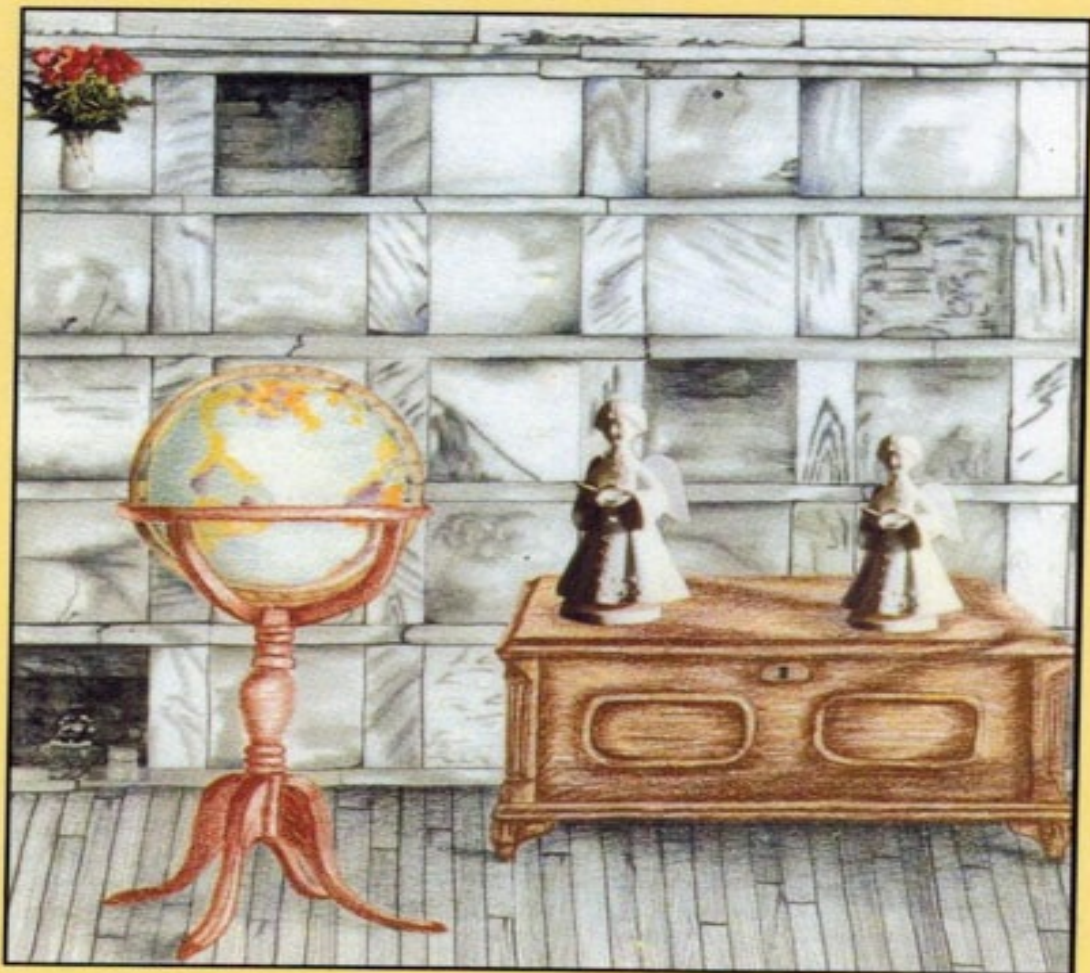


"A magical collection of stories, one of the best I've encountered in years."

—Tim O'Brien

Rumors from the Lost World



Stories by Alan Davis

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*For Catherine,
and for Sara, and Dillon*

*When they stirred in their sleep
we fell through the crust
sometimes to the waist,
to the topmost branches*

*of the trees in which frozen
birds perched,
waiting for the sky to melt.*

—Michael Hettich
from *A Small Boy*

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is anyone
completely here?

—Kathryn Le

*You out there, so secret.
What makes you think you're alone?*

—Thomas McGrath
Selected Poems, 1938-1980

SHOOTING THE MOON

I had baseball cards and books about time travel, my brother Edward had the television, my father worked double shifts at a factory job, my mother housework and a secret wish for a baby girl. We reached for nothing greater, but my grandfather was different.

Once a week I walked him to the local library. If I got lucky, he entered quietly in his flannel shirt and overalls, waved his black glove, and chose a few books. On the way back to our white frame house, he swung his rubber-tipped cane for balance, the crook on the end like a bishop's crozier. On the front stoop, cuffs tucked over the shoestrings of his work boots, he lit up one of his King Edward cigars. "You kids know nothing. They've filled your head with crap."

He paced his attic room, as foggy as a London street in a Sherlock Holmes melodrama. Cigar smoke swirled away through tiny gable vents and his face with its squints and wrinkles came clear at the flare of a match. He was an atheist and a socialist; somewhere in his book-lined haunt above my bedroom was a newspaper article about George Bernard Shaw he liked to read to me. Sitting on a packing crate, I wasn't able to make much sense of what he read, but it was heady stuff, and I swayed in his rhetoric as his black glove tapped across the page. He wore the black fur-lined glove because surgery left the hand freezing on the outside and burning on the inside. My father was often away at nights, working his double-shifts, so my mother trudged up the stairs with a porcelain bowl of hot water balanced against her good hip. Grandpa needed his soak.

Even so, there would have been no heated discussions about nursing homes had he submitted gratefully to this Florence Nightingale act. Her two boys weren't old enough to minister to him, only to listen as she braced the slopping bowl of scalding water and planted a foot on the next step, groaning and gathering a breath, but she appreciated the man who sent me to the corner store for cigars. He gave me tip enough for a box of Good N' Plenty, licorice candies with pink-and-white sugar shells. The man who sat at our formica breakfast table with his magnifying glass, reading quietly for hours, accepting refills of coffee with a professorial nod, was comforting to her. She thought his political opinions were nothing more than the cantankerousness of a man whose favorite team had lost the World Series.

Nothing was further from the truth. When I was unlucky, he worked himself into a rage before we even reached the wooden red-shuttered library. On our final visit there, he scowled at Mrs. Douglas, the front-desk librarian who knew my mother, and vainly searched the card catalog for radical primers. "They've got books in here that make goddamn fools out of people," he said, loudly enough to be heard across the long room. "I don't want my boy here to grow up to be a fool. Do I have to take him downtown to get him a book worth reading?"

After a few minutes of this, Mrs. Douglas got on the telephone, gesturing emphatically, speaking at a staccato pace, and my mother soon arrived in the wood-paneled station wagon. Through the library's plate-glass window I saw her try to parallel park. She wasn't very good at it, especially when aroused. She kept turning the wheel too abruptly. The rear tire kept bumping into the curb. I knew she would lose patience and leave it that way, angled out like a gangplank into traffic.

Mrs. Douglas hovered behind the counter, stroking her chin. It was the gesture she used on an unruly patron who got out of line. "Ruth," my grandfather shouted to her, "why don't you just sit down on your ass and play the fool?" My fingers ticked on the frayed binding of a green *Reader's Guide*. The library was hardly the local hangout, but a couple of my classmates were there, staring oddly in my direction. A middle-aged member of the Ladies' Auxiliary put down the latest popular novel and crossed her arms. Had God (who in my imagination looked something like Mickey Mantle, right down

to the pinstriped uniform) entered the library at that embarrassing moment and promised to make the old man vanish, I would have taken cover on the far side of the card catalog and told The Mick to have at it. My grandfather was the kind of straight-backed old man who attracted scorn instead of pity; I would never surrender to reason, fatigue, or even to my mother.

She strode through the door and said something to him in an angry whisper, and even now it's hard to tell what happened in the conventional style of reminiscence. "Bitch," he answered. "You're a little fascist, that's what you are, a little bitch of a fascist, working your husband to death to fill your house with crap." She slapped him so hard he raised his bad hand instinctively. The black glove flew in a small arc and landed five feet away. I picked it up and held it just so by one of its fingers. It felt soft to the touch, as though the fingers had somehow worked it smooth from the inside. Looking at nothing else, I followed it to the back seat of the station wagon, where a cop was placing a parking ticket under the windshield wiper. I tried on the glove, still warm and moist, and cursed the capitalists before losing my nerve and laying it to rest on the seat. My grandfather, face flushed, a welt already showing on his lower cheek, limped past the wagon, his right arm twitching. "Goddamn fascist bitch," he muttered.

My mother wedged herself behind the wheel and stuffed her mouth with a stick of chewing gum. She noticed the ticket and her jaws started working double-time. Without a word, she turned on the wipers. The ticket fluttered to the asphalt. She gunned the motor and whipped the station wagon around, nearly sideswiping a VW bug. The car's owner, opening a door for his wife and child, gave her the finger.

She gripped the steering wheel with one hand, elbow resting on the window well, and waved a cigarette with the other. "I'm sorry you had to see that," she said. "Grandpa's just old, poor thing. He's had his disappointments." She flung her wad of gum into the street, took a deep angry drag on the cigarette. "It's too goddamn much. I'll tell you one thing. He uses that kind of language again, he's gone." She stubbed out the cigarette. "Your father wants to put him somewhere, great. Otherwise, he can live on skid row with the scumbags and loonytunes."

That evening my parents argued in their bedroom below me. "I'll go there first," my father shouted. "That's for people who can't function, who have to be spoonfed, have to be wiped." My mother said something quietly, but in that tone of voice that could vibrate right through you.

"We don't always *earn* our afflictions. Sometimes they just *happen*," my father answered, so loudly I could tell he was drinking. "We want a girl, you can't have more kids. Is that your fault?" They were up and down all night, using the toilet, opening the refrigerator, the conversation flaring up over and over again like a fever. Above me, my grandfather paced out the disturbing rhythm of his own thoughts. He had big dreams as a young man, hoped to go to college, become a labor leader. "I wanted fame and women," my father once said, "never mind the fortune." Something obscure happened, though, something to do with the Great Depression. He ended up spending his life on county roads, repairing watches. Then his eyes went bad and his wife died.

"I like living in the attic," he told me once, smiling for my mother. "It's a quick way to get off the face of the earth." He waved his cigar. "I'm closer to heaven in case of a stroke."

"Where's heaven, Grandpa?"

"It's on the left side of the moon. You can't ever let them shoot the moon. That's where you go for coffee and beans when you're out of luck."

The day after that last confrontation at the library, he came down dressed in baggy slacks and a rust-colored turdneck that climbed the pale skin of his abdomen. A tattered socialist newspaper under one arm, one white-knuckled hand holding tightly to the banister, he descended upon Edward, my younger brother. Wearing a blue Detroit Tigers cap, Edward was folded fetus-like into the recliner, entranced by a game show.

“Turn off the damn television,” my grandfather said.

Edward looked at me. I raised an eyebrow in silent complicity, forgetting the yellow smell of the newspaper, the mustiness of the attic room with its narrow metal bed, the sound of that scratchy voice echoing from the rafters. I only remembered how often, under duress, I read a radical primer instead of a book of high adventure, how often my grandfather scoffed at my baseball cards. For an awful minute, I only remembered standing in the library, blaming him because he somehow wasn't what people expected.

Edward, who was no gendeman, doffed his cap like Al Kaline, his hero, after a home run. “Grandpa sit down and shut up.”

“All right,” he said, to my amazement, and sat on the sofa. He pulled out a cigar and tore off its tip. “We'll watch it together, you and I, we'll see what we can see.” I suppose he intended to pontificate on the evils of consumer capitalism, but the whirling wheel of the game show, the incessant detergent commercials and the moderator's patter hypnotized him. He fell off to sleep, head thrown backward, mouth open. Edward planted his cap back on and called my mother. She tried to work a plastic sheetcover under him—he was becoming incontinent—but he woke. “What the hell?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. “Where's your husband? He's never home, is he? Too busy filling this goddam coffin with gadgets.”

“Hey, ‘Gunsmoke’ is coming on,” Edward said, turning up the set. Chester, the gimpy deputy sheriff, was trying to keep order until Matt Dillon returned from Topeka.

“Look, this can't continue,” my mother said. “Why don't you form your own society or something? I don't see you refusing the food we put on your plate.” In fact he ate like a bird, lived on coffee and toast. “Besides, we've achieved everything you've dreamed of.”

“But you don't have *dignity*, you don't have *respect*,” he said, nodding with conviction.

He tried to retreat to his room, muttering under his breath, but couldn't negotiate the stairs. He slid down on the bottom step, feet planted on the hardwood floor, and covered his face with his hands. “Oh hell,” he said. “Oh hell.”

When my father heard the story, his face turned an ugly color. He tossed a few union leaflets on the sideboard. A family portrait, an oil painting, hung a little lopsided on the wall. In it, my grandfather was absent and we were all much younger, smiling like Christians because the painter had been on the scene. “That's it,” my father said. “He's brought this on himself. I wash my hands of it.”

Even my mother, who devoted so much of her life to keeping things clean, never put it quite that way.

At the Sleepy Hollow Care Center, he had a tiny airy room. Outside his window was a flower garden, part of a public park, in season well-tended and full of salmon colors and greens and blues.

When we paid him a visit, he had nothing to say, just worked his jaw and stared at the flowers.

My parents inscribed his favorite Shaw quote on the headstone, one he repeated often, especially when mocked or contradicted: “Some people see things as they are and ask why. I see things that never were and ask why not.” On the day we buried him it rained. I stood in the drizzle beside his grave, staring at the words on the tombstone and daydreaming into the spit-shine of my best shoes until the service was completed. Afterwards, we went for pizza.

Without him in the attic as ballast I floated away, and my mother, after a prolonged but successful quarrel with my father, sent me to Bible School, of all places. Talk about Jesus got mixed up with diatribes about the workers' struggle for dignity, the batting average of Mickey Mantle, and the plot of *The Time Machine*. By the time I went off to college, the thought of that inscription in the cemetery made me cringe.

One cloud-swept autumn afternoon, I told Sally, my wife, about the inscription, expecting her to grin. “A neat old man,” she said. “You know that's the quote Bob Kennedy used on the campaign.”

trail?" She nodded, staring from the wraparound porch of the restaurant to a bevy of geese flying south in formation. She had worked hard for Kennedy, followed his every notion in the papers. "How come you never talk about him?"

I stared at her. It was true. After a fashionable renouncement of my family, I decided politics, especially Shaw's creaky socialism, lacked existential truth. I felt profoundly sorry for my grandfather. His illusions had made his life miserable. I shrugged. "You saw what happened to Kennedy," I said, stroking my goatee sagely as geese plummeted through tatters of cloud the color of cigar smoke.

Even long dead, he continued shouting. I'd wake, thrashing upstream in my dreams, to the odor of cigar smoke and attic mustiness. He wanted his story told, he wanted someone to listen to an account of his ungentle passage through the world, but instead of sitting my wife down and talking until I grew hoarse, until vocal fry punctuated my memories, I'd take off my glasses and palm my hands over my eyes, then journey to a lake cabin with a redwood deck. Stones dropped into clear water, making concentric circles. My grandfather sat beside me, rocking on the porch. I have his weak eyes, you see, use them as much as he did. In another exercise, my eyes open to the darkness inside my hands, I saw him walk past me, swinging his rubber-tipped cane, staring at the fence, the cow-pasture finish to one deadend street. He hooked the cane on a strand of barbed wire and climbed. On the other side, I paused, surveyed the high grass, gathered a breath and went on, into a field of black-and-white cows.

"How can he be dead?" I said, finally telling her the story one late afternoon. "I can still see him. He's still there, sitting at the kitchen table, pinching off the tip of a cigar, quoting Shaw or Carl Sandburg." All afternoon we had sandpapered our bedroom wall and spackled nail holes, getting ready for a new coat of paint. The cigar-smoke color of the paint as I rolled it onto the walls, or maybe the intoxicating effects of its fumes, set something off in me. I couldn't stop talking. "So I stood in the hard rain beside the grave," I finished, "wearing my best boots, and then we went for pizza."

"Boots? You wore boots?" Jaunty after a job well done, she grinned. But it was clear she had listened, really listened. "Somehow I can't imagine you in boots."

"Shoes. Okay?" I clicked my tongue, a little irritated. "You find the rhythm of the story, a few details change. The point is, I had something on my feet."

"Sure," she said. "I get it." Then she furrowed her brows. "*Pizza? You went for pizza after the funeral?*"

"Yeah," I said, and bit into my lower lip. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "We have to eat, I guess. In respect for your grandpa, though, I hope you skipped the anchovies." She put down her putty knife and went off to rinse her hands with turpentine. When she returned, her mood had changed. "No, look, I'm sorry. Really. I'm sorry he was so unhappy." She rubbed her eyes and sniffed her knuckles, as though ready to cry. "If it's any consolation, your father was right, I think. We don't earn our afflictions. Sometimes they're just given to us, we have to live with them."

That was it. My grandfather was alive in somebody else's head, the head of someone I loved, and I knew she would keep him there, tell people about him from time to time. Air him out, so to speak, let him move through the world in a way which was still very difficult for me. She smiled, shrugged, and padded into the kitchen to start dinner. I worked on details in the bedroom, touching up the baseboard, smoothing out the rough spots, but by nightfall the job was finished, the paint mostly dry.

I joined my wife. Candles were flickering on the dining room table and the good china was laid out like a message from a more perfect world. Sally had pulled out a silver wine bucket, a wedding gift forgotten for years, and filled it with ice and a bottle of *vin ordinaire*, the only sort of wine we drank. After dinner, we brought the candles and the last of the wine to the new room and toasted my grandfather. The room was pale gray and satisfying to sit in, like being a child again and walking with

him to that red-shuttered library on an overcast afternoon, his mind filled with the plight of the
workingclass, mine with the necessity of traveling back and forth in time.

RAMPARTS STREET

Emily, after rejecting the eighties and its gold-plated bait, has come to the idea that she can learn about herself and her times by learning about her mother, getting in touch with her roots. Emily even flirts with taking a course in Italian, a language her grandfather spoke with gusto. English though it served him well enough, never gave him pleasure. He liked to roll Italian phrases in his mouth, feel how they forced his lips to puff out and pucker with male pride. In English, he was much diminished.

For Emily's sake, her mother tells and retells the story of a rainy February evening in 1942, when two government agents tore apart the house with carnival glee, as though Mardi Gras, which vanished with the war effort, had to be replaced with something more physical than periodic blackouts and a raid practice, the self-important warden with his metal hat and flashlight smirking as he lectured the nineteen-year-old girl. "A single match could give away our position, sister."

Emily takes the story to heart, cites chapter and verse. "You were an American, Mama, New Orleans born," she says, rubbing her fingers together like her father. "You went at things the way your ancestors did, hardscrabbling, getting in the door without asking. Isn't that what the Vietnamese are doing, the Mexicans, the Cubans, the Haitians, all the immigrants?" Emily gave up managing a health spa in the suburbs of New Orleans to work with displaced people. "The same people who want to keep them out are the ones whose fathers wanted to keep us out, at least until they learned how to use us as strikebreakers. And now they want to cut the capital gains tax and give another break to people who don't need it. Isn't that right? Am I getting it right?"

In response, her mother swirls her teaspoon in her coffee-and-milk. Each time she tells the story she manages to recall more of the truth of what happened, because, God knows, on that overcast February evening she couldn't explain herself the way she can now, after chewing it all over for so many years.

"But you were valedictorian the year before the war started. Isn't that right?" Emily says. "You gave the commencement address. You knew a thing or two."

Whatever, her mother says. It was 1942 and Mama motioned me close. "Come upstairs, child," she told me, though I was a high school graduate, already rebelling against the social constraints my father insisted on. "I don't want them going through the tin box." This was World War II, remember, fought so long ago people called it The Good War? Against the Germans, the Japanese, the Italians. Error Flynn came once to the Municipal Auditorium to sell war bonds.

"It's a scream," Emily says. "You know I'm right, don't you? New Orleans has always been the country's salad bowl. Greeks, Italians, Irish, blacks, French, Spanish, Eastern Europeans. You name it. The whites thinking they could do what they wanted to blacks, the Irish and the French thinking they were better than Mediterraneans. Am I right?"

Well, her mother says, we saw newsreels of the Blitz, used ration stamps, had to line up for meat, sweeten our coffee with saccharine, do without ice cream and cake. We knew something was wrong. Patriotism seemed like the answer. Anyway, I couldn't figure why Mama wanted the box hidden away but no matter. I was obedient. It was GI green, about the size of a breadbox, full of our papers. Birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates. A world in a breadbox. And my father's alien registration, paperclipped to a miniature Italian flag—those bright sun-filled colors, so different from the war effort. You know we had to mix bright yellow food coloring into the margarine to make it look edible?

I shoved the box into my closet, because the two agents downstairs, even though they were tearing

our house apart, wouldn't search the room of a girl, an innocent daughter. So Mama figured, anyway leading me back downstairs. "Not a word," she said. "Not a peep."

At nineteen, I was the youngest of thirteen children born to Mama, and the only one who still lived at home. It was a Tuesday, I remember, a meatless Tuesday, and Olsen was as thick as a steak, a good half foot taller than me. He slit open a sagging chair, the one in front of our gramophone, a console bought second-hand and polished to a high mahogany sheen. The chair would be worth maybe a dollar on the street, but it was the one nobody else sat in when Papa was home.

"You toiletface," I said. My mother put a hand to her mouth, my father started grinding his jaw, but he was afraid to speak. It was the first time in my life I used such a word, the worst I could think of, though God knows I heard it often enough, something my brothers called my older sister. But the effect was different, a little scandalous, very vulgar, in the mouth of a bashful child, five foot two. It was no bigger than Charlie Chaplin. "What right you have to come in here?"

"Every right in the world, sister," Olsen said. Grinning, he pulled one of my long dark braids. "That's some head of hair you got, sugar." He looked over at my father, sitting stiffly at attention, perspiring in his frayed, worsted suit. "We're just making sure you all cooperate with the war effort." He slashed the chair until stuffing came out, then overturned a steamer trunk. Worn keepsakes, sweaters, shawls, and doilies spilled across the floor.

Seeing red, nothing but the motion of my blood, I rose to my toes and pummeled Olsen in the back. "You damn palooka!"

Shoulders hunched, he pivoted, frowning, and took one long steady look before bursting into a loud, registered laugh. Gasper, the second man, came up behind me and hoisted me to the couch, sat me down with my parents. "That's enough, Joe Louis." My father, jaw grinding, studied the frayed carpet in that self-conscious way people have when they're embarrassed for the furniture. As for my mother, she was no Sicilian, but she knew what poverty was. She also knew we were just a bad break from more of it.

"They put up with that shit?" Emily's face gets puffy with anger. She snaps open her purse and digs in it, as though searching for the cigarettes she no longer smokes.

What could we do? her mother says to her, staring at chipped china, drip-drying in a wire drain next to the sink. New Orleans was a military center. Soldiers all over the place, Army hospitals on the lakefront, Nazi subs at the mouth of the river. We were supposed to roll bandages, knit socks and sweaters, save tinfoil and coat hangars, old license plates. There was the rationing, the blackouts. We didn't know we had any rights. Olsen and Gasper had official business, they said. "Why do you have a radio but no transmitter?" Olsen said. "Where's your transmitter? You have a short-wave?"

"We listen to Beethoven," I said, "but you wouldn't know him, would you?"

"He's a dago. Who else would you listen to?"

"Beethoven?" Gasper furrowed his brows. "He's not Italian, is he? Verdi, that's your man. You listen to him, sweetheart?"

"And Caruso. We listen to Caruso. You wouldn't know him, either. You're stupid."

My mother squeezed my knee with a large-veined hand. "Just be quiet."

"What are these questions, Mother?" my father asked in his heavy English, his long big-boned face twitching a little, his downturned nose engraving sadness onto his features. He required me strictly to be home by ten, allowed chaperoned dates only, and suspected my volunteer work at the USO. He forbade me to attend late-evening get-togethers, especially dances for servicemen. He didn't trust soldiers with his baby, and the more I argued the darker his face became, like the skin of an eggplant. "I have every right in the world to go to that dance," I had been screaming, almost in tears, when the two men knocked.

Outside it started to rain, a sudden gale from the gulf. Winds thirty miles an hour, the tops of buildings

oaks waving like people adrift in lifeboats. It was better than Beethoven, those storms. Before the war I'd sit by the window, lights out, the night turning off and on, sheets of rain plinking the glass, the ballgame droning on the radio for my brother's benefit, sheet-lightning punctuated by shouts of victory or disgust. When the war came, he got sent off to the European theater, where he met one of his heroes, a pitcher from Mississippi.

"Look, Mister," Gasper told my father, who was running his watch-chain through his fingers like rosary beads, "we're fighting fascism. You should be glad we're vigilant."

"Yeah, right," Emily says, retrieving one of her own father's butts from the ashtray and breaking it apart.

Fascism? For all I knew, Olsen was a fascist. He was certainly dressed for it in his wrinkled, shiny black suit. He pulled out a cigarette, without permission to smoke, tapped it in his palm, and struck his match. "What's a little discomfort, a little annoyance, compared to freedom?" he said. "You all don't know how good you have it. Suppose you were still over there in that stinkhole? You think you'd get a place like this to feel at home in? You think you'd get all that good Spam to eat when there wasn't enough meat to go around?"

My father studied the jiggling glint of his watch-chain.

He had the shakes. When he was little, I found out later, his parents spoke of innocent men dragged by dead of night to stakes in the scorched uplands of Sicily, where predators and insects and the sun would kill them. In America, it was rumored that the government relocated people into prisons in the desert, that Italians were never safe from a beating or the kind of grilling that convinces you you're guilty.

"If it's not our country, too," I said, "then what's my brother doing over there? Why don't you send him home? He's fighting for his country."

"Which country is that?" Olsen said.

"Olsen," Gasper said. "That's enough." He furrowed his brows again, bushy, gray things like caterpillars, and walked to our tiny picture window.

"The point is, sister," Olsen said, "they're not in Italy. They might have some trouble with that."

"When we get to Italy, they'll be there," I said, "protecting a coward like you."

Olsen turned to my mother. "You got any coffee? How about a little hospitality here?" He sat next to my father, in the spot my mother vacated when she went for the coffee. "Where's your registration papers, old man?"

"This is his country," I said. "He's been here since he was a kid. He's been here forever."

Gasper, staring at the rain, turned from the window. "I wish that was true, sweetheart. The truth is I'm sorry about this, but he was born overseas, he never naturalized. There's a man here who says he likes Mussolini."

"Who says he likes Mussolini? Mantegna? Was it Mantegna? That's a lie."

"Maybe that's true, sister, maybe not, but how come he never naturalized?"

Even today, Emily's mother doesn't know for sure. He was born in 1877, came by boat to America. He was still a child, spoke Italian for years, part of that huge melting-pot immigration that filled the aging sway-backed houses in the French Quarter chock-a-block with Italians. His parents grew produce in Kenner and opened a small grocery on Ramparts Street. He learned English waiting on customers. It wasn't a bad life, certainly an improvement over the arid soil of Sicily, the scourge of absentee landlords, the life of an indentured farmhand. In South Louisiana there was rent, hard backbreaking work, French Creoles and Irish who called them dagos and worse, there was the heat. But it was paradise compared to Sicily, where bandits and bloodshed in the uplands restricted travel one way, while the fertile coast had nothing for peasants. America had always been a bright shining dream.

“Where the rich get richer,” Emily says.

Anyway, he couldn't explain to the men why he never naturalized, though he tried. He made bo-like gestures with his hands and clawed at the air, reaching for something tangible, something plausible, as though kneading dough, but finally shrugged the question away. “I have my papers,” I said.

“Well, why didn't you say so? Let's see them,” Olsen said. He waved at the mess in the living room. “Nobody likes this, but it's like a hurricane. You don't want it to happen, but it just does. It's nobody's fault, you understand. It's like that rain outside. You don't make a big deal about a rainstorm, do you? That wouldn't do nobody any good.” He leveled his gaze at Papa. “Especially the people waiting out the storm.”

“I know where the papers are, you big jerk,” I said. “I'll go get them.”

My father sat very still, as though posed for a picture. He was terrified. That I could use the language I did without a stern reprimand was evidence enough. Imprisonment, deportation, the loss of his family. He was uncharacteristically paralyzed. How it must have shamed him, his own daughter going up the stairs for the tin box, Garibaldi-proud, his watch-chain still jiggling in his lap.

Upstairs, the tin box wouldn't open. Mama had the key. I sat on the edge of my bed, defeated. It was a standard-issue tin box, though, and finally I shrugged and carried it before me, hands outstretched, like something intended for the Church. Maybe it was all an elaborate Carnival hoax, maybe the box was full of trinkets. Maybe I'd walk to the top of the stairs with an armful of beads and doubloons and everyone would laugh at our little joke, scream out the classic Mardi Gras refrain: “Hey, Mister, throw me something!”

Downstairs, my mother was serving coffee and cinnamon toast. Coffee was a precious commodity in wartime, hoarded for special occasions, and the cinnamon was pre-war.

Gasper smacked his lips.

“You like that?” I said.

“Your mother's a saint,” he said, sipping hot coffee with chicory. “Those the papers?”

“Give it to me,” my mother said, “sit down.” I put the tin box on her lap. She took a key from a single large pocket stitched to her plain dress and opened the box. On one document I saw the embossed stamp of a notary public. She slipped the registration from the box, leaving the flag buried among other official notices that our family existed.

Gasper studied it, rubbing his eyes, then turned to my father. “So, you used to live on Annunziata Street.”

My father smiled for the first time all evening, sensing something in Gasper's voice that passed right over me. Earlier, almost in tears because he refused to admit my volunteer work at the USO was part of the war effort, I had to bite my tongue and sit on my hands. Now I sulked, suddenly quiet, but nobody noticed. What had happened down here when I was upstairs, staring at the magic box whose contents might save us so much trouble? Does coffee and cinnamon toast make such a difference? The key to the adult world, the world I wanted entrance to, was the size of the topsy-turvy room I sat in and it was a room full of lunatics.

Outside, water dripped from the gutters, splashing on the long, slick leaves of our elephant ear plant. I smelled coffee and cinnamon on my mother's breath. She wants a glass of wine, I thought, reading her mind.

“Salaparuta,” Gasper said. “Where's that?”

My father's hands went into motion again, an artful improvisation to conjure up language. “Western Sicily,” he said. “Near Gibellina, Ninfa, Belice River. Le isole, siamo cosi buoni.” We are good-natured.

Gasper smiled and nodded. “All right, then.” He tugged at his rumpled coat, dark under the armpits.

Olsen stood too, pulling at his crotch. "What about that gramophone? There's something funny about it. Should I take a look inside it?" He caressed the dark mahogany.

My father stiffened, but Gasper placed a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Let it go. We've got other business." He turned to my father. "Good evening."

"Auguri infinite buon Viaggio," my father said heartily, clasping Gasper's hand, as though consummating a business deal. Infinite good wishes and a good journey. He caught me studying his face and stared for a moment at the broguings on his wingtips. After that night, I never had quite so much trouble getting out for USO dances. I didn't see him anymore as the domineering Sicilian I tried to be, or as the helpless immigrant he was that rainy night, but as a man, one who could be cajoled, who loved the world and its chicanery.

My mother's jaw was set, though, the squiggles around her eyes as taut as wires. "It was none of their business," she said. "Those papers are personal." The idea of a brown-edged piece of paper with an official stamp being personal made no sense to me. Through the picture window, the asphalt glistened like dark soil. Olsen and Gasper walked under the streetlights to their car, Olsen with a notebook in one hand. I could see him stand beyond the elephant ear plant, the great wheeling shadow of its leaves washing over him. He unclipped his pen, made a notation, and pointed down the street.

Emily, leaning over the sink, staring into the backyard at begonias, snorts out a lungful of air. "Do you think Grandma even ask those goddamn jokers for identification?" Emily shakes her head sadly. "I can't believe you all let them get away with that shit. They might have been thugs—plenty of those around here just like in Italy. Am I right about that? Or maybe they were just vigilantes. You know, entertaining themselves, having a little fun, the way men like to do?"

You let it drip-dry for years, her mother tells her, the anger gets shaved away. Nowadays you think the only important thing is placing blame or realizing yourself, a woman coming to herself, but there's so much water under the bridge. V-J Day on Canal Street, church bells, whistles, horns, people screaming their lungs out. Air conditioning, television, the Superdome, the bridge over Lake Pontchartrain. Nothing was ever the same after the war. Well, live and let live. I do know I carry some sort of history in my bones. Mama died in 1947, I got married in 1949 to your father, Papa died in 1953. A heart attack. At the hospital, they wouldn't give him oxygen until the doctor arrived. By the time he was dead and I was seeing my own blood again, screaming at the head nurse. "You goddamned Olsen!" I remember screaming. They sedated me. When I woke, your father was there. He wanted to know who Olsen was.

"It's early enough, Mantegna's shop is still open," Mama said that night, forcing some coins into my hand. "Go get us some flowers."

"From Mantegna?" I said, confounded by what I was hearing. "The jerk who caused us all this trouble?"

"You don't know that," Mama said. "Now go."

I got a bunch as bright as the Italian flag. I walked back to the house under that February sky, where clouds were mountains in the moonlight, and moss hung from live oaks like witch-hair. Louisiana became the sky and the trees, not the shops or the swaybacked houses, certainly not Olsen or the government. I even had to fight an impulse to jump on the trolley and light out for the USO dance. Back home, my father was asleep, or at least alone up in his room, but my mother was hard at work with cleaning rags, threads, and a needle, with antimacassars, old sheets, and a shawl, putting things back together. Manic after my errand on the wet romantic streets, I walked to the top of the stairs with the flowers. "Hey, ma'am, you want me to throw you something?" I shouted, my voice a little too bright, like a waxy apple.

She straightened, the barest flicker of an exasperated smile fighting against her mood, and I tossed the bunch down to her, flower by flower. One for Elizabeth, who died in 1914; one for David, 1921.

one for Robert, 1936; one for Frank, Jr., 1939, one for Thomas, who was still alive, but who would die in the war, in 1944; one for Anthony, who died the year after my mother, in 1948; one for Leonard, who had three strokes and passed away in 1959; one for Louis, who was institutionalized for years before a fatal heart attack in 1979; one for Richard, whose liver gave out in 1983; one for your Uncle Joe, one for your Aunt Mary, another for Aunt Emily, your namesake, and one for me. One for Papa, one for Mama, who gathered them all up and found a vase.

I wasn't even twenty when all of that happened. Now I'm close to seventy. Time flies, doesn't it? That wartime night, though, when I was still nineteen, I remember I turned on the radio. While Mama filled the vase with water and bright flowers, the radio filled the room with scratchy big band music. So I jitterbugged, working off my anger with twirls and acrobatic maneuvers. Had Papa seen me, the USO would have been history. Mama stared at me for a minute, not exactly smiling but with her full lips a little lopsided. That was a kind of victory. Then she motioned me over and we got to work again, syncopating our business to the quick tempo of jazz.

THE EVICTION

Tim took off his jacket. “They’re evicting a man across the street,” he said. The wind whistled between his teeth and he squeezed his arms, rubbing out April air still too unpredictable to trust, though it promised a journey to a warmer place.

Russell hoisted himself from the couch where he had spent the afternoon and pulled open the Venetian blinds on the only window that faced the street. Four men and a woman worked their way down the stairs with a battered chest of drawers, an old flowered couch and a television set. The man they were evicting had on military fatigues and a pair of earmuffs—its metal strap was wired across his bald head like a brace.

Even from the window, where Russell’s breath made puffs on the pane, the bald man looked in boisterous good health, leaning against a fire hydrant, big gut slopping over his pants, fingers uncurling and curling. Next to him stood a tall man with a clipboard, in a windbreaker and baseball cap. He nodded as the bald man spoke, then turned away to invoice odd pieces of furniture near a pickup truck on the curb.

“What a thing to do to a man.” Tim scratched at his chin. “You think that guy has a place to stay tonight?”

“Tell you what. I’ll check it out. I haven’t been outside all day.”

He came over and put a hand on Russell’s arm. “You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m all right.”

“Looks like you’re getting evicted,” Russell said to the bald man.

“Yeah?” He folded his arms and leaned back against the hydrant. “You’re a piece of work. You make a habit of coming on to people like me?”

Russell pointed across the street. “You see that window, the one on the third floor with the flowerpot?”

“That your place?” He rested his hands on his belly and pursed his lips.

“Sort of.”

“Sort of?” He took off his ear muffs, leaving a red slash across the top of his head. Russell was using a medication which increased hair loss, so the shining dome fascinated him. It looked polished. It reflected a little of the late light. “How much room you and your wife got?”

“I’m staying with a friend on a temporary basis.”

“Ah.” The bald man studied the flowerpot with more interest. “You making an offer, or what?” The man with the clipboard moved away. Two of his workers were horsing around. They looked like the sort of kids who make a little money with temporary work, and the other two looked like drunks. The woman sat in the cab of the pickup truck, motor running.

“We’ve got a sofa,” Russell said. “It’s good for one night.”

The man with the clipboard, his head a little cocked, turned toward them. He waved the clipboard. “I’ll give you a hundred for all of it.” He removed his baseball cap and stared into the sky. The streetlamps winked on.

“What you say to that?” the bald man asked.

Besides the couch, the chest of drawers and the television set, which actually looked like a good one, there were assorted odds and ends, a cardboard box, a sleeping roll, and a knapsack. “Keep the sleeping roll and the pack, take the money. It’s a fair offer.”

“That sound good?” the bald man asked.

The man with the clipboard put on his baseball cap and held out his hand. “Deal.” He counted the

money. Behind him, a blue neon cross blinked from the corner building. Big block letters proclaimed that the building was the home of Our Redeemer Universal Church. The woman in the truck smoked her cigarette and studied herself in the rearview mirror. While the crew packed the truck she put some kind of cold cream on her face. One college kid grumbled to the man with the clipboard.

“Can I help with anything?” Russell said. “You want me to carry that box?”

“This is my filing system, amigo.” The cardboard box rested on his gut as they walked. Russell heard things moving around. “Nobody touches it. Nobody. That’s why I won’t stay at the church. They’ll separate me from everything I own. They don’t know the information in here could bring down whole governments.” He jiggled the box. “Including our own.”

Tim opened the door. “Make yourself at home,” he said. “They’ve been evicting people all over the city. Everything’s becoming a god-damn townhouse.”

“You don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, old man,” the bald man said.

Tim’s pupils got bright. “What’s that you say?”

The bald man walked to the refrigerator. “You know why they gave me the heave-ho?” He popped open a can of beer. “Because I told those sons-of-bitches they could chew on my ear all day and they wouldn’t get squat. That place wasn’t fit for roaches.”

Tim’s mouth dropped open. Face cast into a glower, he pursued the man. “You mean you got money?”

The bald man sized him up. “No, old man, that’s not what I mean. I mean I have experience. I’ve been to Spain, I’ve seen the bullfights.” He swigged down his beer. “I’ve been to Ethiopia, I was in the Nam for four years. That was a hell of a long time ago. Since then I’ve been everywhere you’ve ever heard of and some places you haven’t.” He walked over to Russell, ignoring Tim, and thumped him on the chest. “Where you been, amigo? You ever been to the Nam?”

“The name’s Russell,” he said. “I’ve been at loose ends.”

“Is that right? Loose ends?” The bald man picked up the phone. “Look, I’m gonna order some pizza. There’s a place down the street that delivers.”

“You up for pizza, Russell?” Tim asked, concerned.

“Why not?” He nodded to the bald man. “Pizza. With everything.”

When it arrived, the bald man paid for it and spread some newspaper on the coffee table. “Let’s catch the news while we eat,” he said.

“I haven’t read that paper yet,” Tim said.

“So. You haven’t read the paper.” The bald man screwed up his face as though working out a problem in calculus. “I tell you what, amigo. Let’s leave this paper here to protect the table. It’s nothing but ads, anyway.”

“You don’t seem to understand,” Tim said. He picked up the pizza and folded the paper. “You’re the guest. You don’t tell me what to do.”

“Look,” Russell said, “let’s turn on the TV and see the news.”

Tim squatted down to adjust the set. The bald man sat on the couch with his arms outspread and his feet resting on the coffee table, nearly tipping it over. “So tell me, amigos.” He grinned a big, goofy cartoon of a smile, his mouth stretched preternaturally wide, his bad teeth sucking in the light. Something gold glinted in his mouth. “Why the Good Samaritans?”

“What’s your name?” Russell asked. “You haven’t introduced yourself.”

“Fair enough,” he said. “Jordan. Robert Jordan. You want me to believe you don’t know that?”

Tim and Russell looked at each other. Tim got everybody a beer and they ate the pizza. A woman, a reporter, stood on the manicured lawn of a Georgetown mansion. “The two delegates are due to arrive in an hour, to meet with several hundred supporters of their war. Almir Lopez, the chief delegate, will then proceed to Capitol Hill to talk with a group of representatives who favor increased aid.”

“That’s old news,” Jordan said, licking cheese from his fingers. “I know Lopez: a rapist, murderer, a pervert. I could tell you stories that would uncurl a pig’s ass.”

“I’d believe them,” Tim said, friendly again. “I’ve heard those people are thugs. We shouldn’t give them a cent.”

“Those people just want their country back,” Jordan said. “Same as the Nam. You namby-pamby were smoking dope and grooving to the Beatles or some shit like that, you didn’t have the guts to do what had to be done over there.” He leaned forward. “Listen, old man. I’ve been there. I’m talking from experience, I’m not bullshitting.”

“Look, I’m not up to quarrels. Let’s change the subject,” Russell said. “So. You don’t believe in Good Samaritans?”

Jordan stared until Russell looked away. “Where’s the bathroom?” He pushed himself up and rubbed his belly. “I need some Maalox.”

Russell pointed to the hallway. “Look in the medicine cabinet.”

“You think it’s a good idea to let him poke around like that?” Tim asked. They had a stash of marijuana behind the towels. Sometimes Russell would smoke to feel better.

Jordan touched him on the arm again when he returned. “Who the pills for?”

“They’re mine. I’ve been sick.”

“That’s tough luck.” He studied Tim’s sparsely-furnished apartment, the couch and TV, the two easy chairs, a desk near the window, a dinette set by the kitchen. His eyes settled on a framed photograph of a plot of land with an ocean view, some Spanish land Tim’s grandparents once owned. “Myself, I’ve only got the gout.” He placed a hand on Russell’s shoulder. “During surgery I contracted blood poisoning. That precipitated it. A goddamn dirty scalpel at a clinic in Bhaunagar, on the Gulf of Cambay.”

Tim frowned. “The gout?”

“The gout, old man.” Jordan made a steeple with his fingers and bowed. “I suppose you think you know about the gout, right?” He smiled. “About your boy here, though. How long does he have?”

“What makes you think he’s my boy?” Tim said. “He’s sick, that’s all. He’s having some tests. What the hell you up to?”

Jordan went to the refrigerator for another beer. “That land on the wall,” he said from the kitchen. “Whose land is that? That your land, Russell? Or does it belong to the old man?” Change clinking in his pockets, he belched and sat next to Russell on the couch. His eyes moved a little loosely in the sockets.

“Listen. We wanted to help you out,” Russell said. “We also wanted to engage you in conversation. I’m sick and I’m bored. If you don’t want to call it a good deed, just call it boredom.”

“Forget it.” He gently touched Russell’s shoulder and yawned. “Look. I haven’t slept in three days. Why don’t I sleep?” He laid back his head.

“Hear what he’s saying,” Tim said. He picked up the folded newspaper and slapped it on the coffee table. “I don’t like this kind of bullshit.”

Jordan opened his mouth in surprise and crossed his eyes. Then he was out like a light, even beginning to snore. Tim looked at Russell, who knew Tim was gauging how difficult it would be to drag the bald man to the door, how much trouble it might take to call the cops. “To hell with it,” he finally mumbled.

Russell went to the spare bedroom. Later he dreamed about an old Mediterranean pension. There was bougainvillea, a patio, a tile roof the color of deep rust. From the patio he could see water. A maid in bathing trunks brought him a tall drink. “Will there be anything else?” he asked. “Sit with me,” Russell said. “I can’t go inside, I have to study the water.” The water changed color several times each day, he had to see the changes. It changed from the color of bluebells to the stained green of military

fatigues, then darkened at night to ink.

When Russell came to himself, Jordan was in his room, sitting on the far side of the bed. For a moment, still almost asleep, Russell closed his eyes and expected his mother to clatter early-morning dishes or his father to sing in the shower. Russell had gone to western landlocked Canada instead of Vietnam and didn't come back until it was safe. That broke things with his father. His father told him once he couldn't show his own face at the main street cafe in the small town where he lived because he didn't want to have to fight the man who called his son a pussy. But Russell never forgot how his father sang in the shower. His throat would gurgle on low notes, straighten out, then lose its way as it climbed the scale.

Jordan ticked a fingernail on a water glass jammed between his legs. "I thought you'd never wake up," he said, voice full of beer.

"What time is it?" The smell of beer and pizza mingled with the odor of Russell's own perspiration. "Where's Tim?"

Jordan pulled a penlight from a cargo pocket. "You decided to be *kind*, is that it?" He played with the penlight, pointing it at the ceiling, flicking it off and on. "I would hate to think, *Russell*, that I'm the beneficiary of your goddamn pity. If there's one thing I don't need and won't stand for, it's your goddamn pity." Spidery lines sprouted around his eyes, he smiled without any humor, his jaw locked and teeth clenched. His mouth sagged, each breath a little struggle. "I've got something I want to show you," he said, and pulled out a billfold, stained to the color of soil. He waved it in Russell's face. After digging in it, as though it were a diplomat's pouch as large as the world, he handed Russell a grimy, faded snapshot, worn thin like onionskin. "My boy," he said. "I've got a boy, too."

It could have been a likeness of Jordan's own face for all Russell could tell. Even the original snapshot before its careworn travels must have been faint, like the image a ghost-hunter might point to as evidence of something everyone around him smirked at.

"No hair, just like his old man," Jordan mumbled. He laid his head on Russell's chest. The bed squeaked under his shifting weight. Russell had trouble breathing. "Jordan, get off my chest," he said as loudly as he could, the ache in his lungs beginning to spread down to his liver and legs.

Jordan was falling asleep like that, settling into Russell's kidneys, when Tim thudded open the door with the heel of one hand and switched on the light. "What the hell? Russell?" Russell motioned for help. Tim grabbed Jordan by an earlobe and forced him to a sitting position. The empty tumbler was still wedged between Jordan's thighs. Jordan hefted it to eye level and turned it in the light. Drops of beer flickered like beads of glass. With a quick flip of his wrist, Jordan tossed it away and it thumped against the baseboard near the door, clunked across the worn carpet without breaking. His jaw dropped open. "Goddamn. Your glasses don't break."

"Look, buddy, it's almost light outside," Tim said. "I want you out of here. Off to the bullfights."

"The bullfights?" Jordan said stupidly. "What the hell you saying? I need some sleep."

Tim pestered him like a turnkey until Jordan collected his things quietly, as though sleepwalking, and left, tossing a bill on the sofa and snapping off a last goofy smile in Russell's direction. "He's my amigo," he said, "no hard feelings."

Tim crumpled up the bill and threw it out the window at Jordan. Then he stood with Russell, who was leaning into the night, breathing in the crisp, chilled air. "You know what?" Tim said. "That asshole buttface walked off with my goddamn newspaper." Tim closed the window and stared at his own fading reflection. "I'm not that goddamn old, am I?"

"No. I'm just as old as you are, speaking in real time." Russell kept looking into the street. Elbow akimbo holding the box, Jordan walked away bowlegged, his pack jiggling in blue blinking neon. "You're no older than anyone your age. It was just his way of getting to you." Later, when he was alone, Russell noticed the nail on the wall, the one the picture of Spain had hung from. The empty

space was two shades lighter than the plaster around it, but the land and the water, rustling somewhere in Jordan's box, is still a place Russell can close his eyes and go to.

GROWING WINGS

Diane stopped using her full-length mirror when the small white feathers on her back were large enough to see from across the room if she twisted in her nightgown like a dancer. Close up the feathers were invisible, the angle of vision all wrong, so she turned the mirror around and stared for hours at its black paint. She also made retreats to a large utility closet full of baggy flannel shirts and large woolen socks. In class, sitting against the back wall, she wore a faded gray trenchcoat to hide the feathers, but her teacher, Mrs. Hanes, often made her hang it up in the coatroom.

She stared at a waterstain above the classroom door. Jamie, who always sat next to her, leaned close and whispered something. She failed to respond to him or to a question from Mrs. Hanes. "Pay attention," the teacher said. Diane lowered her eyes to the worn floor, pockmarked with swirling wormlike scratches. *We should learn not to be aware of ourselves*, she had read that morning in her sister's spiritual notebook, *to no longer have ideas, but to simply live what we are*.

"Diane, redeem yourself. What's the theme of *Lord Jim*?"

Her pennyloafers scraped circles on the tiles, a muffled rhythmic whisper. *You tend to interpret everything, an internal conversation goes on always in the mind*. She repeated Melinda's polished phrases for the comfort. *You must open yourself to the possibility of not-thinking, or meditation, as it is commonly called*.

"Diane!"

Jamie poked her gently. She looked up. My sister often wore purple, she thought; it's very spiritual. Mrs. Hanes got the students writing. "Come with me, Diane."

In the principal's office the steady hum of an air conditioner sounded like the whisper of smooth leather on tile and she thought about the Salvation Army store. Her mother would be scandalized to know how much time she spent there, off the beaten path her classmates followed to school, but it was comfortably musty with a smell of wool and mothballs. The woman at the store always let her sit quietly, often next to a wheezing air conditioner on its last legs, and she would listen to Melinda's voice. *We see what we want to see. We don't see things as they are. We have to discipline ourselves to watch the motes of dust in the sunlight, learn how to put such discipline into effect*.

Sometimes the woman gave her a glass of milk. "You ever talk, sweetie? Or do you just sit and think?"

For the first time Diane told someone. "I'm growing wings."

"Oh. Well, that's good, I suppose."

"I need an overcoat. Do you have one?"

"Oh, I think we might." The woman smiled, her breath sweet with Feen-a-mint gum. She fitted Diane with a coat a size too large. "It only costs a dollar today, wings or not. A special."

A hand placed itself gently on her shoulder. The principal. "Don't you listen, Dee?" He guided her to the counselor's office, his hand still on her shoulder like a small friendly animal. "I'm to leave you with Mrs. Esposito, to have a talk."

The door closed. "Hello, Diane."

A pause. "Hello, Diane."

A longer pause. "Well, we don't have much to say today, do we?" *The Universal Law resolves everything, but there is always a tendency to be impatient*, Diane thought, still feeling the warm weight of the principal's hand.

Mrs. Esposito adjusted a small gold pin on her tweed jacket and shuffled through a manila folder. Violet nail polish, Diane thought. Why did she choose that color today?

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