D. Well, it's eight, and we're going to get breakfast, and I thought you'd be up by now—it's eleven back there—but it's Sunday, I know you always liked to sleep late on Sundays. We drove up from L.A. on Friday and stopped in San Luis Obispo—I just love the way that sounds, San Luis Obispo—and yesterday we saw the Silicon Valley—according to Ernie, anyway, there weren't any signs—and Frisco, and now we're here. It's beautiful here, except I can't get used to grass being brown, and the fog—didn't it get depressing? Anyway, I've got to go—we're in Seattle next, the Stuarts—the number's on the list—I'll call, I promise—happy summer!"

Denise Kishiro—almost a Ph.D. It was Dotty's way of reminding him that his peers were making their marks in the world, while he . . . while he

curated the Museum.

He looked back out the window at the party mess in the yard. A few sparrows were picking at the hamburger buns sitting on the card table. Sun glared off the beer kegs. Sam actually missed the coastal fog, the black-and-white-movie eeriness, the way it hung in the eucalyptus trees across the street from his old house and condensed on the leaves and dripped down like rain. During the summer that was the closest thing to rain there was out there. Ethel was kind of like that fog. Josie was like the glaring sun.

"No," Sam said, "that isn't right."

"What isn't right?"

He jumped and spun around. It was Don standing in the opening of the side door.

"Jesus, Don."

"Sorry—didn't mean to sneak up on you."

Sam picked up a couple of empty bottles from the table. "Been lurking around in the backyard?"

"No, I left and came back."

Sam stopped to take in the cleaned up and combed out image of his friend. "You look a lot better than you did last night."

Don stepped into the kitchen.

Sam said, "Sleep all right?"

"Thanks for depositing me on the couch."

Sam nodded.

"Pillow and blanket and everything."

"Thank Zoë for that," Sam said.

Don cleared his throat. "Zoë knows."

"Knows?"

"You were shacking up with someone last night."

Sam set the empty bottles back on the table. "I wasn't exactly hiding it from her."

Don fidgeted there on the faux-marble floor.

Sam said, "How do you know she knows?"

He was slow to answer. "I told her."

"You told her?"

"I think she knew anyway."

"You told her?"

"She came over this morning," Don said. "I had to tell her or she would've walked in on your caterwauling."

Sam turned to look out the window.

"You even woke me up," Don said.

Sam picked up a couple of half-full bottles and carried them over to the cupboard above the coffeemaker. "I was going to tell her."

Don didn't say anything. Sam took another couple of bottles from the table and put them in the cupboard. Finally Don said, "I've got to go—I'm tutoring today." He gave a little wave of his hand. "I just wanted you to know she knew."

After Don left, Sam spent a long afternoon alone, dealing with conflicting impulses. He wanted to call Zoë, to explain himself and apologize somehow, and he even picked up the phone once and started to dial. But he chickened out, because he didn't know what to say, and he felt like such a

dick that he couldn't imagine her wanting to talk to him. So instead he tried to focus on cleaning up.

What little he did, however, he did on automatic pilot. He cleared the empties off the kitchen table and took them to the recycle box. On the lawn out by the birdbath, he crumbled up the stale burger buns. He tore down Stanfield's bed and tossed the bedclothes in the washer. He picked up a few things here and there, but mostly he just sat around, in the nook, in the lawn chairs, on the drier out in the garage. His mind was every elsewhere.

The power that Josie had to push thoughts of Ethel out of his mind faded noticeably. His skinny former lover and bandmate and muse was right back at centerstage, as powerful as ever. He longed for what he'd had with her, a clarity of purpose, a cause, a reason to get up in the morning and work together. Nothing was conventional with Ethel, but they'd been pals in the most traditional sense. Zoë was a pal, too, that was obvious, and he liked Josie—she was smart—Zoë was smart, too, but Josie more unpredictable like Ethel.

He hadn't eaten anything by the time he'd piled the clean sheets back on Stanfield's bed and took his restless mind out to the lawn chairs. Despite all his rumination and rationalization, he still felt like a dick. He got up and pumped one of the beer kegs, the metal cannister bobbing up and down in the melted ice like a bouy on the San Francisco Bay. He filled a plastic cup and downed it in one *woosh*. He filled it again and sat back down. The beer tasted pretty bad, all warm like that—the afternoon heat was at its height—but the rush came quickly after eight weeks. Sam settled into swigging and refilling his cup and sitting and staring at the birds that picked at the pieces of bread

under the birdbath. One of the pieces was huge by bird standards—his crumbling up had been pretty half-assed—so he got up to finish the job and immediately felt the alcohol rush all over again. Still, he could walk fine.

The funny thing about him and alcohol—and this was what some guy in the program had told him—the reason he had a problem with it was that he had such a high tolerance. He could drink and drink and drink and continue to function long after others had passed out. Back at his lawn chair, he picked his beer up off the grass and took a gulp. Only it wasn't his beer. It was one that somebody had used for an ashtray. He gagged and ran to the kitchen to rinse his mouth out with tap water. The taste didn't go away, so he hurried through the pig sty of a house and up the stairs to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He brushed them twice, brushed his whole mouth. Disgusted with it all and making his way back down the hallway, he found two plastic cups tucked into the railing at the head of stairway. The swine had been all over his house.

He wanted out. He felt like bellying up to some sleazy bar and having some laughs. At that moment the West Main Lounge was sounding pretty good, and he made his way out into the winding streets of the neighborhood. He was fine. He could walk fine, and he was lucid. Breaking into a trot, he found he could run fine, too, and he thought back to his track years, but he didn't want to run. He slowed back into a walk, a brisk walk.

Through the neighborhood he went, keeping Ethel and Zoë and Josie at bay, keeping them mostly at bay. He remembered it was Sunday. That was why it was so quiet. Even the dogs were quiet. Soaking in the glorious summer afternoon, he passed Kalamazoo College, once the scene of urgent

splendor in the grass—he couldn't remember her name. On West Main the traffic picked up, and he started humming a riff in time with his walking pace, getting louder as he passed the convenience store. By the time he passed the rusty shell of Sparky's he had the riff going round and round, and he was slapping his thighs. Then he could see the Lounge's neon sign—not yet turned on in the bright, waning afternoon—the comforting clichéd emblem of cheesy watering holes everywhere, the jaunty martini glass with a crooked stem.

"The stemware's been drinking," he sang, "not me."

Inside the Lounge, the air conditioner kept the place colder than the temperature outside called for. Smoke was thick and the talk was loud despite the fact that only a half-dozen people were there besides the bartender. A couple of them looked up, and Sam felt like an intruder. The talk got a few decibels quieter. He sat at the bar, away from the others. The bartender put on a pair of glasses from the upper pocket of his maroon vest and came over. Looking intently into Sam's face, Ralph—according to the name tag—wiped down the bar and said, "How you doing this afternoon?"

"Good."

"I'm going to need to see some ID."

Everyone in the bar had to be over sixty. Maybe the contrast between them and Sam made him seem underage. He fished out his driver's license and handed it over to Ralph.

He held it out away from his face the way far-sighted people do and compared and recompared the photo with the real Sam, first mumbling, "1960," then saying, "Long ways from home, huh?"

"My folks have a house up on West Main Hill."

Ralph removed his glasses and squinted like he was trying to size up his out-of-town customer, "What d'you need?"

Sam looked at the display of beer bottles lined up in front of the mirror, then at the brand-name handles of the beers on tap and said, "Cognac."

Only one choice of cognac, so no confusion there. When Ralph brought back the change, Sam said, "How long's Sparky's been closed?"

Ralph looked off toward the doorway, squinting, and said, "Two years, at least." Then he called down the bar, "Midge—" A seriously wrinkled woman looked up and exhaled a stream of smoke through her nose. "How long's Sparky's been closed?"

"Shit," she said. "Two years, at least."

"It was December," somebody added. "He give it up and moved to Texas."

A guy in a cardigan sweater said, "Three years this December."

"Two and half years," Ralph told Sam. "About."

"I used to buy pop there," Sam said, "and candy bars."

Ralph went about wiping down the bar next to Sam. It was like a compulsive thing to do, something to keep busy with when there was nothing else, and then he said, "Yeah, the neighborhood's kind of going to hell around here."

Sam took a sip, then said, "Did you ever know a guy named Stanfield Whittier?"

Ralph squinted up his eyes again. "Doesn't ring a bell."

"He died in 1957."

"Nah, I was down in Nashville in '57—Midge, you ever hear of a guy—what was the name?"

"Stanfield Whittier."

"A guy named Stanfield Whittier?"

Midge hadn't, and neither had anybody else at the bar.

Sam finished off the cognac quickly, despite the fact that Ralph had given him a heavy shot, and then he ordered another. They were cheap. He sat there breathing in the secondhand smoke like an asthmatic in a steam room. It was like being back in his bar-band element, except without the responsibility of having to entertain everybody.

Ralph went back to his group of regulars and the talk was boisterous again. Sam drifted away from the barroom banter and thought about Zoë. Her birthday was coming up at the end of July. He ought to do something nice for her, like throw her a party at the Museum before he went off to Europe, something intimate, not like the scene that just happened.

He had a few cognacs—he wasn't counting—and he thought about Ethel. She just *had* her birthday. She'd probably held court for a table full of admirers, and her new girlfriend, and he wondered what the hip things to do in Portland might be. He stared into his snifter of unremarkable cognac and realized just how much he missed her fierce, whimsical exploration of things—the clothes, the interior decoration, the reading lists, the musical sounds, the movies, the political causes, the sexual positions. It was all so far away from Kalamazoo.

Then he thought about Josie. She was about the closest thing to an Ethel he'd seen in Kalamazoo.

When he got up to go, he left a five dollar bill on the bar and said, "Night—thanks." Only it didn't come out quite that clearly. He was sober enough to notice that fact. Ralph said something in response, and Sam slipped back out into the humidity. The sun still shone—still the longest day of the year. He started moving, and soon his momentum smoothed out all his waggles. He wasn't loaded to the gills, as his mother liked to say, but he swam up West Main Hill with significantly more buoyancy than he'd had on the way down.

The riff that had come to him earlier came back and cycled around in his head. It was still there when he stumbled into the side door and bellied up to the kitchen table. He took a swig from the vodka bottle. Out the window, the setting sun cast a warm glow over the kegs and the lawn chairs. He began to visualize the riff going round in his head as a sequence of finger movements on the fretboard of his guitar, so he staggered up to his room and dragged his acoustic out of the closet, out of its case. Coming back down the staircase, he slipped and landed on his butt. The guitar came out of his hands and skidded down the red carpet, coming to a rest at the foot of the stairs with a *sklang*. He retrieved it, undented because of the carpeting, and walked more gingerly then, down the hallway past the reading room, through the kitchen and out into the yard. Carefully he leaned the guitar against one of the lawn chairs and filled a clean cup from the keg.

The sun shone in his face like a spotlight as he took a seat and picked up his guitar. He scooted back and wacked it against the arm of the lawn chair. "Fuck!"

He checked it for damage, and it seemed okay. He located his beer,

Careful to double check it, and took a slug. He dug a pick out of his pocket. He still carried one despite his retirement. He dropped it, and his head spun as he bent over to fumble around in the grass for it. He tried to recapture the finger patterns he'd visualized earlier, but they weren't there. Taking a moment to remember the riff, then humming it, he leaned back and thumped his guitar against the arm of the lawn chair again. He stood up and kicked the chair backwards, sending it to the garage wall. He tried to play standing up. Without the strap, he had to hold the guitar up with his fretting hand, restricting his movements. He sat down in the grass—toppled, actually—and knocked over his cup of beer.

"Fuck it," he said and started strumming. It still wasn't coming out as he'd heard it, visualized it. He yelled and tried it again, two or three more times. He started to pound the strings. One of them broke.

He stood up. Wielding his guitar like a club, grasping the neck with two hands, almost falling down, he swung it into the concrete of the walkway, into the upturned lawn chair, down onto the keg. When he stopped swinging and stood there breathing heavily, he noticed that the yardlights he'd strung up for the party were still on.

And the sun had finally set.

Willis pulled into the Whittier driveway to start off the week the way he did every Monday. The routine of the gardening business balanced out all his running around on the weekends. The Five Spot in Benton Harbor had been jumping on Saturday, and at the wedding on Sunday down in Three Rivers, everybody was acting like they didn't have to go to work in the morning. The bride and groom even scared up an extra hundred bucks for the Kayzoo Kings to keep playing after the sun went down. The next weekend they'd be at the Break Room up in Lansing, and they'd be driving home at three in the morning—unless Rhonda came out. Willis loved all that—he came to another kind of life at night—but he knew if that was all he did, things'd get out of whack again. Working with plants brought him right back to the ground, tending God's garden as he liked to think of it, not the Whittier's yard, not the yards of his other employers, because plants and animals didn't belong to them any more than they belonged to him. The gardening helped him appreciate his life. He was a lucky man.

He slid the ramp out the back of his pick-up and rolled his lawn mower down to the driveway. The noisy old Sears thing would probably wake up the Whittier kid again, but it was ten o'clock already, and it wasn't like he had to do anything back here at his mama's house except take it easy. He was all right, but it was hard to worry much for someone who had it easy as he did. Things go wrong with a woman—something that happened every day—and a man loses his job—a computer company, something like that Mrs. Whittier

said—a man can live through that. He was a college boy. He could find something to do if he wanted to. And he was no slouch on the guitar neither. All he had to do was take a hold of those boot straps and give a good yank.

Willis primed the mower's carburetor and tugged on the pull starter a couple of times before the engine fired up. It always ran rough until it warmed up a little. He revved it and let it set a minute before he pushed it out into the front yard and made his way around the small patch. He loved the smell of fresh-cut grass. It always took him back to his childhood in Illinois, to the memories of summer and playing around the big house where his mama worked and his uncle took care of the enormous lawn.

In the first pass around the yard, Willis picked a red plastic cup out the hedge, crumpled it up, and stuffed it into his back pocket. He was done with the front in less than five minutes, and he killed the engine. The hedge and shrubbery didn't need trimming this week, so he pushed the mower up onto the cobblestone driveway and bumped his way past the side door, standing wide open. The Whittier kid must of been up, but Willis didn't see anybody.

The backyard was a mess like they had a wild party. Beer kegs and lawn chairs were setting out in the middle of the yard, and plastic cups and plates were spread around in the grass. Strung up between the cottonwood and the big maple was a bunch of bare bulbs hanging down in the way, even turned on in the broad daylight. But the wildest thing was right up next to the garage, mixed up with an overturned lawn chair. Somebody'd busted up an acoustic guitar. Willis took hold of the guitar's neck and lifted it up, letting the body dangle from the splintered wood and tangled up strings. It looked like it used to be a nice one. Willis never understood why supposed

musicians thought they had to bust up a perfectly good guitar to be entertaining, but something was even more peculiar about this. It wasn't like there'd been a rock concert in the Whittier's yard. Looked like somebody just busted it up for the hell of it. He left it next to garage and set the chair back upright.

He looked over the lawn, trying to decide if he ought to mow around the things on the grass, just do what he could, or if he ought to come back the following week after the kid found time to pick them up. Willis could pick them up, but he didn't get paid for picking up trash. He was a gardener, not a janitor. And he didn't want to go messing around those bare bulbs.

He figured Sam ought to be up drinking his coffee in the kitchen by then. Willis'd tell him he'd mow the backyard when it got cleaned up. But when he poked his head in the side door, all he saw was more of the mess. He didn't feel good about just walking in, but he did it anyway, because he had a bad feeling about the guitar and the place being opened up and not cleaned up, and he knew that whenever he had a bad feeling like that, it was no coincidence.

He looked out to the street and over to the neighbor's yard, but didn't see any of the white neighbors snooping on him, so he stepped in. "Sam, you up yet?"

The little table next to the window had a couple empty liquor bottles. The place smelled like morning in a two-bit tavern. Willis looked down the dark hallway, then turned and went in the other direction into the room off the kitchen. It was the dining room, and it was a mess, too, no furniture except a couple chairs up by the window and a tall stereo system over by the

shelves with all the fancy dishes. The stereo was lit up. All along the baseboard and setting on the window sill were more plastic cups, some half-full. He walked through the doorway into the entry room. This was the farthest he'd ever been inside the Whittier house.

"Sam," Willis called out, "you can't sleep all day—you got a mess of cleaning up to do."

He didn't dare go up the red stairway, and the double doorway in front of him had a handmade sign with "Private" written on it. He turned down the hallway and looked into a room with a TV and the ugliest shag carpet he'd ever seen. Down at the end of the hall where it turned again to go past the bathroom and back to the kitchen was another open door. Willis stepped through it, and the room reeked like some of the foulest puke he ever smelled. There were big fancy windows and a wall covered with more books than Willis had ever seen in one place except for a library, and lying on the rug in front of a nice leather chair was Sam.

Even for a white kid, he looked pale, almost blue. Willis held his nose and kneeled down beside him. He nudged him. No response. He felt for a pulse alongside Sam's Adam's apple. It was slow like he was hibernating, but at least it was beating. His breathing was so shallow, Willis couldn't tell if maybe he was just imagining it. Lucky for the kid he was laying on his side, or else he might of gagged to death.

Willis stood up and let go of his nose, then felt that reflex to throw up himself, so he stepped out the room in a hurry. He walked back to the kitchen and saw the phone setting over in the little cubby hole by the table. Somebody ought to get the kid to the emergency room, but Willis didn't feel

good about calling the ambulance—they was so expensive. A course, the Whittiers ought to be able to afford it—except they weren't in town. Too bad he couldn't just call them up. They must of had some friends around. Sam had some friends, obviously, since he just had a party. There was the daughter, too—he couldn't remember her name. He pulled the phone book out of the cubby hole and paged through to the Ws. She wasn't married, he remembered Mrs. Whittier saying, so she had to be in there. He found some Whittiers, but none of the first names rung a bell, and the initials didn't neither.

He went back and looked in on Sam. The kid hadn't moved. Nothing had changed. Willis wondered if he could carry him out to his truck and get him to stay put in the passenger's seat. But then he heard somebody out in the kitchen and froze.

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Don went by to check on Sam as soon as his mother was comfortable in her picture-window rocking chair. He'd had immediate regrets after telling Sam about Zoë, and the whole time he was tutoring the Patel kids on Sunday his mind continually drifted back to Sam's comment about almost killing himself. When Don went by the Museum later that afternoon the yard looked the same as it did in the morning, and no one was around. Today the gardener's truck sat in the driveway, and the side door was wide open.

"Sam, you up yet?" he called out from the bottom of the Scarlett O'Hara staircase.

"Who's out there?" somebody answered from down the hallway.

Don met him in front of the TV room. "Don," he said. "And you're

the gardener?"

"Willis," he said and pointed toward the reading room. "He's down there—he ain't dead, but he sure don't look too good."

The smell almost made Don throw up. There wasn't much to show for the magnitude of the stench, just a sizeable damp spot on the rug.

"I didn't touch nothing," Willis said, "except I took his pulse."

Don felt for the vein on Sam's wrist.

"It's beating, but his heart's about all that's moving."

"Have you called for an ambulance?"

"I ain't had time—you got here right after I found him."

Don rolled Sam out of the fetal position and over onto his back. "Let's get him up on the couch in the TV room."

Together they lugged Sam's dead weight down the hallway. The couch still had the pillow and blanket on it from when Don slept off his own inebriation.

"Better leave him on his side," Willis said, "else he might throw up again and gag on it."

Don went into the kitchen and called an ambulance. Then he called Zoë.

"Sam looks like he drank himself into a coma."

"Jesus" was her initial response, but almost immediately came "I'll be right over."

Don went back into the TV room and stood there with Willis. They stared down at Sam.

"I used to listen to him thrashing on his guitar out in the garage when

he was a kid," Willis said. "Looks like maybe he gone down that rock star path out in Frisco."

Don thought about Sam's driving his car into the retaining wall. He reached down and lifted Sam's dangling arm to lay it up on the couch cushion. He felt again for a pulse. It was there, slow and faint. "I think you nailed it with that rock star observation."

"I seen it plenty of times," Willis said. "It's what happens when they lose track of why they took to playing in the first place."

Don noticed how washed out Sam's face looked.

"Hell, it happened to me, too, except I didn't have to run home to Mama—I wasn't this bad."

"This is bad, all right," Don said.

"They get through with him at the hospital, though, he'll be okay," Willis said. "You call the ambulance?"

"Yeah." Don doubted that the hospital was quite equipped to deal with all that was troubling Sam.

"Well, I ought to be getting back to work," Willis said. "People's expecting me—you need any more help?"

"No, Willis, thanks."

"The kid'll be all right," he repeated as he headed out of the room, "long as he gets in a program."

A few minutes after Willis left, Zoë appeared in the doorway. She'd tied her unbrushed hair back and thrown on a T-shirt and wrinkled jeans. Her lips had none of her trademark red lipstick. She and Don exchanged perfunctory hellos, then stood over the couch looking down at the catatonic

Sam. His skin was actually a little bluish.

"I don't suppose there's anything else to do but wait for the ambulance," she finally said.

Don looked over at her. "Unless we want to clean up this dump."

He tried to imagine what was going through her head, what kind of feminine disgust and hurt and I-told-you-so was contributing to the coolness of her reaction.

"Last time I saw you," she said, "you were in Sam's position."

"I think I was more of a stupid drunk," he said. "This is kind of tragic."

They heard the siren of the approaching ambulance, and Don headed out to meet the medical technicians. When he brought them into the TV room, Zoë asked if he'd called Jackie. He hadn't, so she went out to the kitchen phone.

The number was on the list tacked up next to the phone, but Jackie didn't answer. She must have been at work, and Zoë had no idea where that was. After the beep, she said, "Jackie, this is Zoë. Sam drank himself into a coma or something. I'm over at the house—it's around 10:30 and an ambulance is taking him down to Bronson Hospital."

When Don left to follow the ambulance to the hospital, Zoë stayed behind to close up the house. He hadn't said anything to suggest that it was weird she wasn't coming too, and Zoë was glad she didn't have to explain herself. She wasn't angry, just uncomfortable.

She thought about Don's comment. He was educated enough to know the difference between "tragic" in the traditional sense and "tragic" in the sense that newscasters and reporters used it. Sam was certainly more than

just a victim of some accident. He'd actively achieved his current state of— whatever it was. He'd made some mistake. He had some flaw. But she had a hard time thinking of Sam as an Oedipus. There was something a little too pathetic about him.

After a quick peek into the backyard and a quick decision to leave it just as it was, she made her way to the kitchen. She didn't really feel like cleaning up after everything, but she cleared the pair of liquor bottles off the table. These hadn't been empty at the end of the party. She dumped the dregs in the sink and took them to the recycle tub in the garage. Then she went on a kind of automatic pilot and started moving dirty plastic dishware from the dining room to the kitchen sink. She turned off her stereo system. When she'd cleaned out the dining room, she continued through the foyer and the TV room, and then caught a whiff of the reading room. She scraped off all the dishes and emptied all the cups and tossed them in the plastic garbage bag somebody had started. After running the garbage disposer, she went back to the reading room with the household cleaner she found under the sink.

Dousing the stain almost covered up the smell, but not quite, and she assumed her nose was even a bit desensitized from odor fatigue. So she rolled up the rug to toss it outside. No plastic dishware cluttered up the table tops in the reading room because her "Private" sign had worked to keep the party-goers out, but on one of the leather chairs she noticed something bright red and white at the back of the cushion. She picked it up, Josie's lapel pin: "Eschew obfuscation."

Zoë had visions of Sam and Josie groping each other just as he'd groped her on her parent's couch ten years earlier. She leaned close to smell

the chair, to find out if what she'd smelled on Sam was there, too, but all she smelled was leather. Quickly she straightened up, feeling self conscious, and grabbed the cleaner bottle and the rolled-up rug and left the room.

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There was something about the roadside rest just outside Pine Bluff, Wyoming, the picnic tables there, and Ethel riding a motorcycle, Willis on the hood of his Belair tipping his hat to her. Or was it Josie? Sparky's was just like it used to be, but the wrinkled woman who blew smoke out of her nose was behind the counter. Ethel said something about her microphone, and the woman said, no, she didn't have to swallow it. There was more—a mosh of dancers at the Museum, though it wasn't really the Museum because of the stage, plus a swirl of turkey buzzards riding up-drafts along the Pacific Coast Highway, and Ethel on Willis's lap and more—before the drone of a television, like in the motel room next door, and the smell of something like flowers, familiar, only not the kinds of flowers that would normally be growing next to each other. Then finally, right before waking up, hushed voices.

Sam opened his eyes in a kind of twilight. With each beat of his pulse, a throb of pain rippled through his head. To his left hung a watercolor of a beach scene, complete with sea gull and starfish. A thick curtain suspended on a track across the ceiling was pushed all the way open, bunched up against the wall behind him to the right. A television murmured outside the door. The one across the room from him sat turned off. He was in a hospital.

The discomfort in the crook of his left elbow came from an IV shunt. Beyond his elbow, an illuminated nurse's buzzer sat on the night table.

Pushing it was like ringing a doorbell in a large house where you can't hear a thing from outside on the front porch. You think maybe you should ring it again just to make sure, but you don't want to annoy the person you're trying to rouse. He pushed it anyway, just once more, and within a couple of minutes a large woman scurried through the open door and flipped the wall switch, turning on the indirect lighting that ran around the edges of the ceiling.

"Well, Mr. Whittier, nice to have you come around."

"What day is it?"

She made a note on a clipboard at the base of his bed. "Monday, about ten p.m."

"How long have I been here?"

"Since this morning."

He asked for water. She fetched it, and he drank it too quickly, spilling some down the front of his hospital gown. When the glass was empty, he asked, "How soon can I leave?"

"Maybe the doctor can answer that for you in the morning."

He handed her the glass.

"Is there something else you need right now?"

He felt for the bump in his hair and shook his head.

"Well, buzz if you do," she said. "I'm Jill—my shift is nearly over, but Carolyn will be with you all night."

She left the room, and Sam noticed the TV down the hall had been turned off. He stared out the window across the room at the hazy glow of Kalamazoo's light pollution. He wondered what floor he was on, whether

there should be stars out there or not. In addition to his throbbing head, his back ached, and his neck was stiff. The pain in the crook of his elbow came and went. He could tell he wasn't about to fall back to sleep any time soon.

Aware enough to realize that something profoundly stupid had just happened, he also knew that he'd just passed some point with alcohol that was even more significant than totaling his car. With the car he'd been on private property and the authorities weren't involved, he'd been unscathed, more or less, and he'd sought help on his own, not like this. But despite all the significance, he still craved a beer. Just one—or maybe two. Just to get him through till the next morning.

He found the switch on the table lamp and flipped it on. Beside it sat a thick manila envelope with a note penciled on the outside: "Thought you might need something to read." It was Don's handwriting.

He pulled a tall stack of paper out of the envelope. It was Stanfield's next story. He picked off the remnants of a rubber band and tried to brush off the discoloration left on the first page. To get comfortable on the bed, he played with the controls to raise his head and put a little bend in his knees. The IV was more than just a discomfort. It was useless. If it was supposedly filling him up with fluids, why was he so thirsty? He buzzed Jill for another glass of water and some aspirin.

"I don't suppose you can remove this IV, can you?" he asked.

She shook her head. "You'll have to wait for the doctor in the morning." She fussed with his blanket. "You should try to get some sleep."

Sam had been catatonic for a day. Sleep was not something he needed to get. He opened one of the plastic-wrapped packets of aspirin and popped

the two tablets under Jill's caregiving eye. After she left the room, he popped the two from the other packet and set the stack of paper on his thighs.

Section One: The Lunatic

Sanders Wyatt

Just another War of the Rebellion story. That was, finally, what each new case became to me. Sometimes there was a mother, a good mother more often than not, with a deceased husband, and she had outlived her son, whose premature death might have had something to do with his service in the war. Or there was a wife whose drunkard of a husband, perhaps an ex-infantryman, had provided nothing for her and their children when he left this earth. Or there were orphans whose father might have been killed at Gettysburg when they were infants, and even though they were now in their twenties, fully capable of looking after themselves, they felt they had a legitimate claim. I heard each sad tale and made a recommendation.

Making them was not so simple as it sounds, although if humankind were basically honest, I suppose I should not have had a job. And I challenge any Yale or Harvardite who thinks of it as the petty work of a lowly functionary to try his hand at juggling a set of fiery, fragile egos, to focus clearly when all the facts have been obscured by the desperation that grows out of a woman's abject fear of a future without a husband, and then to make a recommendation with which everyone, including Uncle

Sam, can be satisfied. There was not a government post more crucial to our nation's domestic tranquility than was mine.

My office was in Philadelphia, where there was no small shortage of the so-called Philadelphia lawyer with whose talent for meticulousness I had constantly to contend. A cottage industry had grown up around these claims. Some of the names appeared again and again on behalf of the bereaved, lawyers who made a specialty out of extracting gold from the Federal veins for the benefit of the country's widows and orphans, and in no small way for the benefit of themselves as well. For a man steeped in the ethos of lawyering, his client's complaint is always fair and just; therefore, I had to step in with the dispassionate clarity of Solomon, a perspective untainted by potential financial reward, and examine the merits of the case. It was not a job with which to win popularity contests.

The City of Brotherly Love, they say, phil adelphos, and I was charged with meliorating the legacy of our country's great tragic conflict. Were I a true Meliorist, I might have had the conviction to view these individual cases from an historical perspective and place them in the context of the continuing improvement of man. And woman, I should be careful to add. But within my purview fell the victims of modernized warfare, a fact which hardly served to affirm the melioristic thrust of history. As the technologies of waging war have improved, so the lot of man, woman, and child has worsened, and larger has been the scale of human suffering and loss. Were I a sensitive

man, I might have become cynical. Were I a cynical man, I might have enjoyed my work.

The case of Colonel Samuel T. Wagner tested my cynicism and sensitivity more than any other.

Prentice Heath

Pension claims, given the widely disparate circumstances out of which they arise, require widely varying and concomitant expenditures of effort to convey them to their satisfactory resolutions. The claim of Colonel Samuel Wagner has proved to be one of the most burdensome with which I have had to contend. The establishment of his lunacy was not onerous, merely the marshalling of the proper forms with the proper signatures and dates. His mental incompetence was an indisputable matter of public record, an embarrassment to his family and friends, demonstrable with the testaments of Mrs. Wagner, his wife, and Mrs. Adams, his sister, and Mr. Tannenberg, his physician. No objections had been filed in opposition to my court petition to create a committee of person and estate to administer his affairs at First Trust and Equity Company of Pennsylvania. This fact lent credence to my claim. However, that a connection existed between his incompetence and his service in the War of the Rebellion could not be established to the satisfaction of the special examiner without extended, patient effort on my part.

Beyond reasonable doubt was the standard to which I

was accustomed to being held accountable. This obligation is a cornerstone of my profession. The additional onus, however, to negotiate the arbitrary prejudices of a special examiner, placed on me by the bureaucracy of the United States Pension Office and the Department of the Interior under which it operated, constituted a standard for which no jurisprudential education could have prepared me. A special examiner required no special erudition to receive his appointment, no special expertise in the subtleties of evidenciary assessment and evaluation. The examiner with whom I must contend on Wagner's case, a Mr. Wyatt, was, in addition, quite young to be wielding the power with which he was entrusted. And as if this lack of the high professional criteria with which I had been inculcated were not sufficient, the endemic intransigence that is part and parcel of the Federal bureaucratic ethos apparently directed even the most ratiocinative functionary to disbelieve the incontrovertibly obvious when it was presented for his edification. I submit that I was, nevertheless, obliged to exercise restraint in the interests of my client.

Hadwyn Ferrier

Finally the government seemed to be taking Sam's claim seriously. With Watkins and McHenery giving statements, even Bramble and some of the others, no longer was it just Heath and Lizzie and her brother and I making the case. I did, however, have quite a time of it tracking some of them down. A number

of our comrades had already died. I found Hutton up in Maine where he was living out his retirement like Henry David Thoreau. Good old Mountz was actually nearby on his farm outside Doylestown. Pennelroy was selling beer in St. Louis. He'd moved farthest away, not including those I'd heard had gone west to California or other wide-open spaces in search of adventure. So many men needed something to fill the void left by the end of the war, and some, like that show-off Custer, stayed on to die fighting the Indians. Sam was still fighting the rebels.

My impression of Wyatt was generally favorable. He was a methodical man, certainly, not about to be rushed into any sort of judgment. However, I respected him for that. His position was not an enviable one. As a representative of the Federal government with its well-earned reputation for selective fairness, he might easily have proved high-handed. Or he might have had no heart. Neither was the case.

Before he took my statement he said, "You're the gentleman who's been driving this wheel to get it to squeak loudly enough for government grease, am I right?" But he was smiling.

"Well, I'd suppose, but I never thought of it that way exactly."

"How long have you known Colonel Wagner, Mr. Ferrier?"

"We met in university, back in '59."

"Twenty-seven years," he said with a sideways glance as if he were calculating something beyond the math. "You're a loyal friend, Mr Ferrier. Wagner is a lucky man."

"Except that he has lost his mind," I said.

George Mountz

I knowed who he was right off. He had quite a reputation with the men. If you could walk any ways at all on your banged up or shot up bloody leg, you'd keep your boots on and hobble around like there was no pain, even if it was killing you, because you didn't want him to saw it clean off. Now I think it was mostly just rumors being played up for us three-year men, but back then we were scared plenty, and he had something to do with them rumors too, the way he walked around in them bloody aprons with that grimly look on his face. It wasn't no easy job he had, neither, making all those life or death decisions. You had to respect him for that.

He sat down right next to me, but I didn't expect him to remember no company sergeant. "Dr. Watkins."

"Yes."

"George Mountz's my name, Sergeant George Mountz, Company D, Tenth Pennsylvania Cavalry. I served with you up and down the Rappahannock."

"Nice to make your acquaintance."

We shook hands.

"You here for them depositions?"

"Yes, Captain Ferrier asked me."

"Me, too," I said. It was over twenty years since I seen Dr. Watkins, and I still got to worrying when he was around.

"Too bad about Colonel Wagner."

"Yes, it is."

Sanders Wyatt

To piece together what they had to say was my job. To pay Wagner a visit, I thought, would be prudent.

The day I went to the asylum, he put on a show for me, as if the asylum staff had no control over him or had given him leave to roam the entire grounds on account of his remarkable physical health. He proceeded to climb up on the roof of the dormitory and face down an oncoming storm like Prometheus daring Zeus to strike him.

No one seemed the least bit surprised with his peculiar behavior. They intimated, rather, that it was his habit and a source of some amusement for the staff. Wagner stood there, a sentinel without a hat, his thin hair whipped by the wind. Straddling the roof ridge, he stood with his feet on the opposite pitches, and his legs still looked fit for hugging the flanks of horse. He cut a comical figure owing something to Don Quixote, a cavalryman in white.

I wanted to think that there was hope for this man about whom I'd read so much in letters of praise from friends and comrades. Dr. Riley could not be so sanguine, however, and he

told me so.

Prentice Heath

Sanders Wyatt, Special Examiner, was the final obstacle to be surmounted in my quest for an equitable solution in Colonel Wagner's case. A bureaucrat's bureaucrat, apparently more interested in the maintenance of his bailliwick than in an expeditious finding to allay the degradation suffered by Colonel Wagner's family, Mr. Wyatt discounted without comment the profusion of letters and documents, notarized and authenticated, with which I had established Colonel Wagner's entitlement. His pleasure was only to be satisfied with a disruptive and cumbersome verbal deposition process requiring the transportation of the identical persons, who had provided sworn, written testimony, to the City of Philadelphia where he held court. The equity my petition requested, and ultimately succeeded in securing, was incontestably due Colonel Wagner's family; however, Mr. Wyatt had no apparent interest in the obvious, only in the procedures which ensured acquiescence to his authority.

During the intervening time, Mrs. Wagner and her children were constrained to a dependence on the charity of family and friends, and on the largesse of Colonel Wagner's former associates in the military and in business. In addition, as if this were not sufficient humiliation (and it is material to point out that the humiliation was due to no fault of Mrs.

Wagner, whose marriage to Colonel Wagner was the most wholesome of unions entered into by her in large part because of his celebrated service to his country during the crisis of the Rebellion), she was deprived, by her husband's incompetence, a direct result of his suffering during the belligerencies, of real estate which had been under her sole proprietorship prior to her marriage and which might have provided her with some measure of security when she lost him to his mania. Were Wyatt to have exhibited the sound judgment and native intelligence of even the most skeptical tradesman or farmer or businessman, Mrs. Wagner would have been able to circumvent this last affront to decency to which she was ultimately unwarrantedly subjected. The previous two years had proved to be sufficient humiliation, an excess of humiliation out of proportion to the obvious merits of my case; nonetheless, Wyatt could not or would not rule for us until he evinced his authority to rule against us.

Sanders Wyatt

Heath nearly guaranteed an unfavorable recommendation. A pompous and self-important man if ever there were one, he needed to brandish no diploma nor credential to confirm the privileged upbringing and education that had produced him. Too insensitive to discern the motivations or predispositions of others, unable to assess the subtleties of social interaction, he relied on a range of tactics that consisted of little more than

appeals to one's presumed recognition of his authority on any subject to which he spoke. He seemed to operate from the assumption that my inclination was to suspect fraud with each and every claimant, that it was inconceivable I might begin each case with a sympathetic point of view. No one knew better than I that these men had fought for ideals, much more so than the soldiers in ordinary wars over territory or commerce. I was acutely aware of this fact, and Heath's penchant for bluster made him unable to sense that about me.

Heath also seemed profoundly blinded to the nuances of the Wagner case. It was different from all the rest. His claim was not easy to prove or to disprove. No missing limb, no shrapnel scars, no obvious physical infirmity that might be connected to his service in the military. Firstly, Colonel Wagner was unable to file on his own behalf. Others did for him: Heath himself (whose objectivity was highly suspect), the family doctor, and an old school friend and fighting comrade. No direct testimony from the man himself was admissible, because he was no longer mentally competent to speak for himself. Furthermore, there was no mention of him in the casualty rolls of the battle in which he was alledged to have been injured. No evidence to provide validation other than the anecdotal evidence of men whose memories had grown dim after twenty years of trying to forget the horrors they had faced.

Luckily for the lunatic, Elizabeth Sykes Wagner spoke on

his behalf. A gracious, eloquent woman, she was something of a cross between Susan Anthony and Sarah Bernhardt, intelligent and principled and handsome, but, in contrast to these very public women, entirely modest in her manner.

That was the end of the first section. It was like a pissing contest between Wyatt and Heath, a characterization that came to Sam easily after two quick glasses of water. And "Sanders Wyatt" was a pseudonym his great-grandfather was using for some reason, but it didn't really make sense. If the other names were real—and according to Don's book, Wagner's was, and Sam thought he recognized Mountz, too—then there didn't seem to be much of a point in Stanfield's fictionalizing his own name. Sam thought about the others, and tried to remember if he'd seen them on the actual depositions.

The toilet was on the other side of the empty bed to his right, and with some effort Sam climbed out of bed, ass hanging out of the back of his gown, and wheeled his IV stand alongside. The stand proved handy as he stood in front of the toilet, because he became dizzy and used it to steady himself. His stomach was complaining. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had something to eat.

Back in bed he buzzed the nurse again, and this time Carolyn showed up. She was quite bouyant—for midnight in a hospital—and cute.

"Is there anything to eat?" Sam said.

She looked at the clipboard at the foot of his bed. "The cafeteria is closed—obviously." She laughed. "I can get you some crackers and maybe a granola bar of some kind." Waiting for his response, she straightened out the blanket, then crossed her arms and gave him a practiced smile.

"Sure," he said. "I'll take it, and can I have another glass of water?"

She bounced away and bounced back with an assortment of plastic-wrapped snacks and the water. The compassionate equivalent of the bread-and-water diet. He thanked her, and she bounced away again. He opened one of the granola wrappers and propped the story back up on his knees.

Section Two: The Lunatic's Wife

Thomas P. Riley, MD

"Lizzie?" Wyatt asked.

"Lizzie is Wagner's wife," I told him. "Elizabeth Sykes Wagner, from the respected Sykes family that has been in Philadelphia since the middle of the last century."

Wyatt was a decent enough man, his tendency to pry merely a job requirement. He would look at you, appraisingly, one eye squinting slightly as if he were a skeptic in the presence of an optical illusion, but his voice was calm, edged with an easy-going touch of humor. He seemed genuinely interested in what I had to say about Sam Wagner.

The first time I met Lizzie Wagner, as I told Wyatt, was October 1883. She had come by to visit her husband in the asylum and thank me for bringing him there. She confided in me that she no longer knew him as the man she had married ten years before.

"There have been some brief periods of clarity in the past few months," she said, "when we've been able to talk about

our affairs and our children or about the problems his condition has caused him."

I didn't speak right up. I let her think about what she wanted to say next, but when it seemed as if she were at a loss for words to express her difficulties, I said, "He often doesn't recognize you, then?"

"Yes."

Her stoicism was admirable, but by then she must have shed many tears. She didn't seem insensitive by nature, but certainly on guard against further unexpected emotional trials.

"How was he today?"

"I think he recognized me, but he talked mostly of needing to meet with General Bramble as soon as a captain whose name I didn't recognize brought a communique back to him." Her eyes were distant. "He was quite agitated."

I didn't have the courage to tell her that his continued decline was almost certain, though I think she must have known it.

After my first meeting with Lizzie, Wagner became more and more estranged from everyday reality. He came to exist in a world of his own fancy, and its logic was revealed to us only in his habits, as he was unable to explain any of it in a way that we could understand. Some of the things he did made sense to us because of their obvious connection to his service in the war. Habitually he would climb to the rooftop as a thunderstorm approached, and we could easily postulate that the noises and

sights made him think he was back on the battlefield. This happened the day Wyatt made his investigative visit. Wagner was in remarkable physical health for a man well into his forties; it was merely in his mind that he was not well.

Lizzie had stopped coming to visit by then. Wagner no longer recognized her. He wasn't hostile to her, she didn't feel threatened, but she felt there was no reason to visit. They had nothing to say to one another anymore. And I understood that she had her hands full just trying to keep a home for her family. We were all quite pleased that the government appeared ready to accept that it had a responsibility to Lizzie Wagner and her children.

David Tannenberg, MD

Sam had barred Lizzie and her youngsters in the basement and piled up the sitting room furniture in the street and laid out all his firearms on the hearth by the window. He said something about holding his position at the house until General Bramble could send up a unit of horsemen, which he was to command. I called in Tom because Sam had finally gone too far, and Tom was able to put Sam at ease that first meeting, the moment he called out his name. He embodied the nonthreatening style of intercourse the Friends are noted for, familiar even as it fostered mutual respect, although he was not Quaker by faith, merely by employment. He'd dressed himself in an old military uniform and called out from the sidewalk as if he were

a courier come with a message from divisional headquarters.

"Colonel Wagner, I have a dispatch from General Meade."

"Who goes there?"

"Captain Thomas P. Riley, sir, Aide de Camp for General Meade, commanding, Army of the Potomac."

And Tom gave him a note he had just scribbled up, something about pulling back to the Riverside Armory and taking command of the unit there. So Sam gathered up his arsenal and went off with Tom on horseback to the asylum.

In early spring 1885, Tom and I each submitted written affidavits on Sam's behalf and became, in a sense, colleagues on the case, perhaps even friends. Then, in March 1886, a special examiner wanted to talk to us in person, and we were called to give depositions. I suppose the red-tapery of the federal government could be justified on the grounds that pensions ought to be applied fairly, but I could not help but wonder whether any bona fide veteran of the war did not deserve full compensation.

I met Tom in the waiting room. "Dr. Riley."

"Dr. Tannenberg."

We shook hands.

"How is she?" Tom asked, as he always did.

"It's been difficult, but she won't let me prescribe anything to help her sleep."

"She's a proud woman."

"Yes," I said. "And asking for money goes against

everything she believes in."

"This must be hard for her."

"Lizzie's had ten years of hardships. She deserves every penny she's asking for."

Peter Sykes

My sister never let the abjectness of her situation endanger her three children. She remained surprisingly optimistic throughout the two-and-a-half years between Wagner's initial confinement and the final stage of the government's evaluation of his claim, these depositions. Nevertheless, she found it impossible to beg for the means of supporting her family and maintaining the one house she still retained, or rather the First Trust and Equity Company of Pennsylvania retained in her husband's name, nearly everything else she'd inherited from our father having already been lost. I did what I could to help, which was less than I would have preferred, but which was limited given my own family's needs. Others, out of loyalty to Wagner or because of a sense of duty to Lizzie herself, stepped in to help.

Hadwyn Ferrier was the man most tireless and unselfish in his efforts. He had known Sam since their days at the university and had fought with him all over northern Virginia, in defense of Washington, and at Gettysburg. He took it quite personally when Sam was no longer able to look after himself and his family. Ferrier was able to drum up support for Lizzie

among Sam's former comrades, and he was also able to track down a number of them who were willing to give depositions pertaining to his war injuries.

Prentice Heath saw to it that Lizzie never lost her home and provided money out of his own pocket on a number of occasions, I believe, although Lizzie was reluctant to talk about the extent of her dependence on others. She was a very proud woman with a large share of our father's stubbornness. I know that Heath was very generous with her, although I also suspect that he was able to recoup whatever monies he put up when the claim was settled. He was a shrewd attorney.

Dr. Riley had allowed Sam into the asylum even though Lizzie was not able to pay for his care. Phillip Pennelroy, who had been in Sam's regiment, was doing quite well in St. Louis and sent some money to Mr. Ferrier for Lizzie and the children. Someone from Pittsburgh anonymously sent five dollars every month, another one of his war comrades, I believe, and at first Lizzie refused to accept it, but Mr. Ferrier subsequently gave it to me and told me to get it to her without her knowing from whence it came, which I did.

Sanders Wyatt

Elizabeth Wagner added the emotional dimension to the case, a lawyer's dream witness. She knew it all first hand, and one could not help wanting to rally to her aid. One wanted to believe her. I wanted to believe her.

"How long have you been married?" I asked.

"Almost fifteen years." She sat across the desk from me, primly on the edge of the chair. She wore a modest yellow dress that neither competed with nor detracted from her stark beauty.

"Fifteen happy years?" I said, and then immediately felt that I had been inappropriate.

She hesitated as if looking for the answer that would be most prejudicial on her behalf. I rethought my line of inquiry, although inquiry is not the right word for it. We had not yet got around to the actual deposition. I liked to talk to these people before the proceedings became too formal, and all frankness was tempered lest the wrong impression be made. I was not doing well with her, however, as she was already guarded in her response. Finally she said, "It has not been easy."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'll strive to keep my questions less personal."

"I'm not sure, Mr. Wyatt, that you'll be able to unravel the personal from the public in my case."

"You may be right, but I don't want to add to your hardship."

"Ask what you must," she said. "The most important thing is that the truth come out."

I took her at her word and asked the question that to me was at the heart of the matter. "What makes you believe that your husband's incompetence is directly related to his service

in the war?"

She swept a lock of her sandy hair back behind her ear. "If you could see the look in his eyes when a thunderstorm was almost upon him, the terror and the delight at the same exact time, you'd understand how he's never got over the war." Her eyes narrowed, obscuring their blue-grey color, an irony that was not lost on me. "I don't know the scientific explanation for it," she said, "other than what I've been told, and maybe technically he wasn't injured, I don't know, but I do know, probably better than anyone else except his sister Abbie or Hadwyn, perhaps, that he was profoundly effected by the war, negatively effected." Her face grew stony. "It's caused me to lose nearly everything."

Abigail Wagner Adams

Sam and Lizzie's son Peter was born in December 1882. I remember because that was the Christmas when my husband and I came from Baltimore, where we lived at the time, to visit them, and my brother was very subdued, yet proud of the new baby. Lizzie and I'd had regular correspondence from the time I was married and moved from Philadelphia, so I knew she'd been having serious troubles with Sam and his business failures, and she'd written often about his strange behavior, which seemed to be related to the headaches he'd had ever since the end of the war. But when we first visited them, he was very quiet, almost mesmerized by his ruddy little son. And Lizzie

was doing well also, for she'd had a healthy pregnancy and an easy birth, so by the time we arrived she was much her normal self, I thought, and when I had a chance to talk with her in private, she seemed hopeful, as if the season were having a positive effect on her family's life.

However, my brother had become very possessive of his firearms and had to carry them around with him at all times, even when we sat around the dinner table, and my husband was unhappy with this because he's Quaker, as is Lizzie. Although he's not afraid of guns, they are a matter of principal to him.

"Sam, may we have a peaceful meal without thy firearms at the table?" my husband asked.

And Lizzie was nervous, as she never used to be, that Sam would take offense at my husband's request, because he'd become so easily excitable, and she tried to smooth things over for the sake of her children and the season and our visit, saying, "Maybe thou couldst leave them in thy satchel, Sam, as it is Christmas."

And my brother was visibly uneasy, suspicious, too, I think, and he said something about civilians not being able to understand, but Lizzie seemed to have said the right thing and just looked at him without glaring or saying anything more, and he took his guns from the table and put them in his leather bag.

Then during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, Sam had one of his headaches, and as Lizzie had her hands full with her new baby, I applied the hot compresses to the back

of my brother's head, much as I'd done years earlier. His humor changed at this point. He was morose and irritable, and spoke of things that I did not understand, but that clearly had something to do with the Rebellion, and I remember how surprised I was that they were still so vivid in his mind.

For the remainder of our visit, my brother stayed away from the house most of the time. My husband went out to look for him on New Year's Eve day, although Lizzie didn't encourage him to do so. She said there was no telling where he'd gone and that he did it often, and she also reminded me that after he had one of his headaches, he preferred to be alone, which I recalled. She said others had often succeeded in finding him, but he'd always been hard to talk sense with and couldn't easily be talked into coming home.

When we left to go home to Baltimore, he was still gone, and I tried to get Lizzie to bring her children to Baltimore to stay with us for a while, because I could help her with the baby and she could rest a little. It had only been a month since she'd given birth, but she wouldn't come and said she'd be alright. So we left and I told her I would write as soon as I got home, which I did.

Elizabeth Sykes Wagner

When Peter was born in Decemaber of 1882, our lives had become about as difficult as I thought they could. It was incumbent upon me to provide for my children, which I was just

able to do with the investments I still had and the handwork I was able to take on at home, for though I had finally put behind me all the troubles from the foreclosure on my property in Germantown the previous year, the loss left us without a steady income. Sam was gone much of the time, and if I asked where, he was not able to account for himself to my satisfaction. I never did understand. When he was home, his irrational behavior often made me wish he were gone.

For example, one time he brought home a dozen dogs, an ill-tempered pack of no particular breed, mongrels in fact, that looked to have grown up along the riverfront scavenging for their meals. They were ill-mannered, and rabid for all I knew, but he'd paid money for them, and he spoke of a wealthy landowner in Virginia who wanted them. Ginnie and I were so afraid we would not go out into the yard, and then he seemed to forget about shipping them to Virginia and let them all go.

He often spoke of enterprises and ventures, but from what I could see, these were little more than figments of his deluded imagination. He seemed to find men who would entertain his delusions, but they were not the kind of men who could be counted upon for business, as I believe every businessman in Philadelphia had learned to steer clear of him by then. I am sure they were polite to him if he were able to corner them in one of their smoky gentlemen's clubs, because he had been a popular and admired man during and before the war, and even after the war. However, his steadily increasing

incompetence had become a matter of common knowledge, and the only men able to match his delusion were others broken by the war or drunks.

Mr. Wyatt asked me, "Was your husband a drinker himself?"

"Absolutely not," I told him, "though that seemed a small consolation to me."

Sam had mortgaged my property in Germantown, this was in 1879, so that he might buy a livery business, which my brother claims he paid an inflated price for. He knew nothing of running a livery business, despite his experience in the cavalry, and he did not have the acumen to pick it up before he had to close it down within a year for lack of business. He also failed to keep up the payments on the mortgage and the taxes, and that is why my property was foreclosed on.

While he was attempting to make something of his livery business, I miscarried. When I mentioned this fact to Mr. Wyatt, he became noticeably uncomfortable.

"You don't need to provide details of such a personal and intimate nature if you don't wish to," he said. "I don't want to make this any more difficult for you than it already is."

"If by 'intimate,'" I told him, "you mean details pertaining to childbearing, I assure you I think of it all as quite natural. What I tell you may be personal, but it is a little late to worry about keeping my personal problems private."

"As you wish," he said.

Around the time of my miscarriage, I stopped trying to talk to Sam about his business difficulties and failures because of his sensitivity to them. He had a tendency to become very defensive and sometimes even angry, intimating that I did not allow him to succeed through my interference, although I was never able to interfere and as a result we lost his fortune and mine.

December 1882 rang a bell. This was the end of the second section, so Sam set the story on the nightstand and stretched his aching back muscles. Bed sores would be next. At least the aspirin had made his head stop hurting.

He wondered what time it was. The scene outside looked exactly as it had when he first opened his eyes. He buzzed Carolyn.

"A little after midnight," she said.

"Long night."

"I'm doing the same thing you are," she said in that bouyant voice of hers.

He looked at his IV, then down at covers draped over his bent knees.

"Reading," she said.

He smiled at her. "What are you reading?"

"Oh, it's just a trashy novel." She laughed. "What's yours?"

He tried to explain it as succinctly as he could.

She just said, "Oh."

He shifted his body around to find a comfortable position.

"Is that all you needed?" Carolyn said.

"How about a cup of coffee?"

"No, I can't get you that." She smile. "I can get you more water."

"I'll just wet the bed," he said.

She laughed at that. Sam was glad she appreciated his sense of humor.

"Can I give you something to help you sleep?" she said.

Her question made him think of Josie and her "kiss me here." He looked up into her sweet face. "No, I just keep thinking bedsores are blooming on my butt is all."

She laughed again. "Would you like me to check it for you?"

"No, that's okay." He had her get him another glass of water, just in case, so he wouldn't have to bother her again.

When he returned to his great-grandfather's story, he remembered the back of the photograph of the beautiful, somber woman: "December 1882."

Section Three: The Lunacy

Peter Sykes

By the early 1880s, Sam's behavior had got quite unbearable. Many of his friends and former business partners had come routinely to avoid him rather than be put in the awkward position of having to keep up with his mercurial temperament or say no to his byzantine schemes.

One involved expanding the railway lines so that more freight might move between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, although he did not call it "freight." He called it "supplies." He seemed always to think in military terms. Of course, he held no sway with the railroads, or with anything else, for that matter,

but his ambitions kept him busy right up until the end.

Just prior to his confinement, he pressed me about a plan he had for an electrical generating station in the Frankfort neighborhood where we lived. Edison's success with it in Manhattan the previous year had a number of entrepreneurs in other cities looking to join in the rush of progress, and Sam had had an interest in technological matters since his university days when he studied engineering. But interest was all there was. He had no capacity for creating such a generating facility.

The fact that no one had any interest in becoming his partner made no difference, however, as his mind had moved on to something else. All one could do, what we had all learned by then, was to humor him, hold on to our wallets, and let his inconstant mind tire of the matter and move on to something else. Nothing could be gained by trying to talk sense with him. And we always feared we might agitate him.

Hadwyn Ferrier

I don't remember exactly when it was clear to me that there was no way back for Sam. His difficulties, which had created in him a kind of general uselessness, became more and more marked by delusion. What was real to our minds was no longer real to him, and what was real to his mind wasn't shared by anyone else.

I'd never doubted that his headaches were tied to the concussion he received during the Rebellion. But with his

increasing tendency to hoard firearms and to always steer our conversations toward matters of the war and to become agitated when doing so, I'd begun to suspect that his delusions were also a casualty of his service. By 1880, I'd become convinced that this was so.

"Was he given to drinking alcohol to alleviate his headaches?" Wyatt asked.

I knew right off what he was suggesting. "Sam's never been a drinking man," I said. "He discovered early, when we were still in college together, that his body wouldn't tolerate alcohol."

"Then you would corroborate Mrs. Wagner's claim that her husband was not a drinker, that his troubles could not be traced to alcohol?"

"If he'd been a drinking man, Lizzie wouldn't have stood by him as she has."

"I have to account for every possibility," he said, almost apologetically.

"But I wonder, Mr. Wyatt," I said after thinking for a moment. "If he were a man driven to drink while trying to alleviate his war-related suffering, and that drinking ravaged his mind, would he be any less deserving of some government compensation for his suffering?"

Wyatt didn't have an answer.

Peter Sykes

It was in 1876 when I last seriously entertained ideas of a business partnership with Sam Wagner. Lizzie's first child was born that year, a girl that Sam insisted they name Virginia. We called her Ginnie. I was feeling somewhat responsible for them as I could see that Sam was continuing to have difficulties establishing himself.

I could only imagine what it meant to be a veteran of the Rebellion, and from the accounts I had read about the suffering and from the men I had seen who had lost limbs or eyes or their hearing, I felt that we who were too young to have fought owed them something. It was clear to me that his experience in the cavalry had had a profound effect on him. I heard this from his sister Abbie who often talked about his cleverness and vigor before the war when he proved successful trying his hand at his father's bookselling business. And friends like Hadwyn Ferrier, whom I came to know through Lizzie and Sam, also spoke about his sharpness before the war. Although it was not obvious from his physical appearance that anything was wrong (only his headaches seemed to suggest this), it made sense to me that the headaches could have a bearing on the difficulties he had sustaining a business. These difficulties did not appear to be from a lack of trying on his part, just a lack of priority.

Through my family, I was acquainted with certain horse breeders in northern Virginia, whose partisanship during the war had cost them the trust of the Federal government. Sam and

I thought we could re-establish that trust. My own expertise with livestock was limited, but horses seemed natural for a man of the cavalry, and I was sure I could be an effective middleman based on my varied experience in wholesale. I was looking to branch out and the potential for horse trading, especially with Sam's contacts within the Federal government and the cavalry, seemed unlimited.

On our initial visit to Virginia, however, I became convinced of Sam's being unfit for any business enterprise. We were visiting a large breeding farm adjacent to the Rappahannock River where Sam was reminded of his service in the Rebellion. The farm was located near Buelee's Ford where Sam told me he had been knocked from his horse and stunned by an artillery shell. The terrain was still scarred from the cannon fire, and Sam became quite agitated at the sight, talking rapidly and telling me of the heated exchange of guns and the rush of the retreating Federal forces, whose flank he and his fellow cavalrymen were trying to protect. He became so excited that I was unable to make sense of much of his discourse, except that it was clear he wanted to retrace some of the cavalry's movements along the river. The breeder, Mr. Fouquier, allowed him to do so with one of his horses, which we were taking on a midday ride as a preliminary part of our business.

Sam rode off and we did not see him again until after dark when he came back on foot. Apparently he had driven the horse hard for several miles down river and back, causing it to

loosen a shoe and come up lame. Then he stopped to talk with some of the farmer's neighbors about the engagement at Buelee's Ford and left the animal with some colored boys who brought it back to Mr. Fouquier. We had to pay for the horse, needless to say, and Sam's actions caused a great deal of inconvenience for us. In the end, we were unable to consummate any of our business transactions.

George Mountz

When I seen Colonel Wagner at the reunion in 1875, he sure seemed different. All the men seemed different, a course, because ten years is a long time when we really only knowed each other for three or four years, at the most, during the Rebellion, and knowing somebody in a war is a different kind of knowing. But the Colonel was changed the most. He used to be such a earthly man. It was like he was one of us, and he almost was, starting out a lieutenant with us volunteers, and we always could count on him to jump right in there in the heat of a fight and get us out of it, because he was so cool when things were hot.

So when I seen him at the reunion I was sorry to see how nervous he was, and his eyes, they were like he seen some ghost. Captain Pennelroy was there, too, all the way from St. Louis, and he was happy to see the Colonel, but he told me (the Captain, I mean) how when the Colonel was in St. Louis after the war, he knew something wasn't right, and it seemed like it was

just getting worse.

Then the strangest thing happened, later when one of them spring storms come up, the kind you hope you got everything in the ground before they come on you, and that thunder and lightning on the front edge had the Colonel climbing up on the roof, facing it down like a Baptist.

"Sounds as if he spent more time these last few years as a human weather vane than just about anything else," Wyatt said.

I thought that was a queer thing to say, and I said, "I ain't seen him since the reunion, so I wouldn't know."

Then he said, "How did you get him down?"

And I told him we didn't get him down, he just come down himself when the thunder stopped. And he didn't look no better or no worse than he did before he went up there neither, just a little wet, and still saying things he was agitated about but I didn't right understand, and them eyes still spooked.

Edward Watkins, MD

I began my career with the cavalry as the chief surgeon with the Tenth Pennsylvania before I became the surgeon for the entire division, so I received an invitation to the reunion in 1875 just as any of the rest of the volunteers did. Jeremias Hutton, the chaplain, organized it along with Captain Ferrier, and they tracked me to Allentown where I'd set up my private practice after the war.

I hadn't seen most all of the men in those intervening

years, and it was a pleasure to be with them again. In fact, the only disconcerting thing about the whole affair was what had become of Colonel Wagner. I remembered having put it to him rather starkly back in 1864 when he talked of renewing his term. If he valued his health, I told him, he ought to get out, and that's what he did. But it appeared that the relative tranquility of civilian life had not had the palliative effect on his health as I'd hoped.

He'd brought his old service revolver with him, which was odd enough, although the nature of the gathering, to reminisce about old times, might have excused doing so. What was disconcerting, however, were the facts that it was loaded and that he appeared to wear it as if he might have occasion to use it. His agitated nature added to this appearance.

From our conversation I gathered that he was still troubled by headaches, which he'd overcome to render excellent service in the Wilderness Campaign, but which eventually became the primary basis for my advice that he retire. That he still suffered from them indicated to me the degenerative nature of his injury we are still seeing today.

By the time he climbed up on the roof in response to the thunder and lightning of the approaching storm, I'd become convinced that he exhibited the symptoms of an unbalanced mind, a kind of obsessive fascination with his memories of the war and a tendency to mix up those memories with present day reality. And though I often thought of Colonel Wagner after the

reunion, and wondered how he was faring, I never saw him again, and only became aware of his fate when Captain Ferrier was able to contact me for these depositions.

Jeremias Hutton

The Colonel Wagner I remembered, who would spring from his horse and plunge into the thick of a dismounted charge to the cheers of an inspired regiment, or with his characteristic coolness would redeploy the troops of a sagging battleline where the fire raged the hottest, or, then again, would not so much as turn up a collar to press on through a hailstorm of enemy bullets, this Colonel Wagner was very much the same Colonel Wagner I saw at our regimental reunion. He looked as gallant as ever in his field coat, which fit surprisingly well after ten long years, and which displayed his colonel's bars on top his shoulders in a brilliant yellow as pleasing to the eye as the brilliant red on the shoulders of a red-winged blackbird. The storm that passed over us that evening clearly reminded him of battle, a thunderous vapor that appeared to mock his eyes with air. Still a strapping man despite his years, he scaled the two stories of our meeting hall before any of us noticed he was gone, and he stood there defiant as Horatio Hornblower in a hurricane.

It was as if those ten years had not passed, and Colonel Wagner was awaiting his next engagement. Captain Ferrier had forewarned me of his condition, describing him as "visionary"

and "distracted." I had not seen him since I mustered out of the regiment in August of 1864, and I heard that he stayed on only for another month or two, until he heeded Dr. Watkins's advice to retire. I also heard that he had not been as successful in his civilian life as he had been in the cavalry.

What made the most profound impression on me were his eyes. They were agitated eyes, shining too hot for a conflict ten years put to rest. That was precisely the problem I sensed with Colonel Wagner. For him the conflict had not been put to rest.

Elizabeth Sykes Wagner

Things changed in 1875 when I became pregnant with Ginnie, my first child. To put it candidly, our early marriage had not been entirely satisfactory. For three and a half years Sam had been unable to establish himself, and we had been using my income to maintain our house, much as I had done before our marriage when the house was in my sole possession. I think this was very hard on Sam. He would go away for weeks at a time to different places, looking after business opportunities like timber and livestock, just about anything but books, which his father had bought and sold. Every fall between 1870, the year before we were married, and 1875, when I became pregnant, he would take a trip to Pittsburgh for business, although it was never clear what business he was engaged in. He had a friend in Pittsburgh, one of his comrades from the Rebellion, and he believed he could start something there.

When he came back home from Pittsburgh in November 1875, he was particularly morose. The Christmas season lay just around the corner, and his head was bothering him. I had begun to feel that although I had a husband on paper, I had not one in fact. I suggested that we visit his sister in Baltimore, where she had recently moved, as we had not seen her family for several months. Abbie had a new son whom neither of us had seen, so we decided to go at Thanksgiving time before it became too cold. The trip proved beneficial to Sam's peace of mind, perhaps it was being near the water or seeing Abbie, his only family left with his parents gone and his brother long unheard from out West.

At Christmas time I knew I was pregnant, and Sam was so proud that he promised he would not go away on any more long business trips. He made a determined effort to conduct his business in or near Philadelphia from then on. I cannot fault him for not trying.

Herrick Shimmel

When I told Mr. Wyatt about looking up Colonel Wagner in Pittsburgh in 1873, because I'd heard he was there, and explained how he actually had a reputation back then, Mr. Wyatt asked, "What do you mean 'reputation?'"

"He was a public character."

"You mean like the town drunk?"

"No, not like that," I told him.

"Like the village idiot?"

"No, no, he wasn't that either."

The way Mr. Wyatt put it made me have to think about what I meant, and I wasn't sure right off how to explain it. There was a man I knew when I was a boy who used to sit out front of the mercantile chewing tobacco and spitting and talking to anyone who'd listen about how he'd run things if he was governor or the president. His working days were done, so he was always there as near as I could figure, and most everybody showed him respect because he was old, but then had a good laugh about him behind his back. I explained to Mr. Wyatt how Colonel Wagner was like him in a way, except he was younger, of course, and wasn't one to be sitting around, but up trying his hand at everything, just like when he was in the cavalry. I met more than one man in the beer halls who knew about Colonel Wagner, knew his name, and knew he was an ambitious man, even as they laughed about his far-fetched ideas.

"Did Colonel Wagner frequent these beer halls?"

"Not that I ever saw, but like I said he was a public figure."

"Where did you find him when he came to Pittsburgh?"

"He was dining at the Grand Hotel with an old acquaintance of ours, Beatrice Metcalf, and her brother."

"Old acquaintance?"

"Yes, we knew Bea in Washington during the Rebellion," I

said. "She worked in a hospital where the officers convalesced."

Abigail Wagner Adams

In those years between Sam and Lizzie's marriage and my move to Baltimore, I saw more of her than him. Even when Sam was in town, it was difficult to get him to sit down long enough for a civil conversation as his restless mind seemed to keep him in a state of constant agitation. Our continuing friendship, mine and Lizzie's, was very important to her then, and she was a doting aunt to my two children.

There had settled in upon Lizzie's marriage a kind of melancholy that was hard for me to reconcile with my memories of her girlhood, which was generally happy despite the Rebellion, and her humor could probably be traced back to the day of her wedding. Things had not gone as she'd planned, as any girl might've planned for her wedding day, and it sowed seeds of regret, I think, which grew quickly.

The problems started when Sam wanted to wear his cavalry uniform in the ceremony, and Lizzie felt it was an affront to her family's Quaker faith, which she herself didn't practice to the letter, but which she nevertheless wished to respect. It's a testament to her will that she was able to convince Sam to leave his uniform in the closet, since the issue wasn't one of reason but one of imagination, and somehow she was able to disattach the emotion that his uniform had come to

represent and reattach it to the suit of clothes she'd come to associate with his business aspirations. But doing so wasn't easy.

Worse than the problem with the uniform was the spectacle Sam made of himself when a thunderstorm came up during the ceremony. It was a small wedding, not at a church but in a private home, which is common among the Friends, in this case, the home of Lizzie's uncle and aunt as both her parents had died within a week of each other soon after the Rebellion was put down, and when it was time for the vows, a quick-moving storm had just come in, distracting Sam and drawing him out of doors so that no one was quite sure where he was. After the storm blew over, half an hour later, Sam reappeared in soaked clothes and muddy shoes as if nothing at all was amiss. The ceremony was then performed, with Lizzie refusing to let the incident bring her to tears, but she later told me that the storm seemed like an omen to her, and perhaps she should've paid heed to it.

By contrast, their honeymoon was a pleasant time for both of them, for they did love each other very much, and they visited New York, and Lizzie was able to put the unpleasantness of the wedding out of her mind to focus on the hopes she had for her new life with her new husband. But as Sam's mental injuries came to dominate his life, the unpleasantness of the wedding took on a greater significance to her.

Peter Sykes

Concurrent with his marriage to my sister in 1871, Sam sold the house and property he had inherited from his family, as Lizzie and he made her house in Frankfort their home. Then while Sam was away on business, I believe to Pittsburgh where he went for several consecutive years during the fall in hopes of getting in on the steel boom, Lizzie asked me to look into the sale of his property for she suspected that something was not right. This turned out to be true as he had sold it for a song.

When I asked Sam about the sale after he returned home, he was completely surprised that his property would have been worth so much more than he received for it, but he was not at all as bothered about this as I should have expected. In fact, he expressed much more interest in the investments he said he had made in Pittsburgh in steel casting, although he did not appear to have made any immediate profits from them.

Lizzie became concerned over the next few years that while Sam was away in Pittsburgh he would be making unwise investments, so she had me look into his activities there. From what I could tell from my inquiries, he was pursuing legitimate business opportunities that my contacts were familiar with, but it was never clear why he was unable to parlay his interests into some form of return. In October 1873, Sam's third year in Pittsburgh, Lizzie convinced me to travel there and look at his business activities first-hand, which I did, and he and I had dinner with one Thomas Metcalf and his sister, Beatrice I

believe her name was, who were cousins of the Mellon banking family. They seemed to be the right kind of people with whom Sam ought to be associating, and I assured Lizzie that he had promising opportunity there and that perhaps with time, the Metcalfs would help him get established.

Phillip Pennelroy

Colonel Wagner came out to St. Louis in '69 after I looked him up on a visit to Philadelphia where my family stayed when I moved west. Sam's father had died a few months before my visit, and he lived in his family's house, which he let rooms out of to four gentlemen, and two of them had been our comrades in the Tenth.

One of the nights I was there we got together for cards and cigars, and it was like we were all back together in camp, except we ate better and the house was much more comfortable than anything we'd ever had in Virginia. When talk turned to business after a few whiskeys (for the three of us anyway, since Sam never drank and Mr. Wyatt asked me to be clear on this point), I told my former comrades of the success I was having in the beer-selling business in St. Louis, and that got Sam excited. And I think he decided then and there to come out to St. Louis, too, as he was not having any luck in Philadelphia, and he did not want to take over his father's bookselling concern.

I'd had a lot respect for Sam, and only seen him briefly since we both left the cavalry in the fall of 1864, when our

three-year volunteer service was up. I was glad to hang up my saber and get back to a normal life, which led me to St. Louis. But Sam was more ambitious than me. He would have stayed on looking for a general's brevet, if not for his headaches and Dr. Watkins finally telling him to get out. When he came home to Philadelphia, I saw him briefly before I moved west, and he didn't seem to know what to do with himself without his command.

I didn't want to encourage him too much about St. Louis, because I didn't know of any available work, so I tried to be realistic, but he was so enthusiastic about it (too much so, I'm afraid), that I was surprised he didn't leave that evening on the train. He did come out soon after, and I set him up in a boardinghouse I knew of, and he stayed for six months, but had no success with it. Because of his headaches, he was not the reliable man I knew in the regiment.

I have a little story to illustrate this. When he decided to go back to Philadelphia in the fall of 1869, he was quite excited to take a number of things he'd picked up in St. Louis, nothing especially important, gifts for a woman he was sweet on and for his sister and her family, a new pair of boots, and a pistol alleged to have belonged to Grant when he fought in the West. Buying the pistol was an example of unreliability in itself, for who could believe such a story about a common pistol without some proof? Nevertheless, after he'd put all of these items in a trunk to take back to Philadelphia, he became distracted by a

conversation over breakfast or something like that, and when it came time to board the train east, he left his trunk at the boarding house. Later I wired him about it, and he replied that I should do with it as I wished.

Abigail Wagner Adams

When our father died in January 1869, all he left was the house and property, plus a modest bank account. Sam was the oldest of the siblings, and he took over the family home, as our brother had given up any claim to the property when my father provided him with a sum of money to set himself up in California, and Sam insisted that I take the money in the bank account.

The first thing he did with the house was remove all the books that our father had collected over the years as a book wholesaler, but luckily, I got them, for I would've been distraught if he'd just disposed of them. They were, in effect, a large part of my share of the inheritance.

Sam immediately turned our home into a boarding house, which was certainly within his rights, but it fell upon me and my husband to manage the affairs of the place when he went off to St. Louis in the late spring, and it was then I discovered that his arrangements with the boarding men was something less than contractual. One of them had yet to pay any rent whatsoever. Fortunately, my husband thought to have Sam sign a contract with us giving us the authority to evict and use our

discretion in the management of the house, or else I don't know how we could've enforced anything. We knew Sam wasn't stupid, and we chalked his absent-mindedness up to his overriding ambition to prove successful in St. Louis, but I'm convinced now, and have been for some time, that this was early proof that his mind had been damaged during the Rebellion.

George Mountz

I was twenty-one when the Rebellion ended, but I wasn't no settling-down twenty-one. I went away to fight when I was seventeen, and I could of kept fighting. I didn't have no interest then in cows and corn. First I stayed on in Washington, which some of the Army of the Potomac done, then went to the Federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, and even out to the Nebraska territory before it become a state in 1867.

When my fighting days were finally done and I come back to Doylestown in 1868, my father had a time of it keeping me on the farm. I thought maybe my wandering days were through, but I wasn't happy, and I thought I might find work in Philadelphia. I thought maybe I could hook up with some of the men there who were with me in the Tenth. I knew Colonel Wagner was a Philadelphia man, and I got to wondering what happened to him since he mustered out in the fall in 1864 on account of his headaches.

I found him, all right, through Major Simpkins, who'd

taken over his father's mercantile so's he was easy to find. The colonel had a house in Frankfort he was letting out rooms in, and I even took one of them for a couple of months, though I was worried the whole time how I was going to pay him because I couldn't find much work, but he never asked me for none. I thought it was queer. How's a man supposed to make any money on letting out rooms if he doesn't ask for none? But he seemed busy with his plans, because he was always ambitious for things. I meant to pay him and would of if I had it, but since he never asked, I didn't bring it up, and then after a couple of months I come back to Doylestown where I lived ever since. I even tried to give him some money at the reunion in '75, 'cause of my conscience, but he didn't know what I was talking about and wouldn't have none of it.

Mr. Wyatt asked, "What do you remember about Colonel Wagner's health at the time of your stay in Philadelphia?"

"I don't remember much, except he was active, like I always remembered him."

"What about his mind?"

"He was forgetful, like I said about the money," I told him. "And when we would talk about old times in Virginia, he got excited some and looked ready to fight the war all over again."

I didn't have to tell Mr. Wyatt how peculiar that was, the colonel's anxiousness to be back in the cavalry. He just nodded his head and said, "The colonel's champing at the bit must have

been a sentiment you could no longer share after all your service in the saddle."

Elizabeth Sykes Wagner

Mr. Wyatt asked me how, if Sam's insanity was a result of his service in the War of the Rebellion, it had not been apparent to me that something was wrong before I married him.

I told him that when I first made his acquaintance shortly after the war in 1866 (because I knew his sister Abbie), he seemed forgetful, but I did not think this fact was connected to the headaches, of which she spoke. I attributed it to his busy life, for he had taken on many of the responsibilities of the family house with his mother already gone and his father growing more and more feeble. Many of the men who had fought to put down the Rebellion were finding it difficult, I had read, to adjust to the pace of civilian life, so I found it quite understandable that Sam would be a little preoccupied.

"And you and he married in 1871?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

"And in the intervening five years you found no reason to suspect that a war injury was driving him into insanity?"

"I was no expert on insanity, Mr. Wyatt, although I suppose I now have justification to claim a small degree of expertness."

"What I'm trying to understand, because I do not know myself, is whether there might be no indication of insanity soon

after the alleged cause, and none even five years later, but only after ten or fifteen years."

"It is true we do not have much of an understanding of the lunatic's mind."

"How could a war injury cause a man's insanity," he then asked, "and yet eight years on, the woman he marries not know anything about it?"

I know he had not meant to, but Mr. Wyatt broke open a floodgate when he asked this question. I did not answer right away; I could not, because, though I did not cry, my heart was aching in a way I had been able to avoid since before Sam had been taken away to the asylum.

"Mr. Wyatt," I finally managed, "who can explain why, in spite of good reasons we may find not to, we fall in love with those whom we fall in love with?"

Having reached another convenient stopping point, and full of thoughts about the person he'd fallen in love with, Sam put the story down. He remembered the time right after Ethel took off to Portland, remembered his own heart's aching, and he realized how lucky he'd been that she'd just gotten out of his life, that he hadn't had to sit by and watch her lose her mind like Elizabeth had done with Wagner. Of course in his case, he probably would have been the one losing a mind.

Sam thought about Stanfield's other stories, and how they compared. This one was more traditional than the rest of them—even though it was like a scrambled up set of depositions—and it was the closest thing to a page-

turner that he'd read. And in a way, all of Stanfield's stories worked together. They shared the same elements. The Bea in Pittsburgh had to be the Bea who was singing "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in the screwy story. There were the lightning storms and the climbing up on the roof. People like Shimmel and Pennelroy showed up in a couple of places. This story just had a lot more to it and made a lot more sense.

Sam found the button on the side of the bed to straighten out the bend in his knees, then he got up. The vinyl flooring was colder on his bare feet than he'd expected, and his legs stiffer than he'd been prepared for. Waddling like a toddler, he wheeled his IV stand to a spot in front of the window. The streets down below were empty, eerie in the glow of the streetlights. He tried stretching to relieve the soreness in his back and legs, felt a rush of dizziness, and quickly sat down in the visitor's chair in the corner.

When his equilibrium returned, he rolled his rig out into the hall where the lights were uncomfortably bright and the silence spooky. He held the back of his gown closed with one hand and pushed the IV stand with the other. He walked down the hall, ran into no one. Retracing his steps and continuing in the other direction, he came upon the nurse's station, which Carolyn had apparently abandoned. He continued on, thinking he might find her at a row of vending machines or in the doorway of a patient's room with a syringe full of morphine or antibiotics in her hand. All he did, however, was end up back in front of his own door after traveling the entire perimeter of the ward.

Inside his room, he had a pang of missing his guitar. From the time he was a teenager and up until recently, his routine response to insomnia had

been to sit up strumming his acoustic guitar and letting his fingers wander at the whim of his overactive mind. But he had disturbing, melted-together memories of destroying that guitar. All he had this morning were Stanfield's obsessions to keep him company.

Section Four: The Injury

Abigail Wagner Adams

From the time my brother came home from the war, he was troubled by headaches. He was agitated much of the time, and his personality had changed from the outgoing man he'd always been when he was younger to the irritable man the war had created, and this would happen without warning, although it seemed to happen more in the fall when the weather got colder. He'd ask me to help him, and so I put hot compresses on the back of his head and this seemed to offer some relief, but he'd have no recourse except to stay in his room and wait for the spell to pass. Often he'd leave town on some type of business, once all the way to St. Louis for almost six months, and I don't know what he did for his headaches then, for he must've had them.

All during this time, up until I married in 1868 and set up house with my husband in Frankfort, I was busy keeping the house I shared with my father and brother. My mother died in 1864, not unexpectedly, though she was not aged at the time of her death, due in part to her constant worry over my brother's

safety during the Rebellion. Without her, my father began to suffer health problems. He was much older than she. My other brother David, who was four years younger than Sam, had left for California in 1862 for reasons of his own rebelliousness, for not wanting, I imagine, to follow exactly in our brother's footsteps and head off to war, and I'm sure my mother's perpetual worry over Sam also contributed to his decision, as he didn't want to subject her to more of it. One brother putting his life on the line for his country was enough for so small a family. Therefore, David was gone when both of our parents died, leaving me and Sam to make arrangements, so that much of it fell on me because Sam also had his headaches to deal with, and he could not always be counted on for help in household affairs because he was ambitious to establish himself in business.

We weren't able at first to see how much the war had changed him, or how much untreatable damage his injury had caused, because if it had been obvious, I don't think my friend Lizzie would've married him, no matter how much she might have loved him. His mania took over slowly, as his visions became reality for him more and more. In hindsight, I'm convinced I can see how his lunacy progressed, and there was no hint of it before the war, only after, when his headaches should've been an obvious sign that something was terribly wrong.

"There is no history of lunacy in your family, is there?"

Mr. Wyatt asked.

Had the process of getting my brother's pension claim not been dragging on for two years, and had I not learned much earlier to steel myself with patience, if for no one else but Lizzie and her children, I might have been outraged by Mr. Wyatt's suggestion. But I simply said, "Absolutely not."

Edward Watkins, MD

Colonel Wagner would have stayed on until the war's end had I not made clear his choice: If he valued his life, he would have to muster out at the end of his three-year term. I suppose it is ironic that his greatest achievements had come after his concussion, but the intermittant headaches he suffered as a result indicated to me that additional service on the battlefield would only add to the rapid deterioration of his health. He needed extended recuperation.

After he retired I didn't see him for more than ten years. I opened up my private medical practice in Allentown, my hometown, and I had little occasion to come to Philadelphia. An exception, of course, was the ten-year reunion.

The last thing he had said to me before he mustered out was something like "It appears I won't be making general," to which I had responded, "Would you rather be a dead general or colonel living in a respectable retirement?"

Wyatt said, "I suppose it is also ironic that his retirement and recuperation did not lead to his good health."

"Sadly, yes."

"But you found no reason at the time of his retirement to suspect that his concussion, as you've called it, would lead to insanity?"

"No."

"And yet this is not surprising to you?"

"Not at all. Neural injuries can be degenerative just like any other, but we have no way of predicting if or when."

George Mountz

I remember the engagement at Buelee's Ford like it happened this morning. We were mounted and spread out along the slope below General Bramble's headquarters, waiting for orders, when the Johnnies set up them guns on the hills south of the river. The slope over there was crawling with them, and we knowed we were in for a fight.

On our left was a battery of our guns, and they was like David to Goliath, only in this case David wasn't going to win. As the Johnnies commenced to shelling us, our guns fired back, and it wasn't long before we could hardly see nothing because of the smoke and the dust, but we knew some of our division was trapped on the south side of the river.

Now, our orders was to hold that position below the headquarters, but Colonel Wagner seen that someone had to get across the ford to them men and get them out of there, so he left Major Simpkins in command of the Tenth and rode down the

hill to pass along the general's orders.

Mr. Wyatt said, "Wagner went himself?"

"Yes, he was like that," I told him. "He always wanted to be where the action was the hottest."

"Was he reckless?"

"No, just sure of himself," I told Wyatt. "We thought he was charmed because he always had to be charging at the front of his men, but he never got injured. Serious, that is."

We didn't see the colonel again until late that night in camp after we pulled back to Warrenton, and at first the rumor was he was killed, but he wasn't. His uniform was a mess. He had no hat, and he told us he lost his horse to one of them Rebel shells and would of been killed himself if not for his good luck. A course, I suppose now that luck don't seem so good as it did then. I never seen him so excited before, and I don't know if he ever rested that night, though the rest of us did, because we were tired as bulls after breeding time.

Kennard McHenery

I served with Colonel Wagner from the time the Fourth Cavalry Division of the Army of the Potomac was created in 1863 until he mustered out in September 1864. I was an aide de camp on the staff of General Bramble, who commanded the division, and Sam Wagner was an officer with the Tenth Pennsylvania and eventually its commanding colonel. We often had interactions both official and unofficial. In October 1863, I suppose I was

the closest thing to an eye witness of his being nearly killed when a shell exploded beside him, killing his horse.

The division guarded the right flank of the army as we retreated toward Washington, so that Lee's forces couldn't get around us to the west. When the shelling started from thirty or so Confederate guns across the Rappahannock River near a spot called Buelee's Ford, some of the forward positions of the second brigade became stranded on the opposite side of the river. They gave us all they had trying to out-flank us, as we were the army's rear guard, and they came like they were fueled by a passion for revenge against General Meade after their failures at Gettysburg that past summer. They weren't able to turn our flank, but they made a mess of things for us.

General Bramble sent me to relay an order to Sam Wagner, who at that time was a newly promoted lieutenant colonel, and the order was to move his regiment so that a battery of our guns might take his position and return the Rebel fire. After I relayed the orders to him, I proceeded to the battery, and from the battery's position I could see the lieutenant colonel disappear into the smoke below.

"And you're sure it was Wagner?" Wyatt asked.

"Yes," I said, "his was a distinctive horse with a grey rump."

As the guns were being limbered up I watched for him. I could see him from time to time through gaps in the smoke. Then came a barrage of shells, and when the smoke cleared he

was no longer visible.

When I got back to the Tenth's position, one of Colonel Wagner's majors who had been left in command of the regiment said that the colonel had gone down to cross at Buelee's Ford. He was delivering a message to the second brigade commander to move farther down stream and cross to the north side at the next ford. I later found out General Bramble had wanted me to take the orders across.

"Don't you find it strange," Wyatt asked, "that he would take it upon himself to deliver the message, a colonel with his own regiment to look after?"

"Sam Wagner liked the action," I said. "Besides he wasn't a colonel, but a lieutenant colonel, fresh out of his captaincy, and General Bramble had often counted on him for this sort of thing before. Sam was quick acting."

Wyatt looked like he was having trouble believing me.

"I don't think it was right he did it," I said, "but it was not unexpected."

"And what happened to the stranded brigade?"

"When I got back to the headquarters, General Bramble asked why I wasn't delivering his message, and I explained I hadn't received the orders. I was just about to ride off to the ford myself, when we caught sight of the brigade moving out of the trees down river."

"So Wagner made it," Wyatt said with some amusement.

I nodded my head, thinking about the colonel later that

night, clothes tattered, hat gone, talking so quickly it seemed almost like nonsense. "Yes, it was quite astounding," I said, "but often I think how close it came to me being locked away in that asylum, instead of him."

Edward Watkins, MD

I have no recollection of Colonel Wagner's injury, but then I remember that the aftermath of Buelee's Ford was particularly busy for me. But I am not surprised I don't remember, because I have no recollection of his ever being injured. I remember him at the engagement at Buelee's Ford quite well. The main body of his regiment was mounted along the slope below us at General Bramble's headquarters. When the Rebels opened up with their barrage, the general sent an order down to Colonel Wagner to see that the small battery to his left was limbered up and pulled back. Through the field glasses I saw him ride into the smoke himself.

"But didn't you find it odd that Wagner's injury was never reported?" Wyatt asked me.

"No," I said. "It was common for injuries not particularly serious to go unreported."

"And yet you are trying to establish that Colonel Wagner's injury did indeed prove to be serious."

"He did not think it serious. My recollection is that he was not one to stop and complain if he could stand or stay in the saddle."

"And yet you are sure he was injured?"

"I have no reason to doubt that he suffered a head injury," I told him quite honestly. "I should be more surprised that he lived through that shelling."

"And you did not see him later that night?"

"By the time the Rebels made their advance and crossed the Rappahannock, I had pulled back to my field hospital where I saw to the evacuation of the injured. I did not see the colonel for some days."

"But you can see the difficulty from the government's point of view can't you?" Wyatt said finally. "The trail of official records you helped initiate in that field hospital, and during the evacuation, never put Colonel Wagner among the injured."

Augustus Bramble

In the winter of 1863 the morale of the Army of the Potomac was low. It was especially low in the ranks of the cavalry because of the defeat at Fredericksburg, where the cavalry had been given no significant role and could only stand by and look upon the decimation of our infantry. Throughout the subsequent winter, the cavalry did little more than ride pickets up and down the Rappahannock in the mud and cold. Therefore, when General Hooker reorganized the army and created an independent cavalry corps, which is when I took over the command of my own division, we looked forward to better

days.

We were given a chance in the days before Chancellorsville when we raided Rebel caches and destroyed rails and bridges and the like south of the Rapidan River to the west. It was then I first came to know of Captain Wagner who led a small force that captured a dozen Rebel cavalrymen and their officer, as well as the usual horses and mules and several able-bodied negroes looking to join the fight. Wagner seemed a bright man with good sense, and he would prove to be always valiant and reliable after he assumed the command of his regiment.

Wyatt asked about the engagement at Buelee's Ford, and I explained how we had come under intense fire from twenty Rebel guns perched on the hills south of the river. He wanted to know about my orders to Lieutenant Colonel Wagner, but I was not able to recall the specific chain of events, just my determination to get the stranded brigade across to the north side of the river.

"Do you recall his being injured?"

"It was not brought to my attention at that time," I said.

"I recall only that the brigade was moved thanks to Wagner's efforts."

"And you don't recall seeing him in the aftermath?"

"I remember him taking the command of the first brigade during operations around Thanksgiving Day when General Beckman was on a brief leave. But I don't recall seeing him

between Buelee's Ford and then."

"And he was well as far as you could tell?"

"Well enough to lead his dismounted troops in a rout of mounted Rebel skirmishers along the Orange Plank Road during those operations."

"So you never heard anything about the Colonel's being injured?"

"From what I remember about Colonel Wagner, I wouldn't have expected to hear anything about an injury unless he was being carried off on a stretcher."

Wyatt just nodded his head and stroked his chin.

"And I'm not surprised that he would be injured, because he was always one to go where the fighting was the most intense."

Herrick Shimmel

I commanded the Seventh New Jersey regiment that fought alongside Colonel Wagner's Pennsylvanians in all the major cavalry engagements from the Shenandoah campaign in the spring of 1862 until I assumed command of General Bramble's second brigade after Gettysburg. Even before he assumed command of his regiment, he was very ambitious for it. I remember him as a firm and steady leader. We depended on each other in the heat of battle time and time again, and he never let me down.

In camp the night after he crossed Buelee's Ford to get

word to my stranded brigade, he told us how he escaped with a narrow chance, but that his horse was killed, and he was shaken badly. There was some talk, I remember, of his charmed life, and at the time it seemed his luck was still with him.

He had been injured and he suffered from headaches afterward, but if anything, his near-miss increased his boldness. Throughout 1864 he consistently performed daring acts, rendering gallant service to the Fourth Division. I remember in particular the charge he led near Spotsylvania, which drove off a force of Confederate cavalry that held a bridge blocking our advance.

Mr. Wyatt said, "From your knowledge, then, his injury had no immediate noticeable effects on his competency and his judgment?"

"Other than the headaches, which kept him down, I noticed nothing in his performance that was adversely affected."

"Still a firm and steady leader."

"Yes, but perhaps more daring," I replied. "He loved the action."

Phillip Pennelroy

Colonel Wagner and I joined the Pennsylvania Tenth within days of each other in the summer of 1861. We were both lieutenants then, and we both gained captaincies of our companies in the summer of the following year. We fought alongside one another

for three years, and I can attest that his resourcefulness, ambition, and bravery was surpassed by none other I fought beside. When the position of commander of the regiment became vacant with the departure of Colonel Eisenberg back to his native Prussia, the regimental officers were of one mind that Captain Wagner should receive the promotion.

"A captain promoted directly to colonel?" Wyatt asked.

I told him that we'd lost our sole major at Gettysburg, and that Captain Wagner had been acting like our major from that point on. And in addition to his ambition and competence, he had a kind of battlefield luck which inspired confidence in the men.

The incident at Buelee's Ford seemed at first to be another instance of Colonel Wagner's luck, for though his horse was killed, he seemed only shaken. It was a miracle that he made it through that bombardment alive. But I have no doubt that the explosion led directly to his present insanity. Soon after, he began to suffer from headaches.

"But he remained as competent an officer as always?" Wyatt asked.

"Yes, it seemed so," I said. "His reputation for daring only grew during the year between his injury and his mustering out."

We began to worry about him, though, because he'd lost some of his coolness on the battlefield, which was always important to his success as a horseman. And he missed more and

more action because of his debilitating headaches. It was apparent to all of us that they could be traced back to his cheating death at Buelee's Ford. But mustering out was difficult for Sam, in spite of Dr. Watkins's advice, as he had found his calling, I believe, in the cavalry. I think he would have liked nothing more than to be a breveted general there with Grant at the end. But the fact that he could not see his own failing health and had to be told not to reenlist was a good indication that his judgment was beginning to falter.

Jeremias Hutton

From the midsummer of 1861 when we were mustered in together, filled with dreams of doing what we could to help President Lincoln guide our country through its blackest night, I found Colonel Wagner to be the most gallant of horse soldiers. He was not as flamboyant as a George Armstrong Custer or any number of the knighted horsemen of Europe who saw in our national tragedy an opportunity for their own personal glory, but he was every inch a cavalier.

The Tenth Pennsylvania was a ragtag outfit when we first gathered on the drill-grounds in Philadelphia, but First Lieutenant Wagner cut a dashing figure, riding tall in his saddle, an integral part of Company A's rapid mastery of horsemanship and drill. His steady rise through the ranks could have been predicted in those early days, and the seeds of his promise became even more apparent once the regiment was transplanted

to a camp outside Washington in late summer. They came to fruition in the Shenandoah Valley in June 1862 with the bravery he exhibited against Ashby's Rebel Cavalry when the regiment, still green and untested, was routed near Strasburg. He received the captaincy of Company A later that summer.

At Fredericksburg, after minimal reconnoitering duties, the entire cavalry, including the Tenth, was reduced to a spectator's role, but that did not dampen Captain Wagner's drive to be useful, and he took the initiative, soon taken up by others, to do what he could to alleviate the suffering of the overwhelming number of wounded infantrymen being ferried through our ranks to the field hospitals in the rear. After the regiment's stalwart service under Bramble at Gettysburg, his fellow officers recommended he be given command of the regiment upon the departure of Colonel Eisenberg, an exacting and colorful Prussian brought in to lead the regiment just before its move to Washington. He sealed Captain Wagner's fate by concurring and recommending that he be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel as well.

Buelee's Ford presented yet another opportunity for Colonel Wagner to prove his mettle. He rode down the slope into the murderous fire to carry out General Bramble's orders personally and retrieve the imperiled guns, leaving Major Simpkins to lead the retrograde movement of the regiment from the field, so that I did not see the colonel until the next morning in camp at Warrenton. Stories around the campfire that night

told of a shell which knocked him off his horse, but which did not prevent him from carrying out the orders to the letter.

"Yes," said Mr. Wyatt at this point, "I've read your account of the incident in your regimental history. You seem to contradict others' testimonies about who was ordered to do what."

"I only know for sure what I saw with my own eyes," I explained, "which was that on the following morning Colonel Wagner appeared very tattered, his uniform was soiled and ripped because of his brush with death, his manner was as agitated as if he'd seen old Hamlet's ghost, and his eyes looked as if, indeed, he had."

Hadwyn Ferrier

Sam Wagner and I volunteered in the summer of 1861, but joined separate regiments. I knew him from our days at the university when his mind was bright and his intellect enjoyed the challenges that engineering presented him. He was not one to learn from books, however, if he could learn from doing, which is why the cavalry was such an opportunity for him.

We ended up in the same cavalry division under General Bramble, whose staff I served on, so I had frequent intercourse with him as part of our duties. He rose quickly through the ranks because he was ambitious, but also quiet and competent. He was very popular in his regiment as shown by his early elevation to lieutenant colonel. He had distinguished himself at

Fredericksburg, at Brandy Station, and at Gettysburg, where much of the glory that accrued to the cavalry went to Custer, when it was as much due General Bramble and other steadfast men like Sam.

I drew up a map of the engagement at Buelee's Ford so that Mr. Wyatt might better appreciate the circumstances we found ourselves in. Along the bottom I showed the position of the twenty Rebel guns that were shelling us, and the position of the second brigade stranded in the stand of Virginia pines on the south side of the Rappahannock. Then came the river and the ford itself. In the middle was the spot where Sam's horse was killed. Behind that, the battery of our guns on the left, and his regiment on the right, guarding the perimeter of the general's headquarters, and finally the headquarters.

Mr. Wyatt thanked me for the map after looking at it briefly and placing it with other papers from the depositions, and then he asked, "What do you remember about Colonel Wagner in the immediate aftermath of Buelee's Ford?"

"How excited he was."

"Were you able to notice an immediate change in his manner that might lead you to suspect that he had, in fact, received a brain injury?"

I didn't answer right away because I knew that, in Mr. Wyatt's mind, everything hinged on establishing a credible connection between Sam's being knocked off his horse and his later insanity. It was apparent to many of his friends and

family, but Mr. Wyatt was paid to remain skeptical.

"Many of the men who didn't know him as well as I might not have noticed more than a superficial difference, as in his clothing, or his uncharacteristic excitement, but I noticed something behind his excitement, an unmistakeable shock to his nerves, and my suspicions were soon verified when his headaches began."

This answer seemed to satisfy Mr. Wyatt, although it was difficult to tell. He held his cards very close to his vest.

Abigail Wagner Adams

It was in October 1863 that we received the shock that finally proved too much for my mother's fragile health. She hadn't been well for some time, but Sam's volunteering for the cavalry put an added strain on her, and she had been growing weaker by the month as the Rebellion dragged on. It was that October we saw a dispatch from the battlefield, a newspaper account of Sam's injury at Buelee's Ford, which could have been on the moon as far as we knew, since we'd never heard of it, but which became etched in our minds because of Sam's close call.

"I understand you have a copy of the dispatch," Wyatt said, at which point I took the brittle, folded paper from my mother's Bible.

I watched him reading through the short account, sure that he was looking to find good reason to believe it. "Perhaps you can find the author of the account to confirm its

authenticity," I said. "It's from a Philadelphia newspaper still in circulation."

He didn't appear to have heard me. "You say this caused your mother's passing?"

"Hastened it," I said. "She died that winter."

He refolded the clipping and handed it back.

"It has the date here in this upper corner," I said, "October 20, 1863."

"Yes," he said. "I think it's safe to say that something indeed happened to your brother in October 1863. Exactly how that relates to his present condition we need to establish beyond Uncle Sam's reasonable doubt."

Thomas P. Riley, MD

"Dr. Riley," Mr. Wyatt said, "it is then your professional opinion that Colonel Wagner's lunacy can be directly tied to the head injury that, although never officially reported, has been established through the testimony I've received in these depositions?"

"I've seen a number of cases in these veterans of the Rebellion," I told him, "ranging from a mild form of anxiety brought on by loud noises all the way to a type of paranoia that breeds what to us is a random violence, but that in the mind of the sufferer seems to make vivid sense."

"So, your answer is yes."

"There is no way we can be perfectly certain about the

mysteries of the human mind, but the number of cases among these veterans and the links between these forms of lunacy and their sufferers' battlefield experience seem too clear and frequent to be coincidental. "

"I am looking for a simple yes or no, Dr. Riley. "

"I wish it were simple, but it seems that nothing is simple when it comes to mental disturbance. I have men at the asylum who seem as lucid as you or I one day, and the next have no idea of the depth of their delusion. I've known cases in which the sufferers have no apparent sources for their lunacy outside their own heads, so that we can do little but keep them out of harm's way and keep them from harming others. All we can try to do is to establish beyond some reasonable doubt what connections are to be drawn from the facts of the individual circumstances and proceed to treat their suffering to the best of our capabilities. "

"So these links between Colonel Wagner's service in the Rebellion are clear to you beyond a reasonable doubt?"

"Beyond a reasonable doubt, yes. "

Out the window was the faintest suggestion of dawn, although the more Sam looked at it, the more he thought he was just imagining it.

He buzzed Carolyn again.

She abruptly came into the room and stood with her arms akimbo.

"Yes?"

"I was just wondering what time the doctor will be in this morning."

"The doctor?" She crossed her arms. "Which one?"

"I don't know," Sam said, shifting his aching body on the bed. "The one who'll let me go home."

Carolyn removed the clipboard from the bed and looked it over.

"When the day shift comes on, one of the staff doctors will be able to release you." She replaced the clipboard. "You'll need to fill out paperwork, so it'll be sometime after administration gets in—after eight."

"And what time is it now?"

"Two-thirty."

"Two-thirty?"

"Are you sure you don't want something to help you sleep?"

"No," Sam said. "I'm not sure."

Carolyn stood there waiting for him to say something more, then she said, "I'll go get it."

"Wait—you don't have a guitar here do you?"

She just rolled her eyes and left the room. She returned with a glass of water and a packet of two pills.

He popped them and washed them down.

"Okay?" Carolyn said.

"Yeah."

She left, and waiting for something to happen, Sam picked up the last few pages of the story.

Section Five: The Conclusion

Sanders Wyatt

To conclude my examination of the claim of Colonel Samuel Wagner, I offer this summary:

I approached the case with a prudent kind of skepticism that I believed to be entirely warranted. Mental disturbances, it is well documented, may be the result of any of a number of exciting causes, not necessarily a presumed cause, and therefore I directed my examination towards determining whether there might not be another likely to have produced his insanity besides the one that so many have alleged. I find that he was not a drinker of alcohol, that he had no family history of mental disturbances, and that his own occupations after the war presented no physical risks known to be associated with the onset of mental incompetency. On the contrary, I find that he suffered from and complained of severe head pains immediately from the time of the alleged injury he received to his person in October 1863 at the engagement at Buelee's Ford, Virginia.

I draw attention to the testimony of doctors who have high standing in their profession, to Edward Watkins, the regimental surgeon who advised Colonel Wagner to retire before the war's end, and to Thomas Riley, the director of the Society of Friends Asylum where the claimant now resides. And although I have no testimony from any physician who treated him immediately after his return to civilian life, I also draw

attention to his wife's family physician, David Tannenberg. All of these medical experts find it wholly consistent and entirely possible with the type of injury the claimant is reported to have sustained in the Rebellion for it to manifest itself in the kind of insanity from which he now suffers.

I draw attention to the high rank held by the officers who have testified as to the character of the claimant and his service to the Union and, from those who had recollection of it, his condition after the engagement at Buelee's Ford. He was not a West Point man, and in fact did not complete his course of study at the University of Pennsylvania, yet respected graduates of West Point like Augustus Bramble attest to Colonel Wagner's bravery and resourcefulness and selfless service to the Union cause, all of which resulted in his rapid rise within the cavalry corps. This is shown to be evident during the incident in which he was reported to have been injured, and throughout his subsequent service, which occasioned some of the severest privations of the conflict and demanded some of his most selfless leadership on the field.

As for the present condition of the claimant, in age he is in the very prime of his manhood, yet he is the most completely stranded wreck with whom I am met. He labors under the delusion that he is posted at the Riverside Armory, which he commands, and that the Rebellion continues. He remains harmless, and in fact does not appear even to suffer, except for his headaches, so long as he is left alone. However, if anyone

attempts to touch his head, he will react violently. He has rubbed it so much that he has lost most of the hair on his temples and has only a small amount left on top, quite the opposite of most men of his age. Storms seem obviously to remind him of the war, and thunder and lightning excite him so much that he will climb the roof of any structure to stand bare headed and face them down, according to the testimony of many of the deponents, as if they portend an impending battle.

I draw final attention to conditions of claimant's wife and their two children, who have come to depend on the support of his former comrades because of the fact that his mental incompetence has resulted in the loss of both their fortunes, including that which was hers solely before marriage. With the burden of supporting Colonel Wagner lifted, she might concentrate on re-establishing her capable self sufficiency and provide for the future of her children.

In light of all the facts of this case and of the testimony from eminent and respected men in the medical and military professions, I find this claim to be a meritorious one and recommend it for admission.

Elizabeth Sykes Wagner

Sam Wagner is not the only man I have ever loved. But I sensed in him the soul of a man with whom I could find equality in marriage. One did not have to demean oneself to respect Sam Wagner, and conversely his respect for others was never at the

expense of his own dignity. He had a wealth of spirit and an ease of confidence that enriched everyone in his presence. This is perhaps best shown by the number of friends and comrades who came forward to testify in support of his pension claim. None of them stood to gain from his or her testimony; none had a material interest in my husband's claim. Yet all of them have repaid him in the coin he lent them throughout the best years of his life: a guileless combination of ambition and generosity.

Nevertheless, our marriage was not an easy one. For all that he accorded me with respect to my humanity and my intellect and my natural rights to pursue my own interests, the battles he was obliged to fight again and again with his own demons left little energy for him to meet me halfway in our household partnership. As a result it fell upon me to sustain our domestic life. And although our intellects were finely matched when we met in 1866, by the time our son was born some sixteen years later, all that was left of his competence was wasted on his delusion that the war still had to be fought. There could be little companionship between two minds whose ideas of what was important diverged so much. The religious dimension of our relation, our "pilgrimage towards a common shrine," as Margaret Fuller puts it, kept us together in spite of everything else. And this faith manifested itself in something that was for me intuitive, but which lately has been elevated by the legitimacy of scientific inquiry: eugenics. The births of our two children sustained my faith in Sam Wagner when all else

suggested he was lost. The strength and beauty that our marriage union at one time represented lives on in the intellect, the values, and the promise of our children.

Now I love another, but for our children's sake, I do not seek divorce from Sam Wagner in order to marry again. Nevertheless, the man I married, is no longer among the living. I've cried many tears over this fact. For everyone's sake, including his own, now that he has been provided for by the government whose ideals he embraced with such optimism, we must both find our own ways in the world.

Near the end of the deposition process, as we sat in his office waiting for Mr. Heath to fetch me home, Mr. Wyatt asked, "What will you do to survive without a husband?"

I told him, "Much of what I have been doing for the last ten years. With what little property I still possess, I'll strive to fill the roles of both mother and father to my children, hoping to instill in Ginnie the need to carry on the fight for recognition of our rights of independence and self determination, of power over shaping our own destinies. I can think of no more fitting tribute to the values my marriage union with Samuel Wagner represented."

Sam finished the story in a dreamy state of mind, drowsy with Carolyn's drugs and serene with the fact that the noise in his head had grown quiet. As he fell into sleep, he had the distinct impression—and it wasn't a thought or a conclusion based on logic, but more like a feeling that washed

over him and reassured him—that Elizabeth Wagner was the woman in the photo with "December 1882" written on the back, and that she was also his blood great-grandmother.

Don picked up Sam early on Tuesday afternoon, after Sam's midmorning call. During the drive back to the Museum, he fought off the urge to say something tactless, but when he pulled up in front and turned off the engine, it just came out: "Sam, you're a fucking idiot."

Sam didn't budge. They both stared out the windshield for a moment, and Sam said, "Thanks for bringing me the story."

"You're welcome."

"And the change of clothes."

"Thank Zoë for that."

Sam gathered up his bag of dirty clothes and the manila envelope.

Don said, "What do you plan to do about this?"

Sam paused in his motion of exiting the car. "They've referred me to the Senson House."

"I mean with Zoë."

Sam's response came belatedly, but when it did, it came out in a rush.

"Why—are you thinking of doing something?"

Don abruptly turned away and looked out the windshield again. Sam was right. The question did imply something else. "She cleaned up the mess."

Sam covered his eyes with his hand and rubbed his temple. "Do you think I should call her?"

"She's gone, visiting her family."

They sat there, quiet for a minute, until Sam said, "Thanks for getting me to the hospital."

"Willis found you." And then, because he realized that Sam had no memory of being found, Don added, "In the reading room."

Sam nodded his head.

"You retched on one of the old rugs in there—it stank so bad, Zoë hung it out in the backyard."

Sam continued to stare out the windshield.

"It smelled like the by-product of some exorcism."

Sam grabbed onto the door handle.

"But you're lucky you ended up in the fetal position or you might have asphyxiated yourself."

Sam pulled up on the door handle and paused a moment.

"By the way," Don said. "I still have the depositions—I'm almost done reading them."

"Good," Sam said.

"I'll bring them back soon, maybe tomorrow."

Sam pushed opened the door. "No hurry—I'd really like to know what you think of them."

Sam climbed out of the car and asked Don if he wanted to come in, but Don told him he had to pick up his mother's blood pressure medicine, which he did. But more to the point, he didn't have the energy to begin sorting out all the complications. Nevertheless, he didn't race off. He sat there and watched his friend walk across the lawn and around the side of the house. In the confines of the sagging driver's seat, Don tried to straighten out his

question-mark posture. His shoulders ached. He dug his fingertips into the muscles at the base of his neck.

It wasn't clear whether Sam understood the complications. He did seem humbled by his comatose adventure. But Don felt that it was somehow going to be up to him to make things right again among the three of them. He started up the Chevy and eased away from the curb. In less than three weeks Sam had managed to upset seven years worth of comfortable stasis.

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The kitchen looked like it always did. Except for the lingering sour smell of the beer—which was nowhere to be seen—there was no reason to suspect it had been the scene of a party. Sam opened the window in the breakfast nook to let in some air and looked out into the backyard. The kegs were gone, but the trashcans that had held them still sat there under the maple tree. The lawn chairs formed a circle in the middle of the lawn, just like during the party, but the scatter of plastic dishware had been picked up. The light bulbs hung there between the trees, but they were turned off. The rug from the reading room was draped over the old clothesline pole.

With a twinge of disgust, he remembered his acoustic guitar. He reviewed his jigsaw-puzzle memories of smashing it on the sidewalk, but a lot of the puzzle pieces were missing. As he recalled, the shattered mess ought to be lying next to the garage. Somebody must have moved it.

He headed for his room to get out of the khakis he'd worn home from the hospital, the ones there'd been a party in. He wondered if Zoë had picked them out for him on purpose. He passed through the dining room, clean and empty of just about everything, including Zoë's stereo. It also did not suggest

a party, except for all that emptiness, possibly, and the same sour odor. Sam opened one of the windows, fought with the old, settled-in and slightly warped casement, which always wanted to stick. In the foyer, he noticed that the "Private" sign had been taken down from the parlor door. A single plastic plate sat on the bay-window table that was still tucked under the dining room table. Zoë must have missed it.

Upstairs, he peeked into Stanfield's room, where the clean bed linens lay tangled up just like he'd left them. He opened one of the windows. In his room he changed into shorts, then went back downstairs, opening windows as he went. He ended up staring into the refrigerator, ravenous enough for one of the preformed burger patties leftover from the party. Soon the smell of frying beef replaced the smell of stale beer dregs.

The next few days were lonely days at the Museum, but they were broken up first by Jackie's lengthy, Tuesday-evening phone call, which could have turned into a visit had Sam not convinced her that he was okay and she didn't have to skip her pitch-and-putt night at the golf course. Jackie laid her motherly thing on him, the usual thing that she must have thought did some good, even though it always made things worse.

"Guess I should have come to the party after all," she said, "to keep an eye on you."

"It didn't happen during the party," he said. "It was Sunday."

"Maybe I could've seen it coming."

Sam didn't say anything. He was thinking about Josie, and hoping that Jackie didn't know about her. Don was right. He was a fucking idiot. If he just could've waited. Not that Josie was the reason for the binge.

"Sam?"

"Yeah, I'm still here."

"You're getting some help, aren't you."

"Yes."

"Have you talked to Mom?"

"No."

"And you're sure you don't need anything right now."

"I'm fine," he said. "I've eaten—I'm going to take a hot bath and go to bed early." He wasn't sure he was doing exactly that, but he hoped saying so would make his sister ease up.

"Okay," she said, "I'm going to the golf course."

"Go—don't worry about me."

"Yeah, right."

On Wednesday morning, Sam bumped into the next-door neighbor and explained that, yes, his food poisoning was cured. Early afternoon, he answered the front door to find Josie standing there. Her visit was the second thing that broke up his lonely few days at the Museum.

After an awkward hug on the faux marble floor, she followed Sam to the reading room. "I remember this room." She wore a broad smile.

"The reading room," he said. "My great-grandfather's." He pointed to the photo of Stanfield and the kid. "This guy's." He realized he was being curt, but he didn't feel very good about her being there.

Josie kicked off her shoes and sprawled out on one of the leather chairs. While Sam stared at the woman in the photo with "December 1882" written on the back, Josie just lounged there, wiggling her feet. She wasn't as forward

as she'd been at the party, but he could tell what she had in mind. He was hoping that if he ignored her she'd go away.

Finally, she broke the uncomfortable quiet. "Do I get to hear your CD today?"

"My parents don't have a CD player," he said. "Don't need one for all their Sinatra LPs."

"Don't be dissing Frank," she said and laughed and rearranged her sprawl on the chair.

He hadn't been, but he didn't bother to defend himself. He was preoccupied with the photo. Something about the woman's eyebrows—or maybe the eyes themselves—reminded him of his father, like this actually was his long-lost blood great-grandmother. Only the date seemed to be a stretch. His grandfather Samuel had been born in the 1890s.

"Got something interesting there?" Josie said.

"It might be my great-grandmother."

She came around behind him to peek over his shoulder, and she rested her hand there. "She looks wise."

He didn't look up, but her hand felt good.

"I have an idea," she said. "Why don't you come over to my house and bring the CD with you?" When he didn't respond, she added, "No vodka—promise."

Sam looked up then. She had an impish smile on her face. She was no dummy. She knew full well the awkwardness of the situation—with Zoë, with the party, with the way their hormones had put the sexual cart before the get-to-know-one-another horse. Yet she didn't let that stop her from

being up-front about what she wanted. There was a lot to like about her.

"We could do that," he said.

"This evening?"

"This evening?"

"We could have pizza."

"I could just give you one of them, too, if you want."

She was all for that, and still thought he should come over. But his guilt was stronger than his present need for companionship, so Sam lied. He said that he and Don were meeting to talk about the stuff in the trunk and he briefly explained what that was. It wasn't so much a total lie, though the meeting wasn't likely to happen exactly that evening. He offered to get her the CD right then. She agreed and followed him.

At the foot of the attic stairway, she gestured down the hall toward Stanfield's room. "Ah, the scene of the crime."

Sam didn't say anything, just started up the stairs.

Josie was right behind. "That was another one of our clichés, wasn't it?"

He pushed open the trap door at the top of the stairs and found the light switch. While he dug through his box of old band stuff, Josie sat primly on the edge of a backless dining room chair, a broken one from the set downstairs. By touch, he located the CDs, pulled out two, and handed them to her.

"Here, have two—they're cheap," he said and closed up the box again.

"This Ethel looks interesting," she said. "And look at your hair."

Sam did not want to look at his hair, and he did not want to hear the

CD. He wanted Josie to leave, but he did want to see her again, too. What he ended up doing was telling her that he had a medical appointment. He didn't tell her what kind, and he fudged on the appointment time by a couple of hours, but he got her to leave. Seeing her to the side door, he gave her a hug and a kiss—her mouth tasted sweet and clean this time—and they agreed to get together soon. Despite how awkward he felt, she still felt good.

A couple of hours later, Sam sat in the waiting room before his audience with the substance-abuse counselor, the third thing that broke up his lonely first few days back at the Museum. He sat and thought about Josie and Zoë, about the party and the drinking and the resulting hospital bill, and he thought one thing seemed awfully clear: This coming back home for some rest and relaxation had been a dumb idea.

The receptionist called his name, then escorted him back to David Tarkinian's office, where patient and counselor shook hands and passed up the formality of the big mahogany desk for the plushness of the chairs near the window.

"Call me Dave," the counselor said.

Sam didn't call him anything. He was a sharp dresser, but not in a formal way, no suit, just an iridescent short-sleeved shirt, pleated pants, and silvery-grey slip-on shoes. He had a small silver hoop pinched tightly around his right ear lobe, and his cascade of greying curls looked like they were trimmed weekly.

At first he tried casual questioning, asking Sam what he wanted to talk about. When Sam wasn't able to put much into words, Dave asked him what had happened for him to be referred to counseling.

"I drank myself into a stupor."

"A stupor?"

"More like a coma, I guess."

Dave was jotting things down on his tablet just like a stereotypical shrink. "Do you remember what you were feeling or thinking about before you starting drinking the alcohol?"

Sam thought back, but had trouble coming up with anything. Finally he said, "I was depressed."

"Depressed about what?"

Sam stared at a ukelele hanging on the wall of the office.

Dave looked over and said, "What kind of music do you listen to?" He was smiling.

Sam thought for a moment. "The last thing I listened to—besides the music at the party—was Bill Evans."

"Evans is a favorite of mine," Dave said and continued to write. "And the music at the party?"

"The usual dance stuff—funk, world beat, some rock."

Dave looked up from his tablet. "So, it was the party that started you drinking?"

"After," Sam said. "None during."

"After you went home?"

"I was home—the party was at my parents' house."

"You started drinking after everyone else went home?"

Sam felt like the mouse in a game of cat and mouse. "It was later, the next day—yes, everyone was gone."

"Do you often drink alone?"

"No," Sam said, not caring that it was a bit of a lie.

Dave flipped up the front page of the tablet and continued writing on the next.

"I was sitting in the sun in the backyard," Sam said, "and the yard was a mess, and there was a keg that still had some left in it."

"Did the mess in the yard depress you?"

"No, why would that depress me?"

Dave didn't say anything, just kept writing.

Sam said, "I was thinking about a girl."

Dave reached a stopping point in his writing and looked up. "What were you thinking about her or feeling about her?"

"I was thinking that I 'd been a dick."

Dave showed no reaction to Sam's vulgarity. "How did that make you feel?"

"Depressed," Sam said, and at the moment he was feeling exasperated with the circular route that Dave's questions were taking. Dave didn't act like he noticed.

"Would you say that you are depressed often?"

"My sister thinks so."

"Do you often drink when you are depressed?"

None of his smart-ass answers was slowing down the barrage of questions. "Before that I hadn't had any alcohol for almost two months."

"And were you depressed on that previous occasion?"

"I almost killed myself."

Dave stopped writing and looked at Sam. Finally he had no immediate follow-up question.

"I crashed my car," Sam said.

Dave started writing again. "And you'd been drinking?"

"Yes."

Dave asked a few more questions about the kinds of treatment Sam had sought earlier and about his family history, then handed Sam a small, thick book that looked like a navy-blue paperback Bible. Embossed on the front cover were the words *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

"A. A. provides these books to the Senson House," Dave said. "You might find it helpful."

Sam held it at arm's length like a pamphlet from the Jehovah's Witnesses.

"I've bookmarked the most useful chapter."

Sam opened it up to the marked page and saw the fabled list of twelve steps—the admitting your lack of power over alcohol, the taking an uncompromisingly honest look at yourself, the deciding to hand over your fate to God as you understood Him to be. Or misunderstood Him to be, Sam was thinking. All twelve steps laid out simply, leading right up into the attic of his self-awareness.

"They have a couple of weekly meetings," Dave said, "here at Senson, also at the Ark—you know where that is, don't you?"

Sam didn't, but said he did, so that Dave wouldn't be compelled to give him directions.

"Neither Senson nor the Ark is run under the auspices of the A. A.

organization, but we work together. I think you should attend one their meetings and see how it feels."

That "feels" thing again. Sam closed the book and stared at its quasi-religious cover.

"Looking forward," Dave said, "will Wednesday afternoons continue to work for you?"

"I think so."

"Good—why don't you make an appointment with Darlene for next week?" Dave had one of those automatic smiles on his face, the kind that isn't exactly genuine, but isn't exactly fake, either. "I think we've made a good start." Sam tried to hand the book back, but Dave said, "It's yours to keep." He saw Sam to the door and shook his hand. "I'll see you next week then."

Sam drove back to the Museum taking a roundabout way. He wasn't sure his appointment had been such a good start, but it wasn't like he had a lot of options. He drove slowly, happy to be out of the house. When he made it back, he found he'd missed another one of his mother's calls.

"Hi, Sam!" the machine sang. "Are you screening my calls? Good Lord, how long have you been home now—three weeks, right? I think that's right. Are you ever there? Well, we made it to the Stuarts'. It's Wednesday, about—Ernie, is it seven o'clock?—yeah, about seven, so it's four back there. The Oregon coast was beautiful. And Portland is a nice town. I've been buying lots of postcards, but not sending any—you know me and writing. Oh, I talked to Jackie on Sunday, and she said Zoë'd thrown you a party. She's such a sweetheart. So—I hope you didn't wreck the house—ha, just kidding.

I'm sure you guys had a wonderful time. So, call us, okay? As soon as you get this message! Okay? Bye!"

Sam picked up the phone and dialed the number his mother had left for the Stuarts. It rang and rang. Not even an answering machine.

∞

Don finished reading the depositions on Wednesday, but didn't feel like going over to the Museum until Friday morning. The side door was open, so he stepped through it and found that Sam wasn't sitting at his usual breakfast-table post. Outside the window, the breeze was picking up, rustling the trees.

"Sam?" Don called out, then made his way down the back hallway to the reading room.

In one of the leather chairs, Sam sat focused on a stack of papers. He looked up. "Hey, Don."

"Feeling better?" Don said.

Sam looked back at the manuscript. "I'm standing with one foot on the first step and the other on the landing."

Don cleared his throat.

"Other than that, I had a respectable bowel movement this morning after my first cup of coffee."

"You're not saying that just to get out of your morning enema?"

That elicited a smile from Sam.

Don said, "What're you reading?"

"The one you brought to the hospital—rereading certain parts."

"I have the depositions here," Don said and held up the stack of

xeroxes.

"You know this thing here," Sam said, waving the manuscript, "is almost depositional."

Don took a seat in the chair opposite Sam.

"There's a cast of characters that take turns talking—even my great-grandfather, but he changed his name to Sanders Wyatt."

"Sounds like a character in a romance novel."

"And I'm not sure about the rest of them, but Wagner was obviously the colonel's real name—your cavalry books even mention a Colonel Samuel Wagner of the Tenth Pennsylvania."

"Really?"

"So I don't know why my great-grandfather thought he had to change his own name."

Don showed Sam the cover page of the depositions with the list of deponents. "Are these the other names?"

"Prentice Heath—yeah, he's one."

"The lawyer," Don said.

"Right, and David Tannenberg and Thomas Riley—the doctors." Sam squinted. "Peter Sykes—he's in there—and Bramble."

"It's not just a transcription of the depositions, is it?"

"I don't think so—the characters take turns with the episodes—most of them show up several times."

"The characters or the episodes?"

"Both." Sam handed the page back to Don. "And it's divided up into sections—The Lunatic, The Lunatic's Wife—like that."

"Chapters."

"Right, and also it goes backwards."

"Backwards?"

"It starts in 1886, and the episodes go to—" Sam thumbed through the pages in his lap. "—to 1861." He looked up. "Until the end, when there's a conclusion."

Don opened to a random page in the depositions. "Is this in there?" He read aloud Elizabeth Wagner's account of her husband's unsuccessful attempt to run a livery business.

"Not in those words, but yeah." Sam pointed to the depositions. "Does anybody mention trips to Pittsburgh in there?"

"Somebody—I don't remember who."

"How about his sister, Abigail, is she in there?"

"Abbie, the one who put hot compresses on Wagner's neck for his headaches."

Recollections of the episodes ping-ponged between them—the exploding shell at Buelee's Ford, the failed livestock business with the brother-in-law, Wagner on the roof during the thunderstorms. When they convinced themselves that Sam's great-grandfather had repackaged the depositions to form the succession of vignettes, they sat quietly for a moment.

Don pointed at the voluminous *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* that spread across the top shelf of Stanfield's bookcase.

"Did you check the *Official Records* for these guys?"

"Didn't think of it."

Don scooted the step stool over and pulled down the index. It opened

with a crinkling sound and smelled as if it had spent several of its hundred-odd years steeping in dankness. Among the half page of Wagners he found Samuel T. with half a dozen references.

"Wagner's here," he said.

"Check for Bramble."

Bramble had over twenty references. Shimmel was there, and Pennelroy, and Ferrier. There was even a single entry for Buelee's Ford.

"These are your primary sources," Don said. "You should compare these to your great-grandfather."

"You're the historian," Sam said. "Anyway, 'I've got to go in a few minutes—A. A. meeting.'"

Don left the index out and sat down. "What are those like?"

"Don't know—this'll be the first one."

"What do you think?" Don said. "Are you an alcoholic?"

Sam arranged the manuscript into a neat pile in his lap. "The first step of the twelve is admitting I have no power over alcohol." He looked up at Don. "What do you think?"

"I don't know." Don averted his eyes. "Seems like a new phenomenon to me."

"I drank a lot in high school."

"We all did."

"Right, Don—you drank maybe twice, once when you got kicked out of that dance."

Don felt embarrassment spread across his face.

Sam set the manuscript on the end table. "You just smoked a ton of

weed." He ran his fingers through his hair. "In California, I'd smoke just so I wouldn't drink."

Don had not—up until then—asked a single pointed question about Sam's totaling his car, or about his coming back to Kalamazoo to convalesce, because he'd figured—up until then—that if Sam needed to commiserate about it, he'd commiserate. "Did you split up with your girlfriend because of alcohol?"

Sam was staring at his hands. "No, Ethel suddenly decided she was into women instead of men—instead of me."

"Sexually bifurcated."

"I guess."

The full weight of Sam's comment had to sink in a little while before Don put together a causal chain. "So splitting up with her caused your problem with alcohol?"

"No."

"Or exacerbated it?"

"I had the job at the computer company, and I was working out everyday—weights and running and some racketball—and I gained a few pounds—all muscle, you know." Sam laughed and stood up and walked to the window. "I wasn't drinking at all, just smoked some dope every now and then—a lot of the engineers did—but mostly I stayed high on endorphins, I guess—my head was pretty busy with the work—it was one of those ambitious start-ups."

"When was this?"

"November to April—April 16."

Don shifted in his chair.

"That's when I got fired, and the day after I got a call from Ethel, from Portland—she probably thought I'd be at work—I think she just wanted to leave a message—and as soon as I heard her voice, the little box I'd stuffed it all away in popped open, the cord I'd tied it all up with just snapped and there they were, all the ugly memories—all the beautiful memories, too."

"What did she want?"

"I don't even remember—a box of our CDs, something like that." He pointed to his wrist.

Don said, "Eleven-thirty."

"That afternoon I started drinking, and I ended up at some party in the mountains, and I must've blacked out before I crashed into the retaining wall."

"And you didn't get arrested?"

"It was private property."

Don slouched down in the leather chair. "So, it was Ethel after all."

Sam turned away from the window. "If you're alcoholic, I suppose any excuse'll do." He stopped and looked intently at Don. "Listen to me yammer—you're better at this than the shrink."

Don wasn't so sure about that.

"Anyway," Sam said, "I've got to go." He gestured toward the manuscript on the end table. "Why don't you stick around and read that—tell me how it compares to the depositions."

Don wasn't exactly itching to read the rough draft of an amateur novelist—who after all wasn't even *his* great-grandfather—but he thought

about his nonexistent plans for the afternoon. And the depositions themselves had certainly been interesting.

Sam said, "I'll buy you some dinner."

Don thought about his nonexistent dinner plans.

Sam said, "Chinese food?"

Don's weakness. "Okay, I'll check it out."

"I'm not sure how long this'll take, but there's stuff in the refrigerator if you need something before then."

∞

When Sam arrived at the Senson House, several people stood chatting and smoking cigarettes and drinking diet sodas in the back of the auditorium. Some of them looked like characters from a country song, the kind who'd say, with a perverse note of pride, that if it wasn't for bad luck, they'd have no luck at all. Some were dressed in the kind of clothes you'd find at thrift stores, ten, fifteen years out of date, polyester pants and tuck-in shirts with large collars. Near the periphery, where Sam stood, one guy gestured incessantly with his nicotine-stained fingers and babbled about the Kalamazoo minor league baseball team. Another guy near the table stacked with sodas was missing his left arm up past the elbow.

Not everyone was so stereotypically down and out. One woman who looked like Rosie the Riveter had biceps that were the obvious products of a weight-lifting program. She was one of the very few not puffing on a cigarette. A couple of guys in business suits appeared to be stopping by during their lunch break from their downtown office jobs. One woman looked familiar, and Sam decided he'd seen her cashiering at the grocery store.

When the crowd started making its way to the seats, Sam followed along watching for cues. A number of people had the blue A. A. book—he'd left his at home. He nodded hello to a grizzly fellow who sat a couple of chairs down the row from him. A man stood up in front of the crowd and went to the podium.

"Good afternoon, everyone, my name is John and I'm an addict." He paused and surveyed the room. "This week we'll focus on steps eight and nine, identifying and making amends with the people we've harmed. But first, do we have any newcomers to the meeting?"

Sam looked around the room. The graying gent in his row was looking at him. It seemed that the guy at the podium was, too, so Sam raised his hand slowly.

"Welcome," the facilitator said. "And you are?"

"Sam." The room paused, and he realized he was expected to fill in the blank. "And I'm not sure what I am."

"Fair enough," the facilitator said. "Welcome, and we hope you'll be able to find out while you're here."

Next he asked for volunteers to help him read what the blue book had to say about steps eight and nine. It took more than fifteen minutes as people made their ways up to the microphone, introduced themselves, and read haltingly through the advice. It told of coming clean with people who'd suffered because of the alcoholic's mistakes, of doing so without causing them more problems. Sam didn't listen closely. He was thinking about Zoë. After the reading, people stepped up to share their personal experiences.

A sad-faced woman was first. "Hello, I'm Doris, and I'm powerless

over alcohol." She looked around the room and took a slow, deep breath.

"My sister Eveline passed away on Sunday. I was fortunate enough to talk to her before she died, but there was so much more I wanted to say. I was such a selfish sister, and she was so good at whatever she did—her marriage, her children, her garden, her job at the hospital—" Her voice cracked, and she paused. "And I hated her for it."

Doris spoke of trying to sabotage her sister's happiness and not being there for her when she needed her, and she ended with a plea for forgiveness, a plea that she'd already made directly to her sister and now wanted to make in front of her friends in the program. When she went to sit back down, the crowd gave her a polite, supportive round of applause.

A succession of people followed her, but not everyone in the room, so Sam figured he wasn't expected to get up and speak. He was relieved. The final person, after about an hour, was the man with the missing arm—Jack, who said he was an alcoholic. He also talked about his family, and then about a priest who'd tried to help him and whom he'd let down, and throughout his speech he made several references to having been in Vietnam and having lost friends there.

Sam wondered what percentage of the worn-down men in the room had been in the war and come to count on drugs and alcohol to drive away their torments. The stories of these abused vets made Sam's own story seem so trivial. Guy meets gal, they make beautiful music together, then gal leaves guy for another gal. That wasn't all of it, of course. There was probably some baggage Dave would attribute to his mother. But it all seemed pretty tame compared to a guy getting his arm blown off by a grenade or his mind

destroyed by shell shock like Samuel Wagner.

After the brief applause for the last speaker died down, people joined hands with their neighbors. Sam scooted uncomfortably toward the man down the row from him and took his extended hand. A short prayer followed: "God, grant me the courage to change the things I can, the strength to accept the things I can't, and the wisdom to know the difference." Or something like that. As prayers go, it seemed entirely reasonable.

The man let go of his hand, leaned toward Sam, and like he'd been listening to his thoughts said, "Jack always ties everything back to being a Vietnam vet."

Sam looked into the man's face, the two-day's growth of frosted whiskers, the dry skin and varicose veins of his cheeks, the folds of wrinkles around his eyes.

"He likes you to think he lost his arm in 'Nam," he added, "but he lost it in a car wreck—wasn't even drunk at the time."

Sam looked over at the one-armed man, then back to his neighbor. "Posttraumatic stress?" Sam asked, grasping for something to show that he belonged in the room with the rest of these twelve-steppers.

"In 'Nam he just sat at a desk all day," the man said. "He wouldn't know what posttraumatic stress was if it jumped up in his lap."

Back at the Museum, Sam found Don in the reading room.

Don said, "How was it?"

"A great place to pick up a nicotine habit."

"That's it?"

"I reserve judgment."

Don held up Stanfield's story. "Well, I'm about two-thirds done."

"That was quick."

After asking Don if he needed anything, which he didn't, Sam retired to the kitchen to forage. When Don joined him, it was almost three o'clock, and he was sitting at the window watching a few large raindrops splatter on the walkway.

"You know," Sam said, "I can't see how hanging out with a bunch of people who've drunk themselves into ill health and poverty is going to help me at all."

Don sat down and rested his chin in his hand. "I don't know—it seems pretty obvious to me."

"I don't need a faceful of reminders."

"I'm sure nobody thinks so."

Sam turned back toward the window and asked, "How about you—what are you going to do about Zoë?"

Don took a second to respond. "I don't know."

"Come on—you've got some idea."

"Really, I don't know."

"Are you going to ask her out to the movies or read some Shakespeare together or take her out to the theater?"

They both looked out at the sprinkling rain. "I don't know what I'm going to do," Don said. "And what the fuck do you care, anyway?"

Sam didn't answer. Instead, after a moment, he asked, "What did you think about my great-grandfather's story?"

Don continued to stare out the window.

Sam crossed the kitchen and moved the half-full coffee pot from the coffee maker to the stove. When he dialed in the burner, he said, "Really—what did you think of it?"

Don said, "Is there any tea?"

Sam rummaged around in the cabinet above the coffee maker and found an opened box of flow-through tea bags that looked pretty old. He held it up.

"That's fine."

Sam set up a saucepan of water on one of the burners.

"The depositions are obviously all about Wagner," Don said. "But the manuscript—" He hesitated, holding his chin again. "A lot of attention is paid to Wagner's wife."

"That's what I thought," Sam said. "Come here—check this out."

He led Don to the reading room and showed him the photo with "December 1882" written on the back.

"Is this Wagner's wife?" Don asked.

"That's what I was thinking, but who does she look like?"

Don took too long to answer.

"My dad?"

Don stared at it. "I guess."

"Flip it over."

He did and said, "This is cut off of a larger picture."

"I know," Sam said. "And who was with her—the Colonel?"

"December 1882," Don read. "So you think this is Lizzie Wagner and what—your dad's grandmother?"

"That's what I was wondering."

The sprinkling rain had become a summer shower when they returned to the table with their caffeine. They both sat quiet, watching, until Sam said, "When's Zoë due back?"

Don went to take a sip of tea, but set the steaming cup back down. "I don't know—she hasn't been talking to *me*."

Sam got up to add more coffee to his cup. "Really, you should ask her out to the movies—or better yet find some Shakespeare—drive her back to Stratford, Connecticut."

Don blew across his cup of tea and took a sip.

"I mean it, Don."

"Why are you trying to foist her on me?"

"It's not foisting," Sam said. "It's just—"

"Guilt?"

Sam looked out at the rain. "Call it whatever you want—but I wouldn't suggest it if I didn't think it would work."

Don stood up. "I thought you wanted to talk about the depositions."

"We are," Sam said, but Don kept standing. "Okay, okay—no more Zoë—promise."

When Don took his seat again, Sam said, "Remember the first story, the one you and Zoë looked at?"

"Yeah."

"Near the end Stanfield says, 'When I saw her, she would tell me things,' or something like that. When did he see her?"

"The depositions?"

"No, this sounds different—or how about the last line: 'she stopped coming by to visit'?"

"Maybe she was trading sex for a favorable ruling on the pension claim."

"Maybe."

"I was kidding," Don said.

"Well, whatever—I think he had a thing for her."

Don looked at his watch.

Sam said, "You want me to order now? You have a favorite Chinese place?"

"Jade Palace."

"You want me to order?"

"They don't open till five."

Sam got out the phone book anyway.

"Okay, let's assume you're right," Don said. "Stanfield had a thing for Elizabeth Wagner, the wife of one of his pension claimers—and let's forget for a minute the supposed resemblance between the woman in the photo and your dad, who may or may not be Lizzie—why would she be interested in your great-grandfather?"

"You yourself mentioned trading sex for the pension."

"Come on, she wasn't the type."

"How do we know?" Sam said. "We only see her through his eyes."

"I don't think he was the type either."

"Well, okay, but an important thing for Lizzie Wagner would have been that the Colonel was locked away in an asylum and had been for a

couple of years—and even before that who knows how long their love life suffered."

"So she wasn't gettin' any?" Don said.

"That's one way to put it."

"They had a son in the 1880s."

"In 1882—December, to be exact—which means by 1886 it could have been four years without sex."

"Maybe she was using birth control—they had it back then, and she was the type who would have used it."

"But what about the first years of their marriage? You'd think they would've been the most attracted to one another then, but Wagner goes off every fall to Pittsburgh—it wasn't until 1876 that they had their first child—she wouldn't be using birth control when they first got married."

Don gestured for Sam to give him the phone book.

"And what about this Bea in Pittsburgh?" Sam said. "What if she and Wagner had a thing going?"

"A regular soap opera."

"And my great-grandfather was Lizzie's retribution?"

"Well, I don't know about all that," Don said, "but it is odd how Lizzie Wagner gets the last word in Stanfield's manuscript."

"Right—she even says she's in love with somebody else."

"But she doesn't want to divorce Wagner because of her kids."

"And even though Wagner is no longer among the living, as she puts it, he's still her excuse for not getting together with my great-grandfather."

"You just said they did get together."

"They could have gotten together, but not got married," Sam said. "He couldn't have her as a wife."

Don sat there with his chin in his hand. "You're building a house of cards out of unverifiable details from your great-grandfather's fiction or whatever it is."

Right then the phone rang.

"Zoë," Sam said.

It rang again, there in the wall, two feet from his head. He looked over at Don, who sat there like concrete. It rang a third time, and Sam picked it up. "Hello."

"Sammy! You're there."

"Hey, Mom."

"I was beginning to wonder if you were off in your own RV—Ernie, I got a hold of him—I was worried about you. In my last phone call from Jackie, Wednesday—no that was Thursday, yesterday, because Wednesday we had dinner in the Space Needle—anyway, Jackie said something about you drinking too much at Zoë's party and going to the hospital. Is everything okay, Sam?"

She left a short pause for him to answer, but he wasn't quick enough.

"She said I ought to talk to you—you didn't fall down and break an arm or something, did you? Remember that time in high school when you kicked the wall and broke your toe? You were drinking then, remember? I didn't know what we were going to do with you."

"Mom—"

"I know how you get when you're depressed—are you still depressed

about losing your job, honey?"

"Mom."

"Yes?"

"I drank myself into a coma—"

"A coma?"

"They think I'm an alcoholic, Mom."

Dotty was quiet on the other end for a moment, and Sam looked over at Don.

"Well, I don't know where you would have gotten that from," Dotty said. "Nobody in my family or your father's family was an alcoholic."

"Mom, what do you know about my great-grandmother? On dad's side."

"Your great-grandmother? She wasn't an alcoholic."

"No, that's not what I mean."

"Well, you know all that furniture in the parlor was hers—"

"No, not Constance," he said. "My real great-grandmother, dad's father's mother, the one who died before Stanfield came to Kalamazoo."

"You think she might have been an alcoholic?"

"No—"

"Sam, I'm worried about you."

"Don't be—I have a lot of support back here." It was a bit of a lie, but Sam just wanted her not to worry. He did not want them to return early from their trip—living at the Museum with his parents would certainly drive him to drink.

"Yes, Jackie and Zoë are there, at least."

"Right, Jackie and Zoë." He repeated their names in hopes that her hearing them from his own lips would reassure her. Don was looking puzzled. "So—my great-grandmother."

"I know very little, Sam—her name was Elizabeth."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yes, Elizabeth, but that's about all I know. She was Quaker."

"Quaker?" Don was perking up.

"Yes, your great-grandfather used to say that out of respect for her, he should never have let your father's father join the army in World War I. I think he blamed himself for your grandfather's death."

"Is Dad there?"

"Of course he is."

Her end of the line went quiet until Sam said, "Can I ask him some questions about her?"

"Well, sure, but don't hang up—I want to hear more about you."

"I'm okay, Mom."

Ernie came on the line apparently briefed by Dotty. "What do you want to know about her?" he said.

"Anything, I guess."

"I never knew her, you know."

"Right, but you must have heard things," Sam said. "From Stanfield?"

"I never knew what to believe from him."

"From your mother? Hadn't your father told her anything?"

"He never knew her either."

"Did she die in childbirth?"

"Something like that."

"Something?"

"Shortly after."

Sam felt like he was being stonewalled. "Dad, I was putting some of my stuff up in the attic and I tripped over that old trunk." He paused for Ernie to say something, but he didn't. "So, anyway, I've been reading some of Stanfield's stories."

"He'd be happy someone is."

"There's a woman in them named Elizabeth—who's Quaker—and who's married to the Civil War cavalryman that Stanfield kept writing about." He paused again, but again, no response. "Is that your grandma?"

"I never talked to him about it."

"That's it?"

"You'd have to know him to understand."

Sam didn't. "How could you not care who your grandmother was?"

"Your great-grandma Constance was all the grandmother I ever knew—a grandmother and a second mother to me."

"Step-grandmother."

"Technically, yes."

Sam just listened, and after a moment Ernie went on.

"My father was dead before I was born—my mother depended on Constance for everything."

"So, do you think your real grandmother was this cavalryman's wife?"

"No."

"It's just a coincidence?"

"My grandfather was a nut—he made a lot of things up."

"So you read it, too?"

"No."

"You never read it?"

"I'd heard it for years," he said. "I didn't have to read it."

Sam couldn't believe his father's lack of curiosity. "What did Stanfield do that he could afford to build this house?"

"Constance had an inheritance."

Right about then, Ernie said he had to go. He was like that. It wasn't personal. He'd just reach his limit and have to go. He did it to everyone. But Sam thought his dad's timing was a little suspicious in this particular case, right when he'd started asking financial questions. He hung up the phone expecting to hear it ring within seconds with his mother on the line.

He looked over at Don. "You got the gist of that, right?"

Don slowly nodded.

"My dad thinks Stanfield had an overactive imagination—like he put Elizabeth the Quaker, his first wife, into the story of the cavalryman—to fictionalize it, I guess."

"Except that she's right there in the real-life depositions—Elizabeth Wagner, Quaker."

Sam looked over at the silent phone and thought about Constance's Bible, which made no mention of his grandfather Samuel at all. "It's like my step-great-grandmother willed my blood great-grandmother into nonexistence."

Don got up and looked in the refrigerator. "You got anything to

imbibe?"

"Just what you see."

"Come on," Don said. "Let's get something."

They jumped in the Chevy, and as they backed out of his driveway, Sam said, "You think Elizabeth Sykes Wagner is my great-grandmother?"

"If so, illegitimately so."

"So Stanfield lied and told my step-great-grandmother he was only *fictionally* basing Wagner's wife on his own first wife in hopes she wouldn't be scandalized?"

Don said, "I think I follow you."

"Or maybe he wrote all this stuff after she died, when he was free to think back on his first marriage and put the record straight without hurting her feelings or making her feel she was living in the shadow of Elizabeth Wagner."

"Except if it was Elizabeth Wagner, it wasn't a marriage."

"Right."

"Don't forget your dad's mom was still alive then—the wife of the illegitimate son."

"The son who died before his son, my father, was born," Sam said.

"Why would she care?"

"Because she wouldn't have wanted to marry a bastard?"

They pulled into the convenience store parking lot filled with loitering teens. Inside the store in front of the refrigerators, Sam stared at the choices and thought about the anonymous alcoholics with their diet colas and cigarettes. He went with a liter of a regional ginger ale, something actually

not from a huge national company.

Back in the car they picked it up again. "So after his wife and his illegitimate daughter-in-law died," Sam said, "he started writing all these stories—"

"Except the one I read," Don said, "the paper in that one looks ancient—from the last century, maybe."

"And that one has the most explicit things to say about Wagner's wife."

"Maybe that's why he changed his name to Sanders Wyatt."

The rest of the way back to Museum they rode in silence. Sam liked the idea of this admirable woman being his lost great-grandmother, this wife of a lunatic excolonel from the Union cavalry. She bore the indignities of her husband's tragedy with the fortitude of a saint and the grace of an aristocrat. She wouldn't dissolve her marriage vows despite her husband's living death, despite the fact that she loved his great-grandfather enough to have his child. And she was like a cross between Susan B. Anthony and Sarah Bernhardt.

As they pulled into his driveway, Sam asked, "Who was Sarah Bernhardt, anyway?"

"A French actress—you've seen pictures of her."

"What'd she look like?"

"Dark—she wore a lot of hats—eyes made up like a silent movie actress—she did that, too."

When they were back in the kitchen, Don said, "Have you excavated everything from the trunk?"

"I've gone through it all." Sam mentioned the photos and the typewriter and the typed pages that looked like earlier drafts of the stories

they'd read. "But I didn't tear out the lining, if that's what you mean."

Immediately and without a word, they were in the reading room checking out the lining of the trunk. It had a floral pattern like fabric, but it was just cardboard, and it looked undisturbed. They patted it anyway, feeling for lumps.

"What are we looking for?" Sam said.

"Maybe they wrote letters," Don said and thumbed through the Sears catalog. Nothing popped out.

Sam looked through the quiver of pens and the empty ledger books. "Letters'd make it easy."

"Or notes," Don said. "A lot of what's in that manuscript—the stuff attributed to Lizzie—isn't part of the depositions." Don flipped the pages of the catalog. "He must've picked it up during those infamous visits."

"But if those visits were spent on things like conceiving my grandfather, he wouldn't have been taking notes."

"Well, they wouldn't be conceiving all the time."

Sam dug through the pile of typed pages and found nothing new. The typewriter case contained only the Remington. He pointed at the catalog, which had captured Don's attention. "Let me look at that."

"You could get a full boy's outfit—" Don said, "knickers included—for a buck forty-five."

"A buck forty-five—I'll bet they bought my grandfather a couple."

"Back when a buck forty-five would buy considerably more than a liter of cheap soda." Don held it up as if making a presentation. "Look at all the stuff they have in here. This was the beginning—the golden age of mass

consumption."

"And Stanfield lived to see it become our way of life—let me see it."

Sam took the catalog and opened it to a random page in the middle. With the sense of a psychic he'd come upon a newspaper clipping—three or four column inches long—a small obituary for Elizabeth Sykes Wagner tucked into the gutter of the facing pages. Somebody had written a date in the margin using ink that seeped, capillary-like, around the edges into the porous paper: Jan 27, 1895. Sam read the clipping out loud:

Wagner, Elizabeth Sykes, entered into rest on January 23, 1895 at her home in the Frankfort District. She was forty-five years old. Wife of Colonel Samuel T. Wagner of the Tenth Pennsylvania Cavalry, she was a fourth-generation member of the Sykes family who settled in Philadelphia in the 1750s. All of those who were touched by her during her brief stay on this earth will miss her and her grace and her intelligence and her devotion to her friends and family.

She is survived by her brother Peter Sykes, her husband, and her three children Virginia, Peter, and Samuel. Memorial services will be held for family and friends at 6:00 p.m. on January 27 at the home of Peter Sykes. Donations in her memory should be directed to the Society of Friends Asylum, Philadelphia.

Don gestured for Sam to hand it to him. He reread it for himself, then flipped it over to look at the back side.

Sam said, "She only had two children in Stanfield's story."

"That's in the depositions, too."

"And my grandfather was named Samuel."

Don handed the clipping back to Sam, who slipped it back into the catalog. Don held his chin in his hand again.

"What are you thinking?" Sam said.

"What year was your grandfather born?"

"1894." Sam pointed to the photo of the doughboy on the mantle. "He was twenty-three when he joined the army in 1917."

"So, Lizzie didn't die in childbirth."

"And she was forty-four when my grandfather was born." Don said nothing, just stared out the window, and Sam added, "Isn't that a bit old to be having kids?"

"You know what I don't get," Don said, "is why he's even mentioned there if the family is just going to let Stanfield take his illegitimate ass off to Kalamazoo."

Sam put the catalog on top of the typewriter case. "Was everyone pretending that she was knocked up during a conjugal visit to her husband in the asylum?"

"Maybe she was."

"But she describes him as being dead—"

"Not among the living," Don said.

"Right—would she want to have sex with someone not among the living?"

"In the romantic setting of a nineteenth-century asylum for lunatics?"

"Jesus—"

"And she described him as not among the living in 1886—this would've been seven years later—seven *years* not among the living—"

"One thing," Sam said. "If they were still having sex in 1893—my great-grandfather and Elizabeth, I mean—then it must have been for love, not just for the pension."

Don got up off the floor and settled into one of the leather chairs. "It would've been extremely difficult for Lizzie to sneak away for several months, have Stanfield's child, and then come home as if nothing had happened."

"Why would she have wanted to?"

"She said she wouldn't divorce Wagner," Don said, "and I don't care how progressive she was—Margaret Fuller or no Margaret Fuller—the 1890s were a whole lot less tolerant of this kind of thing than the 1980s."

"So if my grandfather was the product of a conjugal visit, she wouldn't have had to sneak away—for the birth, I mean."

"Right, but if he was—or even if Lizzie just said he was to protect their reputations—why would the family just let him go off to Kalamazoo with some guy who had a ten-year obsession for her?"

"Who was Margaret Fuller, anyway?"

"A proto-feminist."

Don's explanation didn't help Sam much.

"She was a friend of Emerson's—had a child without marrying the father."

Sam got up off the floor and took the other leather chair. "So, if all this

is true—not all the specifics, necessarily, but the basic idea—then I'm indirectly named after a lunatic Civil War veteran, the first husband of my great-grandmother."

"Her only husband," Don said. "And actually, if your grandfather was, instead, the product of a conjugal visit between Wagner and Lizzie, then you're directly related to the lunatic."

"But you've already established that couldn't be the case, right?"

Don just looked at him.

"*Right?*"

∞

Sam had to work hard to stay busy for the next week and some, building up to the Fourth of July on Saturday. For one thing, without Don or Zoë coming by every few minutes, he had to amuse himself. And Jackie stayed away, too, busy with her job, which she complained about because they didn't give her Friday off, making her take a floating holiday—floated all the way off into the fall sometime. For another thing, Sam didn't want to stay busy. He wanted to be on vacation, off in Europe getting lost. He didn't want to expend a lot of energy crawling up those twelve steps into his attic. They were steeper than the stairway up to the Museum's attic.

He saw Willis on Monday. "Willis!" he called out into the backyard.

Willis had yet to start the mower and called right back, "Looks like you got your color back."

"Yeah." Sam felt his face turning red.

"I been there, too," Willis said, "when I was your age."

They shook hands.

"I was down in Chicago, trying to make the big time." He put his foot up on the mower. "All I got was a big-time habit."

"Heroin?"

"Mostly just rye whiskey."

"So what brought you up here to sleepy Kalamazoo?"

"Long story, but they got whiskey up here, too, so's I had to get into the program."

"Really?"

"Damn right—1958."

The year after Stanfield died, two years before Sam was born. "Well, you wouldn't know it today, Willis, you're looking fit."

"I am," he said with a touch of boast in his voice. "Doing all right for an old black man."

"You're not old, Willis."

"I don't feel it," he said. "It's the music—keeps the women interested."

"You're too old for *that*."

"That's not what the women say."

Sam shook his head. "Well, I just wanted to say sorry for the mess in the yard."

"Shit, I didn't care—I still got paid."

Sam had to laugh. "Willis, you got the life."

"Except for that busted up guitar—that was a shame."

Sam looked over at the sidewalk running past the garage and gave up trying to get in the last word.

Willis turned back to his lawn mower. "They got something going on

over at Bronson Park on Saturday." He took hold of the pull-starter. "I'm playing—you ought to come out and smell the sun lotion." He started the mower with a yank and pushed it out onto the grass.

Sam did go out. After a week of slurping soda water within the sober confines of the Museum, he was ready to experience a little carrying on, even if the high was only vicarious. After another lively evening with Josie—she showed up clean as a nurse, saying all the right things about his CD—plus an eternity of an evening playing gin with Jackie, Sam was ready to go out. After his second afternoon of shooting the shit with Dave—he wanted to explore "anger issues"—and another watching the A. A. show from the back row, Sam was *ready* to smell the sun lotion.

As he prepared to head out for the park, Jenny showed up to clean—it was one of her scheduled Saturdays, and she didn't celebrate patriotic holidays anyway. She wasn't in her Amish clothes.

"Wow, you look different," he said, then immediately felt stupid for saying it.

"I just came from my boyfriend's house."

Searching for something more insightful to say, he avoided staring at her black T-shirt, plain except for the AC/DC logo in bolt-of-electricity lettering across her small breasts. "Back in black," he said.

She smiled. "I like black."

"Me, too."

He told her where he was headed and how to lock up when she left. He paid her on his way out the door.

The two square blocks of Bronson Park were downtown, within a

reasonable walk. Sam headed out early, an hour before Willis Hawly and the Kayzoo Kings came on because he wanted to get there in plenty of time.

Along his route downtown he came across all the ingredients of a gorgeous Fourth—the smell of barbeques, the steamy bake of Midwestern short-sleeve weather, the sporadic crackle of fireworks, the non-irrigated green Sam never saw in California in July.

He strolled. He'd never strolled when he was in Silicon Valley. Everyone he passed on their porches and in their yards looked like comfortable clichés you might be embarrassed about, but you'd never strike out with. He passed a sports field taken up by a bunch of soccer-playing brown men that everyone would probably call Mexicans, even though they may just as easily have been Salvadorans or Guatemalans, even Texans. It was a sight he'd seen often in California, a sight he was surprised had found its way to his old home town.

When he arrived at the park, a hits-of-the-'50s-'60s-and-'70s band was ploughing through their time allotment with a set of workhorse tunes that everybody was guaranteed to know. Earlier in the day, according to the program, a polka band had played, plus an old-timers brass band, a barbershop quartet, and a folk-singing duo. Something for everybody. If he was still out in California, they probably would have included a salsa band and Japanese Taiko. He listened to the band up on the stage and longed for polka.

He didn't recognize a soul, and it felt great. He smiled at females he didn't know. Some smiled back. On the lawn in front of the portable flatbed stage everyone sprawled out on blankets and towels, or sat in short-legged folding chairs, beverages in hand. Sam made his way around the periphery,

reading the inscriptions on the park's memorial stones. He couldn't remember if he'd ever taken the time to read them before. The Spanish-American War had more than its share of them. There was one from the Civil War for the 11th regiment of the Michigan volunteer cavalry. It left to fight in September 1863, one month before Wagner was at Buelee's Ford.

By the time Willis and company took the stage to set up their equipment, Sam had found a spot with a clear view up against a maple tree. Willis had on a sharkskin suit and a mauve shirt. He looked like the real deal from the 1950s. He rolled his old amplifier out next to the drummer who was setting up midstage. When he plugged it in and turned it on, the amp had an iridescent green power light instead of the usual red. Ready to go, Willis disappeared until it was time to play. He reappeared with a funky chrome-covered guitar that Sam couldn't place, plugged it in, and launched into a stuttering version of a Chuck Berry tune that Sam could place, but couldn't name. Willis even threw in a little showmanship, like Berry. Sam tried hard to imagine the guy on stage mowing his parent's yard and could only laugh.

Despite the fact that he wasn't much of a dancer—not like Ethel who would dance to anything—Sam was dancing with the maple tree by the time the Kayzoo Kings were halfway through the second tune, a shuffle that Willis said was his. The whole set was infectious like that. The only thing that broke the spell for Sam was the tone of Willis's guitar up high on the neck. It wasn't cutting through.

He found Willis during the break between the Kings' set and the final set, which featured Open Range, a slick country-rock band that Sam

remembered from his high-school years. Willis was surrounded by fans—black and white and brown and yellow—mostly women, and Sam made his way up to him to shake his hand. "This ain't the Willis I know."

Willis looked at him with half-closed eyes. "What'd I tell you?" he said. "I ain't no crackwise."

∞

On Sunday, Jackie called to check up on Sam, and in the course of the conversation she reminded him of their brother Jerry's imminent arrival. "Less than two weeks," she said.

After they hung up, Sam wasted no time in coming to his first momentous decision of the summer: He would escape from the Museum before Jerry's family descended on it. The idea of Buelee's Ford had been intriguing him for days. He thought he'd go see what the reality was like.

When he told Jackie he was taking off, she said she couldn't blame him for avoiding their brother. "And it serves Mom and Dad right for leaving before you got back here."

"I'll be back before I go the Spain," he said.

"Just be careful, Sammy, okay?"

When Sam saw Willis on Monday, he saw a different man, a bona fide bluesman, no longer just a gardener who dabbled in the blues.

Willis was gracious when Sam told him of his change of perspective. "Hell, I'm the same old Willis no matter what I do."

But Sam thought he saw a little bit of pride peeking around the edges of Willis's graciousness. He asked Willis about his guitar, careful not to imply that it was the piece of junk he thought it was.

"I picked that up in a pawn shop in Detroit," Willis said, "twenty years ago."

"It's got a lot of chrome on it," Sam said.

"Yeah, I always was a sucker for chrome."

Later in the day, as he retrieved his smashed-up acoustic guitar from the garage where Zoë had stashed it and put the pieces away as best he could in the case—he wasn't able to throw it away yet—he came to his second momentous decision of the summer: He'd let Willis use his Les Paul.

On Tuesday, he made an appointment with his parent's mechanic to tune up the Datsun. The following Tuesday was the earliest he could get. He also made a xerox copy of Hadwyn Ferrier's map of Buelee's Ford.

On Wednesday, Don came by the Museum—to check up on Sam, he said—and Sam told him about his escape.

"My brother's coming on the seventeenth with his whole tribe, and then my parents'll be back early that next week—all of them here and I don't leave for Spain until the thirtieth. It'll shove me right off the wagon."

Don nodded his head and asked, "Why Buelee's Ford?"

"If you're right about me being related to Wagner," Sam said, "I want to see the scene of his reckoning."

"I didn't say you *were*."

"Well, you brought it up."

"Hopefully it's still there," Don said. "When are you going?"

"A week, the fifteenth—the Datsun goes in for a tune up on Tuesday."

"The Ides of July."

Sam took a seat at the breakfast table, but Don remained standing on

the faux marble floor like he was about to leave. Sam wanted him to stick around, so he kept talking and asked if he'd heard from Zoë.

"Not hardly."

"When's she supposed to be back in town?"

"I think she said Thursday."

Don still didn't sit down, even after Sam gestured to the empty seat across the table, so Sam asked, "Had any more thoughts about the Colonel?"

"I figured it out."

"My great-grandmother was actually Lizzie Borden."

"North is the perfect fall guy."

"Oh—that Colonel."

It was the second day of Ollie North's testimony before the joint committees of the House and Senate.

Sam was familiar with North, but couldn't be so sure of his perfection.

"Why's he so perfect, because he's such an unrepentant liar?"

"That too, but from the administration's perspective, more because he distracts everyone's attention from the real questions."

"Huh."

Don dragged Sam into the TV room and flipped on the set. The committee was in the middle of the afternoon session.

"He's got that little crack in his voice," Don said, "and that gap in his teeth and that dopey sort of puppy-dog face, which makes Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North the issue instead of the secret arms deals with our supposed enemy and our attempts to overthrow yet another democratically elected government in our own backyard."

"Isn't the overly ambitious lieutenant colonel part of the issue?"

"He is, but after he sits up and speaks and rolls over, how are we going to stay mad at him?"

"He looks like a caricature with all those medals on his chest."

"Exactly," Don said. "He's just a loyal terrier that got carried away digging for gophers in the neighbor's yard—just doing what he was bred to do."

North conferred with the pissy-looking lawyer sitting next him.

"Meanwhile," Don went on, "Ronnie is pulling his bad-actor-with-a-bad-script-having-trouble-remembering-his-lines trick, and Casey swallows his cyanide capsule like a good spy to avoid torture and interrogation."

"And North takes the fall to protect his bosses."

"Except it won't be much of a fall—he's been granted immunity."

They stood there watching for a couple more minutes until Don flipped the TV off. "Just wait," he said. "He's going to get away with it—probably end up in the Senate where he can fuck with American foreign policy for the next twenty-five years."

Back in the kitchen Sam asked, "So, had any more thoughts about Wagner?"

"You'd probably have to look up Lizzie's relatives to find anything more definitive."

"Yeah, I don't suppose my dad knows any more than he's telling."

"Why wouldn't he tell?" Don said. "Who could resist the romance of such a story?" He took hold of knob on the side door. "Seems like something your dad would brag about, like being part Cherokee."

"My dad?"

∞

When Zoë came back to town on Thursday, she intended to call Sam right away. She felt bad. She'd acted like a spiteful ninth-grader and not come by to see him in the hospital. Though she knew his taste in women—she'd even smelled it on him—and knew she'd never quite fill those requirements, she'd still got it in her heart that he was obliged to her. The requirements she did fill—or had filled, anyway—and the obligations he did honor were those of a friend. She wanted to make sure she continued to fill them.

Before she had a chance to call him, however, Sam showed up at her apartment with a potted plant.

"What are these?"

"Forget-me-nots."

It was corny, but Zoë had to fight off the urge to cry. She definitely wanted to avoid blithering sentimentality. "Were you worried I would?"

"I would've deserved it," he said.

She took the plant and set it on the kitchen table right in front of the window. "Thank you."

"Just to show some appreciation."

She looked over at him, running his fingers through his hair. "If you want to do something to show your appreciation," she said, "just stay out of those comas."

He sat down at the table.

"Yes, have a seat—you want something to drink?"

He didn't. Instead he wanted to thank her about six different ways for

looking after him. She told him not to worry about it, that he'd do the same for her. Then, without mentioning Josie by name, he apologized for being—as he put it—a jerk. It was nice to hear him say all these things, but Zoë didn't want to dwell on them.

"How can I stay mad at you for screwing my friends when you do something pathetic like drink yourself into a coma?"

He was drumming his fingers on the table. Quietly he said, "This is the only time that's ever happened."

"Denise Kishiro."

His drumming stopped. "I meant the coma."

Zoë knew she was being mean, tapping into a little of her spite, and she was sorry, sort of, but she didn't tell him so. "How about a sandwich?" she asked. "I picked up some cheese and ham."

They settled into making lunch. Had she put in a bit more forethought into it, Zoë probably wouldn't have made the "Denise Kishiro" comment. Sam had his guard up after that. He asked how her family visit had gone, and she said nicely. There was no need to go into particulars. She asked if he was getting excited about his trip to Europe, and he said he'd talked to his friends in Barcelona and they had some plans for him. She said a good plan would be to stay away from the Spanish wine.

When they sat down to eat, Sam told her about his road trip idea.

Zoë thought he shouldn't ditch out on his family. "How long has it been since you've seen your brother?"

"It seems like only yesterday."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I'll see them all plenty enough when I come back for your birthday."

"You'd better not miss my birthday."

"Like I could ever get out of that."

They ate in silence for a couple of minutes, until she said, "I'm so envious you're taking two trips."

"You know, you can take a trip, too," he said. "You ought to go to Connecticut this summer for some Shakespeare—take Don with you."

Sam was not a very crafty matchmaker. She wasn't necessarily averse to the idea, but a kind of stubbornness kicked in. She didn't like being set up. "What makes you think Don wants to do that?"

"You two brainiacs would have a swell time."

"Maybe we would," she said, "but I think you should worry about your own summer."

"I can do both."

"If you want to do me a favor, then don't." They stared at each other across their half-eaten ham-and-cheese sandwiches. "Worry, about me, I mean."

"Yeah, just like you weren't worrying about me when I first got back here."

"That was different."

"No it wasn't."

"You were coming out of a failed relationship and you'd just been fired because you lost it at work—Sam, when people do things like that, other people naturally worry about them."

"Especially when their mothers fan the worry flames."

She reached over and stopped his drumming fingers. "I think your poisoning yourself with alcohol shows we were justified in our worry."

"And what justifies my worry is the fact that you and Don have been stuck back here never failing at relationships because you never try them, never pushing yourselves or risking enough to even know what losing it is."

"I've tried them, Sam."

"I keep thinking back to high school, when we all thought we were destined to do something new and significant."

Zoë let go of his hand. "Idealistic kids."

"Maybe," he said, "but if you give up on ever doing something significant—if one does— isn't that like a living death?"

"I guess it depends on your—one's—definition of 'significant.'"

"Well, it's definitely not settling for something easy."

Zoë loved the way Sam's mind ran with things like this, even if it also added to her worry. "But is it doing something foolish just so you—one— doesn't settle for something easy?"

"Sometimes, yes."

"But when you do foolish things, or keep doing them, that's when people naturally worry, isn't it?"

"Depends on your definition of 'foolish.'"

"I think we both know what 'foolish' is."

"No, because one person's foolishness might be another's life-long calling."

"Who's to judge?"

"Exactly."

They took bites of their sandwiches at the same time, but he finished chewing first.

"Do you ever wonder," he said, "what you're going to be doing in ten years?"

She laughed. "I wonder what I'm doing next week."

He smiled. "Me neither—I can't think that far in advance because I keep thinking I just missed something—like everything important happened just before I got here, wherever I happen to be."

"That's weird, Sam."

"Yeah, I know," he said. "But in ten years I don't want to be sitting around having done nothing significant just because I didn't think it was worth trying."

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Jenny was due back on Saturday the eighteenth, but Sam couldn't imagine that it would be very pleasant for her to clean with Jerry and the clan camped out at the Museum, so he called the number tacked up by the phone to ask if she could come earlier in the week. It turned out to be her boyfriend's number. Obviously she wouldn't have had one at her parent's house. When she called back, she said she could do it on Monday, Willis's day.

Sam hung up the telephone, stared at it, and thought about Josie. In a span of three weeks they'd gone from an initial meeting reminiscent of mountain goats during rutting season to something that approximated what he and Ethel had when they were first getting to know one another. She could talk about music with a precise vocabulary, and she understood context, the relationship between whatever particular group she was talking about

and music in general. She had a range of interest from Bach to bebop to gamelan to rap. Her enthusiasm for music chipped away at his well-earned cynicism about it, something Sam recognized as a good thing. He had to work to keep up with her, and he liked that—it was hard to believe she was only twenty-two. And to top it off, it still felt like rutting season when they were around one another.

He hadn't told her he was leaving town. "Josie—Sam here."

"Hey, Sam there."

"Remember the brother I was telling you about?"

After a moment she said, "The banker with the brood?"

"Right—they're coming to town next week, and I'm not up for lodging with them here at the Museum, so I'm taking a road trip."

"And you wanted to call to tell me you'll miss me."

"Exactly," Sam said.

On Friday he had her over. When she tried to interest him in a glass of the wine, bought specially for him because it was Californian, he had to tell her about his problem with binges. But instead of dampening her interest in him, the confession endeared him somehow. They spent a tender night in Stanfield's bed—where Sam had taken to sleeping—and woke up on Saturday to coffee and a continental breakfast in the nook. As he looked out on the late morning summer brilliance, Sam could almost imagine he was already on vacation.

Jackie came over and spent Sunday evening with him, made him a bon-voyage dinner, her own version of their mom's workhorse macaroni casserole. It tasted better than Mom's. Afterwards they played gin, and Jackie

kicked his ass.

When he heard the lawn mower on Monday morning, Sam was already awake in the bathroom with his second cup of coffee. By the time Willis was around in the backyard, Sam had fetched the Les Paul from the back of his closet and made his way out the side door. He hailed Willis before he had a chance to restart his mower.

"I've got something for you."

Willis met him in the driveway. "What you got in the case?"

"It's my Les Paul," he said. "I want you to take it while I'm gone."

Willis looked suspicious. "Nah—I can't be taking your guitar." He was shaking his head. "What're you going to play?"

"I'm not playing it, Willis—that's the point."

"You ain't playing it now, but you'll play it again."

Sam hadn't planned for Willis's resistance. "I'm going to Spain, Willis, I think I can find a guitar there if I need one."

"What do I need your guitar for?"

"You've got to do something about your sound."

"What d'you mean?"

"I heard you. You've got that sweet old amp, but that thing you're running through it ain't fit for a man of your talents."

Willis set his jaw.

"Here, try it out."

Willis looked down at his gardening hands. "My hands are filthy."

"Come on in and wash them."

He led Willis into the kitchen, and while the bluesman scrubbed his

hands, Sam set the guitar case on the table and took out the pitch-black Les Paul. He offered Willis a chair.

Willis plucked the guitar tentatively at first, resting it on his thigh away from his body like he was trying not to scratch it up. Sam pulled a pick out of the case and offered it to him.

"Don't use one," Willis said.

When he got more comfortable, he graduated from licks lifted off records—that's what they sounded like to Sam, anyway—to longer runs up and down the neck.

"How does it feel?" Sam asked.

"Like silk underthings."

Sam smiled. "Play something up above the twelfth fret."

Willis worked his way up the neck with an elaborate run, up past the double-dot fret markers, up onto the highest strings.

"That sounds better than your other guitar sounds through the amp."

Willis held the guitar up and tilted it so he could get a close look at the face. "How old is this thing?"

"1960," Sam said, "the year I was born."

"Shit, I can't take this."

"Willis, you're the one I trust the most with it—you'll take care of it and play it like it's supposed to be played."

Willis flipped it over and looked at the back.

"If I leave it in my closet, my brother's monkeys'll just find it and drag it out and trash it."

Willis put it back on his thigh.

"It's as nice as your Belair," Sam said, "but the point is, your priorities are backwards—you have a sleek car and a gaudy guitar. If it's all about the music, you need a sleek guitar."

Willis plucked out some chords. "And if I get accustomed to this black beauty, how'm I going to settle for the other one when you come back for this one?"

"We can worry about that when the time comes. If nothing else, you won't be able to settle for the other one, and you'll have to figure out a way to get one of these for your own."

"She sure is sweet," Willis said.

"Wait'll you hear it through your amp—then you'll know what sweet is."

He stopped playing and ran the palm of his hand up the back of the neck. "I don't know—it doesn't seem right."

"Willis, I want you to have it—"

"I'm here, Mr. Whittier." It was Jenny at the side door dressed in her familiar plain dress and headcovering.

"Oh, hi," Sam said. "Come on in."

Tentatively she crossed the faux marble floor. "I'll start on the upstairs."

"Willis," Sam said, gesturing toward him, "Jenny."

The two acknowledged one another, then each headed off to their respective tasks. Sam tucked the Les Paul in its case and stepped out the side door with it.

"Willis," he called out, "I'm putting this in the cab of your truck—take

care of her."

Willis raised his hand, like half in resignation, half in thanks, then started the mower.

While his parent's servants worked, Sam went to the reading room and reassembled all of Stanfield's stories and things and packed them back into the trunk as close to the way that he found them as he could remember. He kept out the two photos—the one with the somber woman and the one with Stanfield and the kid in front of the Museum—plus one of the empty ledger books and the elegant fountain pen. He padlocked the trunk and went off to find Jenny.

She was already done with the cleaning. Not much to do after just a week with Sam occupying all of three rooms and a bathroom. Besides them, all she had to do was a little dusting. He paid her the full amount and enlisted her to help him carry the trunk back up to the attic. Despite the dress that reached down to the middle of her shins, Jenny had a much easier time of carrying her end of the trunk than Zoë had had. She only asked to set it down once, and that was just to hike up her dress to get it out of the way when they'd reached the landing of the Scarlett-O'Hara staircase. When they reached the attic stairway, Sam was happy that he had to climb up to open the trap door and turn on the light. It gave him the opportunity to set his end down for a minute.

When they pushed the trunk into its place among the attic treasures, Sam told Jenny to hold on a minute while he dug through his box of band ephemera and pulled out one of the black promotional T-shirts. It read "Ethel and the Mermen" in modest red lettering across the breast.

"This was my band," he said. "I thought you might want it."

She held it up to read the name, then held it up to her body to see how it fit.

He said, "It's basic black."

"Thanks, Mr. Whittier—I like it."

"Sam," he said. "Call me Sam."

Jenny left just before Willis, and Sam went out to say goodbye. Willis was still as uncomfortable as he had been about the Les Paul thing, and Sam tried to reassure him—again—that everything was okay. This was a flipped-over dynamic. Although Willis had always worked for his parents, between the two guitar players Sam had always been the rookie. Willis had dispensed sage guitar-playing advice and evaluated Sam's progress. But now Sam was dispensing advice and making Willis beholden to him. No wonder the old guy didn't like it.

They had their parting words, Willis humbly thanking Sam for the guitar, promising to take care of it, Sam saying he'd be looking him up when he got back to town, expecting to hear a sweet new sound.

"You know," Sam said, hoping to say something sage himself, something to make Willis feel better about the whole thing, "there's a point where pride just turns into foolishness."

"Huh," Willis said and put his truck in gear. "If it wasn't for foolishness, I wouldn't know half of what I know today."

Then he started his truck rolling and waved. He'd managed to get in the last word again.

Sam called Josie that evening. "I thought maybe we could get together

so you could wish me a bon voyage."

Which they did, and she did on a blanket spread out next to the backyard birdbath among citronella candles and fireflies.

In the waning moonlight around midnight before she left, she jotted down her address on one of her business cards from her days on the newspaper staff. "Here," she said. "Send me a postcard every single day."

Sam took his Datsun to his parent's mechanic on Tuesday. The overalled professional looked at it like it was something from the Soviet bloc, but he said he had somebody working for him who knew his way around Japanese cars. All Sam wanted was an oil change and a tune-up. Not expecting any miracles, he figured that he at least had one more road trip left in the thing. He used his mother's credit card, reasoning that this would constitute one of those emergencies she'd mentioned.

While the car was in the shop, Sam washed his clothes. He wanted to leave as early in the morning as possible on Wednesday, so when he picked up the Datsun around midday, he went shopping for supplies. His car seemed happy for the attention given it, but it still had its familiar squeaks and rattles. He stocked up on road food. He stopped by AAA to get a map of Virginia and piqued the woman's interest in Buelee's Ford. She spread the map out on the counter and scanned the index with him.

"Bueleford," she said. "That's the closest there is—H-19."

Sam brought his finger across H, and she slid hers down 19.

"Bueleford" wasn't easy to find. The type size was among the smallest on the map. It referred to a dot next to the Rappahannock River.

"Bustling place," Sam said.

She gave him a Virginia travel book on the off chance there was a reference to Buelee's in it. Sam thought he just might follow the river from one end to the other—see what he could see.

When he got back to the Museum, Don's car was out in front. He found him sitting at the table in front of the window in the breakfast nook. Sam set his bags on the table and made a show of looking out the window with him. "Anything exciting going on out there?"

Don smiled—slightly. "I'm going out to dinner with Zoë tonight."

"Excellent," Sam said. "Master of history dines master of literature."

"All right," Don said, "get it over with."

Sam ferried beverages to the refrigerator. "No, I'm happy." He put bags of ice in the freezer and looked over at Don. "Really."

"She said you were playing matchmaker with her, too."

"That's right, I've got plenty of guilt to go around."

Don turned to look out the window, but from what Sam could tell, nothing was shaking out there except the leaves on the tree.

"I have to get my laundry out of the drier," Sam said. "I'll be right back."

When he returned from the garage, he found Don in the TV room. Sam piled his clothes on the couch and sat down to fold them.

"North's testimony is just ending," Don said.

"Any new revelations?"

"Lee Hamilton is making his closing remarks."

"Who?"

"The chairman of the House committee."

Don turned the sound up, and while they sat and listened, Sam folded his clean clothes. Hamilton seemed so much less slimy than the rest of the people Sam had seen in the hearings, which had admittedly not been all that many. He was saying something about the wrongheadedness of using covert action to pursue an unpopular foreign policy.

"I like this guy."

"Yeah," Don said. "He's articulate."

"And he's right."

Sam dug through the pile of clothes looking for the mate to one of his favorite blue socks, but it must have been on the ground somewhere between the garage and the TV room.

Hamilton was talking about the Iran-Contra policy being built upon a succession of lies, and he quoted Thomas Jefferson: "'The whole art of government consists in the art of being honest.'"

Sam draped the lone blue sock over the back of couch.

Hamilton talked about foreign policy being the responsibility of both the president and Congress, which wouldn't succeed unless the two worked together. He talked about leaders having the responsibility to build public support for policy, not to pursue unsupported policies in secret, then claim interference from Congress when it acted upon that lack of public support. He couldn't agree that the ends North was after justified the means of going around due processes and deceiving everybody to avoid oversight.

"He ought to be president," Sam said, stacking all his T-shirts together.

"I know, but he'd never make it."

"He probably never went to acting school."

"The marketing people wouldn't know how to sell him."

He talked about democracy being a means and not an end. He talked about entrusting many people to determine policy, not a small group, no matter how well-intentioned. He talked about patriotism, not the kind flaunted by a bunch of medals pinned to the chest, but the kind that upheld the Constitution by trusting in its checks and balances. When he was done, he thanked Oliver North for his testimony and relinquished the floor.

Don said, "That'll be the highlight of hearings right there." He clicked the sound off. "And you were there."

"Folding my underwear."

"But you know what?" Don said. "Nobody'll remember it. The ones who capture everyone's attention are the ones like North—the self-aggrandizing idealogues, not the self-effacing idealists."

"I don't know," Sam said. "Look at Wagner—he was more of an idealist, and he captured a lot of attention."

"Stanfield's anyway."

"No, all those deponents—"

"But who is it remembers him now?"

Sam remembered the quote from the first of Stanfield's stories.

"Spoken like a true historian."

Before he took off, Don wished Sam luck, embraced him like a brother in arms, and asked what he thought he was going to find at Buelee's Ford.

"I have no idea." Sam had his folded clothes in two tall stacks which he gathered into his arms like a bale of cotton. "It's just a whim, that's all."

"Just a whim," Don repeated.

"Yeah, it's been a long time since I've followed one of my own."

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Sam woke up at four on Wednesday morning. He visited the bathroom, then slipped back in bed only to lie there, eyes wide open, checking off the items on his mental list of trip preparations. By five o'clock he gave up trying to fall back to sleep and got up to put on some coffee. Not that he needed it.

For about an hour he readied himself. He ate a quick breakfast of cereal and fruit he'd bought for the trip. He filled his cooler with ice and perishables, then gathered his things together and piled them all into the Datsun. On the passenger seat he put the empty ledger book and the fountain pen from Stanfield's trunk. The sun was just coming up when he stashed the key on top of the four by four underneath the roof of the side porch, right where his brother Jerry could find it.