

THE JUST

BY S. LEE

For My Poseidon
a great windfall on these seas

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A Good Day for an Obituary 1

There's no good day to die like there's no good day to write your own obituary. You're not supposed to. Families write them cause the dying have to get dead, and the living have to get on with it, and writing about who's lost makes us feel like they're still here like a bunch of atoms. I read somewhere they never die and that's what we are – atoms. Thing is I don't trust anybody but Guy and he's no good with words to get it right. But I'm good with them, words I mean, had some poems printed in newspapers, not under normal circumstances, but some liked them and said I'd be a fine talent if... Lots of ifs I don't know about and there's no time for them now. Too much to do. Me and Guy feel it. Feels like we're live, live, living and then what? I don't know about that.

But I do know something's going to happen. Something big, too big for Guy and me, that's why I got to get it right. When I'm gone, I want your word my obituary will run just like I want it. It don't sound like most, it's like the letters I wrote, I talk things out to get it right, to make sense of it, cause Guy sure don't think about it, like he says, it's simple, we're the cause or the effect and we're going so fast it's hard to tell which is which so best not to think. I see his side. Never showed him my letters. Never had to. He knows. It's just I got to put things down in front of me. My obituary's about getting things out where I can see them. The rest is up to you and you never let me down, Hain.

My name was Constance but people called me Connie. I grew up like most but I didn't turn out right. I smiled a lot. Then I met Guy. May be strange, but before Guy, I didn't know about that smile, and when I did, I did away with it. I guess we all do something without thinking about it, till one day we take a look, and that something we thought meant nothing means something. I don't

know if dogs smile, but if they do, that was me. I had to lose it. Wasn't easy, though. Felt wrong to go about things any other way.

It's like Guy said, we got to live by our own laws, cause their laws make us heel when they say so and we can't live like that. We wanted to be free even if it took everything from us, seems funny to say it like that, but stand against them and they'll take your guts but you keep standing even when the bullets come. First time we went about it real polite-like, no guns or anything, just walked into the bank, gave the teller a note, waited and left with the money and nobody hurt. But a mile down the road, they came for us with their laws and their guns and they almost got us. That's how come we got used to them. We never cared for guns but it's a game we chose.

I know we broke their laws. Don't make them right and us wrong though. Way I see it is what's theirs is mine if times are bad enough. Guy and I had nothing to show for doing right by them and robbing happened innocently enough. Guy asked his boss for an advance, and the little man said he wasn't no bank, and one little thing led to another. We took what was theirs. But you can't call it theft if you rob because you've been robbed. Two wrongs don't make a right but we had to start somewhere and settle on what's right later.

And we figured we was right and kept doing right. You got to take what'd be yours if things were just. No way you'll convince them of that. I never thought about it, what's just I mean, probably never would've if I hadn't met Guy. Think about it a lot now and we're in the right, not their kind but ours. Only thing is people get hurt, some ask for it, some don't, and Guy don't talk about it. I trust there's good reason not to. I trust Guy even when things don't look right.

Cause we'll trust each other from beyond the grave if there's such a thing. I hope so. I never told him this.

Things got so loud, so fast, made me want to go
someplace real quiet-like to sort it all out or not. As long
as we're together I trust it'll be all right. Everything'll
be all right. That's how I hope it'll end, and if it don't,
there's always Him.

Unlikely Obituary to Feature Story 2

There was something about Connie. I can't say I knew what to do about it, but I knew I had something after her first letter. Boss thought so too and gave me the go ahead to print my piece and see what happened. No way to predict what did. The heists, the letters, my pieces on the front page, talk of syndication, everything kept coming. Made a name for myself by making hers a household one. Before Connie nothing was happening, now something was, and I rode it out.

It was fast, hard work that began easy enough. Found myself at the right place at the right time for the first job. The bank was two blocks away. I got the call, walked down, asked around, took notes, wrote a piece that ran on the front page the next morning. Thought that'd be the end of it. Only one bank in town and robbers don't do encores. A week later when the noise died down, I got it: a letter from Connie. She read my piece and liked how it ended:

“...One witness pointed out that the robbers went about things ‘real polite-like.’ What can the cops say about that? Maybe there's hope when our thieves are civil.”

She really liked that and told me so and much more. I immediately wrote a follow-up piece. I commented on her letter that I included verbatim. There was something about it I thought people would get. And they got it. Next day the paper sold out and calls came in nonstop. Two weeks later another heist with Connie's fingerprints all over it. Not around the corner this time but two counties over. I took off, got my piece, called it in, and waited. It worked. Got another letter from Connie. Same thing: I followed up with a piece on her letter that was printed in full. People couldn't get enough of her till the end.

But the end took time. Lots of highways, motels, letters. That second letter from Connie came from the scene. She walked in and handed the teller two envelopes,

one for the bank, one for me. The teller didn't know who I was so she opened the one with the bank's name on it and did what she was told. Later the cops called me up.

"This Joe Hain?"

"Yeah."

"Officer Sheridan here. Got a letter for you from some bank robber."

"Connie."

"I think you best get over here."

That call changed the game. Now Connie left a trail of letters for me wherever she went and I published and wrote pieces about them. I'm no head doctor but I took certain liberties and the readers took the bait. What started out easy enough cost me months of chasing after Connie and Guy and writing about the letters she left. Just Connie. Guy never wrote a word.

Eventually I wanted the whole damn thing to end. Nobody knew when or where it would, cops guessed they were headed for the border and planned to beat them to it. The boss thought it'd be good for me to be in on the action, write on the run, make my pieces more exciting. People are eager for more. You have a duty to finish what you started. That's how the boss saw it. Not everyone saw it that way. Like the reporter I bought a drink. This was near the end, right at the border, newshounds raced down to get in on it. If they couldn't get to Connie, they'd get at me. I asked for it. This reporter was no different except he thought he had a conscience.

"You Joe Hain?" he asked, sitting down at the bar.

"I am."

"Mind if I ask you a question?"

I sipped at my drink. "Lot of questions going around these days."

The guy lit up a smoke. The cloud hung in front of us.

“I have one: why’d you do it?”

“Do what?” I turned and looked at him.

“The fiasco. You brought it about.”

“I did my job.”

“Don’t seem like you got the facts right.”

I put my drink down. “Guess it’s a matter of opinion.”

“You made a lot out of them.”

“The letters?”

The man took another hit and let it out slowly.

“Blew her up into something she wasn’t. Even she bought it.”

I motioned for the bartender.

“Everybody thinks they’re somebody. Now she is.”

The bartender came up.

“How much I owe you?”

“Two bills.”

I paid and got up to leave.

“She’s somebody that’s as good as dead,” the man said, looking straight ahead.

I stopped and put my hand on the back of the stool.

“That’s her problem.”

“That you played a part in.”

I left without another word but I’ll say it now: I got my story and that’s what counts in this business. It’s what you have to do to get the job done and that’s what this is. A job well done.

First Letter, First Love, First Heist, 3

Most talk about their first love they didn't end up with. It can't be they were too young to know better, if that was it, the older they'd get, the less talking they'd do, and they'd just forget about it. But they don't. They remember more than there was to, and the more they do, more they wish things were different. With me and Guy things won't ever be different. Haven't been apart since that first night when I was running with a crowd I thought fit me just fine. We didn't do much except go down to the pier, no reason really, just to see what'd happen if we did and that's when Guy showed up. That was it. I went home with him and there was no going back. That's how he is. Guy wants what he does and you want it with him.

We woke up the next morning and trusted we'd be together. Guy wanted to trust us so we did. Trust sure makes what we're up to easier. Guess after this first job we can say we do it for a living. Can't go straight again. Robbing banks makes sense, working hard don't. But Guy don't talk about it like that. He don't like it when people say we rob banks, he calls them heists. I didn't see the difference till we hit our first bank and read about it in your paper. I see what he means now. A heist sounds classy quick. Makes no difference to you, but it would if you were us. A young male and female committed a heist is sharp. And that's what we're after. Sharper we look, more people will see what we're doing is right.

That's how come I like us being called polite-like, civil you said. Doing right like we do shows we got good manners. No harm to anyone who's not harming us. Hand folks a note, they do what they been told, everything goes right, and nobody gets hurt.

Only the law don't let things be. The law goes for bullets and blood and we got caught up in it, not cause

we wanted to, but nothing can be done about that. Now it's about me and Guy and we trust each other with our lives and the money. That's something cause somebody like you is easy to come by but not the money.

But Guy and I trust each other. It's like you say, we're civil. Suppose that's all I want to say. Except that we're going to keep going. If you keep writing about it, I'll get in touch. Never wrote letters before. Never was no thief either. Guess never doesn't mean much.

Connie

Clea's and Carmella 4

Fact is Connie didn't let on about the facts. Guy didn't just show up at the pier. He helped run it. Any covert goings-on got the go ahead from one Guy Dalton. He was a petty crook who trusted his fists. Those are facts and there's more.

Connie took up with a crowd that drank at Clea's. Guy had a seat at the bar. Clea's is where they met. One regular gave up their story. She said "when Connie started coming around, she smiled a lot like she was somebody when nobody's like that. She was something though. Streaked blonde hair, brown doe eyes, pouty lips, fair skinned, a lithe thing. She had the looks and made the rounds with them. Guy wasn't the first she left Clea's with but he was the last.

They were unmatched. Guy looked like a street Adonis, a face cut from marble. I know it's a bit much but everyone was in to them, although both came from places that didn't bother about them. Connie got mixed up in something. Always said she'd be ready to bust out first chance she got and chance knocked the night she walked into Clea's and saw Guy. She smiled and made herself noticed. Before long she drank him under the table. After I closed up, they staggered out together. Together they'd hit on something big they said. That's when Connie stopped smiling. Said she crossed the edge. Words like that kept falling out of her. Guy never understood her really. But he trusted her. Guess that's what matters."

They thought big but started out small. First hit was Small Town Bank. Can't get any smaller than a town where folks looked at the bank with suspicion and the hit proved them right.

The teller said she saw them coming but suspected nothing.

“My boss said to me, Carmella, didn’t you notice anything?”

Why would I? Not my business to. Just thought they were good-looking kids passing through. The young man looked around with his hands shoved in his pockets. Don’t make him no criminal though. Both looked like they was raised right. Walking towards me, the girl smiling cordial-like, keeping her voice down as she talked to her friend. Imagine getting a letter like that from such a pretty thing who smiles at you and says, ‘Excuse me, ma’am,’ and then politely hands it to you. I sure didn’t believe it. Read it twice.

‘Please don’t make a sound. This here’s a heist. A stick-up. Put that money in your drawer in a bag and put it down on the counter. Do as you’re told and things’ll be okay. We don’t mean no harm between us.’

I looked at her clutching a purse almost as big as she was and wanted to ask her if she was sure. I don’t really remember emptying my drawer and putting the bag on the counter. Did what I was told and it was done. They turned and walked out like they walked in. Soon the cops were after them and the rest is what it is. You’re not the first person asked me how I felt. They meant what they said but there’d be no harm between us. I felt like we were on the same side.”

What can the cops say about that? Maybe there’s hope when even our thieves are civil. Times are backwards enough to look like it.

After a tough chase, they’re still at large. I don’t care about them one way or the other, cuffed or at liberty, makes no difference. What does is that there’s an ‘us’ and a ‘them’, that there’s two sides, and you’re either one or the other. Never knew a clear-thinking man who could separate the two, knew a lot who tried and paid for it with their lives or their conscience or both. No justice in that. Not right to

place bets on it, but those who think it's us against them are begging for it, and the sooner they get it the better.

Words to Watch Out For 5

Like you said, second time doing anything's easier than the first. It still don't feel like going through the motions but I get it. Not much I need to get though. Guy's the one keeping us and the money safe, and the more miles between us and the pier, more it feels like we got a chance.

We did First State like Small Town. City was bigger. Wasn't as nervous. Didn't bother acting nice. Not pretending made it easier to walk up and give the teller the note. Nobody minded us till we left. Even the teller did us no wrong, did what she was told like the last one and looked just as shocked about it. But knowing it's me their looking at like that isn't going to get easier – I knew it then, I know it now. I'll keep handing them the notes, they'll keep smiling a little off-like before their lips drop just like their guts, that's when they'll look at me, their pupils real big till the shock makes them do exactly what them words tell them to.

And I'll keep cutting them like that. Cause that's the funny thing. Words cut when you don't expect them. I been done like that. That's how come I know that look. Happened to me first night Guy and I left Clea's together. Just heading back to his place when we got jumped by guys he ran with. Said the boss wanted a talk with him. Wasn't right to be roughed around like that, everybody working for the same man, everybody knowing everybody, no need to come up and push us down, pinning Guy and choking him, holding me too, tried to get up and got slapped real good, but I guess they got their fun cause they let us go, shoving us down the boardwalk to where the boss was.

Never guessed he'd be in the Sun Shop. Seemed like the wrong place. Been there without thinking about it, didn't even know its name, just knew it was across from where we met up, a store with stuff jammed against the windows. Never even saw a sign. Did now. Sun Shop. They pushed us in and locked the door. Guy headed to the back and I

come after him, no choice but to, they stayed up front and told me to go with him. Guy didn't say a word, expected him to but he just kept heading back, the shop being real long with boxes piled in the hall smelling like stale coconuts.

We ended up in a room with lights that made me squint they was so bright. Guy knocked on a door painted white like the walls, wouldn't have known it was there, but it was and Guy opened and shut it on me. Nothing to do but figure out what was being said. Couldn't hear much but what I did made no sense.

"Can't keep this up, Guy. If I'm soft on you, next one'll line up for a handout. I have to collect."

"Just...little off the top, Mr. Carlo. Thought I'd make it up."

"You didn't."

"Wanted to."

Something dragged on the floor.

"Wanted to...You know I'm running a business here."

"Yes."

The man breathed deep. Wasn't Guy breathing like that.

"I'll tell you what. I've a friend who needs a favor. You take care of it, everything goes right, we'll call it even."

"I..."

"It's simple. Ever hear of the just judges?"

Guy coughed nervous like.

"No."

"Good. Favor's simple enough. All you have to do is..."

Didn't get a chance to hear anything after this cause somebody smacked the back of my head. One of the guys waiting up front came back and seen me listening to what I wasn't supposed to. I screamed. Don't know why. Door opened and Guy stood there looking at me.

"What're you doing, Connie?"

I had to tell him something.

"It's you leaving me out here, telling me nothing, just shutting me out."

The boss breathed real heavy again.

“Thought your girl’s name was Louise.”

“Not anymore.”

“Well, this one’s heard too much. Bring her in.”

Man who hit me from behind now pushed me past Guy and into a room just like the one I was in. White and empty but for a desk and two chairs.

“Have a seat. Connie, you said?”

“Yes.”

Guy answered not me.

“Looks like you’re going be helping your man out with a job I have for him. I’m sure you’ll find no problem with that.”

“He’s not mine. We just met first time tonight.”

The door shut. That same man come up behind me again. Didn’t see him do it but could feel him there. Guy sat next to me looking different. Boss smiled but not friendly like.

“He’s your man now. You be good to him. Keep your mouth shut. Do what he says and nobody gets hurt.”

“Hurt? I got nothing to...”

Guy grabbed my chair. “Won’t be no problems.”

Boss rocked back and forth looking right at us and then he stopped.

“Good. Because if there are, you won’t make it back.”

Won’t make it back. I heard them words and knew what he was getting at, knew it but couldn’t believe it, my getting in a mess I didn’t even know to watch out for, and now me and Guy, two strangers, got to trust each other quick or that’s it. Won’t make it back. Didn’t expect to get cut. Looked at the boss just like them tellers.

Things worked out though. Boss let us go. Guy don’t want to die and I want to live and have to be alive to do it. Good thing we see eye to eye. Everything looks the same between us. We gave our word we’d trust each other. Feels right doing the best we can. Got to be justice in that.

All I got to say for now. Be in touch.

Connie

Picking Up, Moving On 6

Pretty clear Connie makes words suit her. Second time doing anything's easier than the first was about me.

They hit First State two counties over. Boss called me in. He spoke to the cops in K----- County. They had fingerprints and descriptions of the robbers for the Small Town heist. Cops told him to send Hain over. The female suspect left him a note, probably would again, she might slip up and lead them right to her, sooner the better because the longer they're at large, greater chance they're going to hurt somebody, and that's what we don't want. Hain might help put a stop to it.

"Don't have a choice. You have to go," my boss Hank said, pressing back into his chair.

Right. I didn't have a choice and didn't want one but I still played it.

I put my hands behind my head.

"Didn't expect to get myself into something like this, Hank."

He leaned forward and put his elbows on the desk.

"The girl's making you and this paper a real player. Nothing we can do about it but our job. Cops think they're headed to the border."

"Think they'll make it?"

"Made it this far. We'll make it worth your time. Stay out there with them, expenses paid, front page is yours, you name it."

He knew how to pay. I stared at the closed blinds.

"I'll need a car."

He nodded as he searched through files on his desk.

"That all?"

No but expenses paid would cover the rest.

"For now."

Hank grabbed the file he was looking for and stood up.

"Everything'll be ready. Give me an hour."

Only an hour. I got up to go when he stopped me.

"Helping cops is new for you."

“Is that what I’m doing?”

“That’s what they think.”

I shrugged my shoulders and left.

Soon I took off for K----- County to do my job checking out leads in the letter Connie left. Cops jumped on this boss she talked about. I did too but went about things different, made a few calls, got some names and numbers, and wound up with a story that didn’t match the official one. Paper printed it anyway. Facts depend on who you ask and I depended on Hal. Buddy of mine gave me his number, said he used him when reporting on the pier, a different boss ran it then, but Hal knew all the bosses and talked to reporters who’d help him out if needed. I called him up and got the story but it wasn’t what I expected.

“Yeah.”

“This Hal?”

Nothing.

“Got your number from ----- . Said you owe him a favor. Name’s Hain. I’m looking for anything on a Mr. Carlo.”

A snicker told me he knew him.

“Popular man these days.”

I switched the phone to the opposite ear and put my notebook on the nightstand in the motel room.

“What can you tell me about him?”

A door slammed. Chair legs squeaked across a floor.

“First thing’s his name.”

“What about it?”

“His parents named him Marco Marino. Made him sound like a stuntman he said. He became Mr. Carlo. He’s a business man. An organized one. Thinks organized crime is just that: organized. Order separates us from the two-bit cannibals, he said. Don’t know the anthropology of it, but I do know the pier runs.”

“Looks like Guy slipped up.”

“He’s supposed to.”

“The boss forced him to skim off the top?”

A match struck and Hal blew into the phone.

“Set him up to. Mr. Carlo knows who works for him. He knew Guy couldn’t be trusted.”

“Then why keep him?”

“Needed him to do a favor.”

“Even though he couldn’t be trusted?”

“He knows what he’s doing.”

“You knew this.”

“Knew what?”

“Guy couldn’t be trusted.”

Hal took another hit.

“Not at first. Found out about Guy one afternoon when Mr. Carlo called me up and told me to meet him at the office.”

“The Sun Shop.”

“Told me he wanted to check on inventory. I’d been working for him for a while and hadn’t seen it. Heard it was a couple miles from the pier. He picked me up. Didn’t say anything on the ride over. He’s like that. Doesn’t talk much and when he do he don’t talk like most. Like that day at the warehouse. From outside it looked like a dump. I didn’t think about it but Mr. Carlo did. He fixed his eyes on it and told me to ‘Look at it rowing against that Pacific. See its planked arms reaching out from the loading dock with no ships, no cargo, no way those arms can bear their own rot but they’re still hanging on. Nobody’d think to store valuables in a warehouse like this...’ Nobody talks like that and what he said didn’t make sense until we went inside. He was right. Nobody’d think there would inventory ordered on shelves ceiling high, row after row making us look invincible.”

“What’d you mean?”

“Mr. Carlo knows what the organization’s made of. The rows are alphabetical by location, and the shelves are arranged by who pushes what. Saw my own nameplate on scores of them.”

“A nameplate?”

“You have one.”

“On my desk.”

“Imagine it on something worth a hell of a lot more stacked high. You’re unconquerable. You think nothing can bring you down.”

Right.

“You have anything else?”

Hal pressed his mouth against the receiver.

“Always something else. Like I said, Mr. Carlo runs things on order, layer after layer, everything tight and intact. Told me inventory is like sediment. Said he knows each layer and its relationship to the next, he puts it together from the ground up and that’s how come he gets it right. That’s why the pier runs. He knows his inventory. He knows us.”

“What’s he know?”

“Knows what we’re like. Knows what merchandise is like us.”

“The merchandise is hot and you get a cut of what you sell. That’s how like is like.”

That snicker again.

“More to it than that. Explained it in the warehouse that afternoon. We turned into the first row and stopped at the first shelf. City was Adelanto. Nameplate said Cole. Never heard of him. Mr. Carlo looked at the nameplate then the merchandise, before he closed his eyes and stroked his lip with his finger. Then he traced the layers that connected Cole with dozens of televisions. ‘Cole...middle-aged and alone in every respect. Works with clients and personnel inside the organization, but shuns people and systems outside it. Likes insularity, closed systems that only communicate with their own. Isolation makes everything manageable for Cole. Everything comes from a single place where he can choose from limited options that he knows. That’s why he connects with the television. When he loads a TV into his truck, and sees the reflection of his face in its isolated screen, he knows it understands. The television is an image of himself. Only thing is his clients are open systems incorporating televised simulacrum of Cole into them. I don’t know if he recognizes this. Anyway, it works. Hard to keep enough televisions in stock for him to sell.’

“See what I mean? Mr. Carlo knows the stuff we’re made of and makes sure our goods are made of it too.”

“What about Guy?”

“Same thing. Just by chance I asked about him that afternoon. Saw his nameplate and the designer watches stacked on the shelves and the two didn’t look right. Word got around Guy couldn’t push enough to break even. A buddy of mine wanted a shot at it. Thought I’d put in a word for him. Wasn’t like I was going behind Guy’s back. Didn’t really know him. But Mr. Carlo knows what he’s doing. Talking to you is proof of that.”

“Of what?”

“What he says plays out. When I brought up Guy, he stopped, looked at his nameplate, the watches, and smiled. ‘Guy’s an opportunity,’ he said, folding his arms against his chest. ‘The kind that makes you take the good with the bad. You use the bad to expand the organization. Guy can’t be trusted. He isn’t good with words. Any man like that isn’t going to be good with your money. Too much in his head you don’t know about. I need to see through a man. Guy’s too thick. That’s bad. But then a friend asked for a favor and we agreed it’d expand the organization. That’s when I thought about Guy. When I reordered the bad with the good, he looked right for the favor. He’s impotent with words, that’s bad, but that means he can’t talk, and if he does, the words won’t come out right, that’s good. Can’t be trusted with money either, that’s bad, but there’d be none of it up front, that’s good. He’d have to do the favor on his own dime to get his cut after he’s done.’ I shook my head.

‘Can’t see him agreeing to it. Heard he can’t do right as it is.’

Mr. Carlo stepped back from Guy’s shelves and stared at them like a masterpiece.

‘He agreed to it alright. Took off yesterday.’

‘Really?’

Mr. Carlo smiled again. ‘Had to. He’s expendable and knows it. I take expendability seriously. Look at this inventory. Every man is meticulously accounted for.

Every man has his shelves and his nameplate. These are acts of permanence.’

‘Yeah, but...’

‘No man is expendable to the organization especially if he’s hired to be. Take Guy. I knew he couldn’t be trusted, but I needed hands to unload inventory and he had two of them, so I brought him in. But I watched him. Asked around about him, and when my friend called about the favor, I made use of him. He could be trusted to shelve inventory not push it, but after discussing him with Mr. Hirst, this friend of mine, we agreed we needed someone like Guy - no money, nothing to say, nobody looking out for him, nothing going for him, someone who might as well be dead. Guy would be useful to us. That’s when we promoted him. Had him push watches. Couldn’t get across the simplest thing about them. Couldn’t meet his quota either. We knew this and promoted him again. Now he’d oversee the distribution and selling of them along the pier. Told him he’d have to live off his own sales during an initiation period, then he’d get a bigger cut of the action. Knew he didn’t have that kind of time. Knew he couldn’t make rent, couldn’t pay for his girlfriends and tab at Clea’s, knew he’d starve if he didn’t skim off the top. Knew he’d play right into our hands and he did. Took from the guys working under him. We waited till he skimmed enough to bury him. Then we caught up with him night before last. Told him he was going to do us this favor.’

‘Heard about him getting a talking to at the office.’

‘I explained what he was going to do. Simple as it was he didn’t get it at first. Don’t know about it, he said to me.

‘What’s not to know about?’ I told him. ‘You’ll cross the border, steal the painting, deliver it to my friend, and make it back here for payment.’

‘Long way to steal something like that. No money to help me get it either.’

I moved closer to the desk and folded my hands on top of it.

‘You figured out how to steal my money.’

Guy shook his head yes.

‘So figure out how to steal money again. Can’t be hard for a guy like you.’

But he looked unsteady sitting there.

‘Plenty of banks between here and there. Think about it. You have a car?’

He shook his head yes again.

‘A gun?’

‘Somewhere.’

‘That’s a start.’

He looked like he wanted to say something.

‘What is it?’

‘Could rob them. What you say. Banks. Lot of them to the border.’

‘There sure are.’

That’s when I heard a scuffle outside. His new girlfriend.

‘Connie.’

‘She’ll prove useful too.’

‘Don’t know much about her.’

Mr. Carlo started walking in another direction. ‘She doesn’t want to get hurt. Does what she’s told and she won’t.’

He suddenly stopped at an empty shelf with a nameplate that read The Just Judges.

‘I don’t get it.’ I spit out in my confusion. ‘Why not just give Guy the money to get across the border to do this favor? It’d be safer.’

‘No risk in that.’

‘Not many are fit to rob banks, Mr. Carlo. When the cops get them, everything’ll be traced back to us.’

Mr. Carlo lowered his head. ‘Mr. Hirst knows what he’s doing. He likes the odds. The more, the better, and odds are they won’t make it, but if they do, there’s justice in that and a lot of publicity.’

‘Do we want that?’

‘Every organization does. Can’t expand without justice or the press.’

“And he’s right.”

I flipped to a blank page in my notebook.

“Know anything about this Mr. Hirst?”

Silence.

“Don’t have to. He knows everything about us.”

“You mean about the organization.”

“I mean about you.”

Then the phone went dead. Just like that. Dead.

Walked out of my motel room and took a drive to nowhere in particular. Wanted to clear up my head. The boss loaned me a convertible for the drive to K--- County. It’s big-boned and tough with too many miles on its back. Still keeps its own cutting through flatlands, and speeding past them I figured it’s as good a time as any to get to thinking. But we don’t work like that. We click. Thinking only breaks you and nobody’ll stop to help. Just get the job done. Go back to the motel, take a shower, have a drink, write the piece, turn it in, get up and do it again. Be easier tomorrow. See what I mean? Man on his first day thought the same. Just get it done. Click-click.

Back at the motel, I had that drink, showered, and got to work. Had to tie in Connie’s letter along with everything that happened because of it - talking to Hal, finding out about Mr. Carlo, the organization, the inventory, this Mr. Hirst, the favor, reason for the bank heists, their heading for the border, the just judges waiting for them. Hard to finish things when I had enough for one day. But I had to.

Reporting’s quick business. You get it as right as you can. Second time doing anything’s easier than the first. You got a job to do, more you do it, easier it gets. Doesn’t matter if you’re law-abiding or not. Take Connie and Guy. They’re robbing banks on their way to the border and the job’s getting easier. Connie thinks it’ll never be easy to cut people with words but it will. It’ll be so easy she’ll look for other means to do it.

But, okay, for now it’s not.

Looking like she does, a ‘pretty slip of a thing, innocent,’ Connie’s words cut and she has a conscience about it. But she gets what she puts out. Mr. Carlo’s words cut her just

so. Point is words cut. Take fear. It splits you. Nothing arbitrary about it. Everything depends on it - marriage, family, friends, trust, justice - you name it. Look at Connie and Guy. Their trust relies on fear and that's smart. Without it they're done.

They have it coming to them anyway, but like Connie says, they're doing the best they can and there's justice in that. Maybe. Maybe not. Justice does fear's bidding, that's its job, and there's something in that, don't know what is, don't know who or what they're fighting against either. Connie says it's 'us against them.' Who's trying to break you? Mr. Carlo? The organization? You're all criminal.

Spoke to an informant over the phone. Someone working for this Mr. Carlo. Discovered the Sun Shop is a front for an organized crime ring pushing hot merchandise on the pier. Mr. Carlo oversees day-to-day operations and a vast inventory. A hands-on boss who knows his employees, his merchandise, and how to match up the two. Guy started working for him stocking inventory. Because he's a disaster with words, Mr. Carlo didn't trust him but he proved useful. Short of it is Guy's trapped. Mr. Carlo and Mr. Hirst, a supposed friend with ties to the organization, promoted Guy to oversee the selling of watches on the pier because they knew he'd skim off the top, and when he did, they forced him to do them a favor. Connie's messed up in it by chance or bad luck.

First night they met, she left Clea's with Guy and then got jumped and dragged to the Sun Shop with him for a meeting with Mr. Carlo. That's when he told Guy that he knew about him pinching money and what he'd have to do to make up for it. This favor has something to do with Hirst. Something about just judges waiting over the border.

Carlo and Hirst don't believe Guy and Connie will pull it off. They believe in opportunity at any cost, especially Hirst. Maybe they'll beat the odds. Maybe they'll get a taste of justice and the press that comes with it.

Could all be for kicks. A big joke. Didn't talk to the informant face-to-face. No way to know if the story goes like he says. Not much to be done about it now. I turned over what I had to the cops who checked out everything and called me up.

"Looks like you've been taken for a ride, Hain," the sergeant belted into the phone. "There's a Sun Shop but no Mr. Carlo. Nobody by that name ever owned it or worked there. No inventory either. Checked out the warehouse. Only thing in it is what the gulls left behind. Nothing on this Hirst or whoever the hell he is. And the just judges is a figment of someone's imagination. Wouldn't be yours, would it?"

Cops dismissed my story and submitted their own report. May the best man win.

Told the boss I booked another night at the motel. Now it's their move.

Comes Down to Money 7

Boss is real. Mr. Carlo, that night at the Sun Shop, everything's like I said. Know what I seen and heard and the boss's running something that got Guy in over his head. We're doing this favor to make things right. That's all I know but I know it. Cops not finding him don't mean nothing. Works like this a lot. Nobody'd believe anybody if we didn't know it's true that some of us are here today and gone tomorrow. Folks left behind don't know the reasons for it and got no right to. So what if the cops can't find Mr. Carlo. He wanted be gone, so he's gone. Don't need no reason for it. Just took off is all.

Don't change what we got to do. Get money to cross the border and get the job done. Thing is, more I thought about it, more it bothered me you asking about who's us against them? We're all criminal you said. Robbing makes us crooks robbing for crooked bosses. Can't be no us against them if it's crook against crook. I get it but putting it like that's easy for you. Guy's right. They been against us. If we'd had a fair shake, we'd be getting the job done without taking what's theirs, but they didn't show us no fairer way, only showed us how they was going to break us to make us do what they wanted us to, and we can't earn like animals. But I really don't know who they are anymore. Like you said, we could be us today and them tomorrow, and how're we supposed to know who's who when we keep changing like this? Could be we're against ourselves and not even know it. Maybe breaking the law's a way out of it. I hope so. Things got to start staying in one place.

That's what I told Guy tonight. Told him things got to stay in one place. Pulled into town late, was hot and hungry and wasn't nowhere to go but a motel with rooms on the second floor, bar on the first. Booked a room for the night and took the suitcases up. Nobody asked questions. We got nothing but money and keep needing suitcases to put it in. Guy's real careful about it though,

locks them up, hides them best he can, just like he did tonight when he closed and locked the door. First thing he did was unlock the suitcases, check the stacks, lock them again, check under the beds, behind the dresser, inside the closet, and then he went into the bathroom and pushed back the curtain. Tub was big enough. Came back out, grabbed the suitcases, and laid them out just so. Then we headed to the bar.

Used to go to the bar without thinking about it. Went everywhere without noticing much. More miles we get from what we know, more I can't get by like this. Used to think people were the same and didn't pay them no mind. Didn't look at how they was looking at me, didn't care how they looked at anything, it didn't matter, I knew where I was, what to expect, knew everything from just being somewhere long enough to get used to it. Not like that now. Can't get used to nothing. Way we're going, we don't cast no shadows. Not in one place long enough. Got to keep going. I get it, we're as good as dead if we don't, but passing through so many places is making me see the way people look at me, and they don't look nice-like, they look like they know something about me I don't. Guy says to quit making myself sick over it, but it means something to be sick like this. Told him it has to do with the money. We got plenty of it but act like we don't and I don't know what that makes us.

Eventually we went into the bar. Minute we did people looking at me. Three with their backs against us turned around as soon as I dragged my chair from under the table and sat down. Almost asked them why they keep lowering their hats, measuring me up from the corners of their eyes, lips tightening like snakes, cause I swear they know something that clenches my skull. I watch them watching me till I feel like doing something so there'd be nothing left to look at cause I'd be gone, that's what I'd be, just plain gone. Waitress eventually came up and asked the simplest thing.

“What can I get you?”

“Beer. On tap.”

She looked at me. Guys at the bar looked away. The pounding in my temples went on.

“What you want?” Guy broke in.

I couldn’t say.

“Beer for her too.”

The waitress looked at me.

“Two beers.” She repeated and walked away.

“What’s the matter with you?”

Guy don’t get angry but he don’t like how I been acting.

I shrugged my shoulders. I hate when I do this and I been doing it a lot lately.

“Don’t like them looking at me like that.”

“Who?”

“At the bar.”

He didn’t turn around.

“People look. That’s what they do.”

“Only since we been going on like this.”

Guy came at me real close like.

“You gotta stop it.”

The waitress came and put the beers down.

“That be all?”

I looked at Guy.

“Yeah. Thank you.”

Guy says that a lot now. Thank you. Waitress didn’t make anything of it. Went back to what she was doing before we come in. I didn’t touch the beer. Looked yellow and sick. Guy slid the glass over. Something dead at the bottom of it.

“It’s got bugs in it.”

Guy pushed back in his chair and brushed the hair out of his face. Been noticing his face a lot lately too.

“Just drink it.”

I drank without looking at them coming at me. Didn’t like them putting two and two together like that right in my face. Dead bugs at the bottom of the glass plus a good as dead thief drinking from it add up real even like.

“Why you got to shut your eyes like that?”

I put the beer down.

“Don’t want to see them.”

Guy crossed his arms down on the table and hung his head like he does when he's thinking. Someday his dammed-up thoughts will flood us all.

"Don't make it any harder," Guy warned, not even looking at me. Can't stand that but Guy don't mean nothing by it. Nobody's been waiting on his words his whole life, that's how come he don't know no better. But I do. Know you got to look them straight in the eyes and say it.

I put my hand on his head and stroked his hair. He looked at me now and I let him have it.

"I'm not making things harder. You know that."

"You not been the same."

"We keep doing what we're doing when there's no need to."

Now his eyes swept around the bar, only thing was a woman looking around too.

"We got to do what the boss said."

My hand fell.

"Get the money to do the job. Nothing more."

Guy tried to get closer but couldn't. "Keep it down."

Why? Nobody's listening.

"I'll do just that if you keep from doing what you're doing."

"What am I doing?"

I looked around too, then I put my hand on his cheek, real loving like, seen that look somewhere before, nobody'd think we was getting heated over money, not by looking at us.

"We got enough money. No reason to keep going after more. Enough's enough."

I had to pick a spot. Got to stay in one place. Enough's enough is as good as any to stick to. Not Guy though. Wasn't given enough to begin with, and now he wants more than enough, and thinks he's got every right to it. I got a right to it too, only we're trapped in something that don't call for it.

"It's not like you say. We don't know what's across the border."

"We do. The Just Judges is what. We deliver it, get paid, get back, get on with our lives."

And this I won't forget. Guy flinched. Didn't know what made him do it. His face just fell apart, like a knife a hairsbreadth from the whites of his eyes forced him to clinch his teeth and split his lips. His eyes looked ambushed by it

and it passed just like that. Stabbed him then let him be, except for his lips shaking nobody'd know it got to him. "Get you another round?" the waitress suddenly come up and asked.

"Yeah," Guy said absent-like, sliding the glass towards her. I watched her looking at him as she grabbed it. She liked him.

"Be right back."

Guy just nodded. Didn't even look at her. Waitress came back with his beer and let us alone again.

"What was that all about?" I asked.

Guy shrugged his shoulders.

"What?"

"Whatever was making you flinch like that."

He jerked his hair out of his face and took a drink. Then he put his glass down and traced the grooves in it. I don't like it when he gets like this cause I don't know where he's at.

"Guy."

He wiped the sweat from his glass before he looked at me.

"What?"

"You gonna tell me what's going on?"

Those eyes stayed on me. Whatever it was got him.

"It's what you said."

"What'd I say?"

"Getting back and getting on with our lives."

"So?" I said but it didn't sound like me.

"Can't get back."

"We will if we're smart. No more risks. We got enough money."

But he shook his head and focused on his beer again.

"Can't get back to nothing. Nothing's nothing."

That word's dangerous for me and Guy. Only reason to do what we're doing is to get back, don't know exactly what that means, but it can't mean nothing. Right now we got nothing but miles, money, the border, don't make us much but it's not for always. Once we get back everything'll be alright.

"We got a lot to go back to," I told him. Told him to his face but he just finished his beer and got up.

“You ready?”

I shook my head.

“I’m going back to the room then.”

And he walked out on me. Didn’t mean nothing by it. I looked around. Was the only one left but I was being watched. Had to be. And that’s how come I just sat there and imagined how I looked to them. Thing is I’m sicker than I look. You’d think the same if you was me. You’d see Connie with the long blonde hair and brown eyes staring real wide-like at everything, and those sad plump lips and skin flawless like a pearl, and a figure so light it can just go. You’d see Connie looking like this and know she had it coming to her. You’d know cause you’d peel her back to see for yourself. You’d see eyes fearing what’s coming that can’t wait, you’d see pulpy lips and pocks about to tear into her, you’d see her body’s not so light, how can it be when she’s had too much. That’s what you’d see and you’d laugh. I would. They sure would. Them watching me.

Noticed them when I least expected to. Accidentally knocked over my glass and the waitress come throwing down her rag to suck up the beer and drag those dead bugs across the table. They made me look away and that’s when I saw them against the wall painted into a mural. Three of them staring like that for god knows how long. Looked like showgirls or worse. One had blonde curls falling on a white face with eyes and lips done up and a pearl necklace wrapped around her neck, hardly had a thing on, red bustier and red tights, that’s it. One next to her wore a silk robe with turquoise trim embroidered with blossoms and butterflies, which is real precious, but don’t go with a caked-on face and jet-black hair. Last one had on nothing but a tan bra and panties, and that same pearl necklace that clashed with her tired blonde hair and heavy makeup. Still the look fit her sitting there with one leg up, her elbow on her knee, resting the side of her head against her hand. They all looked lazy sitting there around a small table with a chessboard on it. Behind them was a white table with bottles, brushes, compacts, and combs scattered over it, with a vanity mirror and fat bulbs above it.

I should have laughed. Watched by a bunch of jades playing chess. Like a game made them more than what they were. Whoever painted them should've made them play cards. The players I know have that same look. They sit at the table real loose like, barely holding up, eyes just glancing off hands they been dealt like nothing can stick to them, their heavy faces watching the play the same way they'd watch their own end. They throw down what the play calls for and drain the pot, not grabbing at it like they want back all they put into it and more. Players I know been sold for a lazy price that lets them sink and rise - win, lose, down, up, down, up. They move with the game. These girls been sold too and look it.

Lucky for them they're not real. Don't know why the painter tried to make them so. Whoever it is can't be no artist. They're stuck. Least I'm not. That's what I thought about going back to the room, to Guy, the suitcases, all that money. Tomorrow keeps coming. Another hit, another getaway, another town, another motel, another letter, hundreds of tomorrows like this is better than being stuck.

I walked into our room and shut the door. Guy didn't move. Put the keys in the ashtray on the desk and took everything off and laid beside him. He's right. Wanting more than enough keeps us going. We got a right to it. What we got ourselves into calls for it. Doesn't matter that everything means something, and nothing means everything, and what's coming don't care, and I'm sick of it already, and it'll just keep going on and on and take us with it.

Another hit today. Letter in my pocket's for you.

We got to keep going.
Connie

The Eye Above 8

We shovel living onto meaningless heaps, but one thing's for sure: Connie makes meaning in the stink of it. She'll save us all.

Ended up here easy enough. Phone went off in my motel room in K--- County, picked it up, and heard Hank's voice:

"They're at it again. Killed someone this time. Get over to ---. She left a letter for you at the motel."

Immediately paid the bill and headed south. Adrenaline kept me going. Didn't think about what's ahead, just drove through the flatlands into the desert. The change slapped. The desert's a perfect killer. Only difference between it and man is intent.

Connie and Guy cut through this same desert but chances are they didn't think about it like I did. They killed today but didn't intend to. They got no guts for malice. That makes them innocent. Could happen to you too. Could be you're on a highway cutting through a desert on a day coming down on you a killer just like them. You didn't mean to but it's easier when you don't.

Could be after they've caged you up, and you're breathing in concrete walls and floor and steel bed and bars, and that artificial light coming through a slit in the door, could be the shock of it's over quick, and that's when you race back to riding through the desert just like you did, not thinking about it or anything...what was that? You flinched. You just did it again. It's the desert. You can't catch your breath, too much heat, stick to the yellow line, steer clear of the whites, the road will end and the sand will go on. Look at the sky. Count on it. More you do, more it looks like that edge you'll make if you just keep pushing it. All you can do is push fast: desert, heat, the edge, there's no telling what you'll do. That sky will end it. What's that? You don't know but the desert does. That don't make sense. Does if you've ever realized

too late what it drove you to. But it didn't make me do it. What?

I sure got to thinking driving through that desert. Guess that's alright. Keeps me one step ahead of them. And I am. They're killers now. Saw it coming, almost laughed how quick it was, but I don't like to laugh at the dead. I could be next. That'd be a shame but same goes for Roy Blankfine. Wasn't a decent man but now he's no more.

I made the town by high noon. Was hot. Pulled up to the motel and saw them under the bar's awning with a metal canopy next to it. A few of them squatted next to pickup trucks. They didn't make a move or talk, just stared out from under their hats. I walked in the motel without looking at them. Sheriff left a note to see him when I got in. By the time I got back it was dark and they were gone.

I headed into the bar. Deserted but for those showgirls. I grabbed a seat across from them. Waitress came up and asked the same thing.

'What can I get you?'

'Whiskey and information.' I wrapped my hands around the back of my head and stretched my legs under the table. A look screwed onto that face.

'Who are you?'

'A reporter.'

Her jaw tightened. Then she stuck her tray into her hip. Nuts and bolts of her fixed.

'Sheriff already come by. They had a couple beers and left.'

'They?'

'The robbers.'

A door slammed. She turned in its direction.

'I'll get that whiskey, Mr...'

'Hain.'

'Hain,' she repeated before disappearing in back. Minute later she brought my drink over and sat down.

'You're not from around here.'

I took a drink.

‘No but you are.’

She smiled. Nothing amiable about it.

‘Just like Blankfine, right?’

‘You knew him?’

‘Everyone did.’

I nodded looking at the whiskey not her.

‘They shot him dead.’

‘Sorry.’

Her laugh ricocheted off the walls till it plain stopped.

‘Don’t be. There was nothing good about Blankfine. He would’ve run us all into the ground with him.’

‘Heard about that too.’

‘The tellers?’ She pushed against the back of the chair, her forearm and wrist now hanging over it.

I shook my head. ‘Interviewed them this afternoon.’

‘And that’s what this is?’

I looked her straight on. Was something about her.

‘It can be.’

She scoffed at this or maybe not. Didn’t know which was which.

‘You going to print everything.’

‘Don’t have to. Can be off record.’

‘What for?’ Her hand now reached for mine. ‘Name’s Marie. Marie Holliday. Two Ls.’

We shook hands.

‘You going write this all down?’

I took from the whiskey again before getting out the recorder.

I put it on the table between us and turned it on. It whined as she closed in.

‘What’s first?’ she asked, looking at it not me.

I sat up and put my elbows on the table. ‘Anything that stuck out about them. Anything you overheard or saw.’

She smiled.

‘I know what I saw. They weren’t no killers.’

‘They are now.’

‘Not coldblooded. Too good looking for that.’

‘Heard that about her.’

‘Not her. Him.’

The whining eased. She breathed down on it.

‘Don’t see the looks of him around here.’

Again she looked at something behind me. I waited.

‘He...,’ she strained to hit on whatever it was, ‘...walked in and stood there like he was cut from something hard, a statue you can’t take your eyes off of, you just want it to suck everything from you, because more it does, more alive it becomes, and that’s what you want.’ That harsh laugh shot around the bar again. ‘Don’t sound like me, does it?’ She fussed with her hair. ‘What the hell. He sure wasn’t like any player I’ve seen.’

‘Player?’

‘Can’t look like that and be no player. Hardly spoke to the girl. Just sat looking hard before he walked out on her.’

‘Anything more unusual?’

Her fingers like a praying mantis crept from her tray to the recorder.

‘The way he stared. People here watch but they don’t mean nothing by it. He does.’

The recorder sped up then eased.

‘Maybe you’re right.’

‘About?’

‘Him being a killer. Who goes and does something like that?’

‘She did it.’

Her elbows now came down on the table just like mine.

‘He put her up to it. Could’ve put anyone up to it. I would’ve done it’

‘What’d he say to you?’

She pinned the recorder down with her fingernail before spinning it round.

‘Two beers. Ordered for her just sitting there like a doll. Guess killing made her look like that.’

I finished the whiskey. Block of ice shifted in the glass.

‘Anything else?’

She let off the recorder.

‘Still think he put her up to it. Blankfine’s good as dead anyway.’

‘That he is.’

Her eyes opened and locked like umbrellas as her hand curled into a fist. Again that laugh punched at the walls that hit back.

‘How dead’s a man got to be before you believe it?’ The laughter quit but the smile didn’t. ‘Death takes time for men like Blankfine. He’s got roots. Before he came, we didn’t have any. Desert didn’t either. Nothing about us stuck and we were fine with that until he talked us out of it.’

‘He was a speculator.’

She ran her hand across the table like she was wiping up.

‘Tellers said that. They sound just like him.’

I pushed my glass aside.

‘What would you call him?’

She got closer. Forearms, elbows, breasts at the edge, pressing against it.

‘A crook.’

‘People want to be had.’

‘Depends.’

‘On what?’

‘What’s at stake.’

‘You mean the land?’

‘I mean the despair.’ She smiled. ‘Had it gripped in our hands so tight Blankfine had to pry them open and force us to drop it. Wasn’t long before we saw what he did.’

‘What?’

‘Hope.’

‘You mean opportunity.’

She shrugged. ‘He had pockets deep enough for both. One day there’s nothing, next day there’s a bank, gas station, bar, motel, billboards splattered with the good life. We bought it. Desert knew better. Dust to dust and that’s how it is. Eventually the bidder pulled out and the dry rot set in again. But the deeds we signed kept Blankfine and the bank going. He kept speculating, hoping somebody’d buy into it. I thought about doing what them kids did. Not for the money. For the despair. I wanted it back.’

‘You thought about killing him?’

‘We all did.’

‘He knew this?’

She smirked. ‘Knew something was coming. Knew the bidder had it in for him too. She did everyone a favor.’

‘Not intentionally.’

‘I heard how she did it.’

Everybody did. Heard it from the teller just like me.

It was the girl. It was definitely Connie. Walked in the bank, handed me a note, folded her hands on the counter. That’s what I remember. Those hands. Thin and white, giving me a note to put the money in the bag real quiet like, don’t want things to get out of hand, not our intention, the money’s all we want and we’ll be out of your way, real simple if you want it to be, and I hope so, no harm if you don’t push it.

I folded up the note, my hands shaking, hers not budging, hers watching mine open the drawer and put the money in the bag. Then her claws came out. Her hand snatched at it like mine wasn’t there. That’s when I lost track whose hands strangled the bag – ‘let go!’ ‘no, the money isn’t yours!’ - but those hands clenched its neck tighter, even when they went numb they held to that bag like this is it, this is what it comes down to – ‘no, don’t do it!’ - they got my neck now, I can’t breathe, fingertips going purple, please...and then the scream. I saw Blankfine and her hand reaching inside her purse to pull it out, her finger curling around the trigger.

‘Connie, what’re you doing?’

Wasn’t no question. He put her up to it.

‘Let it go.’

The gun shivered. He refused.

‘Let go, I’m telling you.’

Then the gun went off. Blood on her hands, on mine, the counter, the floor, on the glass door, fingerprints on everything, everywhere. Blankfine’s dead. Guy she’s with knew it before she did. He steadied that gun in her hand like he knew all along he’d do it. Her hand shaking like that, she didn’t have the nerve. Does now. They got away with it, didn’t they?

‘Ask anybody. She’s a hero.’

‘Teller said she was put up to it. That doesn’t make her a hero.’

I turned off the recorder and put it in my pocket.

‘What’re you doing?’

‘It’s getting late.’

Marie’s eyes widened again. Her hand came down on mine. ‘He put us all up to it. We know this but she doesn’t. She thinks she did it. That’s what he wants. She doesn’t know the trigger was pulled a long time ago. She’d deny it. She’d tell you she did it. She killed him. She chose it. She believes. That’s what makes her a hero. But she’ll end up like us, just not today.’

The same door slammed. The same look as she fixed on it. Something in her eyes. I turned to see who it was.

‘Don’t.’ She pressed down harder on my hand. ‘Not yet.’ Whoever it was left.

‘Somebody watching us?’

She let go. ‘Always is.’

‘Who?’

Her jaws clenched like something was about to bust her mouth wide open.

‘He put me up to it.’

‘Who are we talking about?’

She shook her head ‘no’ as her elbows locked, palms flattened against the table, fingers splayed. No, no, no. Her back arched, her shoulders convulsed, a spasm let loose. She was laughing.

‘Marie...’

She pointed her finger straight up. I didn’t know what it meant. I waited for her to stop laughing. Expected her to be like most who eventually get things out in the open, they get rid of whatever they know, not for your sake but theirs, more they tell, more they’re have no part in it. It’s on you now. You know what people are capable of. It’ll be you who’s guilty for a crime you didn’t commit. Reporting’s like this. ‘Hain...’ she spoke in spite of that laugh. Her finger still pointing at the ceiling. ‘Look...’

And I did. I looked at the damned thing. Felt my pulse going at my Adam's apple.

'What is it?'

She giggled. Real menace in it.

'It's him.'

'It's an eye.'

A leg scratched at the floor.

'Look to the right. At the bottom.'

I looked and saw it in black cursive. *Hirst*.

'See what I mean?'

I said nothing.

'He put us up to it. Even you.'

I couldn't look away.

'Me?'

She moved in. 'You came asking about them and I told you what he wanted me to. We're all in on it.'

I tore my eyes from it.

'It's late.'

She relaxed into her chair. 'I'll let him know you said goodbye.'

I got up and walked out without looking at her. Felt them watching me now - the showgirls, that eye - you've got to be kidding me.

Went back to the room, locked the door, dragged the curtain across the window, turned on the light, and looked around. Typewriter and glass on the desk, broken seal in the ashtray, suitcase at the foot of the bed, coins and a few bills on the stand, towels on the counter, closet open like I left it. Kicked off my boots. I had to be alone. Had to. Looked at the walls and ceiling - bare. It's a game. Play or fold. But it got to me. Took a last look around then sat at the desk and put the recorder down. Every word accounted for, I just had to make sense of them.

Where to start. The sheriff. Told me Blankfine was into stolen goods before land speculating. His former boss was one Mr. Carlo. He vouched for Blankfine in a

recommendation letter, for what the Sheriff didn't say. Fact is nobody knew much about him, where he came from, the usual things, knew he had money though and a lot of it.

Anybody's guess how he came into it. Could be the first time he drove into town he did what nobody did: he stopped. Right on the side of the highway, he gets out and goes to the hood of his car, stands there with arms folded looking at it, seeing something they can't. They stop and ask what's the matter. Just speculating. That's all he says. They don't get it; it's just desert. Let him have an eyeful if he wants. They take off and forget about him but he comes back. Pulls off at the same spot, standing there like he did the first time only now someone's beside him. A man decked out in a suit and hat. He towers above Blankfine like a wax pillar. But it's the desert. It's hot. He melts only to harden overnight and loom above Blankfine the next day and the day after that. These two keep coming back, but folks don't stop and ask why anymore. They're so used to them speculating that they don't see them, and he knows this, the one in the suit. He keeps melting and hardening into the desert until it takes him for itself.

It happens one morning they open their eyes and see those billboards that sting before they get used to them. They've never seen anything like it. The good life. That's what they say in bold letters: The Good Life. Houses and grass and pools and sidewalks and children playing and neighbors waving and the gate opening and Blankfine smiling and motioning to TURN LEFT ← up ahead, right up ahead start living your dream from \$XXX,XXX and up, the sun glinting off his massive white teeth making their eyes tear. Right ahead. Turn off and pull through the gate. Overnight prefab homes stick up like dentures, but the next day and the days after that, nobody opens wide.

This was not the plan. Now Blankfine will rob Peter to pay back Paul in the suit, and then profit by robbing Peter again. A goddamned riddle. You can't give them a pittance for their land, then try to sell it back to them in order to turn a profit

and make good on a loan at the same time. Only simultaneous thing to count on is breathing your last. The pillar knew this and waited.

Could be Blankfine knew too but didn't think it could happen to him. Could be once the bidder walked out, and the billboards and the good life turned to rot, could be that's when he opened the bank in a last-ditch effort to make something out of what was left over from all his speculating. First day it opens for business, he sits there, a man in a suit at a desk, and they walk in one after the other, more trusting of one building, one man, one desk, than all those homes jammed together in the desert. They give him back the pittance he gave them for their land. For safekeeping, he tells them. Blankfine rows the boat again and life is but a dream.

Could be one day the bidder in the suit walks in the bank. A few months go by and a gas station, motel, and bar pop up. Things start coming alive. The gated community waits to rise again. But the desert allows only so much of life. No man from Bethany is going to emerge from a two-car garage.

Could be like I say. Things start looking up. Blankfine holds out because of trust. They trust in their deposits. The bidder trusts in the bank he's invested in. The dreamers trust they're future buyers. Fact is things can look up, but that don't mean they're on the up and up. Blankfine worked for Mr. Carlo just like Guy. Could be he's got sticky fingers from dealing with other peoples' money. Could be one night he's counting piles of it, locking bills in drawers and safes - Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Hamilton, Jackson, Grant, Franklin - all of them coming at him so fast he gets to thinking they're egging him on. Money talks. Come on, Blankfine, nobody's looking with everything looking up. He laughs till he sees they got a point. Skim a little off the top. Who'd notice?

Thing is once money starts sticking to you, that fact eventually sticks out. They forgot to warn him about this. Had to be that one night Blankfine got caught. Looks out from the corner of his eye and sees him standing there. The pillar. Like I said, the man knows how to wait. The pillar's got a name. Hirst. Sheriff knew as much about him as he did about Blankfine: not much.

Least the Sheriff made a list of things involved so far. Opportunity, default, theft, murder, Carlo, Guy, Connie, Blankfine, Hirst, the desert, the bar, that eye, the getaways, the robberies, the just judges, the waitress, the madness going around and around. I got it on tape. It's madness alright. That's what killed Blankfine.

He cracked his skull off that pillar and next thing he knew he's seeing that goddamn eye everywhere when the truth's anything but. But that didn't stop him. He had to be mad to paint an eye like that on the ceiling of a bar. Waitress said she didn't see it coming. Said he'd come in every night after closing the bank and leave the same tip: three crisp one-dollar bills and three polished quarters. Then one night he lost it. Twisted around in his chair, lips hurrying to get out a bunch of words, before he skipped out on the bill, then just like that, next night he walks in with paint and a brush and laughs when she asks him what he's doing. He can do whatever he wants. Thanks to Hirst, he owns the bar and everything in it.

Following morning she walks in and smells it first. There it is on the ceiling suspended between a turquoise and black background and greenish gray foreground. It's the eye. Its top lid frosted over and swollen. Its bottom oozing like oily moss. No lashes. All eye. Whites of it circling a black hole with a white streak blasting out like a meteor. The eye looked out in terror just like Blankfine. Don't make any damn sense. He went mad is all.

I never had a brush with madness. Way things are going maybe I'm due for it. Nobody else has to believe a story about two pretty-faced crooks getting caught up in a crime

ring that forces them to rob to get to the border to score the just judges that'll even the score with Carlo and Hirst. And what about them? Carlo's a few shells away from being a nut, and Hirst is someone nobody knows or cares to know, and I just know he's getting off on it because it's easy for him to be everywhere with his hands in everything when nobody sees him for what he is, except Blankfine who's in the ground. Hirst leaves no traces. What he wants said is said, what he wants done is done, who he wants dead don't run. Everything files in line. He's there and that's it.

Folks in this town are no different but they're tough. He toyed with them and they held out to get back what he took: their despair. Dust to dust, nothing to nothing, day in and day out despair's like the desert - it's certain. Hal said Hirst knows everything about us. Okay. I live on facts. They're certain. Hirst isn't.

Woke up early. Pulled back the curtain. The sun climbed. Maybe that's what Blankfine was after. He wanted to burn and rise. Maybe his eye had nothing to do with Hirst. Maybe he wanted to see all things at all times for all the right reasons. Maybe he was onto something.

The Face 9

Desert didn't make me do it. Guy didn't either. Need to get that off my chest first.

It's simple. Things go fast. Nothing drove me to it but me. Least give me that. Benefit of the doubt or whatever cause there wasn't no time to think. The dominoes just fell. Got a job to do, go to the bank to do it, a guy gets in the way and gets himself dead. I pulled that trigger. Was a split decision waiting for me for god knows how long. Cause second I felt it, smooth and curved like an apostrophe, that's how a trigger feels, like an apostrophe, I just did it. Just like that. I pulled it. But I didn't end up dead. Not going to no cell either. Don't know who you was talking about but can't be me. I'm too fast for words, bullets, cuffs, those goddamn cells, you name it, I'll take myself out before they get me, you hear that?

I'm too fast and he'd have liked me if he had the chance. Talking about Blankfine. Never met him and won't anytime soon. You can count on that. Waitress told me about him. She didn't tell you that though, did she? More women talk, more you can bet we're not telling you what you want. Save that in your little recorder.

Cause she talked alright. Told me Blankfine had a thing for women like me. Had to be fast. I know. I looked at them showgirls he pinned to that wall, and I just knew he had every damn one of them, cause girls like that keep up if you hook them on what you got, and Blankfine got them fast. I could have ended up like them. Could have got stuck. You got to be quick to play tricks. Could be that's what I'm doing. Done it before. Players change not the game. You pull something over on someone pulling something on you. I didn't set out to do it, but I wasn't no coward about it.

Wasn't looking for mercy afterwards. It's fast work that pays, do it just once, you'll do it again. It helps that you're young and pretty, and they're nothing but calloused hands

and faces and bodies, their skin on rails careening for you cause you're so young and pretty and twice as fast as they are, blowing right past them, speeding along to get paid only to get up and shake it off and do it again. Playing is quick work.

I never met Blankfine, but it knew him the second I looked at him. Easy to kill when the decision made up its mind years ago. It followed me around. Wasn't really mine then, the decision I mean, I did what it wanted me to. I would've looked at Blankfine and saw him for who he was, but it looked at him and saw him as someone else. I had no choice. I saw who it wanted me to see. That's how come I looked at Blankfine and saw him.

I saw his face again looking like it did that afternoon way back. At the time, I'd been at it awhile, knew that look you'd miss it if you weren't playing by the rules, but I was and we went back to the room. I got the money for it first, and went to the office to get the key. Front desk guy didn't think twice about why a young thing like me's coming at him at this time of day, when it should be in school learning what ain't going to help when things don't balance out, when one plus one don't equal two. You learn to get on your way.

And that's what I did that afternoon. I got on my way. Felt that key walking back to his car, its teeth biting into my palm as I got in and drove around back, where we parked and got out and headed to the room like we was old newlyweds. 116. A simple number. Nothing counted on it, but I swear when I put that key in and turned it, quickest thought I ever had hit me: what if 116 was the first or last number in the world? Don't make sense but it did. By then I'd seen a lot of numbers on doors, counted them like cards that might tell me if I'd make out. Maybe a lot was riding on 116. If it was the first number in the world, then I was newly born and nothing ill comes to the innocent, but if it was the last number, then there'd be no telling what I might be in for.

I closed the door and tossed the key in the ashtray like I always did. Reminds them time's money. He went to the window and fixed the curtains together. I didn't mind. Tires me out to go from day to night back and forth all day. Easier for it just to be night.

I sat down on the edge of the bed like I always did, not out of habit, I just didn't know what else to do. He saw this and laughed and I knew 116 was stacked against me. I was so young and pretty, and a man who can laugh at that ain't no man at all. He's something else and he was. Wasn't bad looking though. Was a lot like Guy. Only he talked. Asked about things. Should have kept his mouth shut. Guy don't talk so I don't got to, and if he asks questions, I answer them easy enough and it's over. But this guy was different. Thought he'd be like the others. They pull the curtains together but they don't say nothing, don't see the point in it, and I don't care, I just do what I do, walk over to the nightstand, take off my necklace, sit down on the bed, and look over my shoulder, suggest it without saying it, but when I played that on him, he laughed.

'What.'

'What's your name?'

'Connie.'

'Constance.'

I didn't go by Constance and told him so. Name's gotta mean something and it didn't mean what I wanted it to. Thought that'd make him laugh again but it didn't.

'Your name means constant.'

'I'm around if that's what you mean.'

'You know what I mean.'

I played it like I didn't. None of his business, still isn't, that's how come I can't figure how he got me to talking, and not the kind of talk that makes you go the bathroom and shut the door to look in the mirror and have it out with yourself. What're you doing?

What I got to.
Even if it comes down to that?
The money don't care what he looks like.
But he's stale. Whole damn room stinks of him.
You know I can't open the window.
Ask him to then.
What for?
'You coming back to bed?'
See what I mean.
'Give me a minute.'
Listen. Nothing can touch you if you don't live in the
skin you're in.

I stared in mirrors so long started seeing my shadow in
them, the one that followed me from cars to motels,
always throwing itself down on the pavement beside me.
Minute they drew those curtains together it was gone.
Shadows can't live in the dark.

But this guy was different. He closed the curtains and
turned on the light. My shadow was now on the wall
next to the bed as I watched him, thinking he'd be like
the ones that pay more to have me say what they want,
had a feeling this guy was going be like that, paying to
put words in my mouth. Best lies I ever told happened
like this.

He turned on the radio but didn't come to bed. I felt a
draft or something and rubbed my shoulders.

'You cold?'
I shook my head. He stared and wouldn't stop.
'What?'
'Let's try this again. What's your name.'

This time I shrugged my shoulders. Constance. Ever
think twice before you tell a stranger your name? I did.
Thought a lot about it. How it'd echo in the room, where
it'd go, what it'd do if it got out, cause I was stuck, but a
man could take it places I ain't ever been to, and

maybe he'd say it one day for no reason, not even remembering where he heard it, and maybe somebody hears it and takes it where they're heading, and before I know it my name's out there, so many lives spreading it around, god knows how long it'll go on. The name of a whore getting around. It's not right. Least not my kind of right.

'Connie.'

He wasn't buying it.

'Constance.'

'I said I go by Connie.'

He sat down on a chair across from the bed.

'You can go by anything long as you're consistent.'

That's what he paid for. That's how we started talking. He was real clear about things, not like me who's got too many things don't come across right. Told me he was passing through. Everyone says that. They can't accept there's not enough space in the world to pass through anything. Living's too thick with all the atoms sticking together. He was doing what he'd been doing for god knows how long. Can't lie about it. No space for it. I don't blame him. It's the atoms. They got it in for us.

'Where you heading?'

He groaned a little.

'West. I don't know. You?'

I smiled but not like I wanted to.

'Here.'

He nodded like I do, but then his words came at me. The room buzzed, dipped, bent, spun with them. He came from a town not far from here, knew everyone and they felt the same about him, but things got too close, that's not the way he said it, but that's how it is, things closed in, lost a girl he loved, I heard the story before, but he told it different.

He thought he loved her, they came from the same everything, they'd be together forever no matter the odds, had a chance too, not enough odds to go around in a small

town, but then he saw it for what it was, saw them the same as everybody and nobody was who they were, but she didn't see it like that, she saw like everyone else, she saw the minister blessing it going into the ground, can't do nothing about it, can't bring it back, can't go with it, got to keep going on like you did today every day. But he thought he was different and that made him so. So he split. He left and she married someone else. It could've been anyone. He was real clear about that.

Now he drifted into things - jobs, women - he owed nobody nothing but honest work. I liked how he said that. But he didn't know how he'd end up, didn't want to keep doing what we was about to do, can't call that living, you got to be straight about things.

'Don't mean you're living even if you do.'

'I'll have to see about that.'

'She'll be dead for real one day. Then what will you do?'

'Same as I been doing. And you?'

What about me. I shrugged my shoulders.

'You think about it?'

I stopped looking at him.

'Have to. But only when I sleep.'

I folded my hands across my stomach. I told it straight.

I admitted I thought about it, and I prayed he wouldn't ask for more.

'What do you mean?'

'Just what I said.'

'You dream about it.'

I shook my head.

'You do or you don't?'

Either or didn't count.

'It's not simple like that.'

And that was the truth. I can't ever sleep on the job. I saw it when I wasn't sleeping or dreaming. I was in between the two where I could see it and keep an eye on things at the same time.

'How is it then?'

He read into me like I wanted him to. I wanted to be honest just to see. Decided it'd be tonight for no reason.

'How it is.'

We almost laughed.

'How death's supposed to be.'

I told him the truth cause it wasn't no dream. I was there. Happened on a night like this. I hung around till some guy pulled up and I got in. Driving to the motel, he looked in the mirror like he saw something wasn't there, a wife, a girlfriend, something that got into his head to feel guilty about, that's how come I don't feel guilty about nothing, just makes you do something worse and then what?

He parked in the back of the motel, didn't tell him to, he just knew.

'Been here before?'

The engine died.

'You're young.'

'It'll be more.'

'How much more?'

'Double. Plus a room for the night.'

'I got to pay for the others then.'

I shrugged my shoulders.

'You better be worth it.'

Then he got out and headed to the office. I watched him in the mirror. Thin, jeans pressed, t-shirt tucked in, belt snug, hair slicked back, a neat man, every ounce of him fussed over. Got to watch for guys like this cause they keep to the script, have to, everything's a matter of fact or they lose it. But he did good. Came back and snapped his fingers and I got out, seeing the pockmarks now as we walked to the room. He unlocked the door and shut it after I came inside. Closed the curtains first thing. I went to the bed and got ready. He come over and without a word it was done. He threw down the money and was gone. No

shower, sheets untouched on other side, that's how neat it was.

I just sat there. It was early, room was paid for, I knew to make the most of it, hardly touched my face, so I didn't have to fix it up, could go right out and turn another trick, but I felt like I had to lie down. Had to. Got up. The door was locked. Key was on the table next to the money. I could do it. I could lie down. Wasn't asking much so I did. I laid down on the clean sheets, could feel the fold lines, and that's when it caught up to me.

'It?'

'You know.'

'Death.'

I stared at him.

'Sorry.'

So was I. I was sorry I laid down. How many regret lying down, and how many lie down and run like I did? Heart smacking my ears, not pounding like it usually does, because it knew it was coming, I didn't, but it did, and it knew it was beat, and I heard and felt it fast as I was going, but I kept running cause I felt the afternoon dying on and on, like day was bloodletting, tasted it on my tongue, real metallic like, felt something prick my face. That face.

I'm not making sense though. Let me just say the way I saw it.

Death's an old man on a bicycle.

You laugh but I seen it. I lied down and saw it like in a dream, only it wasn't no dream. I was running on a path through thin woods, lights shooting from windows of houses through the baldness, tar softening the blows to my feet. I remember I ran along like a housewife, little mrs. susie taking a jog before washing up and

getting dinner ready, real fit and smiling and thinking nothing, except maybe a storm must be blowing in, so dark yet so early, my, my, my, I always take my jog at three o'clock to have time to get everything ready before it starts over again. Gosh, it is dark, isn't it? But I don't smell rain. I'll be able to get my run in. Least the air smells fresh. Funny I don't feel afraid, neighbors are right over there, if I scream they'll hear me, lucky to have them and this path safe for all of us, but who would think to harm a housewife going for a jog in the afternoon? Nobody'd get it in their head to do something so wasteful. Just relax. Be happy you have the path to yourself, no kids scattered over it, god bless them, but I raised concerns at last week's meeting, we may be a gated community but that doesn't mean we should unleash the children, mine are forbidden the path, they'd destroy it, they're cute as buttons and they love their mommy, but I need to run off with just mommy or I'll snap. Funny to say it like that, of course I wouldn't, it's just nice to say it. Half an hour a day is all I ask and I'm smart to, way things are going for my husband, it's smart for me to look like success even if I'm a gutted, rotten thing, oh my, where are these wicked things coming from today? Must be the weather, the pressure does things, I don't know what, I'm not good at repeating what I hear. Did I just laugh? I did, odd to do that when it's so dark, probably shouldn't, I normally don't like to but it helps to laugh and be done with it, 'oh, yes, see you soon, oh, yes, I'll tell him you said hello, crazy how busy things get, oh, yes, yes, oh no...did I forget the oregano?, I did didn't I, well, let me dash back into the store, see you later, of course, we should get together real soon, so good to see you, bye, bye,' laugh-laugh-laughing as I turn back to get the oregano that I didn't forget, but I don't have time to explain that I have to fit in a run before picking up the kids. Gosh, it feels easy today, although I can't really see the path now. No lights on in the houses, usually they leave them on, what are they are trying to say by turning them off, that I should run through the pit alone while they snicker at me from within those cavities, those gorgeous houses of ours, gussied up with siding hiding every inch of them, wreaths and cornucopias nailed

to their doors, our dirty mats below, 'welcome!, welcome!, come inside and sip from the crystal, clink-clink, everyone, a toast to this lovely evening, to our beautiful company, to the wonderful dainties my wife's prepared, here's to us, our children, our community, our...excuse me honey?, oh, my wife has something to say, go ahead, this party is as much yours as it is mine'...'thank you dear, I just want to say thank you all for gracing our home to celebrate another season of decay sprinkled over with holiday pinwheels rolling down the hallways, dens, bedrooms, where we fight and roll on the floor like half-eaten worms, always killing the lights so no one sees our stinking flesh perfumed with the happiness you tie to a string and yank out like a hollow disease, there, there, see how everything's better, but it's not and we got to go at it again, pulling down the shades so no one sees we're happy with the stench of blood, guts, lips smacking, bodies exploding against glass, and we smile and smile and turn off the lights and hide behind the shades again, watching someone pass by, a housewife, our neighbor mrs. susie, jogging along the path snaking across the end of our properties, see her stick figure race past those anorexic trees?'

Shhhhhhh. It's coming like an eclipse, look at her, she can't see it but we can, he's coming up on her on a bicycle of all things, it's so quiet she won't know what hit her, and tomorrow we'll say how tragic it is, we'll say it and cry and cry, but we'll really laugh through our teeth, poor thing, so sudden, no one saw it coming but we did, the path was too black for her, shhhhh, he's going to pass her and...

Sorry ladies. It's not like you think. You can't see what I did. The old man passed, and I admit I didn't know what hit me, wasn't how the storybooks tell it, it came from nowhere and flew by on a bicycle with a bright headlight. It was dressed in jeans, sneakers, windbreaker, shock of white hair receding but long, and as it cycled past, I looked at its face – old, thin, and

caked white. Funny how I thought I'd run after it. I wanted to rip off my smile and fling my lips to the ground, I wanted only blood, teeth and truth, I wanted to be him but he's faster, and I didn't wear the right shoes. Did I just laugh again? What a tragedy to be so spoiled by my picture album— click-click - husband, kids, dog, garden beds, friends, neighbors, parties, three o'clock jog, and orgasm cut from my pretty storybook - oh my, but look at him peddling away. I'm too much for you. I'll bet you never passed one like me before, bet you wanted to touch me for real, go ahead, lots have, in and out right under a perfectly scented life, but a little shit is necessary, and it's so easy too, you would laugh the way I say, 'oh, honey, I forgot to pick up the dry cleaning, I'll be right back...oh, honey, what a mess, how late I am, the traffic was horrible, but look what I have for you, your favorite: peanut butter and fudge delight, let me get dinner going, you must be starving...oh, I am too, but I had a bite to eat along the way...oh, yes, yes, that's true, honey, I don't like to snack between meals, but let's talk about you now, how was your day, what'd you do after leaving the office, you're awful late yourself...oh how sweet, you picked up a bottle of chardonnay and roses, what did I do to deserve this...oh my outfit reminds you of when we first met, well, that's real touching, honey.'

Wait, where are you going? I can't see your headlight. Are you leaving? But we're all for an old man on a bicycle who laughs as you drip, drip, drip through the hole that you are, cause Death's got a nasty sense of humor. See? Look at it coming back for me like I knew it would, irresistible, everyone says I am, and you...you...oh my...no one's ever done that before, do you have to keep the headlight on, if someone sees, I'll have explaining to do but...

Oh, my, my, would you look at her? Poor susie. Maybe we won't laugh about it. Can you imagine her husband seeing her like this? He's so used to her ironed smile and pants creased up the middle, it'll be hard for him, it's hard even for me. What are you talking about? You hated her

guts. I know but there's nothing left of them now. What did the old man see in her? Poor thing. Maybe she'll dry up and blow away, be best for everyone, especially the kids. But look. A vulture's going at the scraps with his blood red rubber face, a black ring tracing his lidless eyes, a hooked beak twitching like a conscience, it's him alright, but they'll blame it on something else, the cops and the husband, they'll think it's a fluke, something wild got her, even with our gates it got her, and it'll get us too if we're not vigilant. Oh dear, look at him getting back on his bike. Hear the children laughing? He's peddling again. Aren't they your kids? I don't know. I can't see. Then ask susie. We can't. She's dead. No she's not, she's right here. Why are you laughing?

Sorry. I can't help it.

'Then someone woke me up.'

'Who?'

'The maid.'

'But you had the room for the night.'

'She wanted to make sure.'

'Of what?'

She didn't see me come out.'

'She knew.'

I shook my head.

'Must've done it before too.'

'How'd you know?'

Knew it the instant I went from susie dead to the room waiting for me - table, ashtray, keys, window, door, other side of the bed, skirt, bra, blouse on the floor - everything waiting to be used by my thighs, arms, shoulders, toes, stomach, hips, my pretty face and spine, and that's when I woke up and saw her. Don't know how long she'd been standing there, but when I looked at her, she looked at me like she'd been where I'd been, seen what I'd seen, and knew what it all meant.

'Ever look at someone who looks back at you like they're you?'

'No.'

'Good. I don't want you looking at me like that cause we don't mean to live. We do what we do, but that don't make it anything to look at. I do tricks. It don't mean anything. Just a bunch of voices, bodies, money being kicked around. The maid stood there and understood it all, and she got no business doing that. What's to understand? It was a cold thing for her to pick up and fold my clothes and lay them on the bed before disappearing and coming back with clean sheets and towels, like fresh things would make me into something. She didn't look at me. I'll give her that. She did her job and closed and locked the door. That's what got me up. Got a job to do. I dressed and business picked up until I checked out. Funny. I thought I forgot about her. Least she didn't get me to do what you did.'

'What didn't she do?'

'She didn't get me to talk.'

'Like me.'

'Like you.'

Like you too. But he didn't know my words don't fall out like yours, Hain. They don't seep into breath and spit, they don't ring above phones and bosses, you dine out and get fat on them, but mine are thin. I got to cut them up into tiny pieces to make something out of them. Guy don't got any so we live off mine.

And I got you. You're like that guy in the motel who got me talking. He bit into words and let me talk so I'd be fat like him. Too bad I gagged on them. I swallowed them whole. I didn't chew them like he did.

Fattest I ever was was in that motel room. That's what words do to you. Make you so fat and ugly you can't stand yourself no more. See why Blankfine was easy. He was a decision that made up its mind in that motel room when that fat man made me eat all those words. Someone had to pay. I walked into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. Bulging eyes, chubby cheeks, skin on my jaw hanging. I was grotesque.

He had to pay and he did and it was good. Cause the waitress didn't tell you something else. I met Blankfine. I said I never met him and I didn't, least it wasn't no who are you and how do you do. He talked at me, I talked at him, we took it back to his room, but that don't mean I met him. We had it out the night before I killed him. Bet you think I'm a liar, but you slice words differently than I do. Remember, I slice mine thin. You got to sniff between them to know what I'm really getting at.

Thing is I wasn't looking to get at anything that night. Guy walked out and I hung around. Bar was going to close, waitress wiped up the tables and stacked the chairs on top of them, she didn't say a word to me, which was fine, I was busted from the drive, heat, and having to get away to pull into another empty bar and motel.

Fine. But I still had to do something to know today from tomorrow. Today is Monday. I know cause I did something. I killed a man on Monday. See how you keep things straight? Don't have to kill. You could take a ride on a Ferris wheel. You laugh but I liked the pier cause it could be a zero night, but it's tonight not tomorrow, and I knew cause I was doing something, I was riding the wheel round sky-mountain-ocean-sand-green-red-yellow-pink-blues-running-twisting-turning-round-and-round-tops-of-heads-bodies-like-mine-turning-as-I-rise-rise-rise-can-you-see-me-up-high-look-I'm-rocking-the-boat-in-midair-that's-me-above-the-circustop-and-down-below-sandals-dragging-on-screams-for-cotton-candy-and-french-fries-but-you-can't-get-me-look-how-high-connie-is-connie-is-high-today-not-tomorrow. Do something and you keep today and tomorrow straight.

And I like today. That's why I stuck around the bar. Go back to the room and it'll be tomorrow quick. I stuck around and that's when Blankfine walked in. Had on a

suit jacket and pants that didn't match the heat or him, trust me, I got to know his kind years ago.

'Excuse me. I sit here.'

He grabbed the chair next to me, and dragged its legs to a spot he figured on. Was real keyed up, but he cooled once he sat down.

'Bar's closing you know.'

I wanted to grab something too. Looked at the napkin under my beer. Grabbed the corners of it, four corners, four right angles, world would go to hell without them, especially mine, without Guy-banks-money-just judges across the border- without them I wouldn't be a perfect square, at least I am for now, and now can last a long time or no time at all.

Blankfine got up and sat back down again. Something was eating him.

'It knows me.'

It knows me. See what I mean.

'What?' I asked but wanted no part in it.

'That.'

His finger stuck up. I looked at the ceiling.

'What is it?'

He laughed but not funny like.

'His eye.'

I saw what he did.

'Looks like god.'

He stopped laughing.

'I didn't think of that.'

His mind was gone and that eye did it to him. He couldn't quit it, even with me sitting right there, no man can keep from looking at me, except one who has it in for himself. And Blankfine did.

'I see it looking at me here, there, nowhere.'

'It's omnipotent.'

'You mean omniscient.'

This eye everywhere and nowhere made sure he lost it.

Nothing more to say. I got up to leave.

'I got to go Mr...'

'Blankfine. You want a drink?'

Still wouldn't look at me, but he wanted to buy me a drink.

'Already had one.'

He laughed for real this time.

'I know. So does He.'

I stopped fidgeting with my napkin and pushed my chair back.

'I'm going.'

He smiled.

'Of course you will. You got to go and kill, don't you, Connie?'

Now he turned and looked at me. Imagine a stranger putting your name and killing side-by-side, like those two things are the same. Couldn't go back to the room now.

'What'd you say?'

'You know.'

He was right. I did.

'How'd you know my name?'

He pointed at it.

'He told me.'

'The eye.'

'Has a proper name.'

'What is it?'

'If you're nice, I'll tell. I heard you used to be real nice.'

I thought I knew him. Can't remember them all, but I recognized this one.

'I'm not doing that anymore.'

The waitress came over, handed Blankfine a drink, not a word to him or me, just did her job like the bar wasn't closed. He took a sip. His adam's apple snaked up and down like it swallowed something three times its size.

'That's good.'

He wiped off those thin lips with the back of his hand.

What could he do to me? Nothing.

'You going to tell me his name?'

He looked at me hard now. Knew he couldn't keep his eyes off me. And I liked it. I like being looked at and not watched, they expect nothing when they's just looking, but when they's watching you, they expect

things, they expect I'm pretty but not innocent, somehow I'm guilty and they know it. Blankfine looked too hard now for it to be just looking. He watched and I watched him back.

'Your eyes...back and forth.'

I felt them going right, left, right again.

'So?'

His finger circled the rim of his glass as his eyes followed mine.

'So you're lying.'

Impossible. I hadn't said a damn thing.

'About?'

He took another drink as he kept watch.

'Don't be like that. You're still a nice girl. Got yourself into a mess for a guy you barely know. I'd say that's real nice of you.'

I blinked. Wasn't my intention to.

'He loves me.'

I repeated those words to see if I could. I don't blame Blankfine for laughing.

'Curious how I know that's not true?'

I was.

'You know who got to you first. You can't love anything after him.'

'Who got to me?'

He motioned to the eye. His answer to everything.

'Does it ring a bell?'

It didn't. It's absurd.

'No.'

He shook his glass, ice cubes bashed against each other.

'The name Hirst means something to you.'

I shook my head.

'No it don't.'

Blankfine ripped his smirk off. Everything got serious enough to laugh for real.

'He goes by other names. Once I thought I was dealing with some players, never met them face to face, can't get things done meeting and greeting all the time, come to find out later they were one and the same Hirst.'

Blankfine looked choked up by it.

'A man like that'll make you honest. Don't matter who's who when you're dealing with him. You do right or it's the big nothing. Know what I mean?'

I nodded.

'He'll kill you.'

The smirk returned.

'Someone will.'

I looked for the waitress nowhere in sight.

'Someone like you.'

I laughed.

'You're crazy.'

Something sighed but it wasn't us.

'You're next.' Blankfine glared at the eye. 'You'll see.

You owe him.'

I shook my head feeling weird, like what he said had nothing and everything to do with me, he didn't make sense, but I knew what he was talking about was true, I just couldn't place his words, wasn't nowhere to put them, nothing about me matched up with them, but there they were staring right at me. I owed someone, everyone does, but who?

'Hirst you say?'

'That I did.'

'How is it I owe him?'

Blankfine's arm shot up, his fingers curled into his palm except one getting someone's attention, I was going to turn around to see who it was, but the waitress came up.

'Another round.'

'I'm trying to get out of here, Roy.'

He handed her both our glasses. Mine wasn't even empty yet.

'One more and we'll take it elsewhere.'

'Right.'

Waitress let her arms drop and the glasses banged as she did what she was told. And so did I.

'You know we're going back to the room.'

'Long as it's yours not mine.'

Don't know why I said that. I don't have to say I can't go back to any room. I'm not going back to my room because I'm not. Don't know why I get myself into things, overstepping what I can't see, it's stupid not knowing what's really going on, cause I swear I don't.

'Guy won't care.'

'How you know him?'

'Same way I know you're coming back with me.'

'Can't make me.'

Can't make me do it. Can't make me sit and listen to more of this either. I'm just here because.

'I can't but he can. You owe him. Remember you burned him. He doesn't blame you. He sees it all. You were young, too young to do that kind of thing at that speed, day in, day out, you must have felt chained to it, no love in it, but what you burnt cost him, what he expects now is a...'

'I got it.'

I knew who we were talking about.

I got it alright. We went back to the room. Place was dead. Waitress - nobody around - no cars but one, so you tell me how he got there? I went back to the room. I was sure he was sitting right there, older but the same thinness you don't touch, you just don't, a lot about him don't look like what it is.

This here's a warning, Hain. You don't choke a snake with your hands, you shoot the son of a bitch.

You'll see. You'll do what I say if he sees to it. Cause he sure sees you putting us out there. I don't mind, not at all, these letters of ours put things straight and quick for me, all the facts in a row, bam, bam, bam, no time to lie. I swear there'd be no lying if there was no time for it, but nobody'd wants to live like that cause things would be what they seem.

What I'm getting at is you watch out. You know too much, and what you don't know, you're making up. You got time to make a myth out of us, but you're risking it, you don't

know enough about us, you don't know the backstory. Lots of people like you take the risk. They said god set things right in seven days, cause like you, they had time on their hands to come up with that, I'll bet they had centuries, but I'll bet they didn't know the backstory either, bet they didn't know how god couldn't stomach the idea of us, but one thing lead to another and here we are. Don't think he didn't want to cut us loose, and I'd have told him go ahead and do it. You see, people like you don't tell it like it is cause you don't want us to know. But I do.

Just like I know it's a matter of time before he gets his comeuppance, but you can walk away, and don't go shaking your head about it like there's no way you're not going to do exactly what he wants you to, you already are. If you knew what was best, you'd run. You got a duty to. I'm telling you, you're gonna kill and get killed, and he's not worth what your guts will do to you before it's all said and done. They'll squirm till you cut them out, but you can't and they know it, so you'll kill again to make them stop but they won't, so you'll do it again and again just to take your mind off them, and before you know it, your mind squirms just like your guts and that's it. That's your backstory nobody's gonna know but me.

Do what you need to do. If you don't, I left something on the table for you.

Remember I killed a man. The name don't matter, only the face. A face within a face. You stare at him, but you don't see him and that's it. That's all it takes. That's what makes killing easy. You see someone else when you kill a man, don't make sense but it's true, for me, anyway.

Guy hasn't done it yet. I think he'd like to but he don't talk about it, I don't really like talking about it either,

more I do, more I think it wasn't me. How could it be?
Just when we think we know we don't.

Got to get some rest now.
Connie

She says every man gets his comeuppance. He can't pile up years without things sticking, he does what he has to and what's done's done, no time to take it back, that's how man gets a conscience: he needs somewhere to put things that stick. Course no man obeys it; comeuppance is his backup. It gets his attention, makes him think about what he's about to do. Found out this man Hirst has it coming to him. Wouldn't mind watching it, problem is he's no man, he's like a "shadow without air." Heard this someplace and it rings true about a man like him. I haven't met up with him but it doesn't matter. Connie's playing along. She knows something he doesn't want known. Better if she didn't know. Not my problem. How it all started is because it's going to end and take things with it.

Course it's easy to lose track of things out here. They moved on, checked in and out of another motel without incident, except for the poem she left on the table. Got a call about it. Motel wasn't more than a hundred miles away. Pulled in late afternoon, looked the room over, cops didn't miss anything, these two aren't complicating matters above their heads. What they're messed up in don't make sense, and cops have a hard time arresting things that don't. Connie gets this. Said that much in the poem. Pretty sure she wrote it. Showed it to a lady who knew her real well, said she recognized the writing, said it proved Connie still had a conscience. Don't know about that but the poem's hers. Can tell it is. I can't understand a word of it.

I got to talk sense
Eyes pinned to that fence
One above blue seeing all,
Makes me think I kick to fall
Back when I saw him there lurking
Out of nowhere saw him smirking
Sat down in a corner shadowed by blankness

Claws out, on his lap, feather in my headdress
Paid for it inside that dry old sin,
A Lady thought me kith and kin.

Poem came with an address. Adobe de Bene. I left to see
about it.

Thing about the chase is getting ahead and she's good at it.
Figure Guy's doing the driving, she don't talk about it, so
it must be he's fast with getting away and she's just fast,
doesn't matter what Guy knows that she don't, her plans
are fast, her looks faster, then she's gone. That's how she
stays ahead.

Cops found a painting of her on the nightstand. What's she
want me to do with it? Hold it out ahead of everything to
make me go mad out here with heat, motels, deadlines,
highways, and words, words, words making days,
mornings, nights go fast and heavy till something's got to
snap? Won't be me. I got a job to do. Bury it in the glove
compartment and then get on with it. I did but her looks
stick. Not like I hadn't seen them before. Cops showed
me a photo of her and Guy after the first job. Fresh and
good looking like two dimes in a dozen. I forgot about her
but not this time. Painting's no bigger than an index card,
can't see her body, just her face and those eyes looking up
to no good. I stuck it in the glove compartment, but what's
that change?

Less nonsense and things would be better. Nobody wants
that though. Think there'd be none of it in the desert, but it
runs deep here, and that just goes to show. Least I found
Adobe de Bene easy enough. It had taken some punches
over the years, places get old and die and Adobe de Bene
knew all about it: bald spots like mange on its walls, tiles
on its roof like bombed out sores, gutters like limp broken
necks, front door a splintered bone. Adobe de Bene knew
what was coming and so did she. Katarina. She lives with
the rot because it suits her.

Don't know how long I waited before she came out. I didn't think anybody'd walk out of Adobe de Bene. Guess I didn't think about a lot. Didn't think I'd grab Connie's poem before getting out of the car, didn't think about her being in the back of my mind where I don't go looking, didn't think I'd walk up to a lady looking every bit the stranger I knew, nothing but a poem and this address to go on. Nothing but a dead end. Why think about it?

Katarina does and she likes to talk about it. She rolls up words like shirtsleeves, keeps them close to her skin, above the elbow where she can see them. Can't say I liked her. She knows how to talk, and she don't care if she gets it right. She was a wrecked, fatal woman, the kind that whipped a calloused life with youth and beauty, cutting its skin wide open to make it bleed so she could taste what life really was before it neighed and snatched that whip from her, its hooves crushing her for good.

Katarina was ruined but she knew to stick around. Tried to steel herself against the decades. Her long-dyed hair glared like a black corona around a face that got the better of her. She was too obvious: black lines for brows, painted red lips, pupils like glints of barrels ready to fire above heavy bags. Everything about her sagged. Tired neck and breasts, wrists thick with flesh, fingers choked by gold rings. Still her look was quick and to the point: she paid for living.

"You lost?"

That's how it began. And Katarina didn't have time to wait.

"What's in your hand? A poem?"

I gave it to her. "With this address on it."

She looked at it, turned it over, something forced her lip to curl under. She smiled.

"Connie." She handed it back to me. "She sent you."

"Something like that."

“Not with that girl. She means what she says. She has a conscience. You know that now.”

I put it back in my pocket.

“Only thing I know is she’s robbed banks, killed a man, and now she’s heading to the border like everyone with a conscience.”

Katarina threw me a look that snatched itself back.

“I see,” she smiled again, but it was different. “Come on inside. The desert won’t have us talking out here.”

She turned and pushed the door back. I walked in. Place hadn’t been touched. Dust sprawled on everything - wooden floor, lamp shades, curtains, end tables, sofas, armchairs, reception desk, even on the massive staircase looking like a spine keeping Adobe in line.

“Place is really something.”

Katarina motioned with her hand to sit down on the sofa across from the fireplace.

“Anything to drink?” she asked, disappearing behind me, her voice trailing off.

“Too early,” I answered, looking at the fireplace. Had a stone fountain in it with moss growing out of its mouth. I heard a laugh then footsteps coming back.

“How’s a whiskey?”

Katarina stood over me with a neat one. I took it. She sat down on an armchair closest to the fountain, placing her drink on an end table before crossing her legs, and easing back into a stiff cushion that made it look like she had a gun to her back.

I sipped at my drink.

“Not too early after all, is it Mr. Hain?”

Didn’t tell her my name. Haven’t been volunteering it ever since the phone started going off late and no one on the other end when I answer it.

“How’d you know my name?”

“That’s what you said it was.” She sipped from her glass, her red lips marking it.

“No I didn’t.”

She nodded like that muzzle was still against her.

“Then allow me then to introduce myself. Please call me Katarina. Everyone at Adobe de Bene did.”

I don't trust anyone who talks about the past like they're not sitting there sucking in the same minutes as you. If you got flesh and bones sticking to you, forget the past.

"Still haven't told me how you know me. We've never met."

"I do feel like I know you. We both have stories people want to hear. And here we are. Time must be working in our favor."

I rested the drink on my knee, immediately it sweat through my jeans.

"You been talking to her?"

"Connie."

"Yeah."

Katarina ran her hands against the arms of the chair.

"I don't bother about that child. Haven't spoken to her since she left. Heard this and that, none of it makes sense. She had a home at Adobe de Bene, she woke up in the same place, same bed, everything the same no matter what, the girls and I loved her, clients adored her, she was so young, couldn't have been any younger, not a mark on her, born spotless we said, couldn't teach her to look like that, she was blameless no matter what. Men liked that. Made them innocent too. They left no trace. Like what they did didn't happen."

"What didn't happen?"

"Sin, Mr. Hain. If you believe in that sort of thing."

Felt like I was being dared to say it.

"I believe in facts."

Her head fell to her chest as her shoulders convulsed like she was sobbing. She wasn't. She was laughing.

"Facts? That is quite fantastic," she suddenly exclaimed, as she looked up at the ceiling, a black line tearing down her cheek. "Although I guessed you'd say that."

She removed a handkerchief from under the straps of her dress, and patted her cheek until the black was gone. Then she took a long drink and put her glass back down on the table. She cleared her throat but said nothing.

"How can you guess anything about me?"

I put my glass down just like she did and leaned forward. Katarina sat there looking down at her knees where swollen veins twisted up and vanished.

“She’s got you caught up in this now. Could be she gets herself killed, could be she’s toying with it, and me being here is her way of thinking twice. You can help.”

“Do what?” She asked without moving.

“Something you know that I don’t. She wants me to know something. Could be you know what it is.”

Thought I saw her smirk, but I couldn’t be sure. A hazy light possessed the room. Katarina stood up, and like a mechanical wave moving forward and backward, she left the room and returned with a stack of something in her hands. She dropped it on the table. Papers. Mine. She sat down again and positioned herself in the chair like she was jockeying for a good view of the spectacle.

“Could be I do know something. Could be what I know will help. Could be you need me to help you not her.” She stopped and looked hard at me. “Could be something else too.”

“What?”

She sucked in the sides of her mouth like she needed to think twice.

“Could be it’s you she’s helping. You like facts. So does she.”

“I don’t like them. Facts are my job. I’m a reporter.”

She smiled.

“Fact is you’re closer to getting killed than she is. We both know that.”

A game of words is what this was. Talk about killing a man is easy.

“By who? You?”

The question made her burst out.

“You surprise me, Hain. Look around. Adobe de Bene wouldn’t do for something like that. The stains.

Eventually they’d tell on me. Killing would be bad business. Although soon it’ll be torn down. Can tear anything down, he says. Maybe but a part of it is like a pestilence. There’ll be no wiping it out and he knows this, still he thinks Adobe will fall to its knees, and then off with

its head, a beautiful thing to witness, he says, quick and clean, the freshness of a new start. He has the stomach for it. A double homicide is what it'll be."

"Double homicide?"

"If he kills Adobe de Bene, I'm as good as dead, and he knows it. It's part of our history. Makes it harder for him to lead it to the guillotine when there are two names on the deed."

"You own Adobe."

"And so does he."

"Then he's got to make a deal or no go."

Who is he? Christ, here we go again, with Katarina, with everything I've been hearing, seeing, places I end up at, people I talk to, letters I keep getting - robberies, killings, highways, drinks, words - most especially the words. Someone is forcing us to say them. Someone else is doing the talking. They can't be mine, but they're no bastards. They're my words. I'm the one doing the talking and the writing. They're my sons, but they don't look legit. See what I mean? Don't sound like me. Talked to Hank about it, told him something's got to give. No it don't. It's just stress. Deadlines are getting to you. Stay out there, relax, take a day off if she does, everything'll be clearer. You're a reporter. Stick to the facts. Don't blow it. This lady's not going free. It'll be over soon. Be patient. You'll thank me later. Now how's the car running?

He doesn't get it. I'm forced to use words I can't stand. Don't like it one bit. Use to be I put the facts down, Hank published them, and that's all there was to it. A simple routine got the job done. I didn't think about words. Now they got me. Take it or leave it, Hank says. What the hell does that even mean?

"What did you say?"

Katarina had been watching me. I blinked. She appeared more definite now. Get to the point. Get somewhere with her or get out.

“Listen...,” I said, clasping my hands while still leaning forward, “...problem with the deed is yours not mine. I’m no closer to finding out what you know that Connie wants me to. She turned tricks here, did the same elsewhere, tell me something I don’t know and I’ll be going.” I looked back at her like I used to look at people: sharp and dry.

“I was getting to that if am I not mistaken.”

“Just get to the point.”

She shifted in her chair, leaned to one side, hand over hand, real demure, like she wanted this to begin.

“I believe I was, Mr. Hain. I was about to raise a simple question about something you printed.”

“Which is?”

“What did you say about her telling you that you’d kill and get killed?”

The stack of dailies was right there on the table. Latest was on top. She knew I didn’t respond to that letter yet. That’s why I’m here. She knows that too.

“I’ll print my take on that when I know the facts.”

Katarina smoothed her dress as a smirk crawled across those lips.

“Connie tells you that you’re his cat’s paw. You act exactly how he wants you to. Drive here, drive there, check in, check out, talk to this one, talk to that one, print this, print that, kill her then kill yourself, and the only thing you have to say is you’re waiting for the facts. You sure it isn’t him saying that?”

I felt a pressure of some kind. Wring its goddamn neck, Hain.

“Him?”

Katarina feigned surprise.

“Have you heard a word I’ve been saying? He’s on the deed next to me.”

I got my notepad from my back pocket without thinking.

“You do that, Hain. You write it down.”

She paused long enough to make me look from the blank page.

“H...I...R...S...T. You ready to listen now?”

That name again. I spelled it out. Heard that tone in Katarina's voice. Heard it a lot these days, kind of tone that sounds like a question but it's not. It's a threat with no flesh and bones. Just a tone. You ready to listen now? Words in print don't sound like they do when they're said to your face. Same goes for how they look. Hirst. Just a name. But that name don't look like it does when you see it in print, and I know I can't see him, but I know he's there everywhere, in everything. That name is atomic. Connie likes atoms, said so herself, so Hirst is not just a name, he's an atom that is everything, so maybe what I do is done in his name. Maybe I'll kill for a man I never met. He's just a name sticking on warehouses, desert towns, paintings, banks, deeds, whores, killings, consciences, you name it, it's there: Hirst.

Could have been the other way around. A swerve of the atom and Hain could've been Hirst. It is what it is and it's easy to be what you think you're not. Fact is 1+1 does equal 2.

'I said are you ready?'

I put down the notepad and got out the recorder.

"Ready."

Katarina straightened up like an old doll, cleared her throat, shook her hair from her face, then nodded and began. Word for word, this is it.

Make sure I look good, Hain. As good as Connie, pretty and young, least in print. You hear me? I laugh a lot these days. I must like it because it costs to laugh in Adobe de Bene. Was different back then. Everyone says that because it's true. There was laughter and girls were paid handsomely for it – smile and be charming - they were real belles looking for a new start. Most drifted down from up north and got stuck in the desert, that's how they found their way here. They knocked on the door and told their story - man left them, no reason why, he's too quick for that,

so they hitchhiked far as they could before highways, rides, money, time, and men ran out. I listened like it was the first I heard it. I never asked why they took the leap, trusting when they knew better. Because they knew they'd get cut up flinging themselves out there like that. By the time they knocked, Adobe de Bene had to slow the bloodletting. I did it but I never asked why. A real woman doesn't. She knows women pay. For what? For everything. We don't care why. We care about how, and that's when our stories break through the pip, shedding it to bloom in the void if it has to.

But a woman, a real one, won't forget that moment oscillating between her being a part of that seed and being nothing to it. She can't forget because on the one side of that moment are her memories, on the other a vacuum. Nobody can live without memories, but real women need memories they can raise from the dead, those lying back in that fresh-faced moment when they didn't know what they'd be.

I've been raising the dead for years without so much as a signal I'm coming for them. I sit here like this, not thinking, just looking without seeing line or form, when something recalls a moment of innocence when I didn't have to scrub to get things clean. The more I call it to mind, clearer it gets, till I see it sure as I see you sitting here. Memories live. They have eyes, lungs, I see and feel them breathing right now this very second. You and me, we see it's true.

Look.

There I am on my land before everything, before him, before his knuckles struck that door, before the prospect, the highway, Adobe de Bene, before I smiled like that, because before everything I was happy. The desert was all there was and it echoed Katarina. I was young, a world to myself, and we looked at each other and believed. Because the desert has eyes, ones it secrets away, they

trick you into looking at but not seeing them, they make you believe water is its greatest mirage, not your blindness.

Because the desert looks at you from love not malice. This is its true illusion. You look but don't see it. What you see is merciless desolation, heat sucking at your eyes, you see a lie and believe it because you're a liar.

But I'm not. The desert knows. It knows what it taught me. Look and see. The desert is not the forest. There is nothing to hang on to, no arms folding you in shadow where you can dance and dream and dress your sores in cool oblivion. The desert is not folklore. It's real if you have the eyes for it, the imaginary ones, the ones that watch as you close the door and turn to face the desert, seeing it as a country without a capital, a land without land, a place with no body, seeing in an instant no limits, everything wrung out licking the air. You see all this before they see you reflected in its eyes loving you pure and simple. This is when you know.

Still the desert plays tricks because what if. What if you look and see and deny it? I will never know. My eyes have been real from the moment I closed that door in my childhood and turned to face it. I looked and saw and loved. What if it is magic, death, woman-man, a whorehouse pivoting on nowhere - what if? What if I looked through the desert's eyes, what if I swore I saw infinite distance only to see what was right in front of me, these rock formations I touched and laid on before the moon came for me where I concealed myself between their slits, the darkness echoing the moon's call. Katarina. I did not answer. It could not find me in between their hard red faces and bodies clawed at by the wind, light, and heat. The darkness called again and again, even if it was just for play, I did not answer, even if it was just to pass the time that did not move, no revolution from sun to moon, I did not answer.

Darkness is not the desert.

When I looked through its eyes at those red faces and bodies, I loved like it loved. The desert is beauty. Clean like death. It loves what it does. These faces and bodies are testaments to grace. How could I do what I do for so long if I didn't see how the desert sees?

Many times I have seen these testaments come to life. Roughed up beyond hope, they live and breathe to tell a love story that only a young woman can believe. But that is not enough. A woman has to be certain like the desert and I am.

I cannot carve my lover's name into desert. I cut it into moving rock, bending, refusing to bleed, this is where his name lies: in stone.

Back when I still had to become what I am, I opened my door to the desert and it danced and kissed and loved and desired me. I looked and saw a milky red fog now veiling, now exposing, the lovers, these rocks, the bodies of men and women stripped without remorse, closing in on one another, imperceptible. One man, one woman, almost frenzied, the burning rod whipped, and they touched and danced in tongues piercing with song. I saw lovers just like I see you. I saw them and had to be one among them, not for a diseased night between imagined and polluted womanhood. I had to be love eternal, to be desiccated and ravaged without the phases of the moon, I had to be scraped at until the rawness exposed something deep where only the blade can go: his name. To get to him, to get to his name, I had to have them. All of them.

And I did.

At night I danced with the desert, I became rock like them, petrified and moving, forgetting morning that made me see the desert with your eyes seeing nothing but

rock, a mass, a thing, but you are blind. You believe facts. But they are not certain. Only the desert is. It is love. I am Katarina. I am certain. I am love. And real love has two names that go hand in hand. Mine is one with his. I made our names one through many.

I don't expect you to understand. It means nothing to you that I had them before he came. I had been in the desert for years. My ecstasy rasped until he knocked. That night I cut him deep into me where the desert refused to go. I turned on it to be with him. I was in love. All it took was him. No man believed a young woman could be absent from him, her body in flames in the desert, but he wanted to be certain, and that changed everything.

Do not ask what this means. I will tell you. The desert is love. It is a prison. I cut his name into me and it scarred, but it was fresh and I was young, I did not see how grotesque I would be, I did not see how women whore to keep love secreted where only one man and one woman can go.

He knocked and I opened my door to him. He came inside and left it open. He told me to look. I did not see it. I was in love. My eyes saw only one man, one woman. He told me to look out the window. It could be mine, all of it, the desert mine. My eyes saw only bodies on fire. He told me to look and see the highway, to imagine opportunity. I saw one man coming for one woman, eternally. He told me to look at how I lived. My eyes saw only poverty before he came. Everywhere I looked, I saw him, and he stayed. He made me think we would see nothing but us, everywhere, like the desert, forever.

But man is not the desert.

A thousand mornings he looked out and saw his highway. It burnt his eyes out and made me a whore. I

couldn't have known, not at first, a real woman can't, she is palpable - she is what she is. I could not have known they are not like the desert. They need us - man, his highway, his deeds - they need our eyes, bodies, dreams, signatures, properties, they need our fat because their gain is not thin. They eat us up and make us hungry just like them, and we and eat and eat until what? I haven't made it that far but I will and so will you. They'll make certain we do. They'll gnash their teeth on our guts. God help us.

He knew this. He said he loved me. The desert refused to speak. I was so young and pretty, I couldn't have known, I only wanted to look in his eyes and see myself. He asked what would become of me. How could I know? I only knew I wanted to be as big as him, so I tasted his dreams, I ate them up, I became fat on them, until one morning I looked out the window and saw the highway. And I ate it. That night, I came to him as a woman, the next morning his name beside mine on the deed, wedded like man and wife. That's how Adobe de Bene came to be. His deed, his dreams, his highway, became hers.

He built me a home. Adobe de Bene. I thought it would be our home. Instead it became a stench of rooms awake with laughter masking the sores on the walls. He cut it from my rocks, he took them and cut into them. I watched him do it and didn't try to stop him. I had him. I thought I had all of him. I didn't know what men are made of. All I knew was the more he built, the more Adobe de Bene became him.

But man is not a home.

He walks out and never comes back, and even if he does, you're not the same even if your home is. You're a stain he can smell. Time feeds off you and now you repulse him, so he does what men do, he takes her who's just like you, like you were, and just like you, she won't know there'll come a time when...because she doesn't know time is a hunger, its stench, its laugh, how can she?

Before she came along, Adobe de Bene shut us into one another. I believed time would let us be one man, one woman, together. I believed a lie he knew well. He saw how it watched, how it waited as he passed mirrors in rooms burning, he came for me as Adobe de Bene sunk into its tomb, the desert collapsing under it, the highway shrinking from it, they wanted nothing to do with the dead. That's how he looked at me that day. Time saw it coming. I only saw him. He sat where you are. It was before noon, before it got too hot, before the rot sweats. He called and I came down the stairs, the same ones you see.

'You don't have to keep saying that. I'll remember.'
'And if you don't?'
'It will.'
'It?'
'The recorder.'

I forgot about that. It's not like us. It records words. Nothing but man and woman possess them. We know words are there, we know they lust for us, for meaning, we know they watch us as we watch their every move, until we hear them snickering at our eyes gouged out before the final immolation, they laugh as our flesh gasps at the prophecy licking its teeth as it sits down to table. Before all, before the desert, words know and we know but do not see them. How can we record such things? We are not history. They are.

But where was I?

Yes. I heard him call me. I came down the stairs, our eyes following one another, they like to follow, but his did not look the same. He knew this and he knew my eyes looked and saw hope, even when Adobe de Bene stunk, even when he left his Katarina to whore for him, even when he returned for the deed, even a bloodless thing in the desert is worth something, even

when I looked in the mirror and saw hope baring its teeth at me, even then I did not forsake it to see what time saw coming: our history, our words, dead. A real woman knows to go this far to become what she is. He called and I pictured myself weightless coming for him.

‘Please.’

His voice raised as his hand signaled the chair opposite, his eyes following me but seeing a different thing.

‘Yes.’

And I smiled. Even though I had no need to before him.

He taught me to do this. Smile. I did it like it was nothing.

‘You look pretty like that.’

Never had he said this to me. I did not know what to say. Remember I was young, I had no words, I had nothing but the desert and this man, nothing else, I hadn’t met sin, I hadn’t shaken its hand before turning it over to see my future written on its palm, words telling me what’d I do and say and how I’d say it. I’d learn innuendos like to be fussed over just like a woman – the rouge, the accented eyes, the red lips, - the two go hand in hand. They are yours when you smile and say, “Adobe de Bene welcomes you. Please. Let us relax upstairs where we can talk a little if you like.” Words are maidens for sin. Shit sticks to them and that’s what sin is. It’s shit.

I didn’t know this back then, I only knew there was me and him and he said I looked pretty like that.

‘I’m sorry. I don’t understand.’

‘You can’t. That’s why I’m here.’

‘It’s why you love me.’

I made no sense. He smiled and I went cold. Still I refused to look at it.

He doesn’t love me.

You can say it now that you’re nothing. He doesn’t love you. He crossed his thin legs like an insect’s.

‘Adobe de Bene is real now. You’re a woman. Nothing is more beautiful. Do you understand?’

‘Yes.’ And I meant it.

‘Now you see as I do. Now is it time for us to be otherwise.’

Now.

Once I dreamt about now. I stood alone on the dust that became the highway, when suddenly I reigned above it like an ancient lighthouse. I was weary. I blinked with a sick eye as a morning bird fluttered beneath me. Then a pale blue and green butterfly alighted and the bird pecked and swallowed its heart whole. His voice sounded like this dream. Time for us to be otherwise. My breath fought with blood that ached. Still I did not see it.

‘I don’t understand.’

Since he came to me, it had been us, it had never been otherwise. He rose from the chair and turned to face the wall behind you. He would not look at me. This is how he spoke.

‘I must go. The highway must be finished. Adobe de Bene is done. It will attract them. You must be here for them.’

‘I am here for you.’

I did not know we were the past. He was there. I was here. I could not imagine the present not touching us.

‘You are, Katarina.’

‘Together we’ll be here for them.’

I did not know who they were. Not yet. One thing at a time.

‘You will be.’

‘And you?’

His back tensed, the strain coiling up from his spine to neck, forcing him to peck at something. Wait. I heard it. It was laughter.

‘Katarina...’ He stopped and faced me again. ‘...I will be here always. For you. Always for you.’

I did not see how easy words are, how they'll do anything you want them to, anything, even if they lose, they win. I did not see how he could leave the desert, his home, his woman, the deed, no, no, no, I did not see it coming.

'You'll be back.'

He looked through my words like they weren't there.

Without thinking, my face shattered into my hands. I wept.

Never had I done this. Never.

'Please, Katarina. I will come back.'

'For the deed.'

My hands let go of a face split apart. He remained unmoved.

'We are bound to it.'

'Our marriage.'

'A deed.'

'But you said.'

'Did I?'

I couldn't get my hands on it to put it together. My face was in pieces like my words, but still I tried.

'You did. You said let the desert go. You are now with me, with Adobe de Bene, our marriage will lure them into the desert.'

'And they will come.'

'They?'

'The others.'

'They don't know me.'

'They will.'

The weeping quit. Its scars lead nowhere.

'I don't see how this can be.'

'You will. And soon.'

'And you?'

He smiled.

'I will remember. You are my Katarina. Only mine.

Always.'

Memory. Mine. Love. Always. Only. I was too young and pretty to know memory and love are incompatible. They rule, they war, they make peace out of a treaty of lies, I do not understand why, even now when nothing about me is tucked away, even now I do not understand. I will

remember you as my Katarina, always. To remember is too much. To remember what is loved impossible.

His letter said so.

‘How can I forget coming upon you in the desert, abandoned and defenseless, you, I had to have you, all of you – the desert, the highway, Adobe de Bene – to have you was to have everything. It is right to remember. Fortune demands it. You are it. It is you I remember and to you I will return. Always.’

It is easy for a man to love and remember. Not a woman. We cannot choose both. I chose to love not remember. No man but him. I swore it.

‘You will have others.’

‘Never.’

I swore it. Never. Curse any woman who cheats her word. Never. Time stole his face, but it never robbed me of my love sucked deep. He left. He went from here. He made his fortune while his Katarina hunted down every memory of him to bludgeon the taste, the smell, the feel of him. It was bloodshed. To be the aegis of love, it had to be so. It was the only way to honor him.

And I never loved another. There were men of course, he knew there’d be, the first came after he left. He sent him to me. The man worked on the highway. He heard about Adobe de Bene, the desert, about Katarina who’d take care of him. See how easy it is? Soon I could not tell one man from another. I could not remember him or any of them. My love for him depended on it.

I welcomed every man to Adobe de Bene like it was the first time for me and for him, time and again I welcomed him and him and them and them, until I became Katarina, their very own Madame, who made a

home where everyone could love because no one remembered. He planned it. No one knew who they were. We all looked the same. We worked to be whores and sinners.

But the highway got louder. They heard it through the walls of Adobe de Bene, and then they remembered: it made them who they are. It wouldn't let them forget it. They came from it, they worked it to feed phantoms miles away, they remembered they were men and husbands and fathers and sinners, and I was a woman and a whore. He made sure they had a conscience about it.

It was a game of course. Now it was my turn. Get rid of it, Katarina. A conscience is too loud for this house. The highway chose me to make them forget, but a conscience remembers and splits the ears quick. I had to be louder, quicker, dust to dust with it or else.

One morning came when I walked down those stairs and stood before them in this very room to proclaim it.

'Today, I, Katarina, diadem of Adobe de Bene, woman to one and all, today I challenge the highway with roars of pleasure freed from the bit of conscience. From now on it will be carnival. I will skin it alive. Flesh, music, dance, burning drink, we will scrape the highway silent from end to end!'

I laughed. It was terrible. A handful of little words was all it took. My girls, the men, everyone was happy. Carnival whipped through dusk to dawn without a conscience. A smile, a courtesy, a bill exchanged, our work done and celebrated over and over again. I tell you this was only the beginning. I will show you what I mean.

I was never the same after that morning. My beauty eloped with words and everything changed. Words made me rich. Words helped me honor my love. It was the first time words did anything for me.

Carnival is how the money poured in, we reeked of it, my girls and I. Carnival is how I honored my love. It is true. A fact doesn't have to make sense. Everything about carnival was him, everything was love right now. It had to be. My love was without memory. It had to be the present not the past. It had to be the men, the reveling, the carnival, the excess. He knew this. He planned it. He said we had no choice. The highway was built, the deed was done, and a real woman knows how to take it. I liked the way he said that. I like how his words glide, wink, swing, their steps light and sharp, I like how they make you follow them, and you will, they'll make you sing and drink and dance and love quick and hard like something abominable. I took it in. I became enormous. I was repulsive. He told me to make ready and I did. My love became unfathomable.

I will show you. It's simple. Morning, noon, night in Adobe de Bene, I loved like everything was him. This is how I honored my love. This is how it remained always present free from memory. The more I loved men, the more I loved carnival, the more I loved him. You see me sitting here with my beauty wrecked, I tell you it was not so when Adobe de Bene drowned out the highway. Imagine Katarina alive with beauty adorned, a beauty more beautiful because she forgot who she was, because she forgot her love to keep it alive, because she ate and ate and ate to forget everything but now where her love grew.

To forget demanded more than a pretty face. To forget I had to make one up. Back then my face was not hideous, it was a mask no man resisted. I made the face of Katarina to rule like it did. I made it look easy. Underneath, I suffocated, his Katarina and her love strangled. But they did not see this. All they saw was beautiful Katarina made up to be more than them, more than the highway, more brutal because real beauty is cruel.

You don't believe me. You look at Katarina and can't see beauty were there are now sores. Beauty is a hangman. Look closer. A whore like Katarina will make you see.

Look at me on that very night, the first night of carnival, see me there in satin blue, midnight clinging to my breasts and hips, my skin that of a Queen but holier. It did not betray thousands of nights. It was too afraid and I counted on it. Look at the burnt yellow scarf twining down my neck before falling onto my back where like a thousand black widows my tresses curled round it like the purple and rose irises coiling round the vine sewn into my dress. My body snug, it gasped for more. The men saw it. They saw a real woman in spite of her sex.

I have the mask to thank. From the first night of carnival, I wore it. Masks are the rules of the game. We are never without them. Look at me. I am still a mask. Back then it was impossible to tell. That's how good it was. You see me there before night came, upstairs in the bedroom, sitting on the edge of Katarina's chair, the one with the red vine carved into it that crept along its arms, legs, back, its feet bound and dripping red, how I don't know, I only know it was my chair, it was faithful, it waited for me, still it waits, it doesn't know I'm finished.

Thousands of nights ago, I knew it would be like this. Youth won't stand for it but mine did. I was young and pretty like she is in that picture of yours. I sat there at the edge of my chair before the mirror. It saw me for what I was. Katarina. Beautiful except for those slits cutting into her that will split her face. It thought I didn't know but I did. I was like the mirror. I looked at her turning her head side to side, sucking in her cheeks, squinting at her eyes through glare and smoke, baring her teeth, setting her smile for night coming on, raising her eyebrows, her favorite look, it made her smile for real, and that snicker, she liked how it looked on her, it got its licks in, a real jackal and so what? Nobody saw it but her, but that's when she saw them. Those slits. Their fingernails cut into it would be

her ruin. Her face. Her beauty would make her pay for that snicker.

But facing Katarina is something we all must do.

I looked and saw her claws out and I did what a real woman does: I suffocated her. I strangled her to buy time. I built my first mask on her, my favorite, a temple lording over decay. I have it on now would you believe? No, you wouldn't. Your facts would laugh at such a thing.

Back then they would have believed like everyone else. Katarina a great beauty, not a mask concealing stench. I looked at the mirror and my face begged to be alive. I pinned back my hair. The eyebrows first. I had to draw them together like a thick, black, canopy suspended over dramatic eyes and lips already rehearsing their lines, because when Katarina snapped her fingers, her beauty played like one string for one man, for him her love had to have many men like it was the first time. The mask had to be that good.

Under the mirror I opened the drawer coveting tubes of different shapes and colors, words shouting to do this or that. Masks play by rules and I obeyed. My long finger curled round a tube and unscrewed it. My elbows pressed into the lacquered table, bones and skin dissolving into a varnish so thick I could taste it. Vanity is like that - it licks you up. I looked at Katarina and closed in on her with a brush doused with lies, its thick black lines made my brows unite into a dark arch suggesting what was to come. What they wanted they'd get. My triumph welcomed all to the spectacle.

Next my eyes. Pupils black and deep, whites like pinpoints stabbing at the mirror. They wanted nothing to do with it. My eyes have always been cowards like my words. I had to smoke them out to make them tell lies. But I feared them. I feared their pus oozing

through my dreams where earth gnashed its teeth at the fairytale serenading them to believe its every word, they watched the fantasy and longed to believe, but they have no guts. They gave up on the fairytale to see into the chasm between earth's jaws where there's no soul, no love, only blackness, and they looked and became infected with it.

These eyes in the mirror spit back at me. Fine. Have it your way. Like a Great Queen, I made a mockery of them. I made the blackness of their pupils look blacker still. A touch of gray shadow offered a cheap lightness that was quickly swallowed up. They looked hideous. The men thought there was something about them. No eyes could be that black. A woman like Katarina with eyes like bowels. Never. Hers had to dance underneath where youth skipped about the pits. All men thought this but one.

He's the one I thought about when I started on my lips. He loved them best. Told me they'd bleed for him. I believed him. The mask did too. I watched as I painted them crimson. When I kissed a man, my lips bled deep into his to kiss him, the real one. For decades, we kissed like this. I can't explain it. My lips were enraged. The mask was almost complete.

The foundation was last. It had to be heavy. I rubbed in liquid ivory until my face became a glistening, plastic pearl. I stared at it knowing what I had done. It turned from side to side. It was awful. It was beautiful. It was conception. My first mask. It did not gasp for breath. It did not shriek. It knew it did not matter. For the first time, it opened its eyes, batted its lashes, and laughed. It knew it would be wanted. It knew it would be paid handsomely. Every man would think there is something behind it, something they want to get at it, but it knew better. It was nothing. Nothing but a whore of a woman loving without remembering.

It was hard to stop smiling at it, but I had put on the finishing touches. The earrings with four silver moons

cascading down-down-down, the silver and gold bracelets snaking around wrists and ankles, and the rings I've worn ever since. They never let me forget I am bound. I am nothing without the mask. From that night on, I knew I would never see Katarina again, the real one, I cannot even imagine her. She is too much.

On that first night, I descended not like a woman, but like the mask I am. Katarina came down that staircase, her claws out ready to tear the skin off it. It was carnival. They waited for her. The women, the men, the masks, Adobe de Bene, all heaved. It was right. The swell of drink, music, dance, breath, clapping – dance, dance, dance!- toasts racing over cups drenching earth and sand, doors falling back on the desert, the walls sweating to get at a woman in crescendo, decrescendo, her rise and fall irresistible.

I know what you're thinking. I'm too much. My words are too fat. They stick to the bones. You want facts because they're thin. But you'll see. So will they. They're fat too.

On that first night of carnival, I stood there at the bottom of the stairs, I, Katarina, reigning in the eye of a thousand masks that I burned through like lightening, like thunder. I wanted him to come to me like this.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, look at your Katarina. It is I who sees through your masks, your lips, your eyes sweating, your pulse ready for it. It is I who knows dusk will submit to his lanterns strung out exposing us in drink and dance in our forgetfulness, deaf to memories and his highway with our flesh now lit for carnival. See how he sheds light on darkness? But he will come. Already he comes. You will see. It is he who will damn our giddy masks to ashes, laying his hands on hers who has stretched it round moons and suns looking for him. Your Katarina has done this for our sake. For we are all

him, we are all her, we are skin taut to be both. Our masks pulled tight against us, how can we resist? He is the light. It is carnival that will make us love as he does, as she does, we will love as one, so let us raise our glass. We are Adobe de Bene. We are masks tempted. We are everything and nothing. Black holes raging for nirvana to crush it to bits. All is carnival. You will see.”

No woman had spoken like that. They wondered at my meaning and that was enough. It was carnival. I smiled and snapped my fingers. Let it begin. Now hours piled on hours, drink, music, flesh, dance, our carnival like the new Babylon, our masks careless like time. I had them all, his Katarina flashed like a supernova. This is when he came. On the third day.

I remember it clear as I see you sitting here. Like me, his mask looked too real. They never knew the difference but I did. He came for me upstairs. I had nothing to be ashamed of. He of all men knew. He came for me, not like before, he knocked this time. A simple act. You knock on a door, it opens, you're asked inside, the door shuts, and that's that. But nobody knocks in a whorehouse. Adobe de Bene was ours and I was his. I was a whore who refused to remember him so I could love him today through him and him and him, a carnival of them for him. I opened the door and there we were. Katarina and Hirst. Cut from one skin. A whore and a speculator.

He came in. I closed the door. For days carnival rained while we fell into each other. It wasn't right. He wanted something. I only wanted him. One plus one isn't always even.

I'm sorry. I confuse you.

When I say we fell into each other, I mean we fell apart side by side. It was easy for him. He fell headfirst and smashed to bits and looked at me to do the same. I got up from the

bed to come to him, to disintegrate at his feet in the hope of being licked clean to be reborn. But he wouldn't play along.

I smiled and walked over to the mirror, ready to demolish the mask. I told him so. His hand jerked 'no, no, no.' But, but, but.

'But isn't this what you want?'

He looked in the mirror at me.

'No, Katarina. Not now. Not ever again.'

I looked back at his image and remembered. It was too much. The mask forever. Only the mask. But, but, but.

'But you have come for her? For me. Your Katarina.'

He shook his head. His smile laughed back at mine. It wanted to skin us alive.

'I made you what you are. You're a real woman now. There's nothing left.'

'But that's what you wanted.'

He disappeared outside the mirror, there, beside the bed.

I did not recognize him. I did not know what a stranger was until I saw the man I loved beside my bed again.

Then I knew. He is a miracle. His blood miraculous. I wanted to throw it up. I asked about us to know I was there, somewhere.

'It is not about us. It is about who I want, Katarina.'

The stranger. The viper. My teeth bared. I tried not to laugh.

'It's me you want. Why all this if not for your Katarina?'

He tried but did not succeed.

'My Katarina.' He laughed. 'Look in the mirror. I buried her years ago.'

Impossible. There I was. Here I am. The dead don't wear masks. They don't have the skin for it.

'How can you? In our bedroom, in our home, Adobe de Bene, our deed, our names on it. Katarina and Hirst.

How can you?'

He does not forget. He recalls everything in its own time and ours had come.

‘How anything can be is not the question. The deed is business. That is why I’m here. We have mutual interests.’
Now I fell into him. Side by side, his words shattered me.
‘Katarina.’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you understand?’

I did. I can’t deny it. It’s business.

‘You want Adobe de Bene.’

He looked at me in the mirror. It was better like this. Like we weren’t really there.

‘I want you to meet someone.’

I looked at Katarina. She knew.

‘She reminds me of you. When you were young. This is who I want.’

It repulsed me but I did it. I couldn’t help myself. I laughed. He never heard it before. When he came for me that first time, before Adobe de Bene, before he left, when it was just us, there was no need to laugh. I was happy. He planned it like this. I had to learn how awful it is.

‘You’re beautiful, Katarina.’

He liked sick words. The bile foamed at my mouth, but he had to be sure. The mask hid it.

‘What do you want?’ My eyes flashed. ‘What does Hirst want from his beautiful Katarina?’

It mocked him, it did things I wouldn’t do, and the mask made it look easy.

‘You’ve grown, Katarina.’

‘Whores do.’

‘Still...’

Every woman should be a whore once in her life. A whore like Katarina who forgets her love to continue to love. The more men you have, the more his skin is on yours. It is not about right and wrong. It is about him.

But it wasn’t about him that night. It was about her. The one he wanted. I agreed to take her in to destroy her. He planned it, but I begged to do it. I saw them together that

night. She was a whore from way back, just needed Adobe de Bene to stink like it. And she does.

She ended up becoming my masterpiece. He wanted her innocent but contaminated, fresh but rotten. What she's tangled up in would not have happened if she had looked like me. Wasn't easy though. She fought back, tried to run away, I fought back, tried to make him stay, neither of us won, we both lost, but that's not the guilt of it. A whore's a whore and business is business. She's got no right making it personal. I don't care about what I just said. Connie knew I was no real whore. Neither was she. We didn't have the skin for it, mine turned on me fast, hers reeked but it was blameless. Fact is I'm the one who had to kill. To be a real artist you have to.

'I'll do it,' I said.

Before I saw them walk down those stairs, I looked in the mirror and confessed. I'll kill her. I really will. A whore's a whore, but I'm a killer, and that makes it personal. That's when I first tasted guilt. It was the first time I thought of myself as a person, a real one, and the first thing I wanted to do about it was kill. It didn't sit well, made me fidget, but then I saw them together ruling Adobe de Bene just like we planned. That was it. Business is business. I said I'd do it. She'll look sweet as pie as the abscess eats away at her guts. She'll learn to smile like a real woman. Watching them on the stairs, I knew I'd never feel guilty again.

'I'll kill her. I will.'

'Of course, you will,' he said. 'You'll kill her by making her kill herself. We'll be sure of that.'

'Connie worked here?'

'That's right.'

'Because of Hirst.'

'She had to learn like we all do.'

'But why her?'

‘What do you mean?’

‘Hirst. Why’d he choose her?’

Katarina looked away as she folded her hands in her lap.

‘She’s innocent.’

‘So were you.’

‘Not like Connie. She’s got something we don’t.’

‘What?’

‘Like I told you. She’s got a conscience.’

‘What difference does it make?’

‘It makes it painful.’

She was done. She kept looking at the recorder to stop. Didn’t try getting more out of her. The lady didn’t trust. She counted her words, took a real good look at them, the fronts, backs, and sides of them. People don’t like to talk, afraid someone’ll recognize their words and then what? But Katarina was different. She despised them. I was there. She spit words out when they got too close. No matter what they did, they didn’t do it right.

Not my problem. I had enough to work with and was about to leave. But she saved something for the end. Recorder was off. Had to write it all down when I got out to the car. Had to keep my eyes on her too. She stood up with her hands behind her back, looking like she might do something, just had that look, but it had nothing to do with me. It was about Connie.

She tried to burn us down. Almost did too. Happened not long after he brought her here. Was a typical night, was always carnival, I had my routine, at midnight I collected the money, and checked on the girls. By that time Connie was broken in. She wasn’t a favorite yet, she was learning and that made us alright, woman to woman we knew where we stood, she carried her own and I couldn’t ask for more, no point in causing trouble under the same roof. But trouble let itself in. That night I went upstairs to my bedroom where the safe was, door opened real easy like it couldn’t wait, and there he was. He had her right where he wanted her. I saw him first not her. He looked sucked out, like

he'd go to dust, and that's when I first saw him for what he was. He was ugly.

She knew he was. Proof was on the carpet, soaking it. I put my hand under my nose. The smell. He laid there watching me.

Rip his face off. I bet he'll let me do it.

That's what fear is. When you know someone doesn't care about their face. Connie knew what I meant. She stood by the window naked, her eyes fixed on everything at once as she talked to herself, slapping her face when she got it 'wrong, wrong, wrong.' She kept on like this until she hid behind a curtain. Which one was he watching now? We both wanted him dead.

That's when I saw the flash. She lit it up like a child. Flames ate up the curtain and then the bed. I ran to the bathroom. Minutes later I put the fire out. But it was still alive. It shivered, it convulsed, it kept slapping itself.

'Stupid, stupid, stupid.'

I tore down the curtain, nothing but a spleen mutilated, I spun Connie in it around and around. It was still alive just the way I wanted it.

'You know what you're doing.'

His voice unfamiliar, far away, I turned with my arms around it. He was dressed in a suit, waiting by the door. His face repulsive. My arms almost strangled it.

'I'm coming back for her. Make sure she's ready.'

Then he opened the door and was gone. Can you imagine?

'No, no, no.'

Its head twitched and spasms ripped through its arms and hands. It wouldn't sit down. It rocked back and forth.

'I could eat him alive.'

It looked at me. What could I do? I could use her to get to him. It'd be easy. We'd both end up dead, but don't we all?

She shook her head and turned around to sit down in her chair again. 'You got your work cut out for you, Hain. We're not simple, especially Connie. She got close to getting herself killed. I had to break her in again and it stuck. He came back for her and I haven't seen them since. I'm just as surprised as you about things turning out like this.'

Surprise had nothing to do with it. I had to get the bottom of it.

'I told you everything I know. Just remember what I said. She's got a conscience. She'd never kill or steal without thinking twice.'

She was playing me.

'What are they going after, Katarina?'

She smiled.

'They don't know anything about it. He does. Hirst. He knows its asking price.'

'What price? For what?'

She looked out into the room like she did when I first got there.

'If I had to place my bet, I'd say it has to do with the just judges. And if I were you...'

I left. I got into the car, wrote it all down and took off. Stopped about a hundred miles up the road. Booked a room and got to work. Going over it now, I don't know. She could be making it up - Katarina, Hirst, Connie - all made up. Still they're somebody. Hirst hasn't said a word, but he doesn't have to, everybody does his talking for him, they

say the same thing - he planned it, happened like he wanted it to - same talk only difference is the people doing the talking.

Looking at it this way you see Hirst for what he is. He's everywhere - underground crime, organized crime, warehouses, gated communities, banks, motels, bars, whorehouses, highways - his blood runs.

Didn't that guy Hal say I'm putting down exactly what he wants me to?

But that's paranoid talk. If I'm not careful, I'm going to see that eye everywhere just like Blankfine. Little paranoia helps though. Keeps things on their toes, especially when people are getting blown away or on their way to it. Maybe you're next. Maybe the just judges. I'm being led right into it, whatever it is. Not on the up and up, that's for sure. Maybe it's time to ask Hank for an insurance policy. A real one. A gun.

Didn't he say I'd kill for Hirst and get myself killed?

Head games but why take chances? Tell Hank not to print this. It's nobody's business. That reminds me, something Katarina said, that fire, Connie said she started one, least I think she did. Have Hank check her letter that I mailed back. Way I remember it, Connie set a fire that cost him, could be that one in the bedroom, Katarina didn't say anything about it costing him, but she did say she had to break her in again, obvious she had to get used to it, didn't take to that line of work right off, tried running away, then the fire, still doesn't explain what it cost him though. He profited by her getting used to it. He had to have his hands in the business of Adobe de Bene. Has to be something else. His face. Repulsive she said. It's a long shot but it could've cost him his face. A scar.

That'd be helpful for the cops. Be able to identify him in order have a talk with him. They have nothing on him, no proof, don't need it to ask a few questions though.

Know where Connie and Guy are heading? Who they're meeting? What's the just judges have to do with it?

Just a few simple questions and then everyone'll be on their way. Real polite like. No going down to the station to make an official statement, just meet up with him somewhere like I've been doing. I stop for gas, get to talking to the guy next to me, nothing incriminating. Where're you from? Where you headed? He knows the town I'm headed for, has a sister who lives nearby, going to hit construction a few miles up, best get off the highway two exits from here, take the backroads, it'll save you time. We're wired to get on like this and everyone's thankful.

Talking over a few simple questions helps keep your wits about you, otherwise you're living in your head for too many miles, makes you paranoid, you start questioning who's who on the highway and why they're hanging back like that before they blow past you. Somehow you catch up with them, but now why are they passing you on the right and looking at you when they do, like they're making sure about something?

You get to thinking there's a conspiracy going on, a big web of it speeding down the highway at eighty miles an hour, taking everything and everybody with it. Who's the player? Who's being played? Who knows. That's why you got to stop and get to talking. Got to know what's in your head and what's not. You find out they're just people doing what they do, no conspiracy, just living and getting by and needing to get somewhere to do it. That's what the highway's for. It has nothing to do with him.

Still maybe I'll see him on it. Pull up for gas and there he is. No affidavit just a few simple questions. Where're they

heading? What're they messed up in? What about the just judges? What's it got to do with them? They'll be used and wind up dead. Correct me if I'm wrong. But why them and why me? What do you want with a stranger like me?

A lot has happened already. Maybe we'll meet up, just have to make sure it's him I'm talking to. His face will give him away. No getting rid of it. The scar has to be a fact.

A Portrait 11

Don't have a lot of time so I'll be quick, not about Katarina, about other stuff.

You got time to talk about comeuppance, about getting back what we give, about things sticking to us making us do differently, because you got time for a conscience. Not us. Guy and me, we get up and play it best we can, we don't think about it, we just do. And we're quick. Do this, do that, do, do, do, cause every day's got our flesh and blood on it, can smell it everywhere, hits me right up in the nose, real pungent like, makes my eyes tear. That's how come the cops can't catch us. It's not about getting caught up in something that don't sense. The problem is it makes too much sense.

You got to do like me and Guy if you go against the law, that's how the cops see it and we got to pay for the comeuppance, but what if we already paid for it? Life costs but it costs you something different than it does me and Guy. You got a good life cause way back it sat down with you man to man and asked you what price you'd like to pay for it, and you two came to an agreement, but me and Guy, we got thrown into life without agreeing on a price because it knew we couldn't afford it right off. We had nothing to bargain with, so we come into it, and first thing's the smell of people just like us burning in the streets, everywhere people on fire. Right then we knew it'd cost us. We wouldn't get no fair shake ever, so the way I see it, we already paid the bill for what we're doing. See how it makes sense if you see it our way? Not our fault if you and the cops don't like the smell of us. That's why you can't catch us. You get close and your conscience starts stinking like ours, and you got to lose our scent quick or else. What we're caught up in makes too much sense, and your conscience can't take it.

I paid my debts a long time ago. Why pay double with cuffs, hard time, whatever else they dream up? Sounds like

double jeopardy to me. Wasn't like I didn't try to renegotiate. I tried striking a deal like you did and it made things worse. You're right. Katarina lies but she got a few things right. I do mean what I say. I did come with him to Adobe de Bene. But what she don't know is that I liked it. Least at first. Lots of skin in that house, but it smelled different. I liked the taste of it. Thought it'd mean a fresh start, least a chance at it.

It started with the painting. She didn't know about it. I didn't tell her or anybody. I played along. Like she said, Katarina made me watch at first, made every girl do it, thought it'd ease us into it, didn't matter if we hadn't done it before, was just a matter time before we did. We knew this. We all went with him. It was time.

Only thing was sitting in a chair that looked like it belonged someplace else. Maybe that's why I started fidgeting. The chair felt like I did. I was bored just sitting there, and that's when I glanced over my shoulder and saw her. The painting. She had to be around my age. Barely twenty. She looked like me, she looked like a lot of us, but I was the one who saw her. We were cut from the same skin and blood, only difference was she didn't look like Adobe de Bene and I did. Nobody could tell except Katarina. She knew I stunk and this made me trust her, still I didn't tell her about the girl. She'd have laughed and snapped her fingers at me to do it.

Guy's packing up now and he don't like it when I write too much. Keep showing off like I do and it'll get us killed. Maybe he's right. Won't be my letters that does it though. Go back to Katarina and ask to see that painting on the wall. I'll bet she knows nothing about her, even if she did, it wouldn't change things between us, wouldn't stop us from doing what we're doing. You'd come to find out certain details and so what. The painting's the pretty young daughter of a client, Mr. so-and-so, have known the man for years, what else is there? That's all you'd get out of Katarina. Not me. I'll tell you I got

what I needed from that girl, well, almost, but that's not her fault.

See you're going to read this and want to go into that room Katarina didn't show you. You saw the one everyone sees. Don't matter. They're all the same, even her bedroom, except for that girl looking down at you. That's where you'll find her, in Katarina's bedroom. It'll be a waste though. You're not me, you won't see her like I do, you'll just think Connie's played me again chasing her around like this, cause I'm not just a bunch of words to you anymore. You got my portrait and it makes it worse.

I'd laugh at you anyway. Trying to figure her out, that's something I'd really laugh about. I mean it. That girl and I had a deal. If I kept picturing her to be me, then that's what I'd be. It was our little game and the rules were simple. Go into the room, sit down in the chair, watch them come and go, the masks, the girls, the men, everything the same, boring, boring, boring, until we couldn't take it anymore, and that's when I'd look over my shoulder and there she'd be staring back. Those same brown doe eyes and fair complexion. She was a mirror looking back at me.

But it was a trick. A real filthy one. I didn't know at first, was just a game to pass the time, but then I got to thinking and seeing something that wasn't there. It don't make sense but there it was. It don't make sense cause everything makes too much sense. We'll all end up like this, looking at facts cause they make perfect sense. That's why our game avoided them.

Makes me squirm just thinking about it, that thing that wasn't there. I better stop. Guy hates it when I fidget. He thinks I do it when I know my big mouth's going to get us in trouble. Don't see what difference it makes now. I didn't mean to leave another mess for you, but he wouldn't do what he was told. A damn fool's what he is, was I mean, he probably didn't think it would come down to one simple thing.

Get down on the floor. He just wouldn't listen.

I keep telling myself it's not about him. It's about our little game, and what it came to, and what it did come to is I will never be like her. I will never have what she had. A dirty little trick she played. I should have seen it coming. Her skin said it all. I mean it. I saw it on her skin, not at first, that's the trick, I thought it was just glossy and clear, no mark of life on it, least no life I was living. My skin was like porcelain too, but it knew what I was. Her skin knew what she had and she knew I wanted it.

I murdered it. Boredom makes us murderers cause we kill it by doing things we shouldn't. I stared at her to see myself just like her to get what she had. I killed the boredom by trying to get a conscience. Cause that's what it was. Her skin wasn't just skin, it knew her inside and out and she was immaculate. She lived in it because she could. She was spotless. I'd kill to feel right in that skin.

She'd laugh cause she knew what I was. A whore with a conscience can't come to no good. You're doing something you shouldn't be doing, and the virtue of doing what you do is having no conscience about it, cause you know one thing leads to another, and if you're whoring, you do it and anything else that comes with it.

A lot of could be's come into play. But you know that cause that's how it started. Could be you don't got nowhere to go, could be you're young and your home's too far back to get to, the past's like that, not so much about years but how quick they pile up between who you are and what you thought you'd be. Could be you find yourself miles away from home just standing around on a corner you didn't know existed cause you never thought you'd stand around like that, looking at people different like you want them to know what you're getting at even when you don't, but you do know you got

nowhere to go, you know you got a pit in your stomach, could be one second splits wide open and a million decisions you didn't think you'd ever make are done because of that pit. Could be as simple as getting into a car. Could be you can't get a close look at him, but he says the right words that you can't make sense of, but you feel less hungry just sitting there in the front seat. Could be you never realized how quick time is till you go from a street corner to a house in the middle of the desert, you can't make sense of it but there it is, you end up in it without knowing exactly how you got from a corner to a car to a house to a bedroom that the lady put you in. You don't question what looks like a circus, men and women with masks on doing things you're not surprised about but still. Could be you wait around in a bedroom for weeks, you don't ask about the guy in the car, you never got a good look at him, you don't ask what's going on, you don't look away but you don't ask, you just sit and watch and eat, they feed you real well, flesh keeps up the appearance of things like you, that's what the lady tells you, and you start to believe her, you start thinking you're just a thing. But could be you still got a chance.

Could be you see something as simple as a painting of a girl on a wall. She looks a lot like you used to before all those miles came between you and her. Could be you start thinking maybe, just maybe you made a wrong move, something as simple as standing around instead of keeping going like people do, they can't just stand there, they got to go, go, go, they're looking for something, that's why no car with a stranger in it can pull up to them cause they're already gone. That was your wrong move. You just stood too long. But you still got a chance. Could be more you look at that girl in the painting, more you get to thinking it don't matter if you made one wrong move because you're young like she is, you can right a wrong real quick, you can walk out and find your way back, you can retrace the miles back home and start over.

Could be you thought you had that kind of time but you don't. Could be that stranger in the car turns up in the bedroom you've been sitting in with her. Could be everything comes down to this moment, but you don't know it. You do what he tells you to, you do what you've been watching them do, and now you know the dirty little trick that girl in the painting played on you. She's immaculate because nothing touches her. She knew all along that you'd never be her because look at you, look what you did, look at what he put in your hand, two wrongs don't make a right, they make a whore out of what could have been spotless. You didn't know this but you do now, so what're you going to do? Could be you try scrubbing it off, but it won't go away, could be you try burning it off, but it scars his face not yours. That don't mean you got off. Look at your face. You see it and try to hide it, you try fooling it into believing what it's not. You paint your skin so white that everyone believes you're innocent, but you can smell what they can't.

And you know she can smell it too.

Could be you hear her laughing behind your back, the little bitch knew it all along, she's mocking you, and that's when you turn around and cut her. She had a conscience, but what good did it do her? You tried doing things her way and got had. You're no good. You can see that. You slit her throat. You murdered it. You murdered her conscience immaculate.

We're no good, Hain. I mean it. You, me, Katarina, him, Guy, every one of us is no good. We got no conscience. We can picture it maybe, but that's all it is, a pretty portrait, some thing that isn't real and isn't ever going to be. I get it. We can't believe having no conscience makes us whores. But like you said, we got to at least look at the facts.

Fact is the second he put that money in my hand the game was over.

‘Put your hand out, Connie.’

That’s what he told me to do and I did it. I put my hand out. A simple thing that decided a million things. I had no conscience about it and it made it go by real quick. You put your hand out and do what you got to, your guts ache, you stink like it, but you get on with it like it didn’t happen.

That’s how it is. He tells us what to do and we do it. We all get in the car with him sooner or later. We all whore for him, today, tomorrow, it’s just a matter of time. Even her. You best believe she’s a whore, the worst kind too, she looks like you but she looks down on you, she looks real wholesome and she is cause she’s got a conscience, you just knows she does, nobody and nothing can touch her and you look up to her, you think maybe you got a chance to be like her, to wear skin like that, and she plays you cause the whole time she knows you’re already done for. That makes her more of a whore than you.

Whatever. I don’t got to see her ever again. I took care of her, didn’t I? Could be she got fixed and hung up on that wall again, but she’s a wreck now. Adobe de Bene shut up years ago. That makes me not as young as you think but I still look it. Katarina didn’t tell you that did she? I looked underage then and still do. Pretty proud about it and it really gets to her. You saw her. She was hideous even back then. She wanted me to be just like her. A real woman she said. She still thinks she is. Way I see her is a whore’s a whore and Katarina’s the best. She treats you like one of her own, then cheats you out of yourself. Her girls, she always said. What about us? We weren’t done for when we ended up at Adobe de Bene. We couldn’t tell you how we got there, we just did. We got into his car and that was it, least that’s what they thought, but I wasn’t like the other girls, I looked a lot younger, too innocent.

‘What are you doing here?’

That’s what I heard from girls who just got there like me. Nobody asked them what they were doing there cause they looked old enough to know better. Katarina would tell them that and they believed her.

‘Don’t be so hard on yourself,’ she’d say. ‘You knew you’d end up at Adobe de Bene. You had to. You couldn’t keep carrying on like that and not find your Katarina sooner or later. Think about it. You planned it from the beginning and you succeeded. See how it’s easier to accept if we look at it the right way? Beating yourself up about it won’t do any good. We certainly don’t want to be cruel to ourselves. The men can take care of that without our help. See now, you’re laughing, see how everything’s better if we’re honest? You knew better and now you know for sure. But you’re lucky. You have your Katarina. A real woman is hard to find.’

She said this to all the girls except me. To me she asked what everyone else did. They didn’t even call me Connie. I was just you.

What are you doing here?

Thing is if they hadn’t asked, I wouldn’t have thought about it. I would’ve been what they wanted me to be, a you who sat in the bedroom watching and listening, but I started doing something I wasn’t supposed to. I thought about what I saw and heard and I got to thinking I didn’t plan any of this - Katarina did. She planned it from the beginning.

She may not remember but I do. Around the time when I was almost ready, I sat in that chair in front of the mirror in her bedroom, she was combing my hair like she always did.

‘Combing our hair makes it like silk,’ she said. But it always hurt the way she combed it. ‘One hundred strokes a day,’ she said, dragging that brush across my scalp, pressing harder and harder, not stopping when it bled.

I didn’t know I could bleed like that. I closed my eyes. It made it less painful.

‘There, there, you’re learning.’

She combed harder and harder. The door opened and closed. She kept at it while I kept my eyes shut. A man’s voice. It sounded familiar, but I didn’t look.

‘Is she ready?’

Katarina laughed.

‘Almost.’

The man chuckled.

‘Good. Anything else?’

Katarina sighed. I felt it on my neck, harder and harder.

‘Few of your boys came from the highway. Better than nothing. They’re almost done if you want to wait.’

Footsteps on the carpet.

‘I came for you.’

I knew him.

‘Like I said, she’s almost ready.’

The footsteps backed off. The door squeaked.

‘Wait...before you go.’

She quit combing and now ran her fingernails through my hair.

‘Tell your boys to find ones already broken in.’

The man seemed to laugh.

‘Katarina has a conscience, does she?’

She yanked at the roots of my hair as she started to braid it.

‘We agreed on ones who’ve been at it. I want those kind of girls, not the strays.’

The door opened.

‘Contact me when it’s time.’

She pulled my hair so tight I opened my eyes and looked in the mirror. Her mask, caked and sweaty with cuts seeping through it, looked at him looking at us. I knew him. He was the guy in the car.

Poor Connie had no business being in a warehouse cause she wasn't born a whore. I needed Katarina's mothering for that. And I got it. I learned real quick there's no such thing as justice and no woman's going to make it so. A real woman knows she'd eat her own just because. She knows it and that's why she goes into business for herself.

That's what I did. That's how I met up with Guy. Only thing is unfinished business catches up with you, even if it's just a coincidence. It's just a coincidence that I met Guy, it just so happens we knew some of the same people, it's just the way things end up that we got to rob and kill to get the just judges back or we're dead. It's not what I planned.

Katarina owes me. She was ugly. Nobody'd touch her. She should be out here doing what we're doing cause let's face it, she owes me, and she owes you too. You're mixed up in something bigger than your facts, Hain. You're making a name for yourself, but you don't know who's who. You know we're killers. And now you know you are. You don't go asking for a gun if you're not. But you'll kill and get away with it in the name of justice. That's what the cops'll say and you'll agree, but you can't fool me. First time you pull it, you'll know it had nothing to do with having to kill or get killed. It had to do with you wanting to do it all along.

Cops got laws that'll make you look innocent not me. I pointed the gun at you, you shot me in self-defense, that's all there was to it, and it was pretty easy, you were worried for second, but it all worked out, justice served, and that same night you set your alarm to get up like you always do. Tomorrow you wake up and do all the normal things you did before - you shower, drink your coffee, eat your breakfast, dress casually and lock the door, get in your car, drive to work, put in a day's worth, knock off at five, stop at the store before going home, maybe today you'll work up enough nerve to ask her her

name, you know that cute cashier you've been eyeing, she probably don't read the papers, why would she? The news don't know she exists and that makes her worth your while. No way she can know about it even though you're innocent. On second thought, you don't bother.

She checks you out and you're gone, but the damage is done. You can't deny it. You know it's there, so what are you going to do about it? You can go back home. You're free to do so. You can go anywhere you damn well please, that's what you tell yourself as you unlock your door and go inside. It's dark. Maybe that's what it is. It gets dark early now. You turn the lights on, in every room you turn them on just to see, you didn't do this before, you'd watch the sun come down without turning on a light, you forgot it existed, you were innocent, you forget about a lot of things, you lived and slept in darkness coming on late until summer ended. Summer has a way of making everything lighter than it really is.

But then Fall comes and you turn on a light. The acid test. You know it. You can taste it. You flick it on and nothing. What a relief. Now you flick on all of them, click-click-click, how silly it was to think about it, you were just playing tricks on yourself. You laugh but not too loud. A lot go mad laughing about it when they're alone. They think they got nothing to hide, but they must've done something that makes them lose it. You pity them, you really do. You can afford to. You're light.

You go into the master bedroom, then into the bathroom – flick – the mirror lights up but not like the others. It comes right at you. It's got you. Your hip presses against the sink, you shield your eyes, there you go, that's better, it doesn't exist, remember? Just got to replace the bulb, it's too damn bright. You laugh again knowing you already slipped up. It did not forget. It remembers everything.

Now your hips press harder into the sink, the pain hammering at your bones forces you to open your eyes, and

there it is. That mirror again. It can't know but it does. It knows everything about you. You see it and try scrubbing it off, otherwise they'll see it, if not tomorrow, ten years from tomorrow. It's just a matter of time. But you know you can't make it clean.

Sure I can. I'll scour it till it bleeds and scars, no way they'll see it then, but it knows it's hopeless. A stain like that's for good. No, that's a lie, I'm innocent, I killed in self-defense.

Sure you're innocent, and sure as I'm writing this letter, no way innocent and killing make a sentence without turning you inside out. No way you can live like that. But you got to. You got it like Cain. That mark - you're a killer no matter what justice calls you. You had to kill or get killed. Fine. Defending yourself don't make you innocent though. Fact is you killed. You're a killer. You got the mark. No hiding it, no worrying about it either. They know how easy it'd be for them to do it too.

They'll deny it, of course, but no matter what that judge says, no cute cashier is going to let a killer touch her. You killed, you're a monster, and she'll taste it in her mouth - the blood - not hers but the one you shot dead, and you know what? A funny thing'll happen. She won't spit it out. It'd be so easy to but she likes it. She can because you're the monster. That's all she needs to know.

He doesn't want you to know this. You're going to kill. You don't believe me just like you don't believe you've already seen him. Think about it. You want a gun. Hank got it for you. I'll bet he did. I'll bet you got it on you right now cause you never know. Might have to blow someone away when all you're doing is walking out your front door. No might about it though. Might don't work when you got a gun.

He knows better than anyone. Why you think you asked Hank for it? You saw him that's why, almost ran into him, you weren't looking and there he was a handshake away. I know, I was there, I saw it, almost made me laugh, but simple things don't make me laugh no more, especially a simple thing like a good looking guy pulling off the highway at exit 23a to get gas, food, go to the bathroom, look at the paper while standing in line, simple things you do without thinking about them, and I got to say, you look pretty damn good doing it.

Might've been a different story if I'd seen you first. Getting out of your convertible like that, thin strong build over six feet, a real woman knows why you got that blue shirt buttoned down to the middle of your chest, like you don't know we can't look away even if we wanted to. You're a natural like me, Hain. You make sure we're watching every move you make.

But I get it. You got other things on your mind now. That's how come you didn't see us, you just got out of your car, pumped your gas, sunglasses on, dark waves blown every which way, doesn't matter cause you're it, Hain, you really are. Maybe things would've been different if we'd had a drink, talked it out, maybe felt guilty about this and that, but maybe we would've had a chance for something more than this game of tag. It's real though. It's a game of tag and you're it. And as good as you look, I don't feel guilty. Guilt is for cowards. And we got no right to end it like that.

Especially since we're so close to it now. Like I said, you almost ran into him walking to your car. Should look where you're going instead of staring at your receipt to make sure you didn't get cheated, cause the real cheat is him right there, a handshake away, could've looked up and saw it, that scar, would've known it was him, would've been able to ask him all those questions you need answers to to get to your facts. And maybe he would've turned to me, and said why don't you ask her yourself? Maybe he would've and

we'd have liked that cause it takes all kinds of ways to get to the facts, and it takes time to tell them how they really are, takes all night if you're lucky.

You had the chance and blew it. Simple thing like looking at your receipt did it, but you're still it. You shook on it, that gun of yours, that's your shake. You of all people know we have to keep the game going. Look at me. These letters of mine got them rooting for me. Minute the cops put out that picture of me, I was it. She's so young and pretty so what if she. They got to thinking like that. They don't want me to get caught, especially after this little letter. Poor Connie, she was such a sweet young thing, something really good about her deep down. She wanted to be good, circumstances just wouldn't allow it.

You know them better than I do. You know how they are. They start out with Connie this and that, like it's all about me and they know me better than I think they do. You see what happens though. You see how they trick themselves. All of the sudden Connie is them. They suck at me hard, get a taste of my blood, then they come to find out theirs tastes just the same. They got a taste for it. But no, no, no. No way they're going swallow that. They're not the monster. Connie is. See how they make you them and then back off. They're not killers. How could they ever be such a thing?

But they are. They choose not to be is all. I didn't set out to do it either, you know that, but good intentions don't sell papers. The game needs you to do a good job keeping everybody playing along.

So you're it, Hain. We both are. No justice about it. Looking at it like this, I couldn't have known he had a wife, kids, worked twenty years as a teller, a simple job, he probably thought things like this only happen in the movies or in the big city where the real actors are. Point is killing never seemed real to him until yesterday when

Connie walked into the bank, into the place where he worked, and asked him to do a very simple thing.

Get down on the floor.

How hard can that be? But he never heard that before, he never thought of something so simple, that's how come he got it all wrong, putting his hand in his pocket like that for what? He's got a gun in it? I've come too far to have a simple man like that take it from me. It's kill or get killed and I'm not going anywhere. I got too much to live for cause things aren't simple. I got to live ten times harder. It's the only thing I can do. Live more and more to stay alive. He didn't get it and I didn't wait for him to.

It's you or me. We best remember that.

Yours, Connie

Way Things Are 12

Know for sure they're aiming for the border. At which point cops don't know. That's the thing about borders - lines are drawn, this is here, that is there, they're supposed to make it clear where you stand. Thing is borders don't work like that. No border is definite like no letter of the law is. Bunch of blurred lines and letters is all they are, and we misinterpret them to justify what we do. We certainly got the spirit for it. Do Not Kill. It's simple. We made it law. Then after taking a second look we twisted its arm, we mangled the damn thing, all because we wanted to act on the spirit of the law. It gives us breathing room. The letter of the law's too cramped.

Cause we look at Do Not Kill and think it's just not right because what if? What if we get into a stranger's car, and a long road of choices ends with us killing or getting killed. What if but most don't end up killing. We know when to quit and obey, but not Connie. She's placed her bets. Now she's got to save face. That's why killers like her ride out the spirit of the law. Do Not Kill. Okay, but that don't mean do not kill for any reason at any time whatsoever, sometimes you got to kill the right person at the right time for the right reason because it's kill or get killed. You got no choice not to kill. That's what the spirit of the law is really saying. You got no choice. Do it.

Because choice is the enemy for killers like Connie. It nails them to the letter of the law. It fixes them on the side of the border where they're fugitives from justice. Spirit of things tells them it's a lie. Justice - no such thing. Fact is we chose it. We chose laws and borders to make man just. He's a killer. Obey the law or else. Most don't worry about what we are. They lost the spirit for it. They developed a taste for obeying. They could easily be killers, but the letter of the law states obey and you can get on with your day. But some of us can't and

that's OK. We need killers. They force us to come up with letters of the law at the right time, for the right reason, for the right person. No killers, no laws.

Connie and Guy are running from justice like our first killer. Pretty sure Cain didn't trust it. Justice needs blood to make it work. He got that. How could you trust anything that works like that, especially when you're a killer? Justice needs you to kill. Justice will be served only with blood - yours, his, hers - it doesn't matter. Do not kill. Yeah, right.

Latest job was really something. She killed him dead.

'They're at it again. Really did a job on the guy. Left you a nice letter about it.'

No matter what state you're in, cops talk the same about killing. They're at it again. Really did a job on so-and-so. Best come down here. See it for yourself. Cops keep it simple. Piecing it together is a different story.

Like I said, I got the call. They're at it again. I checked out and headed south. Had that same feeling, I can't get there fast enough - faster - nothing matters but getting there. Pulled in around six. Cops, employees, the whole neighborhood, milling around out front, smoking, talking in low voices, keeping an eye out, they'll be the first to spot them if. Lots of ifs.

'If I'd been here a few minutes earlier, it might've been me. Who'd think stopping at the store would save my life? Just goes to show.'

Just goes to show. Hear that a lot too.

'Just goes to show you can't wake up and go to work and be back later, not when folks like these are loose. How are you supposed to see their kind coming?'

Cop waved me through the tape blocking two glass doors left wide open. I stepped inside the bank. Everywhere cops talking to men and women in suits, every one of them looking ill-fit for a killing. Same goes for the big white spot on the floor. Every bank's got a floor like this, same design, color, smell, only this one had a spot bleached and scrubbed at. The mark of Cain. She'll like that.

'Getting around these days, Hain.'

A cop now came up to me. How'd he know? The recorder. In my hand.

'Comes with the job.'

'Well, your girl did a number on him.'

He pointed at the spot.

'Shot him six times. I'd say that's quite a number.'

Didn't sound like her. She was just getting used to it.

'What for?'

Cop shook his head and folded his arms against his chest.

'Witnesses said he wouldn't get down on the floor.'

Sonofabitch reached into his pocket and got a couple rounds unloaded into him. Just plain lost it.'

I got close to it and stopped. Looked like any linoleum floor except for the white spot.

'What'd he have in it?'

'His pocket?'

'Yeah.'

Cop sighed like they all do.

'Not a damn thing. Like I said, he lost it.'

What else is there to say? A few statements from the witnesses covers it. Connie and Guy walked into the bank, a young good-looking couple nobody recognized, this here's a border town, people come and go and switch sides all the time, nobody keeps track, you live here you keep things simple, too alert and you get in trouble.

The guy she killed had been working at the bank for a couple years, had a wife and kids, moved here from up north, nobody asked why.

‘We don’t go into things like that,’ one of them said. ‘But I can tell you he was an upright guy, never had any problems with him, on time, got his work done, no complaints.’

He was a clean record far as they were concerned. Only thing was him losing it.

‘That’s what don’t make sense. We got down like she told us to. We were trained. We stayed calm and did what we were told. No chance to press the button under the counter still we knew what to do. That’s why it don’t make sense he didn’t get it right. It was easy. Get down on the floor. That’s it. Didn’t have to count to a hundred with our eyes closed or else we’ll never open them again, nothing like that, just get down on the floor. How’d he do it wrong? Just stood there and then what does he do? Puts his hand in his pocket. Wasn’t even anything in it. That young lady thought he had a gun. You rob banks, you think fast. She saw him put his hand in his pocket and that was it. I’m not saying he’s to blame. All I’m saying is if he would’ve done what he was told, he would’ve had a different end. He’d be standing here talking to Hain like I’m doing.’

‘How’d you know who I am?’

She pointed to a cop at the other end of the room.

‘Cop told me to come over and give you a statement. Don’t think he wants you nosing around. They haven’t talked to the wife yet.’

I turned off the recorder.

She smiled.

‘Then it’s true. You’re Hain. Been following your story.’

She stopped and looked around at nothing in particular.

‘The cops keep asking if we know anybody connected with them. Figure they have help getting across the border. Lots of people pass through here. Only person I know is the manager at the hotel they stayed at. Upright guy. I’m sure he never heard of them. He’s a decent guy. You’ll see.’

He's waiting for you. He'll tell you what he can. Ask for Mr. Sommerset at the front desk.'

'He's waiting for me?'

'Cop over there said that's where you were heading.'

'First I heard of it.'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'He'll explain. He wants to see you. Has her letter. She left it at the hotel.'

Have to go off my notes from here on out. I put the recorder away. People aren't honest when they can't take their words back.

I went over to this cop who didn't look or sound like one. Was too polished for enforcing the law. Every piece of metal - badge, gold buttons, buckle, tie clip, even the pen in his front pocket - every inch of him shined. Not to mention his pants and shirt creased like he hadn't sat down. No cop looks like that. He had no real guts. Everything about him was seventy degrees.

I came up to him standing there like he knew I'd do just that. Real smug about it.

I put out my hand.

'Officer...' I didn't get his name. Looked over my shoulder. Lady I was talking to was gone.

'Jones. Officer Jones.'

We shook hands.

'Was talking to a woman who said you had a letter for me.'

'Theresa?'

'Guess so.'

He smirked at this.

'They're all the same to you.'

'They?'

'Witnesses.'

'I got a job to do if that's what you mean.'

'And what a fine job you're doing, Hain. It is Hain I'm speaking to?'

'That's right.'

There it was. That smirk again.

‘Have to be certain when a man doesn’t offer his name.’

He was right. I didn’t.

‘I’m used to it. The criminal mind will confess any number of things that make its crime an almost perfect one, but it forgets to tell you its Christian name. I always have to ask for it twice.’

‘I’m a reporter.’

‘Of course.’

The bank was clearing out. Was time for me to do the same.

‘Listen, I better get going. You have that letter?’

He lowered his head.

‘You don’t need a statement from me?’

‘I have enough.’

‘Sure you do. And in any case, you know I wouldn’t give you one. Plenty will though. Like Theresa. She thinks you’ll print her statement and then she’ll be somebody, she’ll live on and on, her words making her immortal.’

Come on. I have deadlines. I looked at the clock above the glass doors.

‘Concerned about the time, Hain? Too bad you didn’t arrive earlier. It’s settled now. You’ll see. The bank will reopen in a day or two. The shock of it will morph into disbelief about the weather. Erratic as of late, hot and bone dry then storms and floods. The land can’t handle it.’ He paused.

‘But the letter. I have it right here.’

He took an envelope from his pocket and handed it to me.

It wasn’t Connie’s. She didn’t use envelopes. She folded her letters in twos - top down, bottom up. I opened it. Cops don’t give me the original, only a copy.

‘This is the original?’

His eyes narrowed in on something behind me.

‘I do what I’m told. It’s been a pleasure. Let me know if I can be of further assistance.’

He put his hand on my shoulder and walked away.

I didn’t turn to see what distracted him. I stood there trying to get things right. Most everyone had cleared out.

Killing's like that, nothing sticks around afterwards, things have to get back to normal. You'll see. Months from now that spot will be gone. Everything learns to blend in again.

I slapped the envelope against my palm. It's the original. It's evidence. Why'd the cop give it to me? And what about the hotel? I needed the name and address. I saw another cop talking to what looked like someone in charge. They were finishing up just as I walked over.

'I'll call tomorrow. Shouldn't be a problem.'

The man in the suit nodded.

'Think we'd all feel better if someone could watch over things for a couple days.'

'We can work it out. Don't worry.'

They shook hands before the suit headed towards the back. I was in the cop's peripheral. He knew I was there.

'Excuse me.'

He turned in my direction now.

'What can I do for you?'

He sounded like a cop.

'Just need the address of the hotel they stayed at. Was told to talk to a Mr. Sommerset.'

He squinted like he was trying to place me.

'And you are?'

I felt the envelope in my palm.

'A reporter. I just talked to Office Jones, but I forgot to ask about the hotel.'

The cop folded his arms against his chest and rocked back on his heels like they do.

'Officer Jones you say?'

I shook my head.

'Right. Was standing over there when I came in.'

I pointed to a table with papers scattered across it.

'I'm the Chief of Police here, Mr...'

'Hain.'

'No Officer Jones in my precinct, Mr. Hain. Never heard of the man.'

‘You can call me Hain.’
He shrugged his shoulders.
‘Never heard of you either.’
Had to be a mistake. They all know my name.
‘Joe Hain. Paper uses my full name but I go by Hain.’
He motioned at someone behind me.
‘Come over here, Mack,’ he hollered.
I looked over my shoulder. A young cop was headed straight for us.
‘Yes, Sir.’
He didn’t take his eyes off me.
‘You ever hear of an Officer Jones?’
The young cop looked a timid spitting image of the older one.
‘No, Sir. Never.’
The Chief nodded in agreement.
‘Me neither.’
Junior looked relieved.
‘How about a man goes by the name of Hain?’
His lips twitched.
‘Sounds familiar, Sir.’
The Chief’s eyes darted at him.
‘How so?’
His nose was sweating. I wasn’t about to help him.
‘Seen it in the paper. The one about them.’
The Chief nodded. ‘You mean the ones who blew into town today to rob a bank and kill an innocent man?’
He shook his head.
‘That’s right, Sir.’
Chief let out a long breath.
‘Wrap up what you’re doing and head back to the station.’
‘Yes, Sir.’
Junior didn’t look at me once, but as he turned to leave, he did and that’s when he knew. It’s Hain. I’m sure it’s him.
‘Not from around here, are you?’
‘No.’
My voice cracked loud. Bank was empty. Just the two of us.
The Chief directed me towards the glass doors. ‘Truth is I don’t like your kind. You’re not going to turn what

happened today into some circus act to sell whatever newspaper you crawled out of.’

He stopped right outside the doors.

‘I’m just here to do my job.’

He put his hand out.

‘The address you’re looking for is 4205 El Paso Street. Sommerset’s a friend of mine. You tell him Chief Willis sent you. He’ll tell you what he knows and then you get going. Understood?’

I shook on it. Whatever you say, Chief.

Hotel wasn’t far from the bank, but the traffic slowed to a crawl. In a border town, different times of the day mean different things than they normally do. Was almost eight at night, a time when most are at home finishing up because morning’s coming and you got to get to sleep or go mad. Not here. Sun goes down and the headlights turn on, the engines turn over, thousands of them, lights and engines clogging the streets, not just the main arteries, but the backstreets and allies that flood into them, everything and everyone knows what’s at stake – got to get across that border.

The great push happens when most are dead to the world. People on the lam need to make it before morning. They push even when they’ve spent their luck. Darkness helps and so do the headlights. They don’t betray them like you’d think. They give them that edge they need, just like the flashing lights from convenience stores, strip clubs, pawn shops, and gas stations with their penitentiary brightness.

Lights going off like blasted stars makes it hard for the border patrols to see who they should ask to step out of the car, because there’s no way to know who’s who, they might ask the wrong car full of the wrong people, the ones who don’t need luck, the ones just passing from one side to the other to visit family and friends, be back in a few days, nothing in the trunk but what a long drive calls

for, no contraband if that's what you mean officer, nothing on their conscience like robbing and killing. They're not sweating bullets from trying to look innocent. They're not hounded by ninety-degree heat smoking out the guilty.

But like I said, the darkness and those lights work to get the guilty across, even if they get confused by lights shooting from everywhere, especially if they don't know which side they're on, because innocent or guilty is not clear cut out here, but they know if they've killed someone, and that's how they keep it simple. Did I kill a man today? Yes. Push on to the other side.

I read her letter in bumper-to-bumper traffic on the way to Sommerset. Something kept eating at me. She left it at the hotel. She wrote it after the fact. Wasn't like her. She leaves them at the scene. Why the change? Why the risk? Cops have been on them quick. Why chance going back to the hotel to write the letter and leave it there? Hiding out in the open is foolish and that's what they did. What if someone followed them, what if someone at the hotel recognized them, what if they couldn't pull it off, what if they looked guilty and someone called the cops - saw a young couple acting real strange, officer, and I don't want to cause trouble, but something's up with them. There's always someone not minding their own business and that means trouble. You need to keep your head screwed on. No mistakes.

Eventually I made it to the hotel. Pulled into a space out front, killed the engine, and sat there trying to understand why Sommerset Hotel? They keep to motels not hotels. Motels don't ask questions. No matter the state, city, or town, a motel is what it is - they don't make it personal. Everyone pays up front and gets a key. Everyone parks in front of their room. Everyone comes and goes and they put the key on the bed when they leave. Don't want to be disturbed? Nobody does. On the run? Everybody is. Let tomorrow take care of itself.

But hotels make it personal. Welcome Mr. Joe Hain. We have everything we need from you. Your address, credit card, license number, and make of car are all on file. Here is your voucher for a free continental breakfast, and here is the code to access the 24-hour gym, hot tub, and laundry services. Please take the elevator behind you to your floor. If you, Joe Hain, need anything else, do not hesitate to ask. We are available at the front desk twenty-four seven.

Hotels have a litany of tomorrows already staffed and taken care of. They have anticipated your every move. They know it before you do.

I walked through the automatic doors. The air conditioner blasted on then off. The combined impact of air freshener and vacuumed carpet hit me as I headed to the front desk. We're clean and comfortable. That's what they wanted me to think.

'Can I help you, Sir?'

A young woman in a blue suit jacket with a light blue shirt and red striped tie stood there smiling at me.

Can I help you.

'I'm here to speak to a Mr. Sommerset.'

She tilted her head to the side.

'Do you have a reservation with us, Mr...'

'Hain. And no. I don't have a reservation.'

She typed something into the computer and picked up the phone.

'There's someone here to see you Mr. Sommerset. A Mr. Hain.' She looked past me. 'Of course. One moment, please.' She put her hand over the receiver. 'May I ask who you're with?'

'Who I'm with?'

She smiled. 'Your organization.'

'I'm a reporter. Chief Willis sent me over.'

Her head twitched like she pecked at something.

'Of course. One moment please.' She took her hand off the receiver. 'Mr. Sommerset.' She smiled again.

‘He’s a reporter. Chief Willis referred him. Should I...of course. I will let him know.’

She hung up the phone. Almost imperceptibly the corners of her mouth shook.

‘Please have a seat in the lounge area down the hall behind you and to the right. Mr. Sommerset will be with you shortly.’

Heard that before. Be with you shortly takes time.

‘Thanks.’

I walked down the hall into the lounge and grabbed a seat by the fireplace. Was for show like everything else. Brochure on the table said it all. Sommerset Hotel. A Rustic Oasis on the Border. Come join us for a quiet stay in one of our climate-controlled rooms with top of the line queen or king beds, minibar, shower with jet tub, and guest amenities like indoor and outdoor pool, twenty-four-hour bar and restaurant, laundry service, conference and ballroom rentals, and catering for everything from weddings to company meetings. It is our pleasure to serve you for every occasion. So come and join us by the poolside or by the fireplace in our spacious lounge with log cabin décor. At Sommerset, your every need is our first concern.

I rolled up the brochure and looked around. Fake wooden floors and paneling, fake exposed beams lining the ceiling, fake logs stacked on a grate in the fireplace. Sofas and chairs made of imitation brown leather, but they feigned comfort enough for you to lose interest in getting up. At regular intervals the air freshener kicked in and shot out a dose of artificial pine. I could taste it and was about to move, but the lounge quickly filled up. I sat there and asked why again.

Why Sommerset Hotel? Connie and Guy knew nobody would let them be here with hordes of tourists talking, eating, drinking, milling about, they’d have no privacy, they’d know their business, they’d come right up and ask about them like it’s the most natural thing to know where they’re from, what they’re doing in town, you must be

stopping for the night before going across tomorrow, same with us, we're just passing through and needed air conditioning, a clean room, decent meal and a well-stocked bar, we would've packed our bathing suits if we'd known about the pool.

Fact is they would mind their own business if they knew what their business was all about. Or maybe not. Maybe they wouldn't believe it even if they heard it firsthand. Get out of here. You just robbed a bank and killed a man? You must be joking. Two young things like yourselves haven't lived long enough to want anyone dead.

They'd dismiss it with a wave of the hand and move on to the next. But I won't. You rob and kill and book a room for the night at Sommerset Hotel a few miles away. Why?

I threw the brochure on the glass table in front of me. Someone saw you. They had to.

'Mr. Hain?'

I looked up. Mr. Sommerset. Had to be him. He looked the part. Had on a suit matching Sommerset's gold and brown scheme, had a blotched face of authority in a short-staffed industry, had bloodshot eyes from too many bottom lines seen from too many angles, and had dyed black receding hair because he had to make do.

'It is Mr. Hain, correct?'

He extended his hand.

'Just call me Hain.'

I got up and shook his hand. It was clammy.

'I just spoke with Mr. Willis. We can talk in my office if you'd like.'

He meant Chief Willis.

'Sure. That'd be fine.'

He smiled.

'After you.' He motioned at me. 'Down the hall, third door on the right.'

I get it. I can't watch you if you're watching me. It happens. I'm a reporter. Everybody wants to talk, can't breathe until they spill it, can't get it off their chest fast enough, except when it comes to holding them to their word - that changes everything. Now they're suspicious, now they hold back to see about you, now they make a powerplay: they're watching me not the other way around. They're buying time before they talk or cop out.

Third door on the right. I turned the handle and walked in. Looked like any office. Desk with papers and files scattered over it, couple chairs, metal file cabinet, diploma and family pictures on the wall.

'Please. Have a seat.'

He shut and locked the door as I sat down. Then he walked past and stopped behind his desk where he picked up the phone.

'Monica. No calls or interruptions, please.' He nodded.

'Yes. The top floor at the end. Make sure it's ready in an hour.' He paused but kept nodding. 'That is correct. Thank you.'

He hung up the phone, sat down, gripped the edges of the desk and pulled his chair forward. He took a deep breath and folded his hands with great care, as if their position meant everything.

'I'm told you have questions about the young couple that stayed with us the evening prior.'

He concentrated on his words and his hands.

'Anything you might be able to tell me about them?'

I took out pen and notebook. The recorder was out of the question.

He sucked in the sides of his mouth and lifted his chin towards the ceiling, his eyes rolling back.

'I am simply running a business. I'm sure you can understand that.' He relaxed as his words fell into place. 'If they knew that those individuals stayed here only yesterday, that I had to contact the Chief of Police only a few minutes ago to find out what this is all about,' he paused and spread out his hands, 'if they knew that I did not inform them, I

would lose my credibility. Sommerset is a home away from home. We are our motto.'

Those individuals. The evening prior. Home away from home. We are our motto. I wrote it down and stared at it. It had been a long day.

'Did you or anyone see them?'

Mr. Sommerset pushed back in his chair, the line between his lips became narrower.

'I'm not your subscriber, Mr. Hain. I don't read the papers. I don't watch the news. I run a business that provides for others. Sommerset Hotel is a family business. Every guest is welcomed and treated as such. I am aware, of course, that the border attracts people from all places and walks of life, but I do not police my establishment. I do not believe in self-harm. If I profile guests and refuse service based on suppositions, I will inflict harm upon myself. You must have noticed the prevalence of the large chains. Playing judge and jury is bad business. I see what I see. Most people are not criminals. They only have the capacity for it.'

I am not your subscriber. I see what I see. They only have the capacity for it. He saw them.

'You saw them.'

Looked like he was about to smile. His upper lip exposed his teeth and gums but then nothing. The smile aborted.

'Chief Willis warned me about you.'

'Did he.'

His lips fell. 'Pick your words carefully, he said. Far as his first impression goes, you're a hotshot. A lot of your stock pass by here. You are frank. Prosperity cultivates that. It is a virtue most can't afford.'

What's your point? I relaxed back into my chair. Acting like you got all the time in the world cuts through the crap. Makes them nervous because you got time to hold them to their words.

That's when a light went off on the phone. No sound. Just a blinking light. Mr. Sommerset looked at it out of the corner of his eye.

'Seems as if we've reached an impasse, Mr. Hain.'

I played along. I wrote down Hank's number and ripped the page from my notebook before getting up to leave.

'Here's the number for the paper. Think of anything, give them a call. They'll know where to find me.'

He looked unsure as he rose from his chair. The light quit the second he did.

'Please leave your number with the front desk when you check out. I'll be sure to phone if we think of anything.'

I shook my head.

'I didn't book a room here.'

He smiled.

'I took the liberty to do it for you. Complimentary for your trouble. The front desk has your room key. Let us know if you need anything during your stay.'

What could I do? We shook hands and I proceeded to the front desk where I waited to be next in line.

Obviously something was up. Everyone carried on like they hadn't checked out less than twenty-four hours ago. No cops around asking questions, no local reporters getting statements from workers and guests, no television cameras chomping at the bit for the latest, no Mr. Sommerset making certain the family was still intact and happy with their stay, no assuring them that any unfortunate snags will be dealt with appropriately by management and law enforcement, no complimentary drinks and meals to smooth over any nightmares that might erupt when a family of four remembers Connie and Guy standing behind them as they checked in, imagine turning their backs on two killers, who would have thought that would ever happen in a place like this, and what would have happened if. If is the nightmare's cue.

The real nightmare is losing track of which fact is which. People keep calling them killers, but fact is there's only one. Guy hasn't killed anyone, least no one we know about. She doesn't even talk about him anymore. Connie's the one telling them to get down on the floor. Connie's the one killing and collecting the money. Guy's the one standing there, taking it all in, rob-money-kill, he watches it go on

and on. No conscience about it. He likes it. I could see him walking over to that borderline between white and red, the clean floor and the dead man, I could see him standing there looking down at Blankfine like it's something that had to go, and that's when he lifts his boot and nudges his shoulder just to make sure, the leather soaking up red like it's thirsty, and I can see him watching the growing stain on his boot and firing at him to make him pay for it.

'Next please.' A voice interrupted.

I looked in its direction. A new face at the front desk.

Same look though. Young, made up, efficient.

I stepped up and leaned into the counter. I was beat.

'Name's Hain. I was told...'

She was ahead in the game.

'My apologies, Mr. Hain, I do not mean to interrupt, but Mr. Sommerset has informed me that you've had quite a long day, and as a personal friend, we're happy to offer you a complimentary stay. Will you be needing anything this evening from the bar or restaurant?'

'I'll figure it out.'

She smiled.

'The restaurant closes in twenty minutes, but room service is available. The bar's open until midnight. Please present this voucher to the waitstaff and we'll take care of the charges.'

She handed me what looked like a business card.

'I thought the bar and restaurant were open twenty-four hours?'

She tilted her head like she was interested in what I was saying.

'Usually this is the case. However, due to an unforeseen circumstance, we have to close early for the next few days to address the matter. Is there anything else we can assist you with, Mr. Hain?'

I tapped the voucher on the counter.

'What time is it?'

'Twenty to eleven. Would you like a turndown?'

'A what?'

She smiled again.

‘Would you like your bed prepared for the night?’

You’ve got to be kidding.

‘No.’

She nodded and handed me my room key.

‘Elevators are to the left. You’re on the fourth floor. Have a pleasant stay.’

She motioned behind me.

‘Next guest please.’

I went and got my things from the car before going up to the room. Just get my things and knock off. No work tonight. Deadline can wait. Didn’t have much to go on anyway. Tangled odds and ends don’t cut it. To write about them you got to lie. I couldn’t do it tonight. Tomorrow’s another day.

I got my bag and took the elevator to the fourth floor. The hallway was deserted. I looked at my room key. 426. End of the hallway next to the stairwell. Minute later I turned the key in the lock and pushed on the door. Another blast of air-conditioning and shot of artificial pine rushed past me into the hallway. I walked in and closed the door, threw the key on the table, and looked around. Clean sheets on the bed, tv on a polished black dresser, coffee maker and brochures on a desk by the window, a phone on the table next to the bed blinking red. I went into the bathroom and turned on the light. Spotless and stocked with towels, soap, shampoo, conditioner, hand lotion, hairdryer, one mirror bolted to the wall, another beside it with an extendable arm to look close up. I flicked the light off and went over to the bed.

I picked up the phone. The red light quit.

‘Good evening and welcome to Sommerset Hotel. You have one message. Please press one to listen to your messages.’

I pressed one. Had to be Sommerset.

‘This is Mr. Sommerset, the owner of Sommerset Hotel. I want to personally thank you for choosing our hotel.’

Whether you are here for a short or extended stay, your satisfaction is our priority. If there is anything that we can do to make your stay a more comfortable one, please do not hesitate to contact the front desk available twenty-four hours, seven days a week. That's what family's for. Consider all of us at Sommerset Hotel your home away from home. Thank you and have a pleasant stay.'

The line went dead. I hung up and grabbed the remote lying next to the phone. Turned on the tv and pressed on the + sign to go from channel to channel to see what the local news had to say, can't be that robbing and killing goes down and they have nothing to say about it, but that's what it was, nothing but news about weather, traffic, Sunday's border-to-border summer fair, advertisements for go kart rides, golfing, the water park, stores and restaurants promoting everything from genuine leather boots to handmade pottery to discount margaritas. Nobody'd know what went on today at the bank. Nobody'd know Sommerset had a hand in it. Nobody'd know they might be sleeping in the very bed of the robbers and murderer. Fact is nobody wants to know there is only one degree of separation between us and them. Cathy Bell's one missed paycheck from Connie Burns. Gary Stone's one misstep from Guy Stephens. They wouldn't believe even it if you proved it to them, sure, times look down right now, but that don't mean they got the thieving and killing in them, they got their families, their gods, their laws, sure, they're not perfect, but that don't mean you got a right to do away with the law, separates us from the animals, if man can't uphold himself by it, he's got no right to be a man.

I killed the tv and stretched out in bed. Felt too tired to sleep, been feeling like this a lot, the controlled room made it worse. I had no business being here. Thought about checking into another place up the highway. I talked myself out of it. Stay put for the night. They're done with the highway. They're getting across the border now. They can't waste time. They'll make it and

you'll get the call and your letter. Sit tight and you'll get your just due before their luck runs out. Cops are onto them. They'll be in cuffs or dead before you know it, it'll go down so quick you'll think it never happened, just a long bleeding dream that you'll wake up from and that'll make up the difference. Make the most of it tonight and let tomorrow take care of its own ass.

Thought I was lying in bed talking to myself. Not so. I fell asleep and came through when I heard a steady knocking. Someone was at the door. I sat up and put my boots on the carpet, hadn't taken them off, had my clothes on too, was ready for anything even if I was dead to the world. I ran my fingers through my hair. Was sweating which wasn't like me. Whoever it was kept at it. I wasn't about to get up even if I had no excuse not to.

'Who is it?'

The knocking stopped. Probably had the wrong room. I sat on the bed and watched the gap under the door. Whoever it was wasn't going anywhere. The knocking started again. I got up and answered the door. It was Sommerset. Not the composed seventy-degree Sommerset I met in the office. This one was sweating and his hands shook as he wiped off his forehead with a gold and brown handkerchief.

'Good evening, Mr. Hain,' he said immediately cringing, his teeth clenched, his gums exposed. 'Would you be so kind as to let me in? I would like to speak to you about a matter concerning both parties.'

Automatically, I pushed the door back, headed over to the desk, and sat down. I went through the steps automatically. 'Pull up a chair.' I motioned to one in the corner as I flicked on the desk light.

'Please,' he cried, squinting at it. 'One is sufficient.' I turned it off. I watched him come near. Was the first time I really saw him. Tall and thin, face gaunt, broken capillaries shattered on his nose and cheeks. His skin was tense. He placed his chair at a distance.

‘It was not my intention to intrude, Mr. Hain,’ he began, unbuttoning his suit jacket before crossing his legs. ‘Just like it was not your intention to intrude upon my business. Neither of us have intentions on the other. This I am correct about.’

I stretched out my legs, pressing my back into the chair.

‘You booked the room for me, Sommerset.’

‘That I did.’

I lifted my hands. Why?

Again, he wiped the sweat from his face with that handkerchief that he folded back into his hands.

‘I value hospitality.’

I leaned towards him.

‘You’re real clean and tidy with that hospitality. Not a scrap of news about it on the tv. That’s as clean as it gets.’

He smiled like he had a gun to his head.

‘Was a favor for a friend.’ He lowered and raised his head, mulling over what was already settled.

‘Meaning what?’

He scrutinized the room, his eyes narrowing on the desk and the ceiling before dilating back to normal. He refused to look me. He focused on the handkerchief he kept folding and unfolding.

‘We’re public men, Hain. You and me, we meet people, we extend our hands across tables, we can’t discriminate whose hands are whose, what misdeeds they’ve committed. We’re not judges. We’re businessmen.’

I leaned back again and wrapped my hands behind my head.

‘A reporter is hardly a businessman.’

He looked amused. Made his jaw look more prominent.

‘We deal with people, don’t we? They’re business.

Certainly you can’t deny that. You make a living off them and so do I. We indulge them and make them pay for it. It’s our duty.’

I felt my brows knit together.

‘Sounds mercenary coming from you.’

He patted his forehead as he laughed without committing a sound. His silence racked his limbs.

‘Really, Hain, you shock me.’

The convulsions quit. He put the handkerchief in his lap. Everything back to normal. His jittery eyes tracked again. ‘But have it your way. It is mercenary. We make money at their expense. They have no idea they’re nothing but high profit margins. We rely on their susceptibility, their ignorance, or we’re done for. We know that. Cutting against the grain’s impermissible.’ He paused. ‘He would never sanction it. Debts must be paid.’

What debts? I handed it back to him.

‘I don’t have any debts. I don’t owe them, they don’t owe me. That’s how I work.’

You owe, Sommerset. You’re about profit. I’m a reporter. I stand by words - facts, truth - same thing. I owe them nothing but the truth and I get it by going off the record. That’s when I hit on words that are reckless, that go careening off the grid, that collide head first with the supposed truth, but there’s nothing supposed about it. We make it what it is and give it a run for its money, hell, we’ll even have a shootout with it if that’s what it comes to. We hunt it down and that’s why we practice our aim. We’d like nothing more than to blow the supposed truth to bits. We won’t admit it on record, it’s only when it’s off record that we grab it by the neck, slam it against the wall, our barrel staring it down, our bullet itching for it, that’s when we’re ready to pull the trigger.

Only the reporter knows when to call our bluff. He knows our supposed truth has at least one fact about it. He knows we want to destroy what we really want to save. He knows this about us and saves that fact from ourselves. He takes it from us in order to lead us to truth. It’s his duty. His virtue lies in being an accomplice with truth not in abetting its murder. He’s indebted to it, cuts against the grain for it, no matter what Sommerset or anybody says.

‘You owe, Hain. That’s the truth. As you see, no news, no press, no witnesses, no dissemination without him. He is subterranean. He’s under it all making us function, profit,

advance, reconfigure, reproduce and grow by putting capital down on the table where it vanishes. He is the underground pulling our strings from its bowels. He shuns the light. We can only catch him in the kind that makes us go mad.'

Okay Sommerset. You have to talk straight if you want me to understand.

'What are you getting at? Who's pulling the strings here?'

He shook his head.

'Not just here. Everywhere. See that light?'

He pointed at the phone. Red blinked again.

'He'll terminate our contract and I'll lose everything. He gets what he wants. I was mistaken about that. I thought it was by chance he was looking to invest. I thought I happened to be in the right place at the right time, and he happened to like my business plan, he liked what he saw and wanted Sommerset Hotel to succeed. The bank only loaned me the money because of him. He assured them they'd get a return on their investment. I thought it was by chance. Just my luck. It wasn't. It was him. He was right under the surface forcing my hands to do exactly what he wanted and now he wants me to end it.'

'End what?'

He glanced at the red light out of the corner of his eye.

'You're going to print this.? Every word of it?'

I nodded.

'Off the record then.'

'If that's what you want.'

The light quit.

'It's what he wants.'

'Who?'

He crossed his legs to the other side.

'Hirst.'

I should have known.

'Been hearing a lot about him.'

His mouth curved up like he was about to smile.

'Her portrait of him is distorted. She can't see the truth.

How can she at the speed they're going? She caught a glimpse of it at Sommerset. She saw the truth but

second-guessed herself. She thought she was imagining it when she was almost face to face with it. Then she turned a blind eye to him. I envy her.'

He pressed down on the crease in his pants.

'You cannot imagine having to see things only as they are. People don't want to see things that way, so they see everything as it appears to be. I have no such luxury. I see to the point of madness. I cannot sleep, think, walk into my hotel and say good morning without seeing him. I have no choice.'

'You mean Hirst?'

He quit rubbing at the crease.

'Yes.'

I checked the phone.

'He's here.'

He shook his head. Yes. Things made sense now. Hirst was the reason they came back to Sommerset. They risked it because of him.

'Where?'

Now he smiled and it cost him.

'Everywhere.' His voice broke. 'He's everywhere, Hain.'

He looked at it motionless on the desk.

'Is it on?' he asked, pointing at the recorder.

I turned around and switched it on.

'Is now.'

'Off the record?'

'Of course.'

Something had him. He had to talk. All there was to it.

Sommerset Hotel 13

‘Seeing things as they really are is a first principle in hospitality. We must harmonize thousands of parts, and those who see them as they are know every part functions best when it is part of a mirage, a necessary deception to make everyone want in on it. We abet the calculated lie because it works. Look at Sommerset Hotel. It stands between a desert and a border, between the sterile and the wasted, the molested and the sovereign. It is an illusion. It does not exist. Sommerset is a trick everyone wants in on. Its profit margins are impossible.’

He paused like someone had just walked into the room.

‘I am not what you think. Nobody is - Connie, Guy, Katarina, the detritus - cops, witnesses, readers, snitches – we are all his, plain and simple. Even you. Have you heard from Hank?’

‘No.’

He looked dead on at me.

‘You will. I saw that coming. I see like him now. I still remember a time when I did not. My memory still flashes, he cannot control that, the encoding, storing, the retrieving of history when my mind was mine own, who I was then he cannot rub out. Of course, he laughs at such bravado. He knows he is what I see now and the vividness racks and paralyzes. I cannot move or breathe when I see ancient images bearing no trace of him. I still see him even when my past comes for me. I see it as he sees. Past, present, future, I am his.’

Once I almost escaped. It was years ago. It began like any day. I kissed my wife goodbye, pulled out of the driveway, passed the security guard at the gate, and merged onto the highway south towards the intersection where I saw the sign for Sommerset Hotel - 2 miles on the left, Your Family Away From Home. I obeyed like I do every morning. I made a left two miles up the road, and proceeded to the reserved spot by the hotel entrance where I parked and removed the key from the ignition,

then I opened the door and got out and looked around like he was not there. Make no mistake. He watches. I do as I am told. I got out of my car and looked at the undivided highway like everyone does. We need it to make the border, to get across it, we need it to push on.

Anybody watching would have thought I saw only the highway. They wouldn't have second-guessed themselves. There goes Mr. Sommerset looking at it like he does every morning, counting every car, betting against odds the majority won't make it across tonight and need a room, look at him praying for it. That's how they would've seen me. That's how he did. What nobody saw that morning was Mr. Sommerset looking at the highway and seeing only them. The desert and the border. I saw them as I did centuries ago when there was nothing but them - no highway, hotels, gas stations, bars, restaurants, pawn shops, no surveyors, robbers, killers, no families. There was the desert. There was the border. There was sun and earth and moon aligned.

I got out of my car that day and saw them with my own eyes. The desert petrified, without movement or breath, turned to stone under the blood moon. The eclipse came on. Its eyes pinned to the shadow bands, light rippling like waves penetrated through the spectrum of blues, whites, yellows, reds, circling wider and wider until the penumbra broke through and dripped silver onto the desert all-seeing. Light scattered. Sky, sun, earth, moon, separated. The desert saw it was not defeated. It stirred. Again its sands struck out in waves of ancient hieroglyphics repeating symbols heaped upon symbols until the desert could see and feel and hear its language echoing from its body stirred by wind and storm.

The desert saw it progressed. Each wave a pattern, a symbol, a word building upon a word under its surface constantly pushing, shifting, obliterating, resurrecting itself. The desert was not as it appeared. It saw this and grew stronger. It knew no limits until it saw it in the distance. The border. I saw it like the desert that night. It appeared

to be division, limit, a boundary struck between the desert here and the desert there. But we knew the border was not as it appeared. We knew it was arbitrary. We knew we were a wave, a system, a language, a symbol, we were the reason for everything.

We moved in on it. We heaped ourselves up against it. It stood its ground. We tried again. It would not relent. It willed against us. That night we saw the thousand-year struggle reach its zenith. We watched it unfold and saw the way to beat it lie underground.

Our system indomitable. It pulsed, it worked, it governed from below. The strength of the border was only a mirage. It was light and cheap. It was bought in one afternoon. It did not look underneath its surface. It did not see how we controlled its every move, how we synchronized its words into actions. It saw only the appearance of a good deal, a shared border, here and there cooperating with each other, no side dominating the other, no one profiting more than the other, no one prospering from the loss of the other, here and there autonomous yet cooperative the one with the other. A symbiosis. This is how it appeared. The open door. The fair exchange. The goodwill. The miraculous appearance of things.

He's like the desert. He plays tricks on our eyes too. He rules under the surface of himself. His system works nonstop. Our language of experience - what we see, do, think, point to and name - has its origin in his underground. Nothing about us is random. He is certain about that.

I was certain like him that night of the eclipse. I saw the desert overpower the border and I was certain I could do the same. Opportunity is the way. Hotels with franchises on both sides. I had connections. All I needed was an investor.

I drove home that night, but it was not as close as it is now. At that time, there was distance and emptiness. There was man, there was nothing, there was eternity of miles between them. That night I crossed the infinite and was changed forever. I pulled into my driveway late.

Everything dead to the world except one man waging war on another. I thought I battled against myself but it was him. Because a battle did rage. A man cannot have two rulers. It had to be either or - either I would destroy him or I would destroy the desert.

I thought I reasoned it out. I thought I acted on my own logic. I warned myself: do not violate the desert. She raised you. She is the quiet in your dreams. Do not forget where you come from. Remember how you screamed in adolescent horror and no one heard but her. Her gentleness woke you from nightmares. Remember how she counted your footsteps so she could reveal them to you when you wandered into that perpetual chasm. She made sure you dared not to lose. Remember how she guarded your sins buried deep within her where they could not be summoned to stand trial, because everything about you is cradled within her rocking you bone-dry and innocent. She is your matriarch. She is death and rebirth. She is what breathes wind, rain, and heat. Without her, man is without earth, without ash, he is dust to dust no more. Deface her and man has no country.

But the desert is the old world, I countered. America is the new world. It is to her that we pledge ourselves. It is she who stands young and indivisible and liberated from the desert. Look at that hag bowing in reverence before her. Nothing can come between us now. Nothing can withstand us. We are America. We are opportunity. We are enterprise freed. Our immortal nature prospers and endures. Either you're in or you're done.

I will reason it out. It is simple. I am young, I want things, a wife, house, kids, I want the dream not the nightmare.

Just like the desert, I want to rule from beneath the surface, I want to build something from nothing, I want to be sovereign lording over and profiting from it. I see now I am just like her. Only her time is up and America is just beginning. America will make a man out of the desert. America will make it his kingdom on earth. He will be his master. He will be his freedom. Man chooses America because man chooses himself. The desert? Let her be hanged.

You see how I thought I reasoned it out, but it was him. I thought I was alone, but he was there. I thought I raged against myself but. I thought I won but. I thought I saw the eclipse, the desert, the border, America, as they really are but. I thought I could see but he gouged my eyes.

I thought I figured it out.

I keep repeating this, but you must understand I spent weeks putting a business plan together. Then I set up a meeting with the bank, the one they robbed, I thought I knew how to pitch it, a simple matter of financing a loan for a sound investment, you see my credit score, income, and employment history are respectable, you must see repayment is assured. Only one thing was missing and he knew what it was.

‘Mr. Sommerset, your finances are impeccable, your business plan sound, and as we all know, development at the border is overdue. The only issue is, as a potential borrower, you are required to make a down payment on a loan of this magnitude. After considering your finances, we do not see how this is possible.’

I knew this would be an issue and so did he. The bank representative was only doing his job. He’s not doing it any longer, she made sure of that, I wonder if he knew then what he knows now, if he would’ve suggested it knowing he would kill us for it. I doubt it would have made a difference. He represented the bank. He stood

for interest, profit, clients projecting cash like holograms, he represented the ephemeral and the bottom line. He considered men like himself fit for promotion not murder.

And he had connections. He knew him. He knew he was wealthy by indeterminate means, he knew he invested in ventures that were suspect and proposed by desperate and sanguine men looking for an investor who didn't sweat like they did, who didn't look in mirrors like they did, who didn't count seconds, hours, bills, phone calls like they did, who didn't step out of their house and bite their teeth like a hyena, who didn't sleep because one more broken dream would end them, and ultimately, he was an investor who wanted nothing more than to be a silent partner, a man who liked being in shadows. He had him in mind. All he had to do was wait for me to ask the right question and I did.

'What do you propose? We both agree my plan will be profitable. As you say, it has been a long time coming. How do I secure the down payment then?'

He gripped the rounded ends of his armrests and pushed back into his chair. He had to release what was building up.

'Desert's a huge expense, Sommerset. Everything has to be built from the ground up. Water, sewage, draining systems, electricity, concrete to reinforce it, we don't even know if it'll hold the weight, not to mention apartment complexes for workers because we can't bus them out there. And those across the border have to work with us on everything. The paperwork has to be smooth. If we're opening up franchises on both sides, we need seamless cooperation and productivity. The border has to be one in name only, and, of course, circumnavigating the bureaucracy will cost. We have connections but no guarantees. The bank would have to take an unprecedented risk.'

He paused and looked at me as he clicked his pen. Without an investor, it would be checkmate. He put the pen down and leaned forward with his elbows on the desk and his

fingers intertwined, except his thumbs that tapped methodically.

‘I do know someone. Don’t know him that well but well enough to know he has the cash you need. He’s not from around here, but he’s looking to invest. He’s into transportation, real estate, everything we’re basically looking at here. He gave me his card. Told me to call him if something interesting turns up. What do you think? Things work out, you’ll be partners. He’ll have contractual rights as a commercial entity.’

He relaxed back in his chair.

‘What’s his name?’

He started with the pen again.

‘Hirst. Glenn Hirst. Supposedly has businesses in the Southwest and further up north into California. Just so happens to be in town at the moment.’

Hirst. Any name will do when you need money.

‘Why don’t we call him? I could meet him to discuss the plan. It’d be worth his while to see the land.’

The representative picked up the phone and dialed.

‘Yes. Hello. This is Brice Dixon from First and Third Bank. I’d like to speak with Mr. Hirst, please. He’s expecting my call.’

He winked at me.

Brice Dixon. Soon you will hear about him. The obituary will laud him for developing the border town. It will hail him as founding and enriching its culture and strengthening connections between them and us, Brice, a champion of true reciprocity and economic prosperity. It is impolite to speak ill of the dead, but his notice of death will be a lie. He had connections and interests, he worked for salary plus commission, he liked cutting deals and watching interest grow, he liked sweating over profitability, he took it all to heart but that doesn’t make him a hero. He was a middle manager who networked deals and wound up dead at the end of another long day behind his desk. Because up to that day he never came out from behind it.

You must understand that I mean this in the literal sense.

Calls, meetings, paperwork, explanations, revisions, everything happened in his chair behind his desk. Common courtesy demanded he at least get up and walk around it to shake the hands of clients, but Brice refused to budge. He extended his hand across it to remain exactly where he was.

People will be shocked when they hear about it, although not for the right reason. The senselessness of Brice being gunned down will shock them. But they will not see their error. The shocking thing is not him being murdered in broad daylight at a local bank on a quiet one-way street on the edge of a border town. The horror is Brice being murdered doing something he normally did not do. That day he came out from behind his desk to shake his hand and walk out of his office with him. Yesterday the loan principle was repaid. He met with him to accept payment. He asked me to attend. I arrived too late. I only saw the outline of his body in chalk that was nowhere near his desk.

But as I was saying, Brice phoned Hirst that day in his office. He acted as if it was by chance that it happened exactly as planned.

‘Yes. I’ll wait,’ he said before he gasped and then smiled.

‘Mr. Hirst. Brice Dixon from First and Third. How are you?’

He nodded again and rocked back and forth in his chair.

‘Good to hear, good to hear, and you know...,’ he paused and leaned into the edge of his desk. ‘...I have something for you too. See a lot of potential with this one. We need an investor, and I gave you my word I’d call if something interesting turned up.’

He pressed his cheek against the phone and stared down at the desk.

‘His name’s Sommerset. Jack Sommerset. Wants to put up a hotel at the border. Has a solid business plan. Who knows how far this can go? Get one hotel up and running and make a fortune off a bunch of them. Land’s dirt cheap.’ He stopped and shook his head. ‘That’s right. Desert right at

the border. Just sitting out there with nothing on it. No highway, nothing.'

He shook his head again like he anticipated the next question.

'Right now, you have to cross the border about ten miles west. No development there either. A gas station, nothing else. It'd be real convenient to cross where we're thinking. A straight shot to the border, just needed Somerset here to spell it out for us.'

He listened now, his face and neck flushing.

'Will do. He'd like to meet you out there. Give you an idea of the scale of things.' Another pause. 'Tomorrow at six?' He looked at me. I shook my head. 'Sounds good.'

The following evening I drove out to meet him in the desert.

You're thinking I had reservations. A meeting in the desert with nobody around, no highway, nothing except two strangers, one looking for capital, one looking to pay out, you're thinking he'll kill or cheat me for a business plan or no reason at all. I thought nothing of the sort. I thought he'd appreciate my being early.

At five-thirty I was there and he was waiting. I parked and got out of my car. I did it without thinking one plus one equals two. I parked and got out and walked towards him. His passenger door opened and he stepped out.

'Mr. Hirst,' I called out. Seconds later I extended my hand. 'I'm Mr. Somerset. It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir.'

He did not return the gesture. He stared past it into the desert. I could do nothing but play along. I looked at him as he looked at it. He was pale, thin, dressed in a black suit and tie, a black derby hat cast a shadow across his face, shielding it from the desert, from man, from everything. I thought nothing about it. My reason for

being there had nothing to do with his face. I looked past it like it wasn't there. I saw only my reason. If you would have asked what it was, I would have told you I was there to pitch my idea. I would not have thought to question it, how could I when the variables lined up sequentially? I wanted to be an entrepreneur, I came up with an idea, I approached a local bank about a business loan, I was told I did not have enough collateral, my idea required an investor, would I like to meet a man with available cash? Of course. I'll meet a man whose resources are reliable, I'll meet him in the desert by the border where my plan will be the face of everything, a new city, a real utopia built on nothing from the ground up. My idea, my reasoning, my plan - inimitable. I would have bet my life on it.

I never would have believed I was seeing through another man's eyes, thinking his thoughts, acting on his ideas, I thought it was me but he beat me to it. When is what I need to know. When did he insinuate himself? I know what he'd say. When is irrelevant. I am his. Jack Sommerset is a detour, a roundabout way to get what he wants.

How long it's been going on I cannot tell. Maybe someday you will tell them, Hain. That evening in the desert, I never would have thought you would be needed. It was simple. It was business. It was a meeting between two men with mutual interests. It's what everybody wants. You want to make a deal to make profit to make a life for yourself and your family. It's natural. It's the way it is. I arrived early to make a deal. It's what we all want. The early bird gets the worm. He disagreed about this.

'I made sure to arrive early,' I spoke up again. 'Mr. Dixon informed me you are not from this area.'

Now I turned and looked at the desert just like he did. He moved. I did not divert my eyes. I remained alongside him like a specter. All strangers look like apparitions to one another.

‘Nobody is early in the desert, Mr. Sommerset,’ he replied before stepping out into it like he was wading into an ocean. ‘There is light or darkness. You are here or you are not. The desert is clean like that.’

I watched as his footsteps made it submit. The desert was his.

‘The border is over there,’ he affirmed, keeping his back to me.

I nodded. ‘Correct. The close proximity makes it ideal for development. I have brought the business and architecture plans if you’d like to see them. As I explained to Mr. Dixon...’

‘Brice,’ he corrected me.

Suddenly I became disoriented. The wind died. The sun faltered. The sky appeared an oleaginous expanse of blues, reds, pinks, scarred yellows and whites. My eyes began to tear.

‘Yes. Brice,’ I gasped.

They choked me. These simple words. He did not turn to face me. He did not budge. He stood unconquerable. A pillar against the desert.

‘You know him well?’

I did not understand. My teeth now ached, my skin tightened to rip from my bones, my heart punched at my veins, my knees teetered in thin air. I caught my breath, and with words handcuffed, I answered.

‘I know him from the bank. We discussed my business plan and available loans.’

‘Which you failed to qualify for.’

His words blackened space and time. I looked out and imagined a chasm between us, and the more I struggled to understand it, the more its edges slipped away fast to consume itself and the desert in the same instant. It will eat us alive if we do not watch it. It will suck us into black where our breath will not be spared. It will suck harder until the brittle air shatters on our skin, from a thousand cuts our deaths will flood the abyss as we go down into it. Nothing I could do about it. I was trapped in a mirage. Then something gave. It happened

automatically. I snapped out of it as my eyes narrowed the distance between us. My tongue now freed.

‘It is true that I did not qualify for a loan, Mr. Hirst, but not because I am unreliable. I can assure you that I am vigilant about repayments. Brice can provide a full report of my financial history. I am without fault.’

Something I said made him convulse. Instantly his posture caved in, his shoulders hunched, his head dropped, and tremors rattled his back and spine. It will topple him, I thought, but then I heard it. A laugh. He laughed at it.

‘I have failed to meet a man without fault, Mr. Sommerset,’ he spoke in a tone that mocked. ‘You must be a chosen one. I suppose I should express my gratitude by investing in you.’

Another trick played on me. I was it. I didn’t know it then because I couldn’t pin it down to say this is this. Nothing was what it was. His empire tricked us that day. It was supposed to be a business meeting. I had a business plan, he had working capital to grow, we had mutual interests, there was the border, there was the desert, between them there was profit.

‘Just imagine how big this could be.’

Brice knew it. I knew it. Hirst knew it. It was business. We were businessmen. I was a safe investment. This is what good business demands. But his empire calls for more. It is a new technology. I only knew the skin of it. I knew to bargain and negotiate. I didn’t know underneath this skin its guts are electric, its volts race high and low changing back and forth. It’s two-faced like this - now positive, now negative, its charade building up and up until it becomes loaded and burns like Eta Carinae, how could I know it is hot like a hypergiant opening, closing, resisting, consuming, growing, casting its spell so hot and fast, before you know it you’re it.

Please understand me. You are it.

It is what gets up in the morning, drinks a cup of coffee, eats breakfast, kisses the wife and kids goodbye, drives to work, does its job, drives back home, mows its lawn, buys what it needs, makes it with bodies and dreams and sleeps the sleep of innocence because you are only it. You are a component that lives, works, dies, and is born again without knowing it. How can you know? You do what he tells you. Be life everlasting. The same work, same flesh, same love, same needs, you are the same man and woman transmigrating to form the ultimate circuit with the same faces, scars, lies, pains, the same blood flowing in excess. I thought I was a man. I was without fault. I had a plan and it was simple. I needed capital to build. I could not see I was me and you and them cycling through him.

He knew this but I did not. I only knew I had a plan.

‘Would you like to see the plans, Mr. Hirst?’

My voice restrained, already knowing its place. I would learn to rely on it even though I am not the man who raised it. My voice would become a mark, a sign people read easily and quickly. Sommerset does not raise his voice. He does not need to because he knows to control it. This is how they see me. I am Mr. Sommerset. The owner of the hotel. It is a pleasure to meet you, Sir. My voice does not falter. I rely on him to make it work. It cycles through his loop at the same octave over and over again.

He knew this but I had to learn. I only knew I had a voice.

‘By all means, show me your plan,’ Hirst answered through his teeth.

I know what I said. Would you like to see the plans, Mr. Hirst? It was a business meeting. There is a plan and a contract, there is money exchanged, I knew this and yet I felt a sudden urge to say no. I could find another investor, but then a circuit breaker switched on. It had detected my fault.

‘Yes, Sir,’ I replied automatically as I retrieved the plan wrapped in a cardboard tube lying on the front seat of my car. I returned and assumed my place behind him.

‘It would be best to look at the architectural plans first. If you’d like, we can spread them out on the hood in order to view them in their entirety.’

He maintained his distance. He saw the currents ripping through me unchecked. I realized too late that his energy shocks. I had to plug into him to save myself.

‘Please get them ready. I will be with you in a moment.’

The wind picked up and the sun fired off at the horizon. I stole a look at her. She knew who it was. She knew who connected it all. The desert knew to make room for him. Her sands amassed. The border will yield.

I turned around and walked to the hood of my car where I opened the tube. I heard his footsteps behind me.

‘This is it.’

I tried to hold down the plans in spite of the wind ripping through them. It was futile. I needed him.

‘It would be best if we each held down a side. The wind is not cooperating.’

He advanced. The desert looked the other way. She refused to see it.

Now he stood across from me. He did not see the sunset coming at him from behind, he did not see it but I did. I was there. I looked it in the eye as it wrapped a nimbus around his face, he did not feel it but I did. I felt his face on

mine as the corona glowed silver around it gouged out and crowned by the sun's hallowing effect. His hat denied it in order to keep his black hole concealed, but the sun just laughed as it fanned out on the plan in front of us.

‘As you see, on the face of it, there is seamless continuity between the border, hotels, and the highway. However, below the surface is where cooperation is key. The city needs reliable power supplies, water sources, drainage systems, the works. We must build these systems from the ground up, linking them from our side to theirs so they're one and the same. Only in this way will they be fully operational. The border must be one in name only or the city will collapse.’

‘You mean die out.’

I shook my head. ‘Yes. I mean die out.’

He shook his head just like me.

‘You do understand what is at stake?’

I pleaded in vain. Please not again, not again, it is a simple question, something is always at stake, okay then, what was it, what is at stake? I felt my eyes rupture. Look away, Sommerset. Look away or what? Be blinded alive, bones crushed into dust unto dust, flesh without flesh, mind without words, self without memories and love and madness and pain and sorrow, blues-whites-reds-yellows revolving wider and wider in circuits of electric language shocking man into man, desert into sunset, into his wheel spinning.

But I had come too far.

I abandoned man and his desert for my city. It would skin me alive but it would be mine. It would make me in its image but I would be the face of it. It would infect me but as a god in its own right. I thought I wanted it but he beat me to it.

‘When is the soonest we can break ground?’

My eyes darted towards his voice. The match struck his face. I saw it. The scar. I saw what she did to him. That stigmata blazed on his face, on his memory, his eyes witnessing it hour after hour, day after day, fresh as it was on that first day. I saw it shining in the desert just like it did yesterday.

‘Yesterday?’ I had to interrupt him. If he meant yesterday then that meant.

He nodded.

‘He was here.’

He shook his head mechanically as he looked at his hands in his lap. His fingers twitched.

‘Right where you are sitting. It was afternoon. Probably seconds before it happened,’ he paused, his eyes shooting up at the ceiling. The twitching stopped. ‘No. Not probably. He sat right where you are seconds before it happened. The sheriff told me the exact time. 2:43pm. He looked the same. Same thinness, same black suit and hat, same face when the light stabbed it. He sat there just like you. It was afternoon. At exactly 2:43pm. The light struck through the window and I saw it again. The scar. It looked the same, like something seeped into it from below, something with intent. It was Connie. She knew what she was doing. She made sure he paid for it. It doesn’t flinch. It glares no matter what he does, no matter how many hats he wears, no matter what, he can’t get rid of her.’

‘What do you mean?’

He glanced at the door. Nobody was there.

‘He cannot rid his empire of Connie...ever. Of course she’ll pay for her immortality. He’ll make sure of that. Still, her murder will not destroy the fact that she beat his circuit. She exists outside his empire and he had everything to do with it. A man like Hirst cannot accept that kind of perverse error. His organization is impenetrable, it works, it flows, it is soil, skin, pores. But he forgot one thing: he is man first. That’s how the worm got in.’

‘What worm?’

Sommerset smiled.

‘The perverse one. The sin of man working against himself. It’s his imp. But man forgets about this worm. He thinks they’re all the same. He steps on them, thinking nothing of their guts splattered everywhere. They’re just worms. Billions are murdered to put his systems and cities, his law and order into place. The bright sun of man is everlasting. Perhaps, but storms rage on, rains fall, and the worm endures.’

He hesitated as he turned towards it again, waiting for two dark shadows to appear. They didn’t.

‘You are no doubt wondering why she did it.’

I watched him as he still refused to look away from under the door.

‘Not at all.’

He blinked hard.

‘That’s impossible.’

I leaned towards him.

‘He had his way with her. That’s why.’

He shut his eyes at once like a jackal before it’s shot, his upper lip curling against his gums and teeth. He couldn’t take it anymore.

‘He did it for a reason.’

His face suddenly relaxed. His eyes opened and stared back at me.

‘To make her a whore.’

He pressed his lips together but a smile broke through.

‘Although she was already self-made in that respect.’

I leaned back, putting my hands behind my head again.

‘Then why?’

The veins in his neck bulged. Again something exerted pressure on him. Was all in his mind but still.

‘You won’t repeat it.’

I nodded.

‘Alright.’

His eyes flashed.

‘Not even in your paper.’

‘If that’s what you want.’

He smiled.

‘That’s what he thought you’d say. Because by the time this goes to print, I’ll be done.’

I shifted in the chair. He put his hand up.

‘Nothing to do about it now, Hain. That’s a fact. You like facts. Here’s another one. He...’

‘Don’t.’ I stopped him. ‘He’ll kill you for it.’

We both knew he’d said too much. Didn’t change his mind though.

‘Every man for himself and he must do penance. I’m taking care of my own just like you will. That’s a fact. That’s why he did it. He doesn’t think you’ll understand but you will listen. You will because you’re a sinner. You’re getting used to that fact. You’re already meeting your sins halfway. You sitting across from me is no coincidence. You knew something wasn’t right but you didn’t let on. You also didn’t tell the sheriff in your pocket was a letter from a murderer. You see, you’re a lot like him. He saw Connie that first day and knew something wasn’t right, but he didn’t let on. He saw an opportunity, a means to expand. He’s like you. He likes facts and uses any opportunity to get at them.

Fact is when he saw Connie that day, he knew he was Hirst Industries. He was the circuit looping and returning, a man and a system, both legislator and industry. What he did not know was if he was both a just judge and a great sinner. The fact is he had to be both or his empire would self-destruct. That’s when he saw Connie. She was young but doomed. He picked her up and drove her into the desert. He had to. A great sinner desecrates the very symbol of innocence: a young thing. She asked for it waiting on the corner like that. He took her inside Adobe de Bene to condemn her for her sins before he committed the greatest sin on her to condemn himself. Afterwards he confessed and did penance as he prescribed. By fulfilling the terms of his punishment, he become both a great sinner and a just judge. Now he knows for a fact that he is both the God of Cain and the God of Abel. Now his empire is fool proof. As for Connie, he was just to her. He let her live. She’s doing her penance for it now. What more can she ask for?’

Right. What more can we ask for in the eye of insanity?

‘Do you hear yourself?’

He nodded and looked me square in the eyes.

‘I do.’

‘And it makes sense to you?’

His head kept bobbing as his eyes drifted to the floor.

‘It does now. It didn’t when he first explained it. At that time, we had broken new ground and succeeded. The hotels and highway were up and running, the border was invisible with both sides cooperating as profits soared.

We made a killing off the desert. I was rich. I liked what I saw. Sommerset Hotel beat out the competition year after year because we ran like clockwork. We knew our job and the exact time to perform each responsibility. We understood discrete time and completed every task at a specific point to maintain the overall sequence. We internalized this and excelled. At any moment, on any day, you could walk in and witness the charge of human industry – the front desk checking people in and out while one half of the staff polished, swept, mopped, sanitized the common areas, as the other half cleaned the guests’ rooms, their carts advancing down hallways at the same pace from the top to the bottom floor to form a seamless constant, while chefs prepared cuisine delivered by an efficient and cordial waitstaff, as managers and directors operated behind the scenes, overseeing the entire input and output systems to make sure the sending and receiving of numbers throughout the day coincided with projected revenue. For days on end, the electric hum surrounded us and I was happy.

Then something unexplained happened.

The cleaning staff alerted me to it. I immediately proceeded to the room, unlocked the door, and stepped inside. It was on the bed. It looked asleep. The staff made a mistake, I thought as I approached it. I had to do it. I touched it. It was rigid, cold. I backed away.

There has to be a reason for it. Some kind of breakdown or shortage, some pathway disconnected. I picked up the phone. It stunk of perfume. I dialed his number. The secretary answered.

‘Hirst Industries. How may I direct your call?’

I cleared my throat.

‘This is Mr. Sommerset. Is Mr. Hirst there? It’s urgent.’

‘One minute, Mr. Sommerset. He is expecting your call.’

‘But how...’

‘Sommerset.’

It was him.

‘Mr. Hirst. My apologies for contacting you on such short notice.’

A crack. The line had been compromised.

‘I take it you are in the room.’

It moved. No. Impossible. My eyes played tricks on me. It remained lying face down.

‘I am. How did you know?’

I betrayed my confusion because I could not comprehend it.

I had to look through his eyes to make sense of it.

‘You are alone.’

I nodded. ‘Yes.’

Another crack. It had to be intentional.

‘The cleaning staff brought it to your attention.’

I could not stop looking at it. At any moment I expected it to stare back at me laughing.

‘Correct. I addressed the issue immediately.’

The line sounded like it went dead.

‘Mr. Hirst?’

The light on the phone blinked red.

‘It was Maria who informed you. She worked the nightshift.’

‘Yes she did. She works the nightshift.’

I did not mark the error in tense.

‘You know what you must do now.’

There was no denying it.

‘I must get rid of it.’

His laughter sounded in my ear. I closed my eyes. The pressure was unbearable.

‘You are learning, Sommerset.’

For no explicable reason the pressure now abated. I opened my eyes. They zeroed in on it. It was clear as day now.

‘Thank you, Sir. I suppose I should...’

‘I have taken care of it. Simply walk out and close the door. The front desk will be alerted when the room is available.’

‘What about the message?’

The red blinking did not quit.

‘On the phone.’

I nodded.

‘Erase it.’

I pressed a button. The blinking stopped.

‘Good,’ he replied instantaneously. ‘We will need to discuss all of this tonight.’

‘Of course.’

A click. Someone hung up but not Hirst.

‘Stop by the office on your way home. You have the key.’

‘I do, Sir.’

‘Good. We’ll see you then.’

We? The line went dead.

Mornings happen fast in this industry. Before we realize it, afternoon comes, then evening, and everything must fit together before morning comes again. Everything must be in place. He had taken care of it. By late afternoon, the front desk reported the room spotless and already reserved for that evening.

‘We are fully booked for the weekend, Mr. Sommerset.

A couple from Orlando booked the room within seconds after it became available.’

He was right. It was as simple as turning my back on it and closing the door.

I drove to his office late in the evening. It had been a full day. What I didn't have time to think about materialized as I headed west towards the border. Bumper-to-bumper traffic on the highway makes it seem further than it is, sometimes it takes hours, forcing you to think about things because there's nothing else to do. Some turn back. Having to think makes them reconsider.

Happened to the man in front of me that night. He was nervous, kept checking his rearview mirror, looking around like something was about to betray him and then what would he do? He couldn't take it anymore. He slammed his car into reverse and took off in the opposite direction. He looked at me as he sped past. He reminded me of it. I remembered things are not what they seem.

It was in the room this morning. I know it. I saw it. It defiled the bed, but that's not how they'll see it. The couple from Orlando will open the door and a rush of cold air and pine will make them instantly feel like they're somewhere that smells of Ponderosa. They will happily forget they are in a congested border town in the middle of the desert. They have to because Sommerset Hotel is their family away from home where an immaculate room in log cabin-themed décor awaits them. They have to play along so they will.

I sat in traffic and thought about this couple, and the more I did, the more I saw through his eyes. We are in business together. We have a contract. He is the commercial entity. He is the reason we exist. He is what makes everything fit. This is what I saw that evening.

I saw myself walking into Sommerset Hotel and seeing it like he does. I saw them checking in and out the exact number of guests at the exact times; I saw them servicing the exact number of rooms at the exact hour and minute; I saw them waiting on the exact number of customers at x number of tables; I saw every customer breathing, smiling, eating, drinking, relaxing, eager to let their guard down at

the exact peak times. They all moved like electrons in a wire. Even what happened out of sight flowed with his charge.

That's when I saw it for what it was. What corrupted the room that day served a purpose.

It walked in the hotel that day just like they do. It checked in thinking it had plenty of time to eat, take a swim, maybe lie down for a nap before meeting him later that evening. It thanked the receptionist and proceeded to the elevator. It pushed the right button. 4th floor. It looked at its keycard. 426. Its pulse increased. It felt it was about to accomplish something. It proceeded to its room, it unpacked, arranged its clothes, first hanging up the dress in the closet, then carefully folding its blouses and skirts and placing them in the dresser.

It looked around and decided to take a swim. It changed, draped a towel over its arm, walked out of the room sensing how its body reacted to the air conditioning, its nipples hard, it felt assured, it was meant to be. It rode the elevator down into the lobby and smiled at the other guests looking as relaxed and happy as it did.

It noted the polite staff, a family away from home, it smiled again certain that this trip was a sign that things were looking up. Its cheeks blushed. How lucky it had been to run into him on that corner in broad daylight. It couldn't believe he saw something in it, potential he said, maybe they could meet to discuss a management position, something about a failing venture needing a change, it thought it remembered the name. Adobe de Bene. He promised it would be the right fit and it agreed. He set the date, paid for the car, the room, the clothes it bought especially for their meeting, and as it remembered all of this, it felt like somebody.

It walked through the hotel lobby towards the pool smiling, and they returned its smile as if it was the most

natural thing. They didn't know how it used to live or how it vowed to make a change. What it used to be was gone. The past was the past. Now it was just a pretty young thing going for a swim, and it liked being the admired object of their hospitality, they didn't gawk, they opened doors for it, they asked if it needed anything, they treated it like it was you.

I saw it like he did. It acted out his plan. I could see it but it couldn't. Guests checked in and repeated its exact words, other young things living and breathing the same potential it did, smiled like it as they moved through the lobby on their way to the very same pool, the hotel staff moved around it like negative and positive charges flowing in the same and opposite directions, everything running just so.

Men in black suits walked in and nodded to the front desk without it seeing that they recognized and watched it pass in front of them before they stepped into the elevator, pushing the same button as it did. 4th floor. The doors closed. And that's when I saw him. The sun was at his back as he crossed the lobby, a towering specter nothing touched, imagine the shock if it knew what it was dealing with. I knew of course, but I saw it too late. It was good as dead.

The traffic finally moved, and before I knew it, I turned off the highway into the parking lot of Hirst Industries. I killed the engine. Still I could not get it out of my sight. It was on the bed. I was not a witness to it, but like him, I knew. It was a game and I was next. I was it. I was positive and negative and I would be charged. I was his accomplice. I got out of the car. He has to tell me about it. I saw it and he took care of it. He has to tell me why in order to kill me for it.

The front door - locked. No lights on inside. The moon opposite the sun. The windows shone metallic. I used my key to open the door and then stepped onto the mat connecting the entrance to the hallway. Light emanated from his office at the end. I moved towards it like it was the

most natural thing to do. I was it. I see through him now. He will tell me why, otherwise he has no reason to do it, and he is reason for everything.

‘That’s you, Sommerset.’

I stopped right outside his office. The door was not all the way open.

‘Yes, Mr. Hirst.’

A drawer rolled back then forward again.

‘Do come in.’

I stood a moment in the center of the doorway. He was alone. What he took from the drawer was not on his desk. Had to be in his hands lying underneath it. I stepped in. I did not take my eyes off him.

‘Please sit down. This won’t take long.’

I sat down.

‘Thank you, Sir.’

He smiled and pressed back into his chair, his eyes on me.

‘You performed well today, Sommerset.’

I nodded as my hands became hot. He took his out from under the desk. They were empty.

‘I can assure you I did not confide in anybody about it, Mr. Hirst,’ I asserted as something gripped my throat, a vise unrelenting, but I did not betray it. I remained still. My forearms in perfect symmetry with the arm rests, my hands relaxed, my breathing shallow and controlled. My skin flushed hot, but I did not take out my handkerchief.

‘I harbor no reservations about your discretion,’ he affirmed. ‘You function at an exceptional level. Always have. However...,’ he paused as he leaned forward to look me straight on, ‘...it would have had no effect on the scheme of things if you had talked.’

A pain shot from my elbows to my fingertips. I did not react. I focused on the amber light coming from his desk lamp. It glowed on his scar, fusing it with the rest of his face.

‘Excuse me, Sir?’ I asked calmly to mask the suffocation. It was only a matter of time.

He smiled. The scar rose before falling again.

‘They know about it.’

I felt my eyes grow wider.

‘Who?’

‘Your staff.’

My head shook violently back and forth.

‘No, I swear, I was the only one who saw it.’

I did not know I misspoke. He turned his head without looking away.

‘Each member of your staff saw it.’

‘How is that possible?’

He kept his eyes on me as he slowly relaxed back into his chair.

‘It’s possible because it’s simple. They executed a part in it without knowing what it was. It is a guest of Mr. Hirst’s. Reserve 426 for it. Be attentive. Leave it a welcome message. Ask it if it needs anything if you see it in the common areas. Provide its room key to members of Mr. Hirst’s staff. They will be assisting it during the length of its stay. And then comes the denouement. Unfortunately, something has come up. It has to cut its stay short. Clean the room twice and take the block off.’ He paused. ‘You see now that they did their job, and without knowing it, they committed murder. You do see the genius of it.’

He was right. I did. I breathed easy.

‘Forgive my asking, but who was it? I didn’t see its face.’

I heard what I said. It came naturally. It was on the bed, naked, face down. Perhaps I did see it before. I smiled. He smiled back.

‘We always see eye to eye, Sommerset.’ His eyes narrowed into two black pins.

He’s going to tell me. He is.

‘You saw it as you walked out of the elevator. You looked right past it as it stepped in.’

I shook my head no.

‘I can assure you I do not look past them, Mr. Hirst. You have seen me. I make it a point to look all guests in the eyes.’

His turn to shake his head.

‘Not this one. Perhaps you already knew it was dead. It did not, of course. It was going for a swim. It was happy. It

smiled at you and you didn't see it. I'm not reprimanding you for negligence. You responded as the grid intended. I commend you.'

It gripped my throat again.

'But why, Sir?'

He opened the drawer again.

'Why?'

He can't do it before he tells me. Remember. My knowing why is the only reason to do it.

'Why did you do it, Sir?'

He closed the drawer and placed his hands under the desk.

'I didn't.' He wet his thin lips. 'You did.'

It was time. I was really it.

'No.' The word was swallowed whole. 'That's impossible.'

'Is it?'

I knew it was. I never saw or touched it. And I could never do that to it. I knew the facts.

'I did not do it, Mr. Hirst,' I professed in a voice stifled. My breathing labored again.

'You're sure?' he asked, his hands remaining hidden.

They knew the secret. Mine gripped the curve ends of the armrests. It was coming.

'What do you want me to say?'

'What we all do.'

'That I have an alibi.'

'Do you?'

'I was in plain view. I made my presence known in the common areas like you said.'

'Like I said.'

'Yes,' I reaffirmed, growing excited. 'I passed it on my way out of the elevator. The surveillance cameras prove I walked past it without acknowledging her.'

'Without acknowledging it.'

My temperature spiked then dropped.

'Correct.'

'You said her.'

I went ashen. I had to.

'My apologies, Mr. Hirst. I misspoke.'

He smiled and rocked slowly back and forth.
'You greeted all of them except for it. I was there.'
He was right but that didn't prove I did it.
'It was an oversight,' I stammered. 'An honest mistake.'
He kept rocking forward and backward, forward and backward.
'One is all it takes. Man is like that. One honest mistake breaks him.'
His bottom lip curled downwards as my lips pressed together. My thoughts chased it. Tell him the truth.
'No, Sir. I...'
But he held up his hand. Immediately my body rigid as my mind yielded.
'There are no exceptions, Sommerset. You'll see reason. You'll see how easy it is.'
He looked at the clock on the wall. It was a matter of time. He'd be done with it just like it was - on schedule. To him, we were one and the same.
'Sommerset.'
I nodded.
'Yes, Sir.'
He smiled and I smiled back just like it did. How did I know that?
'The mind plays tricks.'
I could not help laughing.
'That it does, Sir.'
I relaxed back into the chair like he did. Again, he placed his hand under the desk.
'You remember now that you passed it without greeting it.'
I bowed my head slightly.
'I do.'
This was it. That was the mistake. Nothing I could do about it now.
'That was all it took. One miscalculation.'
He paused. I wanted to see it.
'Do you recall what you did next?'
My skin tightened.
'I cannot.'
I submitted. It was easy to.

‘You walked out of the elevator and the front desk clerk immediately approached you.’

‘Mr. Sommerset.’

‘Yes.’

‘That woman you just passed.’

‘What woman?’

‘The one that got on the elevator.’ She smiled. She did.

They all did. ‘She is Mr. Hirst’s guest.’

You went pale.

‘I was not informed.’

She hesitated on cue.

‘You were notified, Mr. Hirst. We all were.’

You saw it. She smirked.

‘Of course, of course. What room is she in?’

‘426, Sir.’

‘Thank you. I will take care of it.’

She smiled and turned around as you turned and walked back to the elevator. You stepped inside and pressed the button. You would correct the error. The doors closed. You could smell it. Lilacs. You wanted it.

The bell rung. The doors opened. 426 to the right. You walked down the hallway. How could you have been so careless? You were briefed, the staff was, all remembered but you. A lapse on your part. You would right it. 426. You drew a sharp breath, tugged on your jacket sleeves, then tightened your fist. You knocked on its door.

‘Yes. Who is it?’

No denying you heard it.

‘It’s Mr. Sommerset.’ You stopped. The name. What was it?

You heard it coming towards you. The door opened. It smiled. That’s all it took. It was not what it seemed. You knew it. They’re all the same. Still you couldn’t take your eyes off it.

‘Mr. Sommerset?’

Yes, Ms...’

‘Gina. Mr. Hirst told me you’d be meeting with us.’

It held out its hand. You took it in yours. Hot, smooth, and very thin.

‘You want to come in?’

You knew what it was up to. The others acted just like it. It was bad for business.

‘Thank you.’

You stepped inside and shut and locked the door. It was you who locked it in. You already knew.

‘Can I get you something to drink?’ it asked as it backed into the room. It had on a bathrobe and flipflops. Its legs bare, hair wet, eyes bright - it saw it. That look.

‘No, thank you.’

You felt it staring at you. You squinted at the open blinds.

‘Bothers you too?’ It walked over to the window. ‘My eyes water if it’s too bright.’ It pulled the blinds down. There was light. There was darkness. Ridiculous to think about it. Just say the right thing and leave.

‘On behalf of all of us here at Sommerset, I want to wish you a pleasant stay. Will you require anything else before our meeting this evening? Mr. Hirst is a valued customer, and as his guest, your comfort is our first concern.’

You thought it giggled as it moved past you. It turned it on. The light. It retraced its steps. Again it stood in its robe at the foot of the bed. It looked clean. Then it betrayed itself. It was understandable. It was so new.

‘Do I make you nervous, Mr. Sommerset?’ it cooed before it laughed at your confusion.

You clasped your hands in front of you where you could see them.

‘Not at all, Ms...’

‘Gina.’

You bowed your head slightly.

‘Gina.’

You hesitated. You called it by its first name. It was personal. It would be harder now.

‘Will you be needing anything else?’

It sighed and turned to sit down in the chair. It crossed those legs.

‘He told you about me.’ She motioned towards the other chair by the desk. ‘Please. Have a seat.’

You checked the door. It was still locked. You crossed the room and sat down opposite it.

It smiled. ‘You have a wife?’

You nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Kids?’

‘Two.’

Its smile faded as it smoothed the folds in its robe. It waited in vain.

‘Aren’t you going to ask me?’

You placed one hand on top of the other.

‘Pardon?’

It ran its fingers through its hair, shaking it out, letting it fall around its face, its complexion looking untouched like it had nothing to do with it.

‘Aren’t you going to ask if I really do this kind of thing?’

It teased and you knew it. You coughed into your hand.

Your breath hard.

‘Mr. Hirst did not mention it,’ you answered, wanting to check the door again. You resented it turning on you as it stretched out its legs, slipping its hands between its thighs, leaning closer so you could almost touch it.

‘A scream costs, Mr. Sommerset. Especially if it comes from inside a hotel room with a business man with a wife and two kids.’

It leaned back into its chair, its long legs extended tight.

It refused to look away as it undid its robe. Nothing underneath it. Its skin incorrupt, its nipples hard, its virtue stiff and real - it was too much. It mocked you.

‘You like what you see, Mr. Sommerset?’

Something oppressed you, something airless.

You gasped as it rose up burning, a flare raging, it inched closer, making you hot and furious as it straddled you, its robe dropping to the floor, its laugh cutting you.

You wanted to say something. What was it?

‘Please...’

She put her hand on your mouth as she put you inside her. 'I'll scream,' she whispered in your ear. The undertones. It is not her. It is transient electric pulse. It is quick and over. You know it means nothing. But it had you. It had you until it had had enough and slid away majestic in its bathrobe that it tied around its waist before sitting back down in its chair. It left you a cold dead star. 'Why?'

That smugness again. You knew it was asking for it. 'Because you're ugly just like him. Mr. Hirst is a valued customer, and as his guest, your comfort is our first concern,' it mocked. 'But your shame is your own. You'll see. It'll come down on you just like I did. Your wife and kids will taste like it. Now when you look at them, I'm what you'll see. Don't worry. You'll thank me for it.' That laughter. I had to smash it. 'Mr. Hirst...'

You referred to me although you didn't know I wanted it dead just like you.

'What about him? You're not jealous, are you?' It pretended to pout. 'Okay, maybe you're not as hideous as he is. Your face isn't scarred. Do you know I spit on it when I was done with him? Thought he'd kill me for it.' It stopped and looked hard at me. 'But you wouldn't do that, would you?'

Your skull, tongue, and eyes riveted to something invisible. You did not answer.

'I didn't think so,' it joked as it took off its robe and went into the bathroom. It turned on the shower. It will be like it never happened if you. That's what you thought. You knew you would do it.

'I'm not capable of it, Mr. Hirst. You know that.'

'No, Sommerset. You are. Look.'

'You still here?' it called out as the water shut off.

It was automatic. You got up and walked towards it. The water, the flood, it made it chaste again, washed you right off. But not you. You were stuck with it, your skin and mind reeked of it, your eyes licked at its stench.

‘You still here?’

It dripped naked inches from you. It towed its hair before wrapping the towel around itself.

‘I have to get ready for our little meeting tonight, which reminds me...,’ its tone bit as it walked to the closet.

‘...you will tell him about our rendezvous, won’t you?’ They curled into themselves. Your fists. Your knuckles went pale, blood charged into vessels narrowing. Something had to give.

‘Do you hear me?’ It removed a skirt and blouse from the hangers. ‘Make sure to tell him. It’s what he wants.’ ‘Why?’

You did not recognize your voice. You moved closer without it noticing.

‘Why?’ It laughed. ‘I know where he’s taking me. A whorehouse in the desert.’ She placed the clothes on the bed, letting the towel drop to the floor. ‘You tell him I’m good for it.’

You stood close now. It breathed normally. It was a shallow thing.

‘What are you doing?’

It confronted you in all its holiness scrubbed clean and naked. You couldn’t take it anymore. It turned against you, its breasts on your suit jacket, it begged for it. It would not let it be.

‘You’re just like him. You want seconds. But he pays for them. Nobody’d go along with it if he didn’t.’

It dared you to.

‘What time is it?’

It smiled.

‘There’s time,’ it answered, running its finger down the front of your pants. ‘Now...where is it?’ It slipped its hand into your pocket.

You moaned just thinking about it.

‘I don’t have it on me. I left it back in...’

But it snaked itself around you, its lips, breath, tongue now for the taking as it clutched your wallet in your back pocket.

‘He should have told you what you were in for,’ its words came inside your mouth while it loosened its grip,

pulling its tongue out slowly into cold nothingness without it. Desire foamed at the mouth. It pushed back and opened your wallet.

‘This it?’

Your spleen oozed, you’d eat its pus alive, every last bit of it.

‘Yes.’

You moved in.

It threw it back in your face.

‘Get out of here,’ she spit at you. ‘Go on. Get out.’

It bent down to pick up the towel, but you kicked it away. It straightened up fast.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’

It looked disgusted. Imagine a whore looking repulsed by a man like you.

‘I’ll pay later. At the meeting.’

You reached for it, your finger tracing the areola that grew darker, larger, thicker. It wants it, it’s playing with you, your finger circled round and round. It didn’t try to get away, it eyed you like a black widow, its nipples hardening just like before.

‘Sommerset...,’ it moaned just like you thought it would before it suddenly hunched forward, the muscles in its shoulders, neck, back convulsing as that foul laugh slashed.

‘You pathetic ugly fuck,’ she growled as she stood up. ‘Pay now or get the fuck out.’

Tee-hee. Tee-hee. You heard it. It taunted. Tee-hee-hee.

You ugly pathetic thing. She’d pay. You gripped her neck hard. Her eyes grew wide.

‘Stop.’

The word barely escaped. She saw it coming.

Shhhh.

You watched it struggle wet and naked. A coarse whiteness etched into its face lined with mornings, afternoons, evenings, midnights corroding its skin with pockmarks formed centuries ago – death travelled at the speed of sound to scar it for life. It reminded you of something. You saw it like you saw yourself when you were young, your body rising below the surface, the desert sucking you into waves

breaking fast to strangle and bury you alive. You were without a trace. You lived to see yourself stillborn.

Now you saw only it and you almost laughed at it pleading before it broke into particles without a trace, its energy spreading out into the void clawing at its face, veins, bones, its heart going until it beat dust unto dust. It was easy. The desert will take care of it just like it will take care of you. First it's it, then you're it, then on and on and on.

A light blinked on. It was red. Red (flash) red (flash) red (flash).

It went limp. You threw its face down on the bed. You picked up the phone.

'Yes.'

'It is over.'

You nodded.

'It is.'

'Good. The rest of it will be taken care of.'

You hung up automatically and walked out, shutting the door behind you. The hallway smelled of cool pine like it always does. The worm can taste it. You buttoned your suit jacket, cleared your throat, and walked towards the elevator where you pressed the button with the arrow pointing down. You saw it in the metal doors. Your reflection. It smiled back. You thought nothing had changed. The doors opened, you stepped inside, the doors closed. You were trapped. You descended with it watching you from the other side now. It knew how you liked things you could see, and it knew you saw it, not as it was moments ago, but as it was now behind closed doors where it bared its teeth. It couldn't help itself. It knew what you were and it laughed until you couldn't take it. You rushed against its teeth growing sharper, its breath thickening, its laughter bleeding all over you. Then beep. It was over. The doors slid back. You wiped your hands off on your jacket.

‘Good afternoon and welcome to Sommerset hotel,’ you greeted the guests waiting for the elevator. ‘I am Mr. Sommerset, the proprietor of the hotel, please let know if you need anything.’

They smiled and you smiled back, they had no idea and you didn’t believe it yourself. But it knew. Murder is like that. Only the dead can point the finger.

‘No, Mr. Hirst. You are mistaken. I did not do it. I never saw it before that morning.’

He chuckled. He did not believe me.

‘You did it.’

I snarled. I felt my lips stick to my gums, my teeth cold and bared.

‘You did it not me.’

And that’s when it twitched and squirmed through my skull. It consumed me bit by bit, limbless and blind, my mind was its earth as its body electric burrowed in.

‘I’m surprised, Sommerset. I didn’t think you had it in you.’

Its tail scraped a nerve. The violence rattled.

‘Please, Mr. Hirst...,’ I pleaded just like it did. I never saw it before that morning.

He leaned into his desk, placing his hands on top of it, his fingers tap-tap-tapping.

‘I swear I didn’t...’

The madness wiggled. He held up one hand. It stopped.

‘You are of no interest to me. I have taken care of it, disposed of it, but not for long. Someone is bound to find it and alert the authorities. It will be dug up and identified, every inch of it examined to know the cause of death, to make sense of it by giving it a name: Gina Bowler, Age 19, Relations Unknown. It asked for it. We know that but we can’t admit that’s why the desert is eating its skin off, nothing will be left but your fingerprints all over it. They’ll come for you, they’ll question your wife, your staff, even your kids. Everyone will answer the same question: did you suspect anything? They’ll lie without knowing it. They don’t even suspect they’re capable of it.’

He paused. The worm opened its mouth. The scorpion opened wide.

‘What do you want me to do?’

It shut its mouth and pushed on again, its body slowly grinding through me. I thought I could live with it. I really did.

‘I’ll be in touch. For now, put it out of your mind. Act as if nothing happened. We have mutual interests. Don’t let it get in the way of good business.’

On cue, I got up to leave.

‘Yes, Mr. Hirst.’

I turned my back on him, expecting it right then and there. I pictured the drawer sliding open, his fingers curling around steel, the trigger curved like its tail. Pull it.

‘One more thing, Sommerset...’

I stopped at the doorway and looked into black before turning to face him.

He smiled.

‘What was it like?’

The red again. Red (flash). Red (flash).

‘What?’ I asked, my head shaking uncontrollably.

It tunneled deeper, the holes throbbled and ached. I wanted to be eaten once and for all until.

His body convulsed just like it did. That laughter.

‘Gina. What was it like?’

It grew harder and bigger until I thought my skull would blow it to pieces. The thought made me smile.

‘As you’d expect it to be.’

We laughed. It was all a joke.

I walked out and pulled away. That was the last time I saw him until it all started up again.

Game Over Begins 14

Was almost morning when Sommerset called it a night. He ended things on a clean note. That's how he knew he didn't do it.

'Mr. Hirst likes things clean,' he insisted as he rose from his chair. 'He admitted he did it in his office that evening. That's why I thought he'd kill me. Things have to be clean to kill, he said. Order is key. We act as if nothing is out of the ordinary, we do our job, we punch in, we punch out, we go home without things sticking to us. You understand?'

He killed that girl. We're both certain about it. I'm next. I'm it. We're sure about that too. I thought he'd do it that night. It would've been clean. Black as midnight, no witnesses, enough traffic to drown out a gunshot, no motive, I'm his partner who'd be easily deep-sixed in the desert.

He'd like how I'm portraying it. Showing it interconnected from all angles - time of day, traffic patterns, lack of rationale, lack of eyewitnesses, numerical terms like deep-six. It's trigonometry. It's instantaneous. It's maximum voltage. Pure logic and three plus three equals six. That's why it doesn't make sense. It would've been clean to do it right then and there. My back to him, nobody expecting it, I'd wash right off him - no questions asked.

Not now though. You're a witness. You'll talk and muddy it up, Hain. Hirst incriminated himself because he wants everyone to know he did it. They'll see that now. I've spoken in good faith as instructed. His words verbatim.'

'You've implicated yourself, Sommerset,' I cut in. 'They'll come for you, not him.'

He clasped his hands behind his back.

'Perhaps but the truth will come out. It already has. I have an alibi. I was elsewhere. They'll confirm it. They saw it

with their own eyes. I walked out as it walked in the elevator.'

'You mean Gina.'

His head jerked.

'As you say.'

I couldn't help it.

'Why are you smiling?' he asked in that thin voice.

My head inclined to one side, I looked up at him.

'Who saw it with their own eyes, Sommerset?'

'The surveillance cameras. They saw me up close. I walked out, I looked straight ahead, it walked in. I returned later, I pushed the button for the guests not for myself, I smiled, the doors opened, I motioned for them to proceed inside as I remained outside of it all.'

'And the body?'

It had no effect on him. His eyes drew a blank.

'It's not my concern.'

'It will be when this goes to print.'

His jaw tightened. The muscles cut through his mask.

'This is off record.'

I relaxed back into the chair.

'Of course.'

He looked like he might sit down again, but then he abruptly turned and went for the door. He placed his hand on the knob.

'Of course, all bets are off if something happens to him,' he spoke with his back towards the room.

'To who? Hirst?'

He slumped forward. A momentary collapse before he quickly recovered with his back erect and spine rigid.

'No. Not Hirst. Sommerset. Something will happen to him. When it does, print it. All of it.'

I stood up. The door opened. He stepped into the hallway.

'Wait.'

The door shut. I heard him laughing on the other side.

I woke up hours later and looked at the clock. Almost noon. Nothing I could do about it. Had been one hell of

a night. I'd let Hank know I didn't have anything. Not yet anyway.

I got up, took a shower, got dressed, and was about to head out when the phone rang.

'Hello?'

It was Hank.

'I was going to call.'

'Supposed to hours ago. Got anything we can get started on?'

I sat down on the bed.

'Most of it is off the record.'

'Off the record?'

I shook my head.

'Yeah.'

'How much?'

'About the last ten hours. Didn't get to bed until this morning.'

He sighed into the receiver.

'Anything to print in the meantime?'

'Nothing that'll hold.'

Suddenly the red light on the phone started flashing.

'How'd you know?'

'How'd I know what?'

'That I was here.'

Dead silence on the line. Something now caught my eye. A piece of paper slid under the door. Had to be Sommerset.

'Let me call you back.'

I hung up and walked over to the door. A letter. I opened it and sat back down on the bed. It was Sommerset.

Hain,

Game over begins. Kissed my wife and kids goodbye and took it to the desert. It's not what you think. Its body in the trunk is not why I drove out there, further out than I've ever gone, outside his current passing through the highway, the border, the traffic, lights flashing, I had to get out but not for Gina. She's out there somewhere but I didn't come for

her. I came for me to a point in the desert where Sommerset is unseen and unheard of, where the moon passes in shadows without notice, where the universe electric is masked as Orion hunts, where the holes in blackness explode into death alive and on the move - I came to this point to take the leap, my eyes enflamed forever.

They won't tell it like this.

Their words come from where they are in a desert oasis, in a golden city where water claws at its dry throat until it bursts and showers them with cocktails, pools, car washes, fountains, water slides, the greenest grass sprouting from the mouth of the desert. They don't know any better. They have their miracle in their hands and their words will be just as miraculous.

They will tell a spectacular story.

Like their water that comes from nothing, they will tell you they did not see it coming. He was a successful business man, the first success the city ever heard of. If it weren't for Sommerset we wouldn't be here. He was a maverick. He saw something in nothing and built his name on it. He offered us a home away from home, a way to make a living. Devoted to his hotel as much as to his wife and kids. Everything fluctuated smoothly through him. We looked up to him. That is why we did not see it coming.

Sommerset was beyond us. He was not a man of flesh and blood. He was cut from the infallible, the universal, a true cosmopolitan, he did not need to put on airs, he did his job and did it well - never late or absent, never in meetings longer than usual, one moment he is greeting guests and saying hello to staff, welcoming to one and all, the next he is in the backroom making sure all wires are connected and working efficiently. He switched

effortlessly between the two, making himself an example that we felt it our duty to follow.

He was a just judge of all who knew him. He knew what to do at the right time for the right reason in public or in private, that is why it is tragic because there is never a time or reason to do it, and he knew this, and now it is impossible for us to follow him into a senseless tragedy lacking a pulse. We can hardly believe it so we refuse to. We are here. We work in his name. Sommerset lives. With all due respect to his family, that is all we have to say about the matter.

They will go on like this. I can't blame them. Their words are not their own, like their bodies polished, their language shines hollow on the inside. They will not follow me. They will not know to because the current keeps them moving and smiling and feeling and saving and buying and depositing to accrue more interest in what? In life they will answer and mean it. Gina was different, so is Connie, even Katarina was outside it until he came for her in the beginning before it began.

The beginning before it began and around and around – now that's a story that'll make you a millionaire, Hain. Tell it and you'll be rich because their words have already been had, but yours are only becoming his, of course, you'll soon know their poverty when you see your first word spark, a nothing word, a word you forget exists, 'a' anything - a man, a desert, a plan, a profit, a murder, a sun, a moon, a shadow, a earth, a current immortal, a suicide. A is nothing. It's indefinite. It only points at whatever it is, but the moment you see it spark, you'll be it. Something that is nothing should not bear fire but it will, and you'll let it fly and sink in to burn the flesh off your eyes and lips, even though your mind shrieks. At that precise moment you'll be his and your words will know it and laugh. Tee-hee-hee. Tee-hee-hee. It will unhinge you. Hain's a madman. See how it flies at you?

The only way is to be outside of it. I drove into the desert farther than the current flowed. The second I extended beyond it I knew. I was free. I was nothing. I was man with no guts. My words resurrected had no eyes to see, blind and disconnected they flooded, short-circuiting my mind. A fatal torrent of words. If I touched them, I would become their pathway, they would travel through me to reach everything at once, and the second they did, I would be done.

It all comes down to a second. I closed my eyes and took the leap. My pulse spiked. The voltage skyrocketed. The words sputtered then caught fire, discharging constellations blazing through and through. I recognized words like stars their bodies patterned for meaning, one word, one body, one meaning shot through one man who would have suspended this leap for eternity just to be able to see them coming together to form images he did not know he possessed. Words came at me faster than the ultimate pull, their bodies exploding in me, their images whipping against me, streaking me with hues discordant, a violent beauty flowering in one second lasting centuries.

That's when I saw it again. The eclipse. My moon hidden in the shadow of my earth. That's when I saw it for what it was. I was it. His scar gathered strength from the red ring circling the sun, transforming it into a blade. What has been wounded will wound and it did. It cut words into a million bleeding images. I gasped at one.

Gina.

Her skin so white, so fresh, so young, a little plaything turning in my hands, getting hotter, wetter, straddling me to the point at which I deserted the first breath of man. That is how she gained the upper hand. I thought I hardened against her, against everything, I thought nothing could break me, not him, not her, not even me,

but the second I remembered who it was, I was toppled. I spilled into her completely.

Who's the plaything now, Sommerset?

I was it. I was lame and she laughed at my infirmity. I gasped as I saw my hands gather round her neck, the elegant swan hushed, the words speeding by couldn't stand themselves. But they were only pretending.

Never again.

Two insignificant words that make no sense together. They mean nothing side-by-side. How can what is not at all, be once more at another time? Never again had to be massacred by a man's hand and I did it. Never again. I did it for all us. It's not my fault she was in the wrong place, at the wrong time. Two wrongs do make a right. A just judge knows this.

But the blood on my hands would not wash off. They murdered the words, the woman, both dead and buried and saved at the right hand of the father, but these hands stigmatized forever. I remain condemned alive and hunted by that thing in the earth's shadow. My innocence watches. If he is mind, how can I be guilty? He who could be anyone.

I saw something else before my leap broke into absurdity. Something everyday, a routine, a habit, like any other. I saw Guy pull up at the hotel and walk in like he did the afternoon before, only she was nowhere to be found. Connie is like that. He stepped inside the elevator, pushed on the number 4, minutes later a beep, the doors opened again, he stepped out and turned right. 426. He stopped at the number, looked down the hallway, right then left then he swiped his card. The door gave immediately. He went inside.

I was on the bed, my back to him, I didn't turn to look when I heard him come in, I expected it, the words told me to, I repeated them over and over again, my lips tracing their bodies silently as I felt the muzzle against the back of my head.

It was here. The eclipse. I will never make it beyond the shadow of the earth. Hang it all then. That's what they told me. Hang it all. And I did.

I will not make it to M-----. But you will.

Sommerset

I didn't know what to make of it. Usually questions have answers in plain sight, but where was Sommerset? In the hotel, in the desert, nowhere to be found? Was he missing dead or alive? And what happened to his mind? Was he nuts, sane, or in over his head? Did he do it? Did he kill her or was he convinced he did?

Fact is he had her. Fact is maybe he killed her, maybe he didn't. He was successful. Why lift a hand against that? And what about the letter? The words weren't his. How do I know for sure? How do I even know I met with Sommerset? And if he's dead, did he off himself, or did Guy and Connie do it? No reason to. He said he knew Hirst killed her, but he wanted him to know. He said Hirst had to be the living god of Cain and Abel to be a just judge whose organization runs on good and evil so all wires connect to his current flowing through each and every thing - even you, Hain.

I know damn well I got it right and it's absurd, every damn word of it. I had to laugh to get it out of me. Hirst and his electric cosmos - who wouldn't laugh?

Then someone knocked. They heard me. No use pretending I wasn't there. I grabbed my bag. Whoever

it was I was as good as gone. Had to get to M-----.
Sommerset said as much.

I opened the door. It was Junior, the cop from the bank.
'Excuse me, Mr. Sommerset,'
'Hain.'
'Right...sorry...Mr. Hain.'

He stopped like he forgot his lines. He looked down at his hat that he kept tapping on his thighs as his face turned red. Something was up.

'It's about Mr. Sommerset, Sir.' Now he looked up at me. His eyes were bloodshot. 'I think you best come with me.'
I smiled and gripped my bag hard like it mattered.

'I got nothing to do with him.'

I stepped at him, he stepped back, I closed the door, he cleared his throat. 1-2-1-2-1-2. Things running smoothly. 'He was in your room all night,' he replied, motioning with his hat toward something in the hallway. 'Cameras saw him go in around midnight and leave early this morning.'

I took hold of the bag with both hands now.

'Your Chief's the one who sent me here.'

'I know...it's just...,' Junior stuttered.

Obviously, he had no hand to play. A lackey and nothing more.

'Listen...,' I cut in, '...If you're looking for him, check downstairs. He's around somewhere.'

I almost laughed but I had to play it. Sommerset wasn't going to make it to M---- but I had to.

'He's dead, Sir,' Junior enunciated those three words like they could have been any number of them. He's dead, Sir, Thank you, Sir, Good morning, Sir, That's right, Sir, Hot day, Sir, what did it matter?

I heard you. You're repeating what he wants you to.

'He's dead.' Junior repeated, nodding his head. 'He did it right after he left your room.'

'Who did it?'

He jerked his head. Didn't expect that, did you? Didn't think I had a clue who did it. It's Guy. Bet you'd catch him

if you tried, got to be around here, but that's not what you're up to. Your law and order is make-believe.

'I'm sorry, Sir, I don't...'

'I know who did it.'

Junior checked the hallway before moving closer.

'I think it'd be best if we talked downstairs. Chief Willis is there,' he spoke in a hushed tone. 'He'll explain things.'

Junior was lying and so was I, the question was which one of us knew what he was lying about.

'Okay. Let's go.'

I started down the hall towards the stairwell. That's why the cameras didn't see him. He took the stairs not the elevator. The cameras saw what he wanted them to, right Sommerset? You're right, Hain. I didn't step foot in the elevator after she did. Plain to see how we did it. Now we'll see that you have something to do with it. Now you're it, Hain. You're the witness. You'll print it so we can see it in front of us for all to judge.

I pushed on the steel door and took the stairs quick. One-track mind pestered me. Everything was going down at M----. I had to get there. Sommerset bet his life on it, and anytime a dead man tells you you'll make it somewhere, odds are 2 to 1 you will. Thing is the game's changing hands so fast the odds are up for grabs.

I pushed on the door at the bottom of the stairs and entered the lobby. Same front desk clerk that checked me in was once again greeting guests and shaking their hands, answering their questions by pointing in different directions - this way for the lounge and bar - that way for the pool and hot tub - the elevators are directly behind - and shaking her head and smiling whenever they asked her to repeat something.

No Chief Willis though, no uniformed officers either, maybe no murder at all, just another busy day at the hotel.

‘Can I help you, Sir? Will you be checking out with us this afternoon?’

It was another clerk. I pointed to Junior coming up behind me.

‘This man’s looking for Sommerset. Know where he can find him?’

Junior politely waved his hat in front of him.

‘Thank you, Emily. I’ll take care of it.’

She lowered her head before raising it again.

‘Of course. Please let me know if you’ll require anything else to make your stay a pleasant one,’ she repeated before immediately turning to the other guests.

‘This way, Mr. Hain.’

Junior put out his hand in the direction of Sommerset’s office.

‘His office?’

His smile tensed. ‘Please. Chief Willis is waiting.’

I gripped my bag tight, no way I was going to let on about the letter, it was my ace in the hole because no matter how they put it, I know Guy killed him. Plain and simple, Guy did it. Sommerset’s letter proves it.

I stopped at his door. Junior knocked then pushed it open.

‘Go ahead,’ he instructed quietly. ‘I will be right outside.’

I went in and closed the door just like I did the day before.

Everything looked the same except Chief Willis dressed in a suit and tie and sitting behind Sommerset’s desk looking every bit the conman.

‘Hain.’ He pointed to same chair. ‘Have a seat.’

I sat down, keeping the bag in my lap.

‘You can put it over there.’ He motioned towards an empty corner.

I shook my head. ‘I won’t be long. I have an appointment to keep.’

The Chief pushed back and started rocking in his chair, his face blank.

‘You seem pretty sure about that.’

‘I am.’

‘Any particular reason?’

Here we go.

‘I didn’t do it, if that’s what you’re getting at.’

He rocked back and forth, stroking his bottom lip, looking like cops do when they want you to think they got your fingerprints all over whatever they’re investigating.

‘You didn’t have to. Took care of it himself.’

‘Sommerset?’

He quit rocking and leaned forward, elbows on the desk, hands clasped.

‘Found him this morning. Open and shut case. Trying to keep things quiet for the sake of his family and business. No sense making noise about it.’

‘You found him this morning?’

He wasn’t budging.

‘That’s right. Must’ve done it after he left your room.’

‘Done what?’

That’s your signal. You knew I’d ask. The rocking started up again as he stared me down, his eyes leaden glass. The truth ricocheted off them and smashed to bits.

‘Hung himself. Must’ve been some talk you two had.’

Now his eyes stared out paralyzed.

‘Where’d you find him?’

Room 426. The letter confirmed it. But I was there.

‘Right above you.’ He pointed to the ceiling. ‘Hung himself on one of the rafters.’

You knew I’d do it. You knew I wouldn’t be able to help myself.

‘Come on. You’ve got to be kidding me,’ I laughed.

His eyes flashed with something that was there all along.

‘What kind of man do you think I am, Hain?’ He blinked. ‘I’m a cop, for Christ’s sake. You think I’d joke about something like that? I knew the guy, knew his wife and kids too, never had a problem with him until this morning when I’m called over to get him down from the goddamn ceiling.’

Impossible and that’s the point – Sommerset’s still alive. You need room 426 to finish him off. If you’d have waited a minute, I’d have been gone. Now what are you going

to do?

I stood up with the bag in my hand.

‘I’m free to go then.’

No disputing it. Get out. That’s what you need me to do.

‘Sure you are. Like you said, you didn’t do anything.’ They glared up at me. ‘This little chat of ours was just about an unfortunate turn of events.’

I turned my back on the Chief or whoever it was and grabbed the door handle, knowing damn well if I left that was it, Sommerset would be dead, maybe he was already, no way to know for sure, but I knew if I walked out there was no going back. Room 426 would be free.

I opened the door and shut it. Junior was gone. I headed to the front desk.

‘May I help you?’

I put the room card down on the counter.

‘I’m checking out.’

She took it in her hand.

‘Room number, please?’ she asked, swiping the card through a machine.

‘426.’

‘Of course. Mr. Joe Hain. We have taken care of the room charge. I hope your stay was a pleasant one.’

She smiled as they squinted at the bright unreal violence.

They all did. M-----. Here we come. All eyes on you.

The Lamb and The Just 15

You and me come a long way, Hain, maybe too long. Our words don't even look like us anymore. Least mine don't. I look in the mirror, I don't see them. I look at the paper, they look like someone else. You don't think about words most times. You do what they say and you're done with them, unless what you've been doing can't get done quick and clean like, then you look at them and they don't make sense. It's like staring at them from a distance. You can't get them into focus, so you get up real close, and when you do, you don't believe them, not one word of them, cause when did you ever talk homicide, armed robbery, spree killing, strangulation, you don't talk like this, you wouldn't even know how to use words like that. First time you heard them for all you know, seems like it anyway, but these words that you got nothing to do with hunt you down, call you out by name, know what you're doing and what you're like, they know everything about you, you who'd swear you never saw them before in your life. You'd bet on it and mean it.

That's the kind of words I'm talking about. Ones that'll get you killed because you've seen them somewhere but can't place them. Can't be you they're talking about, got to be someone else, anyone, long as it's not you who swears you're not capable of them, you weren't raised on them. Words like this only exist in the movies where you root for them because they don't cost you anything. Moving pictures make it easy to applaud nothing words, you clap for them cause you're not going do nothing by them. After the show, you get a bite to eat and forget about them. Make-believe words is all they are till they're not, but that don't make them anymore real.

Cause I'm a killer but you got the words all wrong. Armed Robbery. Homicide. Spree Killing. Connie Kills Again. These are your words. They're not real. To make them so I'd have be doing what they say I am and

I'm not. I'm getting by best I can by necessity. That don't make me no killer, I get no pleasure doing it, got no malice in me, not a shred of it, I do it out of necessity. It is what it is and I feel nothing about it. I got no tongue for killing, and besides, if necessity says do it, can't be called killing. I'm not sick in the head. I just have the stomach for it. I kill and eat and sleep and get on with it like nothing ever happened because nothing did. What is must be. See how your words get it all wrong? They're coming between us when we were just getting a feel for one another. Fact is you're the killer your words say I am. You're not going to kill out of necessity. You won't believe it but I see it. It'll look good on you, Hain. Killing. You'll make me want it just looking at you. He'll make sure of that.

Cause living can't be for long, and I'm getting tired or bored of whatever you call it. Killing you say. Fine. Have it your way. Thing is killing makes for too much blood and that's what makes it so easy. Like in Hollywood. All that blood makes you a star and you get sick of it real quick.

[You're no star, Connie, and I'm no killer, not like that. Killing's not about blood. It's about intent, and if you've no choice, if it's you or that's it, you kill to make it right. That's the killing I'm talking about. The law stands by you when you kill like this. It sees the rightness and justifies it. You did it in self-defense. You're free to go.

Free. Not even you can mess up a word like that. You can't force it to play along with you twisting it at its roots, crippling it so it repulses because it's got no logic, no reason, no meaning cause it's grotesque like you.

You know I'm right. I was there. I saw you. You couldn't keep a straight face.

'Don't look at me like that. You know they're making me do it.'
Who?

'You know who.'
You don't have to.
'Got no choice.'
Then you did it. You couldn't help it. You laughed.
'Your face.'
You laughed, your hand shaking.
'You should've seen it.'
You couldn't stop. You put your hand over your mouth.
Put it down.
You gripped it harder.
'Don't you go telling me what to do, Hain.'
You told me yourself. You don't want to do this.
'You of all people. You know you can't trust a word I
say.'
You had a choice that meant nothing to you.]

I like how you put it, that talk about the border, didn't mean nothing to me till we got to M-----. Crossed it without thinking about it, thought about getting caught, maybe getting ripped off and killed, but didn't think it meant anything, a border's just a thing, a line, a tollbooth, you go in, you go out, you pay up both ways, or you pass under their noses and make it free of charge.

But like you said, there's more to it. The border's part of their system, and making do outside it smudges their perfect lines between here and there, right and wrong, if a border controls the lines, then we pulled a fast one on it in broad daylight. We got around it just like their laws. You did good, Hain. Your talk about the border got me thinking. I know something for real now. The border makes it definite where I stand.

Maybe that's why I knew we'd make it. I knew where I stood. There's no going back. I knew it for real now and I begged Guy to go faster. Don't know how many miles it was into the desert before I first tasted it.

Thought the desert was playing tricks on me. Guy was driving hard but it outruns everything, its momentum

cutting through quick and quicker, nothing appearing to be right, the desert making sure of this. I warned myself it is no friend. It likes to persecute but not me. The desert's not going to get me.

Go faster. I screamed to go faster. Guy took off, and the faster he bit at it, the closer we got to it. I couldn't see it but I knew. I tasted its salt bleeding all over us - I put out my tongue and it stung. The sea. It's coming. It'll smash the desert. Guy pushed on. I knew we'd make and we did.

Drove to the boardwalk first thing. Guy had to make a call. I got out to see it, to breathe it in, to run my hand along its body, how long since I felt it? I went to it barefoot like nothing had changed, like the months ticking like a bomb showed no signs that time knew what I'd become. It was three o'clock. I walked barefoot on the boardwalk, the planks tight and smooth, tourists in slow motion, smiling unreal just like me, the sea is so clear and blue, my boyfriend and I actually drove here on vacation, just arrived a few minutes ago, he's calling home now to let them know we made it, beautiful, isn't it? It is. It's paradise. So glad we came. Us too. We looked at one another. Our eyes said it all. We forgot we were happy.

I jumped into the sand burning. I raced towards it, the sea tapping like notes on white keys, I hurried to reach it as it broke on the shore, that moment when everything waxes immaculate – one-one-second-two - then it's over. The sea charges back taking something about you with it, something vanishing, something you want to touch once more, but now you're stripped of it and left pure and empty. One-one-second, I looked down and it did not flinch.

My reflection motioned for me. My breasts, thighs, arms swaying with a face dead still, my irises pushing above a mouth blackened in shadow. A second drew its breath and I saw what refused to be blotted out. It remembered. It had not forgotten me. Only it knew who I was. Connie. So young and pretty and white and clean. It looked past the

larvae eating out my pores. The swarms of maggots on my lips meant nothing. It saw me as I was and then it was over. The sea came for it and left me alone.

I don't like talking like this but living's real thin these days. It's got no fat to it. I'm getting by right at the nerves and bones and it does something to your head, thoughts go bad real quick, they rot and stink but nobody'll believe you. They see you looking pretty and want you just the same, and it only makes it worse cause they make you stand in front of the mirror and tell you to take a good look at yourself, just look at yourself you pretty doll, and they got their hands all over you when they're telling you this, and all you see is gangrene smiling back at them, you make it with them to make them as sick as you. It's not right, but I can't live thin like this by myself, and Guy don't know the difference.

Still liked seeing it though. Been away from the sea too long. Maybe it's a sign. Maybe M---- is meant to be. Maybe things'll go good for us. Could be different here. You and me. Maybe people won't bother about us. Anything's possible. See how I'm doing it again? Saying things that don't look like me. I ever tell you I read our letters aloud to see what you and me sound like? We could be something except we got no chance. You're going to do what you have to and we've got trouble coming for us. Guy and I know what we got to do now, and you'll know when it'll be too late.

The joke will be on you. The border don't stop nobody from nothing. You know where you stand and so do I. I do what's necessary. I crossed over and there's no going back.

One more thing. You won't believe me but that don't make it less true.

Something was bound to happen. I stood looking at the ocean too long. I knew better, but Guy forgot to make it

quick, still I knew better than to stand in one place too long, cause you just don't know, someone can't keep their eyes to themselves and they catch you not moving and recognize you from somewhere, but where, and that's it, you can see it their eyes, they know who you are and now they know they're going to get it.

I don't like that look much. First time I saw it I thought they got it all wrong. Nobody looked at me like that, they must be mistaking me for someone else, but no, that look wasn't meant for nobody but me. First time I saw it it hit a nerve that forced my mind to play a trick on me, but I got the joke. Wouldn't have happened if they'd have kept their eyes to themselves, serves them right and that's how I looked back at them, serves you right that you got what's coming to you, you didn't really think there'd be any exceptions, it's you or me, and I got to do it and that's that and I believed every word of it until today in M-----.

Her mother told me what the name of the place means. Didn't see her at first, didn't see the two of them coming at me, saw only the crests of waves licking at the air like fire, stared at it somewhere back at the beginning, back at Clea's off the pier, back when I first made it with Guy, the Sun Shop on the boardwalk that night, it was the same sea, same Connie, same everything for a moment, nothing mattered especially her eyes looking at me like that, didn't even know she was right there, a tiny thing that barely existed.

'Mommy, can you see it?'

I heard her from somewhere far off, not here and now, not yet, still her tiny voice pricked. My eyes twitched, something caught their attention, they looked up at it flying high, its wings lifting, dragging, then flapping higher and higher as its eye opened wide, its lids reddish orange, its iris leather brown, its pupil a black slit, the whites of it tearing. It did not blink. It gazed at everything at the same time and looked out of place side-by-side with lively greens,

yellows, purples, and turquoise dancing round and round it. Only once had I seen an eye like it.

That's when I felt her fingers touch my leg. I looked down, not really seeing her, she weighed nothing. She was spotless.

'Can you see it lady?'

Her mother smiled, taking her by the hand.

'I think the pretty lady can see it.'

Hesitating one by one, she took each finger back. She looked up at me. Her mother waited.

'That's my kite.'

She pointed at that eye plunging, rising, a crowd now forming to watch its every move.

'That's my daddy.'

Her little finger shot out at a man yards away, working the eye against the gusts.

I smiled. Not like usual. Nothing big. I showed no teeth. Would be too much for her. I smiled with my lips together. The mother kneeled down behind her, clasping her hands around her little belly.

'That's a pretty kite you have.'

The sun struck between us. She squinted at me before dropping her head and rubbing her eyes.

'Okay, Sabrina, say goodbye and let's get going.'

Daddy's waiting'

The mother gave me a look I understood. I'm so sorry. She's not supposed to talk to strangers, doesn't think twice about it though, she's fearless, I'm just grateful she came up to you, you look like such a nice young lady.

The mother got up and gently pulled her away.

'Goodbye, Sabrina.' I waved.

She waved back in slow motion like something wasn't right. She stopped abruptly.

'What's your name?'

I laughed.

'Constance.'

She smiled and waved quickly.

‘Bye bye, Connie,’ she shouted, as mother and daughter raced to father who whipped her up in his arms, placing the spool in her hands.

‘What are you doing?’

I spun around.

‘Don’t go sneaking up on me like that.’

Something wasn’t right. Guy didn’t look himself.

‘Who are they?’

I traced his eyes to her.

‘I don’t know. The girl just came up to me.’

Looking real normal like, he grabbed my elbow and motioned for me to go ahead.

‘She knows your name.’ He spoke in an undertone. He was close. Too close. His hand’s getting tense and you know what comes next. Don’t let on, just play it real smooth like you used to.

‘You get hold of him?’

I asked like I didn’t hear him, like it didn’t punch relentless in my eardrums, like that eye was just a coincidence, like she was just a kid on vacation with mom and dad, like she didn’t already know my name and what I looked like, like she hadn’t been told exactly what to do and say. She was just a fearless girl who asked me what my name was.

‘Got a place a mile up the road. Tomorrow’s it. We get it right, we don’t owe him nothing.’

My hand knew what to do. It would not betray me. It went behind my back, wrapping itself around his, pulling him against me the way it used to.

‘We’ll get it right. Haven’t got anything wrong yet.’

‘Except her.’ He kissed my earlobe. ‘It’s going to get back to him.’

A spike in pressure. That ringing in my ear. How to stop it?

‘She’s just a kid.’ I laughed it off.

His hand came over mine, tearing it away from him. Nobody saw it. The parking lot was straight ahead. The convertible always ready when nobody was looking. He opened the door and shoved me down into the seat.

‘Don’t move, Connie, I swear.’

He gets off on warning me. Started after Blankfine. I really got to him. Connie doesn’t have it in her, that’s what he thought but he got it all wrong. I saw it. I scared him and he didn’t know how to make things right between us after seeing me do it. That’s when the warnings started. It’s his way of putting me back in whatever place he had me in, and I let him, no choice when it’s just him and me and lots of miles to go with everything breathing down on us. Let him warn me cause all it takes is one slip up and then what? Hard to get past the what. One slip up and then what? What was it? I wasn’t scared of Guy, I was scared of something that didn’t have fists, that couldn’t lay a finger on me, I was scared of nothing, that’s what it was, one slip up and then nothing that’s what. Cause once you kill a man, the what don’t count. You’re free from what’s got everyone stuck. That’s what’s scary. You look and talk like them but you’re not cause there’s nothing you won’t do. The worm’s eaten you out.

I like watching Guy to take my mind off it. I sat in the front seat and watched him in the mirror heading back to the same phone, picking it up, making the same call, looking so good doing it too, I couldn’t get enough of his lips moving like that cause I knew what he was saying. He’d take care of it and talking like that looked good on him. He had it under control and that made me want to go anywhere with him.

‘Nothing he wants done about it.’

He started up the engine, backed up, and pulled out.

‘Told you it’d be alright.’

He turned onto the highway running along the coast. We didn't say a word as we drove on to the motel. Our first and last night in paradise. I promise to make good tomorrow. Real good.

[Tomorrow took its time but you made good. So did Guy. Almost caught up with you at the boardwalk. Pulled in around five. Owner of the shop said I missed you by a few hours. You didn't mention him but he knew you, not by name, by seeing you, knew Guy too, swore he'd know him anywhere.

Guy left something for me. You didn't go into that, maybe no time to, maybe you knew not to, maybe meant a lot more when you were around. Maybe you knew about the letter. It wasn't like Guy. He's not good with words you said, and I took you at your word. What difference did it make when I had my story thanks to you?

Of course, maybe you wrote it not Guy. Every word of it proved true. Don't mean they're yours. Like you said, you weren't capable of most words. You were lying. You weren't capable of truth and I don't blame you. What you were messed up in wasn't about truth, least not the kind we're used to. Maybe the letter was you just playing around. You liked putting words down just to see about them. Maybe they happened just like you said by mistake, maybe it was chance, fact is everything went our way just like you said.

Wouldn't have believed it that evening when I parked in the lot by the boardwalk and got out. I believed I'd catch up with you. Where you were had a name now. M----. Knew about it without you telling me in some letter. Driving there I got to thinking maybe we didn't need them anymore because knowing where you were, knowing we covered the same miles on the same highway, the same desert coming at us before the ocean broke out, the desert sinking as the coastline ruled with the sea beside it, knowing we'd run with it until our breath caved-in and we'd shatter as it

lapped us into that outline between what is and what is beyond our reach.

Thinking about it made us real. We seemed more than just a bunch of words. M---- could be the place where we'd spread out everything to see it for what it was. M-- could make us equals now that we weren't chasing each other, wouldn't need to, just needed to meet to decide what's it going to be.

Fact is it's easy to think like this when you're not standing in one place. Driving through the desert will do it. It can take anything you got. You can think things, crazy things, like making it with a girl like you, cause maybe, just maybe, you don't got nothing to lose, you're in too deep, what are you going to do, go back to the way things were? No way. Things like this make sense until you stop moving, second you do you stand there with nothing to show for anything. You get it now. You got to do like they do. There's no other way.

I parked and got out of the car. Was about to head down to the beach like you did, but the owner called me over, wasn't even sure it was me, was just a hunch he said.

'Hey, you there.'

I turned around, don't even know why, could've been anybody he was calling after, maybe things might've ended up different if I'd have kept going, kept moving, but I stopped without thinking. That's when he had me. I turned around.

'You Hain that reporter?'

'Who wants to know?'

He leaned against the doorway of his shop, arms folded against his chest, looking like he wasn't thinking about anybody in particular.

'Friend of yours left something for you.'

Had to be you. Thought you'd stop here. Not a lot people around, you'd get something to eat, check out the beach, fuel up, get a room for the night, perfect spot to wait for tomorrow.

I walked up and went inside with him. A typical souvenir shop. Didn't look like the place you'd leave a letter at.

'Man named Guy left a letter for you. I take it you know him.'

I remember how odd that name sounded. Hadn't heard it from you in a while, I knew you were still together, but you didn't talk about him like you used to.]

Guy and I are safe here. I can feel it. Could stay a lot longer. Room's got a porch right on the beach, looks out at the ocean, nobody around, lady at the front desk said the season hasn't started yet, you'll have the place to yourselves. We can let it all hang out. I always wanted to say that and mean it and now I do.

First time I unpacked since we left, first time I poured a drink and sat on a porch with nothing but the sea in my eyes, first time I'm not looking over my shoulder trying to hear what they're saying, if they're recognizing us. I'm not on like this. No reason to be. The lady said she'll be leaving for home when it gets dark. Gave us a number to call if we need anything. It is really just us.

I wish tomorrow would take its time. It's quiet here and it don't scare me like it usually does cause I know tomorrow will come. Feel giddy about it. Like a kid. Feel light like when I was girl. Used to daydream a lot to keep me real light, nothing could touch me when my thoughts roamed the way they did, wishing for impossible things. I still do this.

I wished you'd have caught up with us at the boardwalk, wished you'd have walked right past Guy without him

knowing, you two almost brushing shoulders not knowing who was who, cause he don't look like he does in those pictures they put out, I don't either, we changed up our looks since the border, but you'd know me if you saw me, I imagine you would, and you know what you'd do with me, living in our heads like this there's only one thing left to do. You know we think about it.

Guy knows we do. Gets hot about it. Has a vendetta against you, Hain. He don't know the word for it but that's what it is. That's why Hirst had him do it, thought it'd be good for him to get it off his chest, didn't want it screwing things up, so he gave him something to do about it. Nothing like killing with your bare hands to take the edge off.

You was wrong about Guy. He's done someone in. It's like you said, a nobody like Gary Stone is one misstep from Guy Stephens. Any man finds out his woman's mind is with someone else - that's what really gets to him. He can't do nothing about you and me, he wouldn't have cared if it was just a fling, we've both had a few, side-by-side all the time, him seeing me, me seeing him, seeing nothing but us for hours and hours makes it hard to get into bed. We only want to do it after getting into bed with someone else, we don't even wash them off, more we smell like them, better it is cause it's like we're someone else, blurs everything, makes us forgot what we are, cause it's hard to make it with someone you watch kill and rob. Turns you on at first but it gets old. Could turn around and do it to you.

Anyway, that's the misstep that made a Guy Stephens out of a Gary Stone. A vendetta. He'll get revenge. That's his misstep. Good thing Hirst saw it or we'd be dead. He'd have killed us instead of her. Hirst dangled her in front of him so he couldn't resist. Was too perfect. I saw her. She looked just like me. She'd take the pressure off alright, enough of it so he didn't blow. I

saw him look at her like it was me. I saw it in him, in his eyes. Mine look exactly like that.

He didn't have to do anything else. Hirst, I mean. She got on the elevator, he followed her, he knew what she was, all Guy had to do was make a move and she was in. He made sure she was good and ready before they even got off the elevator. They're all like that with him. Guy's got looks, pays good too, but they'd do it for free, that's how reliable he is.

Took them time to get into the room going at each other like that, she'd have done him right in the hallway, and I'll bet she'd feel the same even if she knew what was coming. Guy told me about it in his own way. Not like Somerset imagined it. She expected it. Makes sense. It goes with the job. You know it's coming. Taking chances don't pay. Difference was it made no sense. She wasn't strangled while doing it, that's how it usually goes, and I can't really blame them cause most don't even know they're doing it till it's too late, they snap out of it and first thing they see is hands crushing her neck. You can tell what they're thinking. Get his hands off of her. And they do and real quick too, but she's gone and they're stuck with their hands. It didn't go like this though. You need cold blood to do what Guy did. That's what rage is. Cold blood.

They tore at each other on that bed. Somerset got that right. Wasn't much left of them. She got up and took a shower, had a meeting that night she said. Guy didn't bother getting up, wasn't having second thoughts, he just wanted it to be like this, her all over him, stinking like her, her sticking to him like that, like she'd be doing it to herself, be perfect if they could wrap their fingers around it, them both feeling the muzzle against them, watching themselves pull it in the mirror. But it had to be clean. A family-friendly place like Somerset's wouldn't look the other way even though they'd get off on it just the same.

Guy laid in bed and waited. The water turned off. She opened the door and came out. Immediately she saw it in the mirror. He knew she'd check and she did. She walked over, sat down on the chair, and started counting it out. Was more than they agreed. Guy got out of bed and came up behind her. She looked at him in the mirror. She had no idea. She had Guy naked is all. She was the clean one wrapped in a towel. She looked immaculate. The poor lamb.

She just didn't get it. She looked at him, at the money, and thought he wanted more. Her hand reach around for him but he stepped back.

'In bed then?' she asked him in the mirror. 'I'll be cutting it close. But you paid for it.'
She got up. The towel fell to the floor. Everything about her white, hard, clean.
'No.' He put up his hand. 'In the chair.' His breath even. His blood still.
She smiled.
'Have it your way.'
She sat back down naked. Their eyes locked again.
'You coming?'

He closed in on her. She wanted it. He ran his finger up the back of her neck. She started. She closed her eyes. A smile barely there but still. She lucked out. She wanted it not the money. She arched her back. Her wet hair falling all over his hands wrapping around her neck, massaging it, everything soft about her hardened, his finger working down to it hard and red, circling round it until she let it out, and he was just as hard now, that same finger going down on her, getting her off all over it before it slid up to that mouth begging to eat herself right off him, and he let her, he wanted her to taste it first, only then did his hands come together around that pretty little neck. She gripped the chair. She knew there was no stopping him. She wanted it. The greatest pleasure in cold blood. Doesn't get any better.

Guy did it not Sommerset. He hung himself from the door though. He was convinced he did it. A real bastard that Hirst. Can make anybody believe anything. Sommerset was no killer. He was a family man. He had her but by accident. The wrong place at the wrong time was too much for him. He sinned once and that's all it takes with men like him. Easy to convince them they're capable of anything. Sommerset didn't know to get used to it. Cause there's no greater sin than killing yourself. You're all you got in this life. Guess that's what makes a man what he is. He lives. He gets used to sinning.

Course maybe Hirst has him believing that too.

Point is Hirst was right about Guy. Get it out of him so he don't take it out on me. Still has a vendetta against you, but he's not boiling about it thanks to her. Our little lamb dead and gone.

Least she tasted it. She had the goods in the palm of her hand. That money she counted is ours. That's the good we got to show for ourselves. But tomorrow's it. Tomorrow we're done. Got a nice stash of it now. I know I don't talk much about it, the money, I just hope it does us good cause even if we're free to go, even if everything's forgiven, even if all we have to do is live between the lines and everything'll be fine, no way we'd do it. We'd rather be dead and they'll make sure of it.

That's what Sommerset didn't get. He got a taste of something real good. She was it. She played with their rules. Not so with him. He stayed between their lines, that's why the taste of her made him guilty in his eyes and theirs and Hirst played him. If he had just wiped his hands of it. You're a dead man anyway, so let them do you in. Won't be on your conscience. All you got to do is keep your skin safe from yourself. The just judge gets it. You kill me or I kill you makes sense. Killing myself don't. It's all for nothing. Only affects me and now I'm zero.

Tomorrow has to go smooth. We got to be real smart. I don't know what this just judge is about, has to be a catch to it, Hirst is definitely up to something big. He's got a vendetta too. Against who is your guess. No matter what Sommerset said, Hirst don't want to be put on trial in that paper of yours. Talk to Hank. He'll tell you. A lot of your words are on the cutting floor. Ask him about it.

[Sommerset didn't have it in for himself. Guy did. I read the letter. Doesn't matter who wrote it, what matters is the truth. Guy killed him with his own hands. Same ones that handed over the letter. The owner picked up on him quick. Said his blood itched.

'I knew the kid was up to no good. Saw him out there in the parking lot with that girl. Real pretty thing. Looked like he was about to pop her one in the face. Came in a few minutes later.

'You the owner?' he asks.

Kid was gruff. Looked like something was eating him. Seen the likes of him come and go. They look the same, they scrape at that itch, you can see it in their eyes, hard as they try they can't get at it. They don't know they got to bleed it to death. But most get it together enough to look the part. They buy postcards, hats, sunglasses, they're just another tourist come from up north, till they see their conscience on their hands that don't wash off. I figured he'd do the same, buy a postcard and make a call. They all make the call.

'That's right,' I said to him. 'I'm the owner. Can I help you?'

'I got a letter.' He handed it to me.

'Who for?'

'Hain. He'll be coming here.'

'I'm not the Postmaster, kid.' I tried handing it back.

He shook his head. Wasn't taking that for an answer.

'Mr. Hirst said leave it with you.'

I knew the man. He's a supplier. Buy most of what I sell from Hirst Industries. It don't make us friends. That's how come him walking in and handing me a letter to keep for you because Hirst said so makes no sense. Don't owe him no favors. But I took it. Was curious. Like I been saying, this kid don't follow the rules. If you kill, you don't leave a trace. You pay in cash, you make the call on the payphone in broad daylight, you stick to the line like everybody else. They got nothing to hide so neither do you. You don't make a fuss you can't afford. They'll crucify you.

Didn't bother him though. He leaves this here letter with his fingerprints all over it, uses your real name and Hirst's, roughs up his girl knowing damn well she's a liability, she's too pretty and knows it, and the kid acts like this is all going to add up just fine. I'll tell you what. He's going get himself and that girl killed. That's the sum total he's got coming.'

The man was right. I guess he picked up a lot selling souvenirs. Hirst being his supplier had something to do with it. I believed him about them not being friends. Don't believe a word about him not owing Hirst a favor. Wasn't just a coincidence Guy trusted him with the letter. Same goes with the postcard. He tried making it look like it came off the top of his head. I had Guy's letter in my hand and was about to leave when he snapped his finger.

'Almost forgot.' He turned around and searched for it in a stack. 'Maybe this'll help. Came across it by chance. Might explain a few things.'

He handed it to me. I couldn't make heads or tails of it. Was a postcard of a painting. Looked old was all I knew. 'Not what you expected.'

He came up beside me.

'What is it?'

He took a deep breath and shook his head.

'Don't know, really. Man who gave it to me said it was part of an altarpiece. Didn't think twice about it till you mentioned it.'

Told myself to play along. He was conning me and I had to let him.

‘What did I mention?’

He coughed in his hand.

‘Mentioned it plain as day more than once. The Just Judges. Don’t you remember?’

Now I wanted a closer look at it but not there.

‘How’d you know?’

The phone rang. Just by chance. Just like the man who stopped in one day to give him a postcard of a painting from the 15th century, a relic from some altarpiece, and now it just so happens that this postcard falls into my hand, just by chance, I happened to be at the right time, at the right place, to speak to the right man about what has been right there but. It was no accident just like the motel.

‘Listen,’ he called out to me as he hung up the phone. ‘If you’re looking for a place to stay, there’s a motel up the road. Just follow the highway about three miles and turn off on the first gravel road on the right. Follow it down to the beach. Motel’s right there.’

I stuck the letter and postcard in my back pocket.

‘No name?’

He shook his head.

‘No need. You’ll know.’

Of course I will. I thanked him and walked out. He’d wind up dead like Sommerset. Luck runs out. That’s the difference between us. I’ve never been lucky. I don’t hold out for it. I have a price on my head just like he did. So what? Hank won’t cut that.]

We know one thing Hank won’t cut. I played you real good, so good I started believing it myself. Got it in my head maybe things would be different if. But I got straight about that. Minute I got back to the room this morning everything was right there. Not just Guy - everything - suitcases, money, guns, clothes, purses

every bit of us piled on the bed like it always is. We keep it straight like this. We spread everything out in the open so we know what we have and what we got to do.

Only thing not on the bed was the address.

Guy's got it. Not going to the bank today. Going to get that painting we've been hearing about. Don't make sense that's what it comes down to. The Just Judges. Makes no difference to me though. I just want it to be over. I'm thankful it's morning already. Guy knows where I've been, but he don't know about it. That 'what if' kept me up and now look at us?

I know why Hirst planned it though. Guy does too. He don't talk about it, he got out what he needed to and hasn't laid a hand on me since, not when I was getting ready last night, not even when I came back this morning, we just did it on the bed with everything we owned and showered and got ready like you and me didn't happen. Almost feels like it too. Like the second I came inside this room, we were done.

You should've seen it coming. That's what they'll say and they're right, only I did see it, I saw it coming hard and fast, and if you see like I do, you put it all out on the bed and look it in the eyes when it does.

That's what I did last night. I put my dress out on the bed and took a long shower. Wanted to be clean and smooth everywhere, no nicks. Guy left before I got out. Said he was going for a drive up the coast. I knew he was lying but nothing we could do about it. I got ready, slipping my dress over nothing but me, seeing through it just like you would. Nothing covered up. My hair wet, my face spotless, my body open, my eyes watching me. That was the finishing touch. I made sure I was good and ready for you.

Was told to go to the bar, you'll be there he said, it'll be easy, no way he'll know, you don't look like the cops think

you do, you don't look like that picture of yours. You look different. That's what he said. You look like a woman now. It made you a woman, Connie. It's like that. Killing brings out the best and the worst. I was more beautiful than ever when I first had its breath, lips, tongue, its fingers all over me, in me, my back arched, I wanted it more than ever and it knew it was my first time, and that's how it wanted me - unspoiled. It had always been in me but I didn't feel it, didn't want to, until I did.

I walked barefoot down the stairs, past the front desk, along the hallway to the end. Bar was on the right. If only it came down to the bar on the right. I went in. The windows faced the ocean. Twilight came on knowing I was stranded. Was the first time I felt like that. It's not like being alone. You can't die if you're not left alone, and you want to die no matter what you say about wanting more time, you just want more time to die is all. But you don't want to be stranded. Funny thing is I wanted that very thing last night. I wanted to stand abandoned, to be all that was left, the last of it, if there was one twilight, one ocean, one shore, one woman, I wanted to be it. Why? To be alone and delicious. To be the wasteland. To be the desert. To be the absence of all that I am. Forget what I said about it. I want the desert. It played a melody for us, do you remember?

You were there. You heard it. Not a word between us. We let it drown out everything. It touched slow - one...two...three...a flamingo alighting in dreamtime, tiptoeing across the black and white keys of consciousness, hesitant before its wings opened to eternity lacing the highs and the lows, the melody hovering between the two, between us, between today and nothingness, the only way to breathe was to suffocate. And that's when I saw her. She waved at me through a window in the desert, her golden hair and smile charged with the sun electric, she was fearless, a

tiny thing waving as a kite shot higher and higher into thunder lightening. It was tied to her.

Cut it loose.

I choked on the words. The melody played on. I screamed. A trumpet came out of nowhere. It was over.

You asked me something. We knew who we were but we pretended.

‘You want a drink?’

You came to me standing in the dark. I forgot about the dress. I forgot how I watched my body in the mirror. It was only a matter of degrees between then and now, then my fingers made it rise, forcing it to beg, he liked it like that, asking for it wet he pictured me coming for you to finish it off, and I saw it happen in his eyes. Now I came for you but forgot him. He didn’t see that coming. Now I saw only us. You and me.

‘Nobody minds if we help ourselves.’

You went behind the bar. You made it look like it could happen to anyone. You pull in after a long drive from up north, you come downstairs for a drink, nobody around but a woman you can see right through, but you pretend not to. It could happen to anyone far away from home. Now is always the time.

It could’ve been easy. I was ready. You could have finished it off like it was nothing. Without a word you could’ve come to me in the dark without pretending, you could’ve had me right where he wanted you to, and I could’ve made it look so easy, like it could happen to anyone. There’s no motive for a stranger getting off and getting it between the eyes.

I knew where he put it. He made me repeat where but I forgot cause you made it look like anyone could walk past

my body and think it the most natural thing to forget.
And it worked.

‘Bourbon okay?’

A question like that would’ve made me laugh before but not now. Whatever I said I would have to remember.

‘Fine by me.’

Fine by me. That fit us.

‘How do you like it?’

You put two glasses down and looked right at me. I had nowhere to go.

‘Neat.’

You nodded and poured us the same drink.

‘You want to sit here?’

‘Outside. If that’s okay.’

You grabbed our glasses and came around from behind the bar. You looked hard to believe. You really did.

You don’t look like your words.

‘Fine by me.’

You gazed into me past him, past everything. I forgot to lose my breath.

‘Can you get the door?’

I looked away. He would have killed me. Doesn’t matter now but still. I acted like it was the most natural thing to look away and go towards it. You ask me to get the door, you get the drinks, I hold it open then close it and sit down on a chair on the porch, two strangers drinking to the sea, later we go to your room and that’d be it, that’s all he wanted. You’ll find a way to get it into your hands, he said. You know where it is, remember?

You’re shaking your head no but you’re wrong. Could happen to you in a place like this. You’re so light, talking and smiling, coming and going, not once looking over your shoulder to make sure. You forget you’re capable of it. You can see it’d be easy to but no. You forget to be rid of gravity for one eternal second. Count it. I did. I forgot about the gun. I forgot to watch me like he does. I forgot to remember how I did it.

I watched us, the door, the sea, I reached for the knob, my fingers curling around it, one by one, negative and positive, excess and lack. I opened the door. You were it. He was static for this one second.

We sat down like strangers. It was night. Moon and sea came on from the void. We turned to face it, a simple thing, you grabbing the backs of our chairs and pushing them closer to blackness perfectly cut, like in the movies where we happen to be as we are.

‘You cold?’

I shivered but not like you thought. Night stuck to us.

‘No. Just tired is all.’

You stretched out and tasted your drink. It was my turn. It crawled down real warm. I forgot how good it was.

‘Where’re you from?’

I caught my breath then let it go.

‘Up north. You?’

You went at your drink again and looked good doing it.

‘Everyone’s from up north.’

I stared out ahead of us, my eyes glassy, I couldn’t help it. I smiled. We were just pretending.

‘Nowhere to go but down.’ I laughed for real. Like I used to.

‘You alright?’

I waved off the question. I wanted to laugh hard enough to break.

‘It’s nothing.’ I flipped my hair back. ‘Been cooped up too long is all.’

‘The drive down from up north?’

‘Right.’ I thought I’d bust out again.

‘Name’s Hain.’ You put your hand out.

I was it. I had to do it. The back of my head pressed into the cushion as I glanced at the railing. One flat board after another, a perfect barrier. I will look you right in the eyes and forget about him. His eyes stink.

‘Connie. My name’s Connie.’

We shook hands like anyone would.

‘Nice to meet you.’

I smiled again.

‘Finally.’

[Pulled off at the motel a few miles down the road. Right on the beach like he said. Looked forward to relaxing a bit, getting cleaned up, lady running the place told me to help myself to the bar, settle up the tab when I check out. I thanked her and went up to my room. Nobody around far as I could tell, another couple was staying here she said, they come and go a lot but they won’t bother you, their room’s on the other side, which was fine by me, probably be up all night to get the piece to Hank in the morning, I didn’t want interruptions, I just wanted a shower, a drink, the work done, and call it a night.

I had to read Guy’s letter first. Didn’t care that he wrote it, what mattered was what’s next? Their time was up, it might drag out a day or two maybe a week before their luck was tapped, but it can’t last with the reason for everything breathing down on them, on everyone, not a cop in sight but they were watching, for anything out of the ordinary they said, like anything isn’t.

I opened the windows and took a shower. Felt good to be rid of it, the day, the drive, the fact Sommerset was dead, easy to forget going from place to place but the minute you stop, it’s on you. Shower helped get it off my back.

Letter was on the bed along with the postcard. Letter first. I cut open the envelope and unfolded it. Wasn’t in Connie’s handwriting. I’m sure about that. Maybe it was Guy. Anything’s possible.

Hain,

Know you’re onto us. Cops too. Almost got us at the border. Know what you’re up to talking to people, getting a thing for her more you hear about her, getting

into things he wants you to. You're going to get her and you'll get away with it. It's rigged. All of it.

I didn't know Sommerset. I didn't want to do it, had to cause of her, work it off on her he said, had to do it is all. Gina knew all along, had to, was friends with Connie, she's the one who set her up with Hirst, that's why doing it to her was like doing it to Connie. It worked out like he said. We're both alive because of it.

I just don't want blame for Sommerset. It didn't feel right like she did. Looked at my hands like they weren't mine. Strangers is what they were. They didn't know what they were doing so I can't be blamed for it. Sommerset wasn't premeditated like her. I thought long and hard about seeing my hands on her, in her, coming out of her mouth, she liking it as much as they did. She counted on them going through with it and they did. They finished her off and left a smile on her face. That's how good they were. Made Gina smile her last.

Not him though. He still smelled like her. She was all over him so I thought it'd be like he said, it'd be like doing it to her again only it'd be him, a matter of degrees between the two makes them one and the same, just kill them both and be done with it.

Sommerset had her like he said. Was right about that. Wasn't going to kill himself over it. Was right about that too. Hirst made the cops say it even though you know I did it. Sommerset told you. Didn't tell the cops, did you? He said you wouldn't. You'd think they were in on it he said. They are but not like that. Cops don't feel guilty about it. He did and it got him killed.

Sommerset had her like he said. Not just her but Connie. Had a conscience about her too.

Connie played a joke on him, meant nothing by it, she knows what she is and he used her for clients. She met him

where they agreed and came down hard on him, laughed in his face about the wife, the kids, this business about home away from home, the fact that he couldn't get out of her until she split.

She headed for the pier. Told Hirst she was looking for something else, a new life where nobody knew her. She'd been working the border for a while, certain men knew of her because of him, was easy money but she was looking for a change. Just wanted to live like girls her age do.

Sommerset was a regular. She said goodbye to him. She's like that, sweet when she wants to be, thought she was doing good by him, even teased him about it.

'What're you going to do with your little girl gone?'

She joked like that, meant nothing by it, but he took it hard. She left but he couldn't stop about her. What she did to him wouldn't let off. Sommerset imagined Gina the spitting image of her. Gina told me she laughed at him calling out her name. Connie this, Connie that, she forced him to do it - to beg for her - and the more he did, more the razor cut. She laughed in his face. What did she care? She was getting paid. Was just another job to her.

'Your little girl gave you more than you bargained for, Mr. Sommerset.'

She poked fun at him. Successful man with a business wife, kids, he had to know it'd catch up to him. Only way to hold it off was to make Gina pay. She was okay with it. What did she care if he had a conscience about fucking one whore to remember another? Cause he had a conscience about it, was no shaking it, only thing to do was to keep his memory of Connie alive. Gina did it for money. That's what it came down to. She didn't care what he called her. Thing is she was no Connie. She was

born slaughtered already. Made it easy to watch my hands do it to her.

Not Somerset though. Had his back to me. I opened the door and there he is sitting in a chair facing the wall. He knew who it was. The prodigal son. Hirst calls me that. Makes him laugh. I don't like it. I just don't. Connie thinks he really means her. She's the one taking what she can get from him and leaving and coming back to him like he knows she will. She left the border for the boardwalk and ended up right back where she started.

Only she thought she loved me. I liked making her believe it, closest I ever got to believing it myself. Somerset knew I was with her. Ate him up. Not us being together but me being okay about it. I have no conscience about Connie. What I do to her is right, no jagged edges, he just couldn't let it be. She's too young. She's a whore. She doesn't know what's best for her. She licks at it coming for her. Made him want it even more. Her tongue is that good.

I told him she's a whore. Take it and leave it. She's not what you think. She's not your little girl. Look it in the face. He just couldn't. He had a conscience about her only after she was done with him. He put out his hands and she was all over them. He was guilty. He had to keep at her or it would get to him.

They met every night before she left. He paid double for it. Connie knew why. She liked it on him. Looking guilty like he did when she got up to wash off before coming back to pick up the money on the dresser, counting it on purpose in front of him, that's right, you know you can't afford it, looking at me like you'd kill me to be rid of it but that'd only add to it, my blood screaming, you going mad from the guilt of it. See me licking my finger counting the bills? See you getting hard again at the thought of it? Oh, it'd be so easy if.

See you tomorrow? He asked.

You know you will. She answered.

He'd still be alive if it wasn't for Him. Sommerset begged for it. He wanted to be saved. Wanted his conscience clean. Hold it up. Let Him put his finger in the sores to judge it for what it is. But there can be only one judge. He heard him say that but thought it was just talk, a bunch of words he didn't mean but he meant every one of them. Can only be one just judge and it is Hirst.

Sommerset was done. He made sure of it. I got the call late, hung up knowing I had to do it, be risky to pull it off with everything going on, least Connie was a sure thing now. Anybody got in the way she'd take care of them, and she made sure to take care of somebody, had an itch for it. I can trust her now. Fact is if you kill you can't trust a soul who hasn't. It makes you even. You have an understanding.

I had to kill Sommerset. Had to do it after we took care of our own business, that means I had to drive back to the hotel and risk being caught or seen, then cross the border to get to M---- by nightfall. This letter's proof we made it.

Didn't like doing it though. Least it wasn't in cold blood. He expected it. I walked in, his back was to the door, no turning round to see who it was.

'You made it.'

That's all he said.

No answering him. Hirst trusts me cause I don't talk. Just be yourself he said. He'll know it's you. Don't say a word. Walk in, close the door, leave when you're done. Let him do the talking. Hirst don't think I have words, thinks I get on without them. Dumb violence. That's what they'll think too. Too dumb to be guilty. They'll give me my plea. Can't be guilty if I don't know the words. Just approach him from behind, wrap your

hands around his neck, don't let up until you're certain, you understand? Yes, Mr. Hirst.

He showed me with his own hands. Not when we met about Sommerset. Was way back when I unloaded merchandise for him in the warehouse. A shipment came in late, the boss Mr. Carlo told us to get it off the truck and line it up inside, get it on the shelves in the morning he said, let it go until tomorrow and most left but I stuck around, was almost morning anyway, I figured I'd do my share then go home. Looked for the boss to let him know but he wasn't around, wasn't in his office like usual, thought he split so I got to work. He'd see my shelves stocked and know I stayed to get it done.

And I did. When I get to doing something, really get it in my head, I keep at it, block everything out, I don't hear nothing not even what I'm thinking, I don't see what my hands are up to either, don't have to, they know what to do and I trust them. Overthinking things makes trouble cause they're right - I'm not good with words. Picked up most from them so no way of knowing what I'm thinking isn't just them in my head, in my mouth, is it them or me - which is it? Take Connie. I sound like her. Don't mean to but her words keep coming so fast and hard, wish I could grab one and stick it back in my throat to throw up all them words. They're not mine. That's how come I don't trust them.

Trust my hands though. I made them what they are and they're me. That night we lugged boxes from the front of the warehouse to my shelves, no words just work, we did what we had to. Was almost done when I saw him. Came up an aisle and there he was in the boss' office. Only a weak light on but no hiding it. That scar ate up a good bit of his face. Knew the boss worked for him but nobody ever saw him, just heard about him. Hirst. Scar gave him away. I didn't know what to do. Hirst is in the office. So leave him alone. You got no business with him. Finish with the last of the boxes and go home. Was about to but then he

looked down and I heard a man's voice I knew.

'I swear it, Mr. Hirst. He stole it from right under our noses. I don't know who but it wasn't me. I swear it. You know me, Mr. Hirst. I'd never do that to you.'

No wagering about it. The man was telling the truth. I walked towards the office. Door was open. I came up to it and looked in like I was just walking by. Hirst was still looking down at him in the chair with his head pressed against it, face beet red, sweating.

He looked like you, Hain. He wasn't guilty. He was scared.

Guy's name was Hal. Was one of the guys that watched everything - us, the merchandise, trucks going in and out - his eyes on anything that moved. Boss had no problem with him, we'd know if he did.

But Hirst did.

I didn't think he saw me. He was looking at Hal, not saying a word just staring him down. Made Hal lose it. He clenched his teeth in pain but Hirst hadn't laid a hand on him yet. He jerked back and forth like he wanted to break loose but nothing held him down. Just get up and walk out. But Hirst is like that. You're around him long enough, you think and see like he does. Getting up from a chair and walking out of an office is no simple act because there're no such thing. What you do depends on what he does. The minute he commits his act, you commit it too. We're charged like that. He made sure of it. Connie calls it his universe electric, talks about the fatal shock coming, thinks he'll electrocute us all. I only know what he showed me with my own eyes. You can't run a business on innocence.

Hirst reached for a pair of gloves lying on top of a filing

cabinet. He put them on and moved to the back of the chair.

‘Please, Mr. Hirst...,’ Hal pleaded, his eyes bulging.

He saw it coming. No signs, no mystery, just two gloved hands around his neck. Hirst looked down into his eyes widening, the full extent of man coming around full circle, two hands with the lamb’s throat in their jaws, man’s very neck at stake but his hands resolute. Murder is as steadfast as innocence. Go ahead and bet on either one, makes no difference, a wrong makes a right, a right makes a wrong, it’s magnetic.

Hal was almost finished, his face purpled, his tongue half-swallowed, eyes blown up, those hands controlled, those hands like mine, if mine can kill like his, then I can do anything. Hirst set the example. Hal was it.

That’s when his eyes zeroed in on me, two black pits drilling into mine, looking for something before they pulled out, sending me reeling into the office, my eyes gashed, my hands bloated, my tongue stone-dead. I was next.

But then he let go. Just like that. His hands parted. Hal gasped. They backed off and hung down at his side quiet and full of secrets - they could give, they could take, they could kill, they could resurrect, they could anoint difference and the same, they were man’s power over his conscience. He removed his gloves. I stepped towards him.

‘You work for Mr. Carlo.’

I nodded my head that felt like a bomb about to go off. No neck, throat, tongue, just a head about to blow.

‘He don’t talk, Mr. Hirst,’ Hal groaned, his face sweating purples, reds, whites. I glared at him and Hirst understood. ‘You liked our little performance.’

I was excited and agitated but not scared. He got it. Made him snicker.

'It's been a pleasure,' I heard his voice close in on me.

'Perhaps we'll see one another in the future.'

He stood right next to me, his words discharging a high voltage that flashed through my skull. And then he did something I won't forget. He took my hand and put the black gloves in it.

'If they fit...'

Then he laughed and walked out. Don't remember much else. Only thing I know is what he showed me. Man's hands can end and absolve man. They can be of god and of man, they can be the 'tool of tools' and skin and bones. That's what he showed me. They like to kill, not like a coward, like a man. I liked that.

Sommerset was supposed to be my first. I put it like that cause there's no killing a man who wants to die. I was supposed to kill him in cold blood.

'You made it.'

He knew who it was when I walked in the room, knew what I was going to do, he knew and begged for it. He sat with his back to me, his legs crossed, his elbow resting on the chair's arm. No point in turning to face it. The point was he was it.

'The letter is in his hands. I made sure of it. He'll know it's you.'

I reached for his gloves in my back pocket. Wasn't about forensics. Was about him. I wanted to beat Hirst at his own game.

'You don't need them,' Sommerset spoke matter-of-fact.

'He's ruled it a suicide. What he wants he gets. And he's right. Look at me. I'm a dead man already.' He paused to smooth out a crease in his pants. 'But it is you who will lose the most. You do know what I mean.'

I put the gloves on, pressing down on the space between each knuckle, each hand making a fist. They were ready.

'You do know what I mean, Guy?'

The name made me do it. It was mine not his.

‘What?’ I answered back.

Just be yourself he said. Don’t say a word. But he didn’t say anything about him knowing my name. Was supposed to know I was going to kill him. He won’t dare turn around, he said, won’t have any idea it’s you, Guy.

‘She said you’re a cherry.’ He stopped and folded his hands in his lap. ‘I will be your first, correct?’

My head didn’t feel good. Let him do the talking. Let him talk and struggle against it in spite of him letting me do it, let him look up at me strangling him, let his neck hang like a broken wire as I let myself out quietly. Just let it happen as planned but I couldn’t. The disconnect. He saw it.

Sommerset.

‘I don’t know.’

I spat out the words. I don’t know. He had me. He shook his head like he knew.

‘She was right. Not that I doubted her. She’s turned herself into a real woman, hasn’t she?’

He took a deep breath, his eyelids lowering, his jaw tightening as his head pressed into the chair, his Adam’s apple protruding like a fist.

‘She knows about us, Guy. She says you won’t do it. You want to kill and there’s no killing a dead man. The point of killing is doing it against the living. A real woman talks sense like this.’

‘Who?’

His eyes shut. Something like a smile crossed his lips.

‘Connie.’

I didn’t know what to do with them. She was right. I looked at them limp at my side.

‘But how?’

His lips touched and separated for good.

‘She came before you. He counted on me telling you that. You know about Connie and I.’

She came before you. She came. I could smell it on him. My hands stiffened. That cunt asked for it. I looked at him and saw her. My hands knew what to do. They clutched the neck and did not let up even when it hung like a broken wing.

Sommerset thought she was outside of it, his universe electric. He was wrong. Her place is in it. A special place. Be patient, he tells me, and you'll see.

And I believed him. I came through and saw him for what he really was. I no longer saw her. I saw two pits stone-hard, two eyelids receding into two sockets exposing them, forcing them to dilate and swell like two black looking glasses reflecting the shell of the world. My sight burned for the seed inside them, centuries deep it lured me not to stray from breaking the pits with my fist to grab that seed, to see it for what it is – the beginning, the truth, the reason why a killing's a suicide, a lamb a whore, a word a silence, a man scarred a god, a conscience gangrene a just judge, a world a myth, a you a me a we who are him. To bore into a dead man's eyes to get at the pith of it, his universe electric, that live wire cut to bleed sparks lost to blackness, this is what I would not deviate from even if those eyes blinked and the seed rose to a catastrophic shock. Connie knew about it. To deny it will electrocute us all she said. We must obey.

So I did. I obeyed. But now the seed looked a fake, the pits only the blacks of a dead man's eyes. What I said about them - nothing but words, a bunch of lies.

But this is true - my hands did not know when to stop. They crushed his neck until his eyes almost popped. That's when I saw something pass through them, from one eye to the other – quick - this shadow passed by, whispering in my ear.

What is it?

You know what it is. A nurse's rhyme, he said unto me. Unto me he said it.

Impossible. He's miles across the border, waiting for us in M-----. He can't be in two places at once. Yet I heard

him clearly. He was in the room. His words tasted my lips.

Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani.

I mimicked him and finally came through. I saw for real this time. I killed a man already dead. Suicide by another man's hands. I'm innocent. It only looks like I killed in cold blood because of her. She deserved it not him. He knew this and that's why he used the right words. She came before you. He knew they would force my eyes to play tricks on me. Because I only saw her. I swear it. It was my eyes, it was my hands, but it wasn't me.

I have to kill for real this time. Gina and Sommerset don't count. I did it to Connie. I only saw her. To kill a stranger, to see them as they really are, that is an act of truth. He knows I'm right. The sword is coming. He promised. His words against me are true. Blood spilled runs clear. Even his if he's made of it.

Remember this tonight. She's raw. She bleeds. She does it to herself. You'll see. Take her by the hands, she'll like that, she'll think you mean it, then act like you're about to kiss them but don't, smell them first, it'll be all over them, she's been around, looks like a doll but her eyes never shut, she's seen it all, her plastic whiteness oozes with pox underneath sores masked untouchable. Even He can't get at them.

Kiss them if you like. Get her a drink. Have your turn at it. Just keep an eye on those hands. You owe me that. I killed because of you two. You play it right and we'll forget my vendetta. I'll call it even.

Guy

Not the letter I expected. I threw it on the bed. Deal with it tomorrow. It was late. I wanted to unwind, get a drink, cut out early. Place was dead. The couple weren't back yet, least I didn't hear them. Maybe they're not coming back.

We're far enough apart if they did, I'll be able to sleep. Tomorrow I'll read the letter again with a fresh set of eyes, bound to turn up something, the letter and that postcard, they'll give me enough to send to Hank. I glanced at the postcard. Looked like a dead end but still. I put it in my shirt pocket. What the hell. It'll help kill the time.

Headed to the bar. Was empty like the lady said. Sun fired at windows lined up on the back wall, sparks flashing and dying like fireflies. Don't know where that came from. Probably childhood and I don't believe in it. Remembering fireflies going off in summer is proof it existed, being a kid has its time and place, I was there, I know, but play and innocence don't count now. They'll land me six feet under where I count for nothing.

What counted now was her. I knew her the second she walked in. Pretended not to like I did when I checked in, I knew who the couple was, played it like I didn't because I had to play my hand. Fact is she came into the bar looking like she always did - same hair, eyes, lips, body, same face - could've picked her out of a lineup. But the one-way mirror was premature. Right now there was the bar and us and we had to pretend to stay in the game. No ending it in a motel bar. I knew about the gun, might come down to it, no denying she was set up. I wasn't going out like that though, no way, no how was a matter of fact not faith.

The postcard was a fact. Didn't end up in my hands by chance, was a reason for it and that reason was a fact. Was in my pocket and it would keep me alive tonight no matter her standing there like she had no idea. A postcard trumped a gun tonight and she knew it.

Poured myself a drink. Asked her if she wanted one. A bourbon. She was fine by it. Came around the bar and handed it to her, suggested we go outside, was fine with that too, gun wasn't out there, hard to talk when you got

to keep looking over your shoulder to make sure you don't get killed when you expect it just not right now.

She stepped in front and got the door. Could see right through her dress. Guy was right. Dried blood on the inside of her thighs. Could've been the red petals sewn into it, it looked like the real thing but maybe not.

Her body was real. She reached for the door, one foot in front of the other, her breasts, waist, hips, ass, thighs, right in your face like a dare.

What're you going to do? I mean it. What are you going to do about it?

Look away, at anything, at her hands. She's a robber, a killer, a working girl. They'll make you sick and they did.

'You alright?' she asked, her voice like her body. It wanted.
'It's nothing.'

We headed onto the deck. Wind came off the ocean and we faced it to get the cheap hours and days off us. Funny how we pile into cars and head for the ocean to strip the grime down to our bones. We take our chances the rawness is going to work this time, to begin at the beginning and come back with skin that fits - now that's a vacation. Everyone'll see it in everyone else, our brand-new faces just needed a little scraping, the cheapness won't stick this time, we swear it, going to do right from now on but we'll be back. Living don't come off easy.

'Feels good, don't it?'

The glass sweat in my hands. 'It does.'
She sat down on a lounge chair and stretched out her legs. She smiled. Guy was right. Perfect like a doll. She holds her shape.
'You going to sit down?' She smiled again. A real plastic thing.

I put my drink on the table between us and made myself comfortable. Grabbed my drink again without looking at her. Now what?

‘Name’s Constance.’

She said it like it was the most natural thing.

‘Hain.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

Saw her out of the corner of my eye. She raised her glass and we toasted to whatever this was. Then she rested hers on that thigh.

‘You here on vacation?’

Shook my head as the bourbon sunk down.

‘Not really. You?’

She laughed again. Was her way of getting out of things.

‘Not really.’ She stopped and put her hand on the arm of my chair. ‘I don’t mean it like that.’

Keep your eyes off her.

‘Like what?’

‘Of course...’

They all say that. Of course what?

‘What do you mean?’

She laughed it off, her finger tracing the mouth of her glass.

‘It’s just me being me. Of course, you don’t know that.’

She went at her drink again.

‘It’s just we don’t ever get a day off.’

I get it. Keep it light but suggest it. A play on words.

Who gets a day off, yes, we all got to work, and what do you do, I see, must be hard to find time to do anything else. See how easy it is? Can see it coming for miles.

‘You mean you and your husband?’

‘What?’

‘You two don’t ever get a day off.’

She had to be smiling.

‘Something like that.’

The tide rose, the spray almost got us.

‘You have a wife?’

‘No.’ I rested the drink on my leg.

‘Thought so. Wouldn’t be here if you did.’

‘Why not?’

‘You’d be with her. You’d be in the room with her, not sitting here like this with me.’

‘Like what?’

‘Alone.’

‘Why’s it matter?’

She laughed from the absurdity of it. It’d be so easy, nobody around, nobody expecting it, clear as day nobody willing to save anybody if they heard it. Little small talk before it goes off. Can’t save a face like that. Just clean up, fingerprints and all, and save yourself.

‘Come on.’

‘What?’

She breathed in the answer, a mouthful of it, just say it and be done. Then it’ll be my turn.

‘You know what I am.’

That’s not all you’re about. You know what you really are but no talk about that. Not yet.

‘What’re you getting at?’ I went at the drink again. ‘I just met you, Connie.’

‘Constance.’

‘Right.’

Waves rushed under the deck and hissed. Seconds later the ocean dragged them back.

‘You know I’m good for it. I’m young.’

Don’t. One look and that’s it. She’s too hard to brush off.

‘And I’m a lot like you, Hain. You and me, we got something in common.’

Was my turn to laugh now. Up close she was good. I’ll give her that.

‘Come on.’ Her glass pressed into my arm. ‘Got to be more to you. You’re too much to be sitting there like that. Be good. Let me get to know you and I’ll let you get to know me.’

She’s winding you up just like Blankfine. No doubt Guy and Hirst are around. Keep her talking. Longer she does better chance you have. Just don’t look at her. She’s got no conscience about it. Of course, that goes for both of you now.

‘I know what I need to. Leave it at that.’

She shifted in her chair, got her back up.

‘What do you know about me? I’ll tell you. Only what I want you to.’

Her voice was stiff, pulled tight. She took the bait. My move.

‘You’re from up north like you said. Came down here with a man who watches over things.’

She rattled the cubes in her glass. Was almost exhausted. Time for another one and make it neat.

‘What’d you mean by that? Guy’s not bothering about us.’

Just words for play so play them back at her.

‘Who’s Guy?’

She got it. Had to. None of this was real.

‘My husband...,’ she drawled it out. ‘...as you so called him.’

I finished off my drink and got up. ‘Want another one?’

I looked down at her. Okay to look at her like this.

She’s low and knows it.

‘Sure.’ She lifted her glass up to me. ‘You know how I like it.’

That smile cut in. Was taut like her words.

‘Of course.’

Of course. No slack. I took her glass, headed inside, poured the drinks, was all happening fast. Was meant to. He planned it like this. Was supposed to be at the bar right now feeling my head’s about to blow, my hands shaking out of control, no way to keep playing along if my mind and hands let the glasses fall, was expected to do something like this so she’d close in, looking real casual about it, she’ll tell me it’s no big deal, just a couple of broken glasses is all, she’ll sweep up and get the drinks, don’t worry, I’ll make them neat like you like it, go outside now, I’ll take care of it.

That’s the trump card. I’ll take care of it. Can’t play anything against it.

And she’ll be quick first chance she gets. She’ll hide it. Not under her dress, she’s got nothing on, what you see is what you get. He planned that too. Can’t stop

thinking about it and can't think if my mind and nerves are skidding on edge. Knocking off someone's easy when they're like that. She'll come up behind you, press its mouth on your neck, it'll feel good for all you know cause that body's got you wound up, the steel - it'll take the pressure off.

It was supposed to go like this, only it didn't. Her body, the gun, the letter, the postcard, hitting the bourbon after a tough drive, the massive black tide coming at us under us, pulling back then letting loose, the night coming fast again and again but not sticking - it was all too quick. I made the drinks neat and walked back out like the gun and that body did not exist.]

The door slammed. Footsteps on the boards. Two drinks in the right hands, eyes looking out at the white lips rising, splitting apart, riding it out, nothing around but the sea.

'We got off on the wrong foot, Hain.'

'Could be.'

'Meant nothing by it. Just don't like people thinking they know me. Lot more to me than that.'

'Than what?'

'Than what you can't stop getting at.'

'You're not alone.'

'What's he have to do with it?'

'He's up in the room.'

'So?'

'You go back to him tomorrow morning then what?'

'I don't go back to no one.'

'You're his, Connie.'

'We won't talk about it, if that's what's stopping you.'

'There's more to it.'

'There is?'

'More than I can afford.'

'Depends.'

'On what?'

'How much time you have.'

'You're the one who knows that.'

‘Me?’
‘You.’
‘How?’
‘You know where the gun is.’
‘And you don’t? Could easily be you.’
‘Me?’
‘You.’
‘I’ve no reason to.’
‘You’ll make one up.’
‘Why?’
‘Because she asked for it. She knew she had it coming.’
‘Don’t make sense.’
‘It does.’
‘How?’
‘She called you a name.’
‘What?’
‘A coward.’
‘Not a word to kill for.’
‘That’s cause you’ve never been called it.’
‘A coward?’
‘Right.’
‘Wouldn’t matter. I know what you’re up to.’
‘No you don’t. You just got too much sense for it.’
‘That’s right.’
‘And that’d stop you from doing it.’
‘Yes.’
‘Even if I had you where I wanted you.’
‘You mean here?’
‘I mean where you won’t look.’
‘What about it?’
‘You don’t want to know.’
‘Because it’ll get me killed.’
‘That’s not it.’
‘Then what is?’
‘You’ve never had better.’
‘You know that?’
‘It’s my job to.’
‘Mine too.’
‘See that’s the point.’
‘What?’

‘You think you know better.’
‘I do.’
‘You’re just like them except.’
‘For one thing.’
‘You’ll be so hard you can’t.’
‘_____.’
‘See it got your tongue.’
‘No it didn’t.’
‘It’s just a game anyway.’
‘Right.’
‘Until I take it off.’
‘And.’
‘And you watch.’
‘Your hands.’
‘On you.’
‘Not me.’
‘Right. Not yet.’
‘They’ll be on you.’
‘Because you came ready.’
‘No I didn’t. You did.’
‘I don’t have to. That’s how good I am.’
‘That’s a lie.’
‘How do you know?’
‘Your hands.’
‘What about them?’
‘Let’s see.’
‘Well?’
‘It’s all over them.’
‘You going to kiss them or not.’
‘It’s like he said.’
‘Who?’
‘Guy.’
‘Guy?’
‘Said they’ll smell like it.’
‘What else did he say?’
‘Watch them.’
‘And then?’
‘Take my turn.’
‘Then do it. He won’t bother us.’
‘It’s not about him.’

‘Then what is it?’
‘The blood.’
‘It’s nothing.’
‘It’s all over your thighs.’
‘So what?’
‘Why.’
‘I can’t stop getting at it just like you can’t.’
‘I haven’t touched you.’
‘You will.’
‘Because you want me dead.’
‘That too.’
‘What’d you mean?’
‘You coming.’
‘No.’
‘Because you’re a coward.’
‘No.’
‘What then?’
‘The lion can’t lie with the lamb, Constance.’

[I had to laugh. Laugh out of it, Connie, I said. You did good. I’ll give you that. Thing is I didn’t like it. I like doing the talking even if it’s just for show.

The coward and the lion and the lamb, he didn’t see that coming but I did. Get the job done is all he said. I can’t stand it though, the way it drags on and paying out the time’s boring, makes us look silly and nobody’s getting a laugh on us if I can hit back. My neck’s got a price on it. Fine. I’ll get on with what I got to do. He said make him come and then kill him. Okay. That’s not what I’m about, but I got to do what he said.

I know how to really end it though. I’ll find out what I’m about, one thing about Connie alive or dead that’s truth. A fact that sticks. I want to even if it’s just for show, just to talk it out, write it down, see it looking back at me without laughing. Just one goddamn fact that’ll keep its mouth shut. You get it. For whatever it’s worth, I’m more. And we both want it. You and me, we

get we want. Just one fact. That's what sells. Have to make sure we break even. That's why I did it.

'No making peace then?'

You didn't look at me. You looked straight ahead at it.

'That's not what he wants.'

'Hirst.'

'And Guy's his pawn.'

You were off on that. He has us thinking we're free to move about to want things we bump into by chance, only no chance about it, he acts on us by force only we don't know. We're not his pawns. We're his charges. Everything about him depends on us repeating his force magnetic over and over again.

'It's worse than that.'

'How?'

'We transmit what he forces us to.'

'Like what?'

'Everyday stuff. Things you have to be free to take care of - money, letters, business, deeds - still he's behind it.'

'Come on. He's a businessman not...'

'Him? No. He's not Him.'

'Then how does he...'

'Get away with it.'

I had to cut you off. Always the same questions and what had to be done had to get there.

'Right.'

'He gets into the cracks.'

'Of what?'

'What he owns.'

'Like Sommerset.'

'And the border, hotels, banks, gated communities, papers, the desert. It's all him.'

'The papers?'

'Yes.'

'You mean mine?'

'I mean his.'

'Hank knows?'

'Does now.'

'Hank was going to shut it down if it hadn't been.'

'For me?'

'Right.'

'He won't now. He wants it.'

'Doesn't add up.'

'It will. Thanks to you.'

'I'm not Hirst.'

'You walk the same line.'

'I'm a reporter.'

'Right. You make up facts.'

'I do my job.'

'Like he sees fit.'

You weren't having it, Hain. You paid no attention to me. You've been had. What're you going to do about it? I had to wait it out. Had to. You were supposed to dead by now.

'How long?'

'Since what?'

'Since Hirst's been planning this.'

'This?'

'You, me, Guy, all of it.'

Honest I didn't know. Was too late for me. I see him planning for the right time and place by force not chance. He wears our flesh and blood, but he's after what came before him.

'For what?'

You read my mind. See how it starts?

'For what we all want.'

You know I'm looking at you. Be quick. It's right there. Snatch it.

'Justice.'

No. Not yet.

'You're lying. Why else would he make sure I got this?'

The postcard. Why did you take it out? It's too soon.

You shouldn't have had it on you. Everything's wrong, wrong, wrong. Kill you like they said. I should have.

'Where'd you get that?'

'The souvenir shop.'

'Just by chance.'

‘No.’

‘Put it away.’

We aren’t there yet. Put it away. Shove it back in your pocket.

‘Have it your way.’

I know what you’re up to. Have it your way. Like we get our way. Like we got a choice. Cause I’m not like you. I look and see what I missed that I shouldn’t have - your eyes peck, your words do too. You get your way going at a dead woman like me because I don’t have it my way. I don’t have a choice. It’d kill me if I did. Still me, Guy, Somerset, Blankfine, Gina, we won’t let it get to us. We spit the opposite right in your face. Watch me do it.

I have a choice. You get it? I spit the opposite. Connie. Me. I decide. I make the choice. It’s not pretty but it’s mine. I choose to do it. It’s proof I exist, that I breathe, that I’m ahead of it, but don’t you see? I’m blind.

But not you, Hain. You’ve got those eyes.

‘Guess I see it now.’

‘See what?’

‘You really don’t have a choice.’

‘Who says?’

I like trying on old words. Used to say that a lot. Who says? You’re not buying it, I know, I said it to myself, he’s not buying it.

‘You’re playing against the rules.’

I am. I like confusing our tongues. Feels good to have yours all over mine. Point is to keep this up until.

‘It’s not too late for you. Walk away. Go back where you came from.’

‘Where I belong.’

‘Right. Back home.’

‘That’s the point.’

‘What?’

‘It’s not a choice. Never was. He gets it.’

‘He gets what sells.’

'For us.'

'For everyone. Lies sell.'

'For us. For them, they're a dirty little dream.'

'What dream?'

You're short of breath. It hit. I know the signs.

'The american dream.'

'Has nothing to do with it.'

'Sells papers don't it?'

'You're no dream, Connie.'

'I am to them. I'm it. The dream america. I wouldn't be here if.'

'It's rigged. All of it. Even Hirst. He's got no choice else he'd.'

You're too excited. A step too far too fast too soon.

Maybe everything that's true isn't. Maybe that's a plus.

You can't get ahead of it. Point is to get outside it where you're free to suffer.

'Else he'd be where?']

Something about that question comes down to two things that have to be played right: a memory that deceives, an imagination that's gone mad. Together they smote man and woman. She's the real prize. Have to outdo them.

['He wouldn't be here wasting time and money.'

'On us.'

'On anything that don't add up. He's no universe electric, he's no just judge. It's a trick. He's business. This cat and mouse game, he'd cut it loose if he could.' Connie laughed.

'You got more than you bargained for, Hain.'

I finished the drink. Last scrap of anything familiar and good.

'Comes with the job.'

She put the back of her hand against that smile. That's right. Tame it.

'It's not real though. Your job, the paper, you said so yourself - you have no choice.'

Not the whole story and you knew it.

‘So what if everyone’s in on what Hirst turns out to be. Fact is Hain is no set up. My place and time have nothing to do with him.’

Her hands fell to her sides. Wasn’t smiling now, was staring out with eyes dead like two ashen moons.

‘Must be from years back. This place and time of yours. You can remember it?’

‘Of course.’

‘You’re sure?’

Question was a trap. Memory don’t answer to words. No proof you’re getting them right - words about what’s done and over with - only thing you can trust about them is you remember. You know how it went, clear as day you see them, don’t need to go whoring memories around to prove they got faces, they’re all in your head until somebody starts asking questions. Can you remember? Can you?

‘I’m sure as I’m going to be.’

Good answer. Matter of degrees between it and the truth.

‘I envy you.’

‘I haven’t told you anything.’

That smile again but it was heavy.

‘I know it matters.’

‘You weren’t there, Connie.’

‘Didn’t say I was.’

‘Then how do you know?’

‘About?’

‘What matters.’

‘That memory isn’t real?’

Here it goes. The real big bang.

‘Is that so?’

‘It is. It’s not real, Hain.’

‘Doesn’t have to be.’

Good move. She was going to say that. Memory don’t have to be real.

‘Like the recorder?’

‘It’s not the same.’

‘Why? Because it’s not.’

‘Real. That’s what you were going to say.’

‘Was I?’

Maybe, maybe not, it’s too much. Now you’re just talk.

‘Maybe.’

‘I was going to say it doesn’t tell the truth.’

‘The recorder?’

‘Yes.’

She was coiling up at the edges.

‘It’s just a machine. Truth’s got nothing to do with it. It does its job.’

‘Like you.’

Too obvious a fact. Another click on his power grid.

‘I let them talk, if that’s what you mean.’

‘And you record a story and print it like Katarina’s. But a story’s not a fact. Chances are it’s not true.’

‘Katarina is as credible as you. Hard to tell you two apart.’

Something jolted her. She wasn’t laughing now.

‘I’m really getting to know you.’

My turn but I lost track of the cards.

‘You can’t blame anything for what you got yourself into. The fault’s on you.’

‘On me?’

‘That’s right.’

‘For what?’

I didn’t want to hear it. My ears were ringing.

‘Not going to answer cause you know it’s you not me.

It’s your fault you made her words permanent. You tracked them down, she talked, it listened, you printed

every word of it, you even played them back to make sure you heard them right. Doesn’t mean they’re true.’

I smiled.

‘Nothing I can do about it now.’

‘You’re right. Her words are relentless.’

‘For who?’

‘For me.’

She laughed for good reason. Found out why.

‘You can’t imagine anything like her, Hain. Facts don’t help.’

They don't need to. Katarina's used up. She only went to print because of you. She reminded them of you. You're what they want. You're what sells. They see Connie in Katarina. They see you in everything now. They imagine they'd be you if they hadn't become wives and mothers – go ahead and take-take-take, they won't run out of themselves because they're what you want them to be. And you can't be without them. They take out the garbage that bores you. They know their place and smile through their teeth so you don't have to.

But what they really want is to get away with being you. Until they turn on you - just like that - get her. Once and for all, get the bitch. If I don't murder their darling, they will. You can count on that.

'I know what you're thinking.'

'You do?'

'She reminded them of me.'

'You're news.'

'I am but it's not true.'

'The bottom line proves it is.'

'It's just a number.'

'It's money. It's real.'

She smiled. I didn't have to look.

'So is disease.'

'What's that got to do with it?'

'It'll get him and his money. You watch.'

'Hirst?'

'Hirst.'

'It will get us all.'

'Not like it'll get him. I was there. I saw it. I remember like it was yesterday.'

'What?'

'My own place and time that had nothing to do with him. It didn't go as planned. He couldn't imagine it. He could not see.'

'At Adobe de Bene?'

‘No. In town. At the well. Before I made it to Adobe de Bene. When Katarina was the prize. She was young and pretty and in love.’

‘But she was a...’

‘We all were. But a young whore’s not an old one. We get to choose.’

‘There’s no town or well anymore. None that I saw.’
She laughed but already she was making her way back.

‘The well stands. We need water to live in our skin.’

I looked right through them. Her eyes pure glass. It was no lie. Wherever she was remembering was real.]

The Well and The Cross 16

It was carnival. It was always carnival. I was young, a kid, I ran barefoot through the dirt streets past the music screaming in the broad square, around corners, between tenements where blouses, skirts, dresses, bras, twitched on lines tied like a cat's cradle. I was young then. I liked games. I ran at them smiling, my dress flapping, my hair warmed by sun, combed by breeze, tossing about like the girl I was. I was beautiful. I was light. I stood on tiptoes with arms spread and leapt off.

I ran so fast through the square I thought I was flying. But it reminded me I was part of the town, the carnival, the masked people - it was a silly thing - a bicycle wheel I found, no tire just spoke and rim going forward round and round, my fingers balancing it, me relying on it to turn but not slip out of reach. I was young. I played for myself and laughed for no one.

I remember I ran past a horse trailer parked against a building. Its face looked like blood couldn't get to its skin. The wheel stopped dead just like me. That's when I realized the sun wasn't in my eyes. The building shut it out. I was gunned down in shadow. I wanted to cry for someone but who? Who'd want to hear me through the screaming? I was just another girl running wild, a foolish thing chasing after her broken wheel.

I looked at the trailer again. I liked horses. They were pretty and free and I imagined one day I'd have one to go everywhere with. But I didn't like the trailer. Something about it frightened me. It was the door. It didn't have one. I imagined it looked like a casket, the kind little girls crawl into when they know they shouldn't, and then the lid slams and nobody cares what becomes of them. That's why little girls have to grow up fast. Alive or dead, they don't matter.

I wanted to run away but the casket wouldn't let me. The wind picked up, the fine hairs on my arms rigid like spines. Maybe I'd be stuck there forever. I was young. Time was

only a word. I wondered if they'd come for me. Maybe they wouldn't see me tucked in shadow. They'd come looking and walk right past me not knowing if I was blotted out or dead.

It would be the same to them. They'd move on and forget about me right there watching them. Year after year I'd see little things that only little girls do. Everyone sees them sing and dance and drink and get sick and angry and die. Everyone sees them with their mask on. But I'd see them without it. They would lean on my building casting a shadow light does not see through, their body heaving as they tried to catch their breath. Then they'd remember. The mask. They'd tear it off and gasp for it, shoving it in their mouth – air, more air, it tasted so good they'd forget about their face dripping off, the makeup running down their neck and chest, staining their skin red, brown, blue, purple.

They'd laugh it off. Safe to. Nobody around, nobody to tell their secret. Laugh or go mad. Nobody would know what to do if they did. This would make them laugh even harder until the chill set in. They've been in shadow too long. Their heat sucked from them by that ashen vampire looming, its concrete fangs ready for flesh, thighs, breasts, and their mask.

They'd wise up quick. Everyone knew to keep moving. Even a little girl knew. Everyone joined in the procession again and again. The dead march endless. Keep moving to keep alive. I moved with them but I didn't understand. I was young, a little girl, I didn't need to make sense of it. I knew I was alive but they knew to keep at it.

And they did because of him. He followed them. I saw him. He spoke to them like they weren't there. He saw only their mask.

'What are you doing?'

The shadow and the vampire - one in man.

'I couldn't breathe.'

It swooped down on her. I was lucky. I was nothing to it.
Not yet.

‘They’re looking for you. Clean up and get back to work.’

‘Where?’

They really didn’t know. They were lost. There was no sun.
They couldn’t see it but I could.

‘To the well.’

It grabbed her and shoved her towards me. I was right there.
He didn’t know but I did. *I know something you don’t know.*
I giggled but nothing came out.

‘In the square?’

‘Yes.’

‘But everyone will see.’

He kicked at the dirt. She jerked back from it.

‘It’s empty. They’re chasing it. Get going before they come
back.’

The bull. I wanted to see it but only big girls were allowed.

‘Are you coming?’

One half of her in light, the other in dark. I knew her.
Everyone did.

‘No Katarina.’

She was beautiful once. We dreamed to be like her. A
metallic desert cool and gleaming.

‘You used to.’ She smiled. Only I saw she was terrified.

‘Go.’

And she did. I followed her. I was there. I saw her. It
appeared to her. He did not exist. Only our faces did.
Katarina and Connie eternal. We had no choice. We were
chosen.

The square was dead. They left to run after it. They’d be
back, not all of them but nobody cared, it was carnival, they’d
come and go and catch up tomorrow, the procession could
wait, nobody’d remember their names with everything
spilling over, with masks on their names had no chance.
Today the living, tomorrow the dead, put off the last march
and get on with it. And they did. They chased the bull, and
we went to the well alone, a little girl and the pride of her sex.
Katarina. Her face trashed made her desirable. We all
wanted her. Even us little girls. I echoed her every move as

we went through the streets to the well: I flipped my hair back as the wheel spun, I patted my forehead with the back of my hand, I swayed my hips and pointed my toes, I elongated my step to match hers, I imagined the feel of the whitest dress etched so prettily with blue and pink flowers around my chest, with a vase of blooming red and purple roses below. Her cotton dress reminds you where you come from, your past taken from you, that's what they told us.

I liked playing dress-up even though I had nothing to show for it: I had no sex, no body, I was a thin nothing. Pretending to be her made my belly tickle. Then I remembered and smiled. I was invisible. Just eyes cut into air. I could get away with playing the whore. We all knew that's what she was. We'd grow up to be just like her. Just a matter of time, they said, go on now and play outside. They feared her. She owned things, the desert, Adobe de Bene, her sex, not for her children's sake, for her own. She gave nothing of herself. That's what they paid for and it horrified them. Hang her then. No you don't. And they didn't. She was ten hundred of them. The whore of Babylon. They paid for her purple and scarlet and let her be.

We saw what she did. Little girls see everything. We crowned her Queen and dreamt of carrying her train. Silly thing that I was, I followed her to the well. Solar noon on white adobe buildings circling the square made our eyes tear. She looked away. I was right there. I saw them. Black tears streaked our faces.

'Let's go inside, Katarina.'

My voice frightened me but she did not hear. She climbed the steps to it. The well.

I followed, careful to put my little feet inside her footprints. I was afraid. It is off limits, they said, only adults go to the well. We did not ask why, we made up

stories about it, like the one about the baby worm that Mother deserted. The little worm did not cry, it did not know what a Mother was so it did not know tears, all it knew was I am alive, I must keep moving and it did, around and around it moved through dirt, eating at Her bowels to grow and grow and move up and up until one day it appeared in the open. Only Nothing existed then, no sun and moon, no constellations, no trees, flowers, monarchs, no afternoons and mornings, no night, no rain. The worm had nothing and nobody. It did not know it was doomed. It did not know the taste of love. It tasted only dirt choking, even in the open it tasted it. Impossible to breathe. It did not ask why. It did not know the question. The worm just did not know. It only knew to keep moving, but without breath, it had nowhere to go. And it felt it. Without knowing, it felt it coming and it did what we do - it wept. It was the first to weep for Death that pitied the little worm. It was blind, it could not see, but it could feel itself slipping into tears rising and rising until it was no more. But the worm left its mark. The well is its body, its movement in a history brimming with tears. This is the gift of Death: what was lives. The worm is the flesh of the living water we drink. We know the taste of its breath, we know what is lost, and now the little worm knows too. This is how our story goes.

But I couldn't remember the story as I followed Katarina to the well. All I remembered was not to go. Something was there. Something about to appear. The air paralyzed, the sun frozen, the shadow gone. Everything as it was. The square hushed. The silence real. I did not understand. It was fun and games, it was all pretend, but no. Whatever it was saw me. I was in the open. Katarina took the last step.

‘Don’t.’

The word screamed in my mind. She did not hear. I stepped after her. She stared into the well. The water at the brim. It did not move, it reflected nothing, it was too much, it was about to break, one false move and.

She touched it. It discharged.

She turned away, her eyes shut, the back of hand over her mouth, beads of sweat flashed like jewels. She heaved and it sickened her. It is nothing Katarina. It is your eyes playing tricks on you, it's hot, remember what they say, the heat is cruel, it envies us, it wants what we have, it wants to be alive, they say, it wants to be alive like us.

She opened her eyes. I reached for her but she did not see. She looked up into sky for the bones, the form, the lines of what she saw on the face of the waters. I wanted to scream. I wanted to hold her hand. I wanted to cry for her to tell me to go home.

I see you now, little girl. You followed me to the well. Go home where you belong. Go.

But I had nowhere to go. I looked up and saw what she did: the buildings where they lived, story after story crowded with washing pinned to lines snapping against gusts as they crisscrossed from porch to porch, past bars on windows disfigured, past whiteness mocking their pocked lives, those blotches spreading disease past the highest to the lowest of them down to the street where the last string knotted them to it forever.

We saw it. There was nowhere to go. I looked at her. Katarina. Her eyes shot up to the highest point at something too much for little girls. All we see are moving pictures on a screen. We see and hear voices and music and dreams and tap, tap, tap. We don't know where it comes from. We don't know the taste of rods and waves and currents transmitting and receiving. If ever little girls knew, it would ruin us. It's too simple. Like the wash we fix to strings. It's too real.

But I had to see what she did. It was too much, too thin, too rigid, too easy, one horizontal, one vertical, one big

cross. An antenna. A big one. It stood and watched from the roof of their building.

‘It’s him.’ Katarina looked right at it. ‘It is him.’

I put my little hand into hers. She felt nothing. She looked back at the well then at the antenna. I came up beside her and looked back at it then at the well. It was not there. How can it be? To the well, the antenna did not exist. To the well, it was a dead man. I felt her tremble.

‘It’s not him.’ That is what she said. ‘It is not him.’

I did not ask. I knew. The one who followed her, the shadow and the vampire, he ordered her to go to the well to clean up. Go and she went. But it was not him. I saw it for myself. The antenna was his cross to bear.

Because they hissed when he first came with his highways and antennas, his steel towers blotting out everything. When he first came the buzzing was all they heard, but they didn’t trust their ears, the moving picture was all they saw, but they blindly built their lives stories high into things it looked down on. They did not believe when they looked up and saw his crosses defying them. He set them against everything and won. It was too much until it wasn’t.

Now they see with his eyes. There is light in darkness now, there are pictures running in place now, there are worlds away right there in their kitchen now. They were shocked when they first touched the screen, now they believe they are a part of it, now they are one in a million images inside it, now what they see is real and they believe. Now they do not hiss at him. They see as he does. One day everything will buzz into oblivion under a sky vibrating at sixty hertz per second.

But the well did not believe. His cross was nothing to it. Katarina leaned over the edge, her face suspended above the waters.

I stood on tiptoes, little hands gripping the brick wall, I tried to see what she did. She was not seeing things. His cross was not there. It should have been a reflection on the waters but no. Katarina did not pull back. She leaned closer, her breath disturbing it, their lips almost touching, her eyes peered into it.

I wanted to be close to the waters just like her. I was a little girl. It looked like a game. Get as close as you can without touching it. Don't be afraid. You won't fall in. She'll catch you. I smiled and jumped up on the rim of the well. Propped up on my elbows I inched past the edge, my face hanging above it just like hers, my blood rushing for it, my eyes adjusting to see past its waters, spiral after spiral coiling down into earth, I was just like her. I saw the body of the well move with my own eyes. Down and down it goes and me with it.

Wait.

'What was that?'

I giggled. Maybe it's the worm. Maybe it's coming back. I stretched out my little finger. Come here little worm. It twitched this way and that. It wanted to play. Come here. 'No.' Katarina grabbed my hand. 'Don't.'

Now she saw us. Our reflections played on the face of it. 'But why?'

Little girls ask too soon.

A breath later I saw what she did. The little worm was a lie. The worm - a mask - and it split that mask apart quick - its cells joining together to take back the waters, their chain linking, growing, spreading north, south, east, west, to form what is, what was, what is still to be. We did not believe our eyes. The worm split into millions of cells upon the waters. Each a perfect circle, each binding to another to form a chain going in opposite directions, one part horizontal, the other vertical. The cells bound together to form one cross extending the length and width of the well. And the waters held it.

‘It is Him.’

I did not understand until yes, I knew, I was just a child but I saw what she did and yes.

‘In Him we hold together.’

She pressed my hand. I wanted to go. I wanted to take her hand and show her where I played, show her my wheel, show her my building that cast shadow on me and my tomb beside it where I stood invisible. I wanted to tell her the whole story. I was already losing breath as the words ran faster and faster across the waters. She’d like to hear them, she liked stories, they said she told a lot of them.

This story is over, Katarina. The cross is done. We must go. Come with me. I’ll show you where it began. I chased my wheel so fast I thought was flying.

But there was no pretending. It is not done. Now it will never let us be.

‘Let me see, child.’

She turned my hand upside down and there it was. She showed me hers and there it was again. I smiled. Just wait until I tell them. The look on their faces, they won’t believe it. I’ll show them but they’ll deny it, but it’s right here, see the perfect little circles, these ones going side to side, these ones going up and down, see it now, the sign of the cross, how can you not see? But they will laugh.

Childish games, they’ll say.

But the scar.

What about it? She runs wild, probably got into something she shouldn’t have.

But she couldn’t have done it herself.

A no-good kid. The mark proves it. A curse. A cross. The girl’s done for.

They said a lot of things like this.

Little girls are doomed. We said that.

We looked around and saw the earth shooting up leaving tiny pits all over on its skin. Only we could see them. We must be careful where we step, one false move and we fall. We banded together, we linked arms, we crossed distances side-by-side, a chain of little girls afraid of the fall.

We set out in the mornings, clinking through the streets, all for one/one for all, they heard us above the buzzing, they turned up the volume, the antennas groaning under the weight as we skipped on becoming lighter and lighter as we flitted through summer days. It was easy to forget when the heat peeled off our skin leaving us glowing. How can we fall when the blush is on the rose?

We forgot it comes from the earth just like us. And one-by-one we fell. A little girl disappeared yesterday. They'd see one of us was missing. They'd go looking for her, hopeless they'd say, she'll pop up sooner or later, we always did, she'd be changed, her face dry-rotted, her blood stagnant, her heart shrinking from the pus weeping in her veins. Our love didn't like the taste of it but they did. They didn't know any better they said. We hid the rot and stench behind masks just like Katarina. They laid down with us just like they did with her, pretending not to know we were their daughters long gone, they'd tell themselves to forget, they'd go looking for us hoping they wouldn't find us, just another mouth to feed, another cunt to look after, they wouldn't say that to their own faces, makes no difference if they did, she's not mine, she's nobody's, she's all grown up now and a whore's a whore. Hang her.

They blamed it on Katarina. She's the one who made them do it, she started it, she infected them and so on and so on. They warned us to stay away from her but they said it with a smile. They said never to go to the well but they looked the other way.

Go ahead and see for yourselves.

They wanted us to get it. Disease gets everyone they said.
Whores make good hosts. That's what we said.

Katarina and I, we were the ones at the well that day. We saw it with our own eyes. They saw Him too. They went to the well just like us but they were afraid. We weren't. He came for us not them. He infected us and we were not sickened. He is our disease and cure. Not him. He alone judges. Not him. His universe comes first. Not his.

We will make sure he falls. We will spread His disease, Katarina and I, that is why he wants us dead but we refuse. It is Him we carry with us. We are not forsaken.

Look.

She revealed it to me. The needle stuck into us. A cross running the length and width of veins on our wrists. + We could not deny it. Scarred for life for life everlasting she said.

Because someone is going to get killed for this.

How Was Your Stay? 17

Woke up the next morning like nothing happened because nothing did. The girl's wasted time. Connie does not make sense. Nothing does. That's what is going around these days. Nothing.

Heard the lady downstairs. I showered and went to check out. Who knows who she is? Works for him is all. She'll let on what she has to. Good enough for me. Today's not coming back.

Today is it. She knows it, she's been told, she'll pretend but I'll bet they're gone and I'm going after them. Have to get to them before they destroy the evidence. Even Connie don't want that.

'I've kind of grown into it,' she said. 'Do away with it and Connie won't be the same.'
Called herself by her name like it meant something. Don't buy a word of it. She's zero and it eats at her. 'Putting your words in my mouth, won't be none left for you, Hain,' she laughed but no joke - Connie's mine.

'Checking out, Mr. Hain?'

Simple question that went at me like pincers.

'Yes,' I answered, hearing a simple word laced with hate.

'Cash?'

I nodded taking my wallet from my back pocket. There it was. The postcard.

'Sixty even.'

Come on. We went through more than that last night.

'You get the drinks?'

There it was. His smile.

'You made friends pretty quick.'

I put the wallet down on the counter, postcard sticking out of it, made no difference if she saw it.

'I'll take care of hers too.'

'Sorry. Can't let you do that.'

‘Why?’

‘They paid the tab this morning.’

‘The couple?’

She shook her head. “Mr. and Mrs. Guy Dalton. Soon to be newlyweds if you ask me.”

I handed over three twenty-dollar bills, not saying a word about it.

‘What? You don’t think so?’ she asked, the register bell sounding, the drawer coming at her, metal claws holding down twenties, tens, fives, ones. She put the twenties in. I was part of it now.

‘Way they looked and acted, certainly seemed young enough for it.’

‘For what?’

‘Eloping. Said they were going to the justice of the peace.’
If that’s what he wants.

‘That’s right. Headed to the courthouse on ----- Street. Get there before the crowds, they said.’

Just one thing.

‘Where’d they get the money to take off?’

She knew what I was getting at.

‘Not from the parents. Don’t look the type.’

‘Right. Don’t look the type.’

‘It’s the way it is nowadays. Kids don’t stick. They leave first chance they get. No looking back at the way things are. We’re stuck with that.’

She had to keep me talking. They needed time. Okay.

Let’s play.

‘Most don’t see Connie and Guy like that.’

‘Most don’t know them.’

I looked at this lady stuck where she was. Thing is she looked out of place.

‘And you do?’

She smiled. It was her, not him.

‘Not as well as you.’

I know where they’re headed. The courthouse. She spread out her arms and pressed the back of her hands into the countertop. It was getting to her. The end smacked. The blow already stung.

‘I have something for you.’

She pushed herself off the edge and swung around.

Everything going as planned.

‘She left this for you.’

The postcard. Same one sticking out of my wallet.

‘On the back,’ she said, motioning with her finger. And there it was:

How was your stay, Hain?

Yours, Connie

She laughed.

‘Must’ve been some get together.’ She slammed her hands down like she had to get on with it. The sun was up. She laughed again and disappeared in back.

She expected me to leave but I remained at the counter like nothing had changed because nothing had. How was your stay? A threat plain and simple. She talked too much. Connie always talked too much. Last night her words rushed on and on, she couldn’t stop them even if it did come down to him. Maybe Hirst put them in her mouth but words travel in waves. He’s got no business with them, once the pressure sounds them off, he’s just like us relying on blind luck that ours will cash out, he bets on them just like we do, maybe he’ll hit big, maybe he won’t, still the odds are in his favor not ours.

Because she was right about him.

A universe electric. I get it now. He’s in our pores. No getting outside him, no turning him off, his cosmos plays on handcuffing us to it, plugging us in. No paranoia about it. Look for yourself. Whoever you are makes no difference, we’re cut from the same, we get up, sun is quiet, we don’t like that. We turn him on. Everything’s better with running words coming out of speakers and pictures running across screens, his story winding around and around until our eyes are in a noose. There’s no looking away now. He’s got us. What happens next even he doesn’t know because a universe is a gamble, a

big bang, shots go off and we're in living rooms across America when our eyes and minds suddenly explode into an infinite number of transistors, like faceless gateways his signals play on them, his antennas branching out further and further as our births and deaths loop continually.

He'll never die, she said. That's a lie but I get it. He can't die because everything will hush. The quiet - he can't afford it. Nobody can. It costs. The quiet will set him back. It'll drag everything back to the well.

Because he was there.

Katarina and Connie raised their wrists and he saw it: the sign. Two whores scarred forever but he came first. He had to shut them up. He appeared from nowhere Connie said. No. He watches. He is every square inch crisscrossing this body electric. They raised their arms and he saw it. The cross. Those whores. They cut it into themselves.

But they faced the well not him. He did not see how it came to be. He remained in the background looming, not calling them, not hunting them down, not spinning wires around them before dragging off his prey. The quiet suffocated. A lull in the carnival. The men and women gone, the town square blank, everything deserted to chase the bull.

It worked in their favor. They had him at a standstill. Those damn whores. They'll pay.

Why? Nothing stopped him from doing away with them, nobody around, nobody'd see it and even if they did nobody cared - one less whore, one less mouth to feed. Thing is they didn't believe Katarina was just a whore and their eyes fell on Connie like they fell on her. He knew this about them. They were superstitious. Leave the whores alone and good will come. He capitalized on it until now. Now he was at a stalemate. If he killed them for it, they would know. They would see it on their wrists. The sign. They

would know he murdered them for it. If he let them live, they would beat him at his own game.

He is first. That makes Hirst a dead man.

Maybe they would see Katarina and Connie as living hosts. If it can mark them, it can mark anyone. Maybe they would gouge out their eyes and his universe would go black. Maybe but he took his chances. He waited it out. The quiet. It got to him but they would return and they did. He watched as the town swarmed them. If he had done away with them, they would have noticed it. Letting them live, they noticed nothing. It was carnival. They were drunk. They saw two whores bathing at the well. They grabbed them by the neck. Drown them, they shouted and laughed. They knew they wouldn't. They just liked to pretend. They dragged them off by their wet hair as lights and music and laughter blared on and on.

But she is just a child, one said, but all that is for tomorrow, said another.

His risk paid off. Tomorrow would come, the masks would come off, they would remain inside. The heat, they'd say. Their televisions and radios will drown it out until it is safe to go outside again when the well is just a well, whores are just whores, and the heat is just that.

But I was too young, Connie said. They had their way and then hid it in Adobe de Bene.

And the sign?

Meant nothing to them. They were blind to it.

And Hirst.

What about him?

What did he do about it?

He denied it.

Then why all this?

The charade.

It's not and you know it. Tomorrow is a fact. It will be
over and done with even if it's not necessary.
You don't get it, Hain. It is necessary. All of it. We act out
the words and you guess what they mean. It's like me and
Guy. He acts and lets me guess what he means.
Your letters are yours words, not mine.
My letters are acts. You're the one guessing at them,
making them your own, and they believe every word of it.
That's their act. But I don't mean nothing by them. Make
them random acts or facts if you want them to be.
You're a liar.
Why?
I have nothing to do with it.
Don't you?
You made the first move.
My letter.
That's right.
Otherwise you would've just.
Kept on with it.
Your life?
This isn't about me.
But it is. You're here with me, with us.
Because you led me here. It was you.
There were others.
They work for you or Hirst or both.
And the just judges.
What about them?
Who do they work for?
They're not real. You know that.
Do I?
They're a lie.
That's what you see.
I saw the postcard. All of it comes down to is a stolen
painting. For what?
For nothing according to you.
Something's in it for Hirst. Money. And a lot of it.
It's not the money.
He owes someone then. That's how it started. Steal it and
Guy's off the hook and Hirst's friend gets what he wants.
We all want it.

What?

Justice.

I laughed just like they did.

‘Mr. Hain?’

It was her voice not Connie’s. I came through. My eyes. I was in the lobby, my wallet and receipt on the counter, bag on the floor, same light breeze coming through the window at the end of the hall. It was still morning.

‘You alright?’

Something about her. She looked at me like she did when I first checked in. A guy at the boardwalk told me about your place, said you’d have a room, I sure do, not peak season yet, just one night?

‘Yes.’ I answered. How long had I been standing there?

‘You don’t look it. Want a glass of water?’

The salvia in my mouth curled around my tongue.

‘No...I’m fine.’

The hammer struck my temples. My stomach coiled.

Only a matter of time before. One hand reached for the wallet and receipt, the other grabbed the bag as I made for the door.

‘Thanks.’

She smiled on cue.

‘You come see us again.’

I walked out and got sick. Eventually was able to stand up and look down the highway as I wiped off my mouth. Which way into town? Whole damned thing was a guess, a sickness, felt it last night, her going on and on like that and me going along with it, sounding just like her, not believing a word of it but acting like I did. Want to get back home. It was time. Look what just happened. Blacked out just standing there. She’s making us sick. Said as much, didn’t she?

I know I’m making them sick and I’ll pay for it.

But I’m not them. I haven’t touched you.

Doesn’t matter.

It does. I can’t get what you have.

She laughed.

You'll be the worse for it. Think about it.

I said nothing. I was sick of her. And that was her point: it had me.

Cat got your tongue? I haven't cut it out yet, have I?

You're nuts. Every one of you.

A couple words is all it takes, Hain. Every one of you. See what I mean? It's transmissible to everyone. It invades, multiplies, infects, but it is not madness, it is sickness and it's got you but you're worse off cause you're like us. We are not like Sommerset. We stay alive with it. You'll see. It will contaminate, it will strangle your blood, your nerves, your spine, you will see it all in good time, and in spite of it you will live. Have to. Even if it eats you out.

In a whorehouse like you?

She laughed. It split the waves in two.

You should be happy. The sign - it's in your mind now.

I spit on the ground. She'll pay for it. She called it not me. And she's right. She'll pay for the lie. She's a whore, a robber, a killer, the list will go on unless the cops put a stop to it. Least they won't kill her. Connie's not stupid. She'll drop the gun and put her hands up. She'll take it like a man. Cause that's what her lie comes down to - getting back at every man and there's no better revenge than Him.

He'll judge them alright. He'll know my life's not my fault. He's the just judge. He comes with His sword whetted for them not me. I'll be innocence in His eyes.

She said all this. She said even when she wet and cleansed her own feet with her own tears in her own name, He saw into her and knew one day she'd be His bride. She went to the well and there He was. She saw Him on the face of the water. She reached out for Him and His cross cut her.

It was just a matter of time. He lay dormant for years. Her sins multiplying a thousandfold but He did not stir. He watched in silence until Hirst appeared. He dared Him and

It awoke. The scar on her wrist burned and she answered Its call with fire. She said all this in her own words.

...It's superstition plain and simple. You see it's all in her head.

...That day at the well she became His bride.

...Right. She cut herself like her idol. Already she had it in for herself just like her Queen. Katarina slashed her wrists at the well that day and so did she. She liked to play dress up. What Katarina wore she wore. She hated herself and so did she. They've worn hate well all these years until now.

...For years It festered, binding Itself to her guts, her heart, her blood, her mind, His breath was hers, and when she came of age, He came for her. The cross inflamed, It was always there, blistering.

...Right. From that day at the well she was his. Katarina was already. Hirst saw them going against him, spoiling his merchandise, the girl wasn't his yet but she would be. He had to do something or it would cost him.

And he did what any businessman would. He came up behind them, grabbed the knife, threw it in the well, dragged the goods back to Adobe de Bene, and had them cleaned up. Days later Katarina was back at work, a thick bracelet hiding it, and Connie was ordered to come of age quick, to watch and see how it's done. Katarina's the best, and if you learn from the best, you can be better than it, he said. He made sense. She did what she was told. She sat in a chair and watched the men come and go, now and then she looked up at that innocent girl, her only distraction in the room, and she dreamed about... what? Anything. Sometimes she couldn't dream. Her wrist hurt too much. She had fevers, the cut became infected, they dressed it again and again, but still the burn and the pus. Was almost healed by the time she did her first trick.

...It felt nothing for her at first. It slept. And while it lay there unconscious, she got no pleasure from the business. No pain either. The first time everything went like clockwork. The man came for her. He closed the door, took off his clothes, put the money down on the nightstand, got into bed, the weight of him forcing them into it, and she went through the motions she'd seen for weeks and months, she didn't know which was which, she just did what she did. She made it look like she was coming only for him.

There we go now, we're coming for each other before we lose and find one another on that threshold again. Katarina said you have to tease, but it's boring, but it'll make it last and he'll come back and pay more for it. Don't forget this. Regulars treat you better.

Didn't look like it to her but okay. It was all okay. She didn't remember faces. They were nothing and she felt nothing and everybody broke even. That's how she saw things but she never lost sight of it. Especially the first time. Katarina said it'd hurt, after that, nothing. She expected pain so she concentrated on it so he did not exist. She cried out its name not his and it awoke with a vengeance. It was outraged. It erupted, bled, it throbbed.

...He had no idea. Not at first. He got what he paid for. Was only afterwards that he saw it. The bracelet fell off. Like Katarina, she hid it. Katarina agreed with him: it's bad for business. But Hirst didn't know it was their business. You are mad. That's what he would have said, that's what they all said. Was best if they saw it by chance. What's that? What. On your wrist. Nothing. Come on, what is it? The Lamb. You're kidding. No.

Lamb of what?

You know.

She couldn't help it. She'd always laugh at this part.

What's so funny?

He'd put on his jacket, straightening the front of it, everything just so except for it and he couldn't let it rest.

None of them could. They felt like it had been watching.

Seriously, what is it?

I just told you.

A lamb?

Right.

Doesn't look like it. Looks like a T. A cross or something. Is that what it is? A cross.

Yeah. A cross.

You could see it get to them. It was better than murder.

But it didn't stop them. They came back with a

vengeance. Their conscience – what about it? It's

business. I pay good money and look at her? She likes it. No wrong in that. Sure there isn't.

...Sin is right. I heard that once. No. Maybe it was sin is necessary. Yes. That's it. Some mystic said it first. Sin is necessary. I like that. Gives us breathing room. Can be who we are, even take pleasure in it. Sin is necessary otherwise there's no point - no just judge, no first one, no last one, no justice, no corruption - there'd be no point to start at. Without sin I wouldn't be where I am. It's the ticket out. I would've stayed where I was for god knows how long, settled down like they do, be too far gone to ask the time. Least I got out.

Don't know what's coming though. Don't know where I'm going until right now. Right now settles it.

Tomorrow's for them. I see the way they look at me.

I'm untouchable. They can't touch me even if it's all they do. Like you said, they're superstitious. Leave her alone and good will come. But their kind of good. I'll be judged and hanged and they'll nod their heads and still they can't touch me.

They'll say I told you so. Told you that one was no good. From day one, I knew. Didn't I say it? They did but they wouldn't dare judge. They reek and they know it: flesh is flesh – it stinks. They need a real just judge, one who smells immaculate. They have to look on high for him and they do. They look right into the sun. It's worth scorching their eyes. Blind they fall and still they judge in his name.

They see Hirst just fine though. His billboards their eyes, his hotels their sky, his banks their home, his highways their way out, but still he has no right to judge. He owns them not him. That's the truth they nail to their chests. Makes the pain worth it.

...He is to blame. He is untouchable. He is like us, the sinners. But where was I? I lost track of it, of her, or was it you and me - who is this?

Just make sure these words are yours not His. You told me to put it down like this or was it me?

These words are mine not His.

Capitalize it you said. That way they know who I've got it in for. Cause I will infect them all. They'll be sick with Him and they'll believe and they'll see that I pay for it. He certainly will. They're all in on it even you and me. Don't you see?

Only He saw that quiet moment betraying us with a simple act, like trying not to rush to catch up but running just the same, it looks harmless but look at our eyes, look at our Adam's apple refusing to go down, nobody sees but Him, when the world is looking elsewhere this is when He catches our mask dropping to the ground, our sores piercing Him.

He sees it. Our moment of decision. We have a choice. We want to scream but for what? We don't know so we laugh. This is the American Dream.

The Letter 18

Footsteps. They approached. He leaned back in the chair. The closer they got, the more the room lightened. What light? A smile appeared and vanished.

He was instructed to meet them in the basement. No windows, no way for anybody to see or hear, no getting in or out without them knowing - that's what they thought - but who'd think to look for them here with cops, lawyers, judges in the courthouse above?

He shook his head. Absurd but if that's what he wants, that's what he gets. He paid for it.

He looked at his watch. Two knocks. A pause. Another knock right on time.

He walked to the door and looked through the peephole. That smile. He stepped back and wet his lips. He rehearsed and memorized every word. Get it right. He stressed that and paid more for it, and he told him he was good for it, he could count on him, he was a professional, he came highly recommended. He'd get it right. He was a respected con man.

He explained the plan in their first and only meeting.

'You will get it right. Everything depends on it.'

The plan was in his hands now. It was up to him. They shook on it. Later he drove away, passing under stop lights, remaining in between the white and the yellow, the window down letting in the sunset coming on from the edge. He breathed it in like everyone. No rushing it. Darkness takes hours in M---. He'd be back to the private bungalow on time, the client paid extra for it, demanded it just in case, of what he didn't say, but he guessed why and pressed him about it.

I'm no hitman. He repeated himself. I don't kill for money.

He assured him it wouldn't be necessary for a plan as simple as this. Impersonate an art dealer, tell them a story about a stolen painting waiting in the backroom, let her see it not the man, she'd pay him for it and tell him they had to deliver it to a friend as a personal favor, he'd give them the address as bogus as the painting, the story, everything a fake like him. It was all a hoax. Easy pay.

Except he suspected him. Of what he didn't know. He had a scar that's hard to come by. He didn't think twice about Connie and Guy at first. Couple of kids in over their heads made it easier. He got the story down, memorized his lines, waited for the call, meanwhile these kids became the most-wanted. Not what he expected and he was about to pull out when he got the call.

'It's time. Everything's ready.'

'Mr. Hirst?'

'Yes.'

'This plan of yours has changed. I don't think I can.'

'Nothing has changed.'

'They're wanted.'

'Surely you've dealt with this before. A consummate professional like yourself.'

'But they're going to get caught.'

'Not until I say.'

Silence on the line.

'I can't guarantee anything meeting where we are.'

'Nobody will see them come or go.'

'If that's not the case, I don't want to get dragged into it.'

'You haven't been dragged into anything. You've been paid and paid quite nicely to do your job.'

'Right. Of course, Mr. Hirst.'

Of course. Neither said a word about it.

'I will expect you there in three days' time.'

'Yes.'

Two knocks again. A pause again. Another knock again. It will only continue. Do your job and be done with it.

He opened the door and smiled.

‘Connie.’ He nodded. ‘Guy.’ He nodded. ‘I’m Mr. Horne. Please do come in.’

He stepped aside while motioning with his hand. They entered into the room.

‘I take it you were not followed?’

They sat down. Connie placed her handbag next to her.

‘We went through the parking garage like you said.

Nobody was around.’

He looked at her like they all did but only for a second.

Something was off.

‘Can I put that somewhere for you?’ He pointed to the bag.

‘Fine where it’s at, thank you.’

He proceeded to his chair and sat down, watching her out of the corner of his eye. She crossed her legs. She looked like she did in the pictures, was real made up, funny that she looked the part but nobody suspected her. Same with Guy. He looked like a killer.

He cleared his throat. The plan ready.

‘I don’t know how much you’ve been told.’

‘You got the painting and the address.’

‘Of the friend of Mr. Carlo’s,’ his voice monotone, his face stolid.

‘Right.’ Her legs crossed to the opposite side. ‘Guy and I didn’t bring no money. Hirst said not to.’

He glanced at his hands folded in his lap.

‘And Mr. Carlo?’

He looked up and fixed his eyes on Guy. She turned and did the same.

‘Guy?’

He was a dead man.

‘Guy?’ She leaned closer to him. ‘What’s he talking about?’

‘Nothing Connie.’

‘Nothing what? You talked to Mr. Carlo?’

He shook his head. ‘No. Not since it.’

‘Since what?’

‘That night.’

‘On the boardwalk?’

Guy nodded. She looked back at him. He eased into his chair.

‘Guy hasn’t talked to him since it began, Mr. Horne.’

He knew but did not look away from Guy. He interested him. Good looks, no tongue, everything about him right on his face. The man ticked. He was about to go off. Not a word about it in the plan though. Kid’s a wildcard, anybody can see that. Must be a reason for it. He’s thorough this Hirst. He knows what he’s doing. The girl sure don’t. He’s got it in for her. Understandable considering what she is and what she did. He saw it. Cutting herself like that for what? Got himself a real jade here, a fanatical one, nothing good can come of it. A man like Hirst should cut his losses and forget about her.

His eyes dropped to the floor. A thin smile broke out on his lips. Get on with it, Horne.

‘Thank you for clarifying that. I have to be certain this is strictly between us.’

‘The only reason we’re here is because of Mr. Carlo.’

‘Not anymore.’

‘He’s out?’

‘He is.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s not important.’

Connie edged forward on her seat.

‘Is to us. We bet on a lot to get us here. No slip ups and it goes as planned.’

‘And it will. Mr. Carlo is irrelevant.’

‘Because he’s...’

‘As you said, there will be no slip ups.’

She fell back into her chair, snared by her own words.

‘Alright then. Go on.’ She tugged at her purse. ‘I don’t want to go down in this place.’

He shifted in his chair. The next part was hardest.

‘The authorities will not think to look for you under their own noses.’

She sighed or did she laugh? It was hard to tell.

‘Go on, Mr. Horne. You have your orders.’

He nodded and began.

‘I do. Thank you.’

He smoothed his pantlegs, his eyes watching his hands slide down to his knees and back again. They watched his every move. He had been warned about this.

‘Mr. Hirst has instructed me to provide specific information so you understand the magnitude of the situation. You deserve as much. You have come a long way.’

‘And then we get the address of the friend.’

He nodded.

‘And what I tell you must be related in detail to this friend. You will see the painting is not just a work of art. It is a life’s work.’

‘His.’

‘Mr. Hirst’s. Yes.’

‘We’ll see about that.’

‘Indeed we shall.’

He looked up at the ceiling as instructed. Practice made it routine, the more routine he appeared, the more successful the plan. He specified this and paid more for it. Everything going as planned until he did it. He snickered. Indeed we shall. What does that even mean? A man’s tongue is cheap. They all knew that.

‘What was that?’

A tremor unleashed. Connie’s index finger shot up uncontrollably.

‘Pardon me, but it is uncanny, isn’t it? A room in the basement of a courthouse, two of the

most-wanted listening to a perfect stranger go on about the history of a painting of no consequence to the high price on their heads. All I have to do is excuse myself and go upstairs to tell the first clerk I see who is right under their feet.'

'You wouldn't make it to the door, Mr. Horne.' Connie patted the handbag.

'A gun?'

'You bet.'

'Hirst warned me.'

A smirk flared up and died. A tocsin of what was to come. And why not?

'He warned me too.'

'About?'

'To use it.'

This was hardest because it was true. Hirst had been frank about the risks. He presented Hain's work as proof. He knew what he was getting into, but he had only a bit part, a half hour's work, if he pulled it off, he was set.

'Then let us avoid any misunderstandings.'

She moved her hand away from it. Guy looked at her then at him.

'Fine by us.'

Mr. Horne crossed his legs and pulled the first thread from the skein. The coda about to begin. He liked the way Hirst referred to it. The coda. Has venom to it.

'Fine by myself as well,' he replied, his eyes assuming a faraway look. 'And now for what you have come for. The painting is here. You will see for yourself that it is worth it. Just a few words to pass along to the friend. He will be most interested to know certain facts, especially if he decides to auction it at a high price.'

'It's worth something?'

'Millions. It was stolen and now.'

'It is found.'

He glanced at her. She was getting excited right on schedule.

‘Yes, and of course, he’ll want to know why it was stolen in the first place.’

‘You mean who took it?’

He shook his head.

‘It is not the who but the why that matters. This is what you must tell him. He must watch out.’

‘For what? The cops?’

‘It is not as easy as that.’

He paused. His thumb curled under his chin, his index finger covered his upper and bottom lips. He heard what he said. Not as easy as that. Those were his words and he meant them.

‘Then what is it?’

Why was he covering his mouth? Liars do that. His hand dropped. Tell the truth.

‘The letter.’

‘What letter? Mine?’ Her face tightened. ‘Spit it out, Horne.’

I will. Watch me.

The Great Whore, The Great Letter 19

The letter was not hers. It was Maggie's. Hers was a name that breathed.

'It is not yours, Connie, but she is a lot like you.'

'Who?'

'Maggie.'

'Who's she?'

He checked her wrist. He will call it out as planned.

'She stole it.'

'The painting.'

'Something like that, yes.'

'And now I'm going to.'

'You will take it, yes, but there is more.'

'The letter.'

'Yes.' He checked it again. 'There is the letter and that too.'

Now he singled it out. The bracelet had slipped and exposed it. Years had lightened it but the cross remained.

She dragged her bracelet over it.

'What do you mean?'

'She has the mark too.'

'That's impossible.'

He shook his head.

'No it is not.'

Silence. Of course he did not understand. He had not read the letter. It will change everything, he said. She'll give up on it once she reads it. You'll see. Maggie was a whore like her. She'll trust her. She'll do what she says.

'How so?'

Something moved. Something unheard of.

'It's a trick.' Guy grabbed her by that wrist. 'A trick, Connie. Don't you see?'

She jerked back from him like he wanted her to. Because Guy was right. It was a trick. Maggie, the letter - a ruse. She'll refuse to see reason, he said. She'll laugh at it like they do. Fanatics. Connie and Katarina will pay for it.

He simply nodded. He took what he told him at face value. Whatever Hirst said appeared to be true.

‘What are you talking about?’ Connie snapped. Guy was choking on them. He had to spit them out quick or else.

‘It’ll be shot up. Let go. Let’s go now.’

She placed her hand on his.

‘Nobody’s getting shot up, Guy.’

‘The queen, the city, the marriage, the mother of whores, he’ll judge you, Connie. You’re wrong, wrong. Now.’

He got up beside himself.

He called it to a T. He said so to himself.

‘Guy.’ Connie yelled. ‘Sit down.’

And he did. Maybe he’s in on it. A last-minute change to the plan. Guy hands her the truth and she won’t take it.

Look at him. That grin.

‘We got time to hear the man out. Just play along. Trust me.’

She nudged him.

‘Guy?’

‘Yes.’

‘You trust me?’

The grin vanished.

‘Yes.’

She eased back into her chair. ‘Good. Now where were we?’

He motioned with his hand.

‘It’s in back. Please examine it alone,’ he repeated his lines without addressing Guy. ‘You will know what to do. We will wait for you here.’

Connie got up like she did everywhere, quick and certain like she knew where she was headed. Trust me, Hirst assured him, she won’t think twice about it. He marked her footsteps. She walked straight in back and right up to it. Then she circled around it and then nothing. She found it. He put it exactly where Maggie nailed it to the painting decades ago. He did not read it. Hirst told him it was sealed but that had nothing to do with it.

He waited for her not once acknowledging Guy was still in the room. Hirst was explicit about this, and his orders must have been understood because neither spoke even though it was the most obvious thing to do. They both looked at their hands as if their veins tracked what Connie was doing. It was that easy. It happened as they envisioned it. Connie confronted the painting like she would anything – she brushed past it to get what she wanted. The letter was nailed in place. She ripped it open and read it like a dream. It had to be like this. It made no sense.

The time was near. The crier was in the streets. It was a Monday. Morning came down on us rushing in and out of doors and carriages, our feet chewing up the city, our hands hungry, oh, how we grabbed at it! But you don't want to hear about that. Fine. Have it your way with our hands on breakfast cakes, gazettes, stockings and lace, ties and handkerchiefs, gold cufflinks, and bread, more and more bread soft and warm in our hand. The bread had a life of its own. We didn't want to mark it. It would know.

Fingerprints are telling. About what? About us. You too. You're hungry for bread and swallow it just like we did. It is the only way to eat with your conscience.

I was starving. I raced. I was going to see them. The sisters had a job for me. To help me earn my bread honestly, they said, to chew it like them. They knew the odds. Salvation and destruction - a two-faced coin. Go ahead. Toss it. I would be hallowed a whore, I would inherit the earth, I would eat it, all of it, I would be the first. The greatest whore. The first. I like that.

The city knew me well. I won't name it. It was a city and we grew up together fancying it just like they did. The church - the axis on which our blood and knuckles turned. It was hope. The city watched its light girl skipping towards the flying buttresses and stiff wooden door that I pushed open to leap inside and pass time sweeping between the pews, down the aisles, the backstairs, I swept one step at a

time to make it to the place where I leaned my broom against the wall to feel the thickest silk robes against my face, to see the blackest black and the reddest red my eyes ever laid on.

Even then it hurt because they mocked me. They knew about the bloodletting. I was pale when red was the color. They knew, the men who wore the robes, they raised up body and blood all too well. I became a woman behind their robes. They stunk of Maggie.

But I never missed confession. Face to face, I never believed a word of it. I spilt my words and for that I am truly sorry. I was absolved but that hole in my mouth. I did not hide it. Face to face I went. They laughed, the gall of her, it will be her ruin. They forgot I would inherit the earth, I, the weakest, I, the first of my race, I, the world had never seen.

But the world is not the city and she doesn't miss a trick.

Her news travels, her streets have lips and tongues, gossip echoes off her faces seeing and hearing everything. Look at the windows. Look at them watching, their shutters open, candlelight burning in rooms waiting up cause they heard about her. Maggie is ruined. Gone to the dogs. She had it coming.

I will tell you.

The city - she had it in for me. Poor Maggie's got no blood. Nothing but the devil in her. And her men and women said as much not with their tongues, with their eyes. Oh yes, they kneeled before her priests, their tongues sweating for communion, their eyes closing for the host, their mouths opened wide before they ate it up, His body tasted good, its thinness made them feel light as they rose to return to their pews. That's when our eyes would meet. There was no denying it. I was only six and I knew. I'm no good. I had to be, not for me, for them.

They were on the prowl. They needed a goat to be damned to the desert, their sins packed down on it. The city could not bear them. She had had enough.

I knew this when I was six. I knew when I was sixteen men had their eyes on me. Not just across the pews but up close. They had to make sure I could bear the weight. Their women suspected but shhhhh. The city hushed them. She forced them to appear from behind closed doors, their parasols stretched tight, the chiffon of their dresses making light of it, let it pour, their feet would not deign to touch the spit on her cobbled streets. The city insulted but it was her game to play. She asked for it.

She asked nothing of their men weighing losses and wins at her gaming tables. Damn it all to hell if the scales don't tip in their favor. But she knew to entertain. She gave them the succor. Her virtue a two-way street: she needs winners and losers. The city needs her men. They know the fog and cut through it with her eyes. Sin is necessary or her time is up.

The city led them to me. She knew what I was. I was not false. I was alone. I liked to be inside where things did not collapse. My kingdom lived and breathed in my room where I ruled supreme. I was a whore, yes, but the first great one the city had ever seen. I was not false. I made her look the other way but she was proud.

Any whore knows night not day. I read the night on my palm. The lanes and valleys of my kingdom etched into my eyes flashing over their highs and lows. I dressed in their words. I wore the purple and scarlet. The hem of my robe snaked across my palace when dusk turned black and men crowded around tables in her backrooms. They threw the dice. I threw the fire something to eat. I liked it hot. It made me feel rich. I did not have much, a room, a bed, a table by a window, a basin, a row of cupboards. And I had filth. Only the fire was clean. My pride fed it like a real woman. We like it hot. Flames are the Queen's manna. We never rule far from them.

Night came on. I looked out at the kingdom in my hand. I had nothing to repent. I had men, I had money, but until he came, I had yet to see the long robe with the golden sash. He played in the backrooms with the others. Some believed him a devil, some a saint, they all agreed he was rich, doubling his payout for no reason. But I treated him like the rest. No special favors. He trusted that.

On that first night he confided in me. He knocked on my door like they told him to: two knocks. pause. a final knock. I opened it. It was simple. It was him. Only he was unimaginable. He was racked with a thinness forcing him to cave in. His face hung on his neck. He only looked up when something slipped out of place, the fireiron dropping from my hand to the floor, the clang making him look up, his eyes tearing like they had been cut, but it was only flames dancing across his face, their laughter spreading on his skin tight, brow, nose, and cheekbones poking through. He was sick. He knocked and I opened my door to a real face that stole into time to watch it come.

On that first night, I saw it and understood. His face was a sign, a portent, behind the glass, the metamorphosis of a scar almost invisible. It bode no good. The scar had it in for him. I asked him inside where nobody could see. It escaped notice but it was there. Its time had not come yet.

That first night went as planned. He came, he paid, he said he'd like to see me again, then he left. Two plus two equals four. Men add up neat like that. He was no different except for one thing. I asked if he had a wife. They liked to be asked that, I don't know why, I just do what they like. But he didn't laugh. His words were like his face.

‘I’m looking for the bride of the city,’ he spoke in a measured tone. ‘Her ceremony will not be granted again.’ I laughed. His words were so odd I had to play with them. ‘Am I this bride of yours?’

My lashes curled like the tail of a viper. He looked me straight in the eyes.

‘You are the mother of whores, Maggie.’

I made a sad face. It made me look ugly.

‘What? Always a mother whore never a bride?’

I laughed. Its fangs lashed out. Even he could not take the horror of it. My laugh – a demon. It caught him off guard like the scream of a horse being whipped. It was time to go.

‘Make yourself ready.’

That’s all he said before he descended into the city below, his steps echoing through her wet streets, a familiar sound only now it had a terrible face. His face. Man could not imagine such a thing. Only a woman could. A real one. *Let anyone with ears listen to what I am saying. Only a real woman knows the dragon who bore her.*

I did not fear it. The scar and the dragon, all the same to Maggie. Make yourself ready he said. I will suffer. He will *come and make war against me*. His mouth on fire will turn Maggie to ash. Make yourself ready. His simple words knew I would put on my best dress, lace and silk pressed for the great illusion to flatter the greatest whore. Maggie will make herself ready for the ball.

A great many of them took place in the city. The song and dance and lace and silk propping up spirits clashing, tongues promising to love tomorrow, always tomorrow. He wanted his woman to be ready. He wanted them to grovel at my feet, raising the hems of my gown so it did not touch the earth of men, yes, they would whisper about me but they would bow to their Queen.

Make ready Maggie, scrape your face, powder it the whitest porcelain, your cheeks bleeding rose, your lips stained with

blood of the lamb. I had to conquer. I had to devour. Swallow up their pretty gay lives, my Queen, the bile will force the city to stink of them, the gore will lick at the heels of your chariot. I saw it all. I must be ready to leave the ball with a new name cut into my new skin. *Behold. The city's new Bride, the new Queen, the new Woman who will crown herself with the morning star.* Seize the diadem from their majesty – be ready she who has ears to hear!

I was in a fever about it, breathless, I made ready. The men came and I had them, little did they know I was not the same. They did not know to wonder aloud, they did not think to repent spoiling their Queen with their thin lives, night after night, defiling me with pitch and stink. But I did not object. I had to get them ready too. Those who share my flesh, share my fate. *I will rule with an unbreakable rod.* It is dust to dust when I say.

But the men did not understand. Some came and went and paid and thought nothing more of their Queen thrown on the bed. Some thought I was sick. They did not want to catch what I had. She's got something. They closed the door on their Queen and swore never again as their eyes recoiled from her open sores burgeoning like fire. Just a matter of time before it eats her inside out. But they knew the city survived outbreaks before. This fact comforted them. The city would make sure they didn't catch it. Their wealth and wives and children made her prosper. She wouldn't let it come to them. Her allegiance consoled.

So they shut my door for good, vowing never to return. From now on a clean life. No games and backrooms, no cards and debts and whores, no disease getting too close to their flesh safe from the likes of me. Clean and spotless now. I laughed at them. Like the city, they had never been plagued by the outbreak of a real woman. His simple command made it right to imagine all and wait for his return. I was ready and he came knocking

that night, finding my *works and deeds perfect in the sight of my destiny.*

‘May I come in.’

I smiled and opened the door to my kingdom. Already *I assumed the power of my name and words as yet unspoken.* He knew. He will become his Queen. They all will. A greater city will come to outdo the seams of the old. The new Queen and her kingdom will bring this old bitch to her knees. This crone who branded me a whore, who forced me to creep through her streets like black death, shunned by daylight and crisp men and women, this hag who made me suckle my own breast - you will pay. The fire I tended to nights long and damp, I will turn to blasted stone. It will be the wreckage on which my new empire will rise.

Silly childish dreams he infected me with. Get ready he said and I did. Like a little girl I believed. *A child holds the key to His door.* The key to a new city, a new peace, a new Queen, this new child sweeping the doorway clean. It is she. The key is in her hand, she will make open the way open for all to see and hear, she will turn it in the lock and walk in. My little girl, you are me, and we will laugh and run and shine the diadem of our highness forevermore.

The little girl I never was played the fairytale like she knew it well. Then I opened the door one night and magic - his scar appeared the whitest white hardened into the face of man. It was granite immaculate. It knew what it wanted. It knew what it was: the first judge of man, the beginning of his justice hard, white, pristine.

Ha! Man is man but woman is woman.

Still I fell for it. It dazzled at first. Calloused it shone all-knowing. My eyes shied away because even though the scar was a mark against him, a vicious mark screaming out against itself, still it pierced me like a morning star, its five points cutting to my heart letting it be known that the scar,

the sign, the mark of the dragon, *had not found my works perfect in the sight of it and it saw and judged all.*

But a real woman knows she comes first. His justice rules from her sin. His justice is first her whoredom. Man won, yes, he bears the mark of victory, his scar *has the name of being alive, but he is dead.* Now rise woman. Man is a beast. His justice more gruesome, more dead than himself.

The scar could be any man's. Call it by any name you like. Call it Hirst. The name does not matter. What does is his justice leading you by the nose to the open door that only he can shut behind you. You, woman, *with little power you kept his words* alive in your imagination, you did not deny him, no, you made ready. For the enemy, you made yourself ready. Judge me kindly, you begged, *do not blot my name out of the book of life* just yet, you even begged pretty please as you spied yourself in the looking-glass. Because he alone *could bring the hour of trial upon you*, he could point the barrel at you to test your crown, your words, your dreams stitched for you not him. But how did he know? Oh Maggie, it is all too cruel.

'It is time,' he proclaimed as they blocked my doorway. The man and his justice. My eyes shot through it all. A fairytale he is not.

'Of course,' I repeated in a voice I did not recognize. I had nothing. I had nowhere to go. I could not have been more ready.

'We must go.'

We must go. He used as few words as possible. It is best. Words have tails that like to whip and strangle. I saw it with my very own eyes. Words are a bloody affair.

He led me to the church. It was midnight. He led me along her streets. Gas lights burned at their posts, flames

snapped at the glass, their agitation shivered mad onto the street below. I liked her like this. She looked honest. And he held my hand like I was a real lady. Those we passed knew better. It was midnight. They stared from a distance and looked away when we approached. For modesty's sake, they'd say. They watched as we crossed the street in the direction of the cathedral. Like the city, they did not miss a trick. I heard them.

'It's ugly business the two of them. The devil take them.'

Even before he came for me, they made my liver ache. Even before I knew to make ready, I dreamed of tearing down their doors to see them as larvae gorging and dancing and singing, only to stop dead to bow to their Queen they thought had been eaten alive.

'Yes, my little maggots, your Queen will come to the banquet and swallow you whole. You with no legs, no eyes, no spirits, you who have no faith.'

It was a silly thin fantasy that made do until he led me to Him. Surprised? Why? Am I not His creation too? *He cannot spit me out of His mouth.* I am not lukewarm. I am fire. I will scald His tongue.

And that is not all I will do. I will laugh for Him too. Nowhere is it written that He ever did. No one speaks of this but I will, not from pride but from spite. In spite of the price He set for Himself, not once did He laugh at the folly of it. If He had succumbed to it, if He had laughed in the face of it, maybe the *Lamb never would have to stand as if it had been slaughtered.*

But let bygones be bygones. Holding hands, we raced up the steps in that gasp before dawn came down hard. The mad rush to go nowhere. The church door barred and chained. I had to laugh.

‘You laugh.’

I couldn’t help it.

‘They did not expect us to be early.’

They should have been looking out for me. It is not every morning a great whore knocks on their door. It is not everyone who knows they have *seven eyes with seven seals*. It is certainly not for any woman to look into those eyes and break them. He had no conscience about it. He did not come to save me. I was his thief. This is how he saw me. I was a whore but a thief? Never. I stole from no man. Ask them. Maggie is good for it. An even exchange.

‘Wait here.’

He disappeared. I did not move. I did not look. I did not check the time. Light came for them not me. I trusted he would not disturb the order of things. And he didn’t. The great door split open. A candle burned at the threshold. It was a woman.

‘Come, my dear.’ Her hand reached out for me. ‘Before they see you.’

Hers was a rich voice, a perfect jewel cut into a body ravaged. I put my hand in hers and let her take me. It was easy. He was nowhere in sight, but when I carried it off, he’d be there. I am nothing but a thief to him. He had his reasons, I had mine, we’d see eye to eye soon enough.

‘The gentleman has explained why he brought you.’ She did not question it. She held out the light as we passed the empty pews.

‘Have I not seen you before, my child?’

I stared out ahead of us.

‘No. It was not you. It was someone else.’

It was the truth. It was someone else. I refused to take them take by the hand. I would not let anyone take my sins from me. They were my deeds.

‘Do not trouble your heart. That is all past. He sees everything. He knows why you are here even if you do not.’

But I do know. He is the bottomless pit. He has the key to it. *He sees through the smoke, the air blackened by the Great Furnace* that keeps the pit burning its guts into the earth. A flower is plucked, smoke escapes from the pit, dust to dust, everything to soot. That is why he came for me. He thought I’d be covered in it, the greatest whore in a great city, was she not the filthiest? Her soot oozes from her pores. Yes, my Queen, it is you.

But I am no thief. I am no Baptist either. Maggie is no schemer with a forked tongue. Do not be confused. It is all so simple. Listen. I will cry it out.

My body for men. My heart for Him. You do not believe?

Look. *The seal of Him on my forehead.* I have it not you. He has not come for houses in order. He has come for us who have plucked too many flowers, who have breathed too much smoke, who have cried out from that great sweating pit rammed up our noses.

The pit hacked its guts above us. It laughed. Its bowels...never will there be an end to them. But He saw with His own eyes He saw us. The whites of ours flashed. It was He who saw them through the smoke, *the pit like a great mountain burning with fire*, it was He who heard us through the *requiems of the locusts* hatching on our skin, it was He alone who *spotted the Great Rainbow over our heads*. It was He who scattered Himself across the ruin to deny us a single tear.

Hear what I am crying out. You who have ears but cannot see. He is the one. *His face, the sun's, his legs, the pillar of fire.* His heart gold. My eyes were pitch-black but I saw it. The whore and the Lamb. The wedding. The banquet. The words in His mouth here to save us. Evil and good - only words, our words, splattered across a city that will retch over them for the last time.

‘Take this my child.’

The sister offered me a broom, I took it from her, then she led me into the Great Room with its ceiling nailed to heaven, its glass stained the colors of words, a spectrum of them. But I did not understand. Not yet. I only knew to give and take and it served me well until I saw it and understood.

She came up beside me. The broom slipped from my hand as I looked at this great room deserted except for a painting hanging in a niche. We went towards it. I was ready. Let it trick me. It is the way.

‘Take up the broom again, child, and make ready. It is what He wills.’

‘Who?’

I felt the broom in my hands again.

‘Not he who brought you,’ she answered. ‘He is a thief and a liar. He expects you to steal His masterpiece for him.’

‘Then why...’

She gently placed her finger on my lips.

‘Be silent. Even now in this very room the *dragon wishes to devour you and the child you will bear.*’

...And the child you will bear....

The whore and the broom, I began to sweep. I made ready. I swept, and the more I did, the stranger the darkness became. It forced me to see impossible things.

I prayed for dawn to crack through but no. I struggled to keep my eyes blind to it but no. There it was. The great painting. The room could not bear it. Impossible but my words are true. I saw it. The broom in my hand, I had no choice, I had to look, I swept and watched the painting flourish to a height and width miraculous. Then I heard it. A voice. It said to me *now write what you will see, what is, and what is to take place.* I had to laugh. The painting, the voice, too magnificent for a whore.

‘I have no words to write with.’

I was pitiful. Then I felt it in the room. It spoke through me. His voice tore into my guts.

Tear the veils from their eyelids. Do not let them blink. Not once. To them reveal my masterpiece in all its hues. To you alone I reveal it: the dragon will lie with the lamb, she will breathe fire on Him, together to be melded eternal.

Together will we be lighter than air, unified we will carry the great procession. Those who came before, radiant like the blade issuing from my mouth, cloak them in golden robes, their names sewn in whitest silk. Those who fell behind, those blind and stinking ones, those who laughed about getting ready, Fate will close in on them, its mammoth wings spreading wide like a mouth swallowing the sun, its beams severed like glass, wounded and bleeding and reeking of pitch, they will turn to flee but where?

Only the inferno everywhere spewing the bowels of those like themselves, just like them their guts will spit through its nostrils, those two hot coals breathing in and out the stench of their lives, while its awful tongue licks the air for a taste of the great feast before slithering over their fallen bodies littering the streets. It knows it is close:

the dragon is on the move. The city will serve it. She will make ready the great banquet and these fated ones will take their place at the table.

Only you, Maggie, know the real city. Do what you must. Wed the city and the dragon with my robes of gold and steel. Heretofore it will be. Show them the bed of the whore is cloaked in the power and glory of my name.

Write it down.

Here and now to eternity it will be. I will wed the two, alloy and gold will become One, and you will bear the child of my promise. It will bear the mark +. The whore and the child will carry it in her guts. Through her, I will be the first just judge. No others before I.

This pact a renewal. Before, man judged dead men, now he is alive and will rise to be judged rightly by I who am first. It is because of woman not man. I breathed into man and lost. Only a real woman has the lungs for it. She alone has the right to name it justice.

The voice quit. I swooned. It was too much. It was absurd. You cannot teach an old whore new tricks. I rebelled. I will get rid of it. I swear I am a whore. I promise nothing. Pick another to carry your burden to term.

My fingers tightened around the broom.
Say it.

Good comes not unto me, I do not live in sun, I live in shadow, I pray for the dragon, let it eat my child and swallow it whole, He knows the maiden I am, He knows the word fails me. Write it down. My ears unseeing, my

eyes deaf, the great painting buzzing with lies and blindness.

He knows what I am and wants me just the same. He knows I will steal it for him. Why else do I still hold to this broom? I sweep and make ready to thieve it as His ceremony of words outlasting the tongue of man plays on and on.

I deny Him. But I will give Him my words. I will steal it but not a moment before I write down what I have seen and heard and sow my testimony into the back of it.

Once and for all my eyes bore into the painting and it shrank back. It's not what you think. It was no coward. It feared not the eyes of whore or Queen. Now I saw it for what it really was. It glistened with the Lamb and the Just Judges eyeing its miraculous fleece. But hate lurked. All shall not be well. Whatever it was wanted to rule supreme. The Lamb would only keep its skin because of me.

I approached it, closer and closer, it let me in to give it a mouth, a tongue, words to speak. This painting, one panel of a greater altarpiece, was all I saw. The just judges, the one mourning in perpetual wilderness, all adored it like I. The Lamb. Our eyes shrank from its corona. Its whiteness making ready to hang for the skin of man.

Scratch your eyes out and you will see with the mind of a woman.

It began like I said. I approached it and the Lamb looked upon me. Who cannot say that but I can say more. I came to be on the other side of it, on the inside of the painting, in the mouth of it, it opened wide and I entered.

His tongue softened the blows to my feet, His breath forbid the stench to assail me because I was alone, I walked where lines, shapes, colors, where imagining and the real found no patron. Art is for man. The Lamb is for woman. She is

anchored to its tongue, miles of it smelling like magnolias wafting in and out of paradise as she wanders in blackness, her eyes, ears, mind scratched out to see as He saw, to hear as He did, to know His word when He spoke it.

I walked in sweetness obliterating light. I wished to lie in it and so I did. I laid myself down on His tongue and succumbed to Him always ready. I do not know the word for it, I only know that I slept but did not sleep, that I dreamt but did not dream, I only know that suddenly His tongue curved up like a scorpion's, seven pointed barbs aflame, with my eyes blotted out I saw with His.

It was about to strike, not as it did the living madness on Patmos, he was only a man, this time it came to do in a woman, its seven needles burning for her veins to shoot them up with Him, beginning now her blood shot full of Him, her cells bearing the science of Him marking the end and new beginning.

I will make sure the monkey remains on our back. He will be first to judge even if it costs us blood.

The needle struck. I screamed where not a sound lived. Here the nightmare laughs. When I awoke, there it was: +. I cannot put it into words. He put none in my mouth. I only knew we were One and I was alone.

I was on my own. Do you hear me? I was left to myself to fix my blood for Him. Always I needed a fix. Always I whored with my blood full of Him, I raged, I infected, I became the greatest whore the city had ever seen. Even the one who led me to Him, the one who bid me to make ready, the one with the scar chewing up his face, I had him again and again. He came to get to the bottom of it, to know what became of me when I made ready with my broom sweeping up before the great

painting. He wanted to get to bottom of it but His tongue cut mine in two.

My words bloodless make no sense. He knows what I have done I have done for Him. The city is dead. The Queen is a bride without a vow. Only His justice knows what I am for good and for evil.

And so I am a whore not a bride-to-be. A bastard now feeds off me. With child is two words and so I am. I know what I will call it: Katarina. He will never know. Even today he asked about it. It is his. Spit the truth out. Out of a mouth like mine? Never.

He is father of all. This is what I tell him and I laugh so hard to make it bleed all over him. But it must come. Let it bring what it will. Its blood is His. Katarina. Let him try to get to the bottom of that. He will remain the first and last. There is nothing he can do.

This letter is a revelation in spite of my words. Until he came, I had no need of them, I had no use for them except to answer one question - how much? I was cheap, I used the same words again and again. They did not count. Now they do. Now I feel the skin of them in heat, in cold, in outer space where galaxies pass through them like pores capturing something, anything, a secret, a fact, to sweat out. I have done my penance. I have sweat them out for Him. He will see to it. I am no fool.

My revelation in your hands, my daughter. This is my wish. So I nail it to the back of this panel that I will steal, for one day you will find both and do with them as you will. You are it, Katarina. It is absurd. It is true. Through Him all is blood, all is possible, even for whores like you. I am a testament to His fact.

Maggie

She had to laugh. He said she would and she did. She was not in the room with them. They did not see her lips pulled tight, her tears snapping off her cheek as she held it in her blood-stained hands.

They saw none of this but they heard the laugh. It was Connie. She laughed at what she forgot could be played against her. It was the truth. She did not expect to come eye to eye with it. The joker.

She laughed because she played her hand to steal something that was hers all along. This was it. The endgame. The whore came up short.

The Return of Things 20

‘Can’t let this go to print, Hain. Doesn’t make a damn bit of sense.’

That’s what Hank said when he read the letters. One from Connie, one from Maggie, maybe she wrote them both. She left hers unsigned. It meant something, she wasn’t playing this time, she had to get the venom out, had to suck hard at it. Doesn’t matter if it was all in her head, to her it was true, every word of it, and when it was over, the way she saw the truth mattered.

It was too late by the time I got to the courthouse. This Mr. Horne, the painting, Connie and Guy - gone. Only the letters remained. Of course nobody saw a thing, nobody knew or heard of a Mr. Horne either, and far as they could tell, the basement had been abandoned for years. Whole thing’s a hoax they said, anybody claiming to rendezvous under the very courtroom they’re going to be tried in is a liar. Nobody believed it. They were adamant about that – no witnesses, judges in every chamber, two faces that anybody’d recognize thanks to the press, and not one person saw them? Was all a lie. There was no Mr. Horne and Connie and Guy were never there.

But what about the letters?

What about them? They prove nothing. Maybe you planted them, Hain.

I was getting nowhere. They wanted no part in it. Even Hank backed off.

‘I can’t let it go. You have to give me something more.’

‘But the letters.’

‘Not enough. Not this time. Who’s going to understand a word of it? It’s nuts. The painting’s been missing since the war.’

The Just Judges. Nobody’d heard of it until now.

‘Listen, everything was okay when it was just some pretty young girl getting caught up in something over her head.

Hotshot boyfriend thug who don't talk, bad luck when it came to men, anyone will buy that, and her robbing banks and running from the law, they understood that too, they even got the killing, felt sorry for her. One thing leads to another and it's easier than we think. But now what?

'They're still out there.'

Could hear it in his voice. He wasn't buying it.

'You built this up, now you got to deliver. No more crap about Maggie, her revelation, the painting, some game of who's who in the nut house. It don't cut it, Hain.'

'I was at the courthouse. They were there. The letters prove it.'

'They prove nothing except she's lost it and you will if you're not careful.'

'I'm making it up then?'

Hank breathed into the receiver. Something clicked.

'You had a good run with this. Cops say any minute now. End it the right way and you write your own ticket.'

'You've been talking to the cops?'

'Have to. You know that.'

'And Hirst.'

'What about him?'

'Been talking to him too.'

Silence.

'He's a powerful man. Cops can't pin anything on him. This rubbish about Maggie speaks for itself.'

She knew it would be like this. Everything planned to the last word. His story ticks.

'You need to get your head screwed on. He's not the goddamn anti-Christ. He's just a wealthy, powerful man.'

'Who owns things.'

'Of course.'

'Like you.'

'What do you mean?'

'He's got you.'

Another silence.

'You best think about what you're saying, Hain.'

Too late. I raced with the speed of light now.

'I heard it.'

'What?'

'The gun. Went off right as I got there.'

'Cops found nothing.'

'I was outside the door.'

'Then how'd they get out?'

I didn't know. I wasn't supposed to. My job was to get the letters.

'It doesn't matter. They'll be in custody by tonight.'

'You're sure?'

'You led them to them, didn't you?'

He's in on it. He knows who's who doesn't matter anymore.

Hirst-Katarina-Maggie-Hirst-Katarina-Carlo-Hirst-Guy-

Connie-Guy-Sommerset-Hirst-Maggie-Katarina-Connie-

Hain-Hank-Hirst-Horne-Hain-Hirst-Hain-Hirst-Hirst.

A carnival of names spinning round. Nobody knows who's who but it can't keep up. Fact is it will end. Hirst, Adobe de Bene, the scar, the cross, Maggie, Connie, Katarina shooting up with it - blood dies and everything with it.

What about Him she'd say?

A misstep of imagination. A junkie's a junkie. A bad habit makes anything real. I didn't lead them to them. He did. A bad habit leaves tracks, and Connie left too many right in the open, too many reckless words saying too much, words-words-words she kept saying. They're the real monkey on her back.

I did my job. I immortalized her and that's exactly what she wanted. She'll last for who knows how long. Words outrun us. Connie's done but they'll pay to see what happens, even if she makes no sense. That's where Hank's wrong. They have to know how it ends even if Connie lost out with them. Wasn't the killing that did it. They already imagined that. They got that about her and forgave her for it, pretty little thing in over her head, she had to do something. No, Connie lost with them because she wouldn't fold. They wanted her dead for no other reason than she was too good at being alive. Get it over with why don't you. But Connie turned out to be

real. More to her than met the eye and they can't stand for that.

Bring it to a close, Hain.

That's what Hank told me last time we talked.
You know how it ends but there's no getting ahead of it.
He was right.

Cops staked out the motel. Were convinced they'd go back to it. They set a trap for them. Figured they'd use me just in case. She's got it in for you. Not that it mattered - one false move and she was as good as dead. She knew it, said as much in her letter, the one folded into Maggie's.

'This is it, Hain, See you.'

Wasn't like her. Maybe it rattled her. Maybe it was the painting. Maybe it was the dead bodies. Killing's like that. It smacks.

Felt something like that when I spoke to the cops. Was told to go back to the motel and play it just like before. Do what you're told. You don't want to be an accessory. To them I looked it. To me I looked like I was doing my job. When it was said and done, they changed their minds. Nobody thought it'd come to that. I sure as hell didn't. Nobody thought they'd be capable of it. They're surrounded, they know it, but they planned it all along. Have it your way, pigs. You want us, come and get us, in fact, we'll come to you. If you can't get it right this time, you don't deserve your skin.

Connie liked to taunt. She saw it coming. Her mask gone, her tracks visible, a junkie can work around anything to hit the mainline. +. +. +. +. Come on, pigs. Nobody's going to believe my story, not even me.

The motel was just as unbelievable. It remained unchanged. Same woman at the front desk happy to see me again, and would I be taking advantage of the open bar again, a wakeup call then, and oh yes, that couple on their honeymoon checked in again, almost too much of a coincidence, maybe you all know one another. No? Well you should the way you follow one another around, not any of my business of course, and that laugh again and again. I grabbed my bag and headed to my room to wait for their signal.

The cops were everywhere but invisible. Hard convincing myself they were real but then the tap on the wall. That was the signal. Go to the bar just like before. This time keep her inside. We don't want to make a scene, but if she insists on going outside, we'll be ready. Whatever you do stay put if anything.

I got it.

I headed to the bar. Told myself a couple of minutes is all it'll take, but she was ahead of the game. Walked in and there she was. Couldn't see through her this time. She had on tight black jeans and a t-shirt. She was ready. She knew. She turned and looked right at it.

'This is it, Hain.'

Just like her letter but she sounded different.

'Get me a drink and meet me outside.' She smiled. 'I know they hate the sound of that. Not what they planned. Just keep your head down if things start.'

'Don't do it.'

She pushed herself away from the bar.

'That's real sweet of you. But you're going off script. Be smart and things'll turn out okay. For you.'

There was something else. Something I saw in her letters.

'Have it your way.'

I did what I was told. Cops said if she goes outside, send her a warning. Have it your way.

'You can count on that.'

Then she walked out on the deck and laid down on the same chair. I poured the drinks and headed outside. They were there somewhere. I handed her a drink and sat down. Nothing and everything had changed.

‘You have the letter?’

‘I do.’

‘On you?’

‘Why?’

She didn’t laugh this time.

‘He fought you on it.’

‘Hank?’

‘Yes.’

‘He’ll come around.’

‘He don’t believe a word of it.’

She pushed back into the chair. Familiar things did not look the same.

‘Thought you were about facts.’

‘I am.’

Now she laughed. That’s when I knew. I hated that laugh. I hate it.

‘We’re not who we think we are.’ She paused like she was going to laugh again. ‘Lookalikes. All of us. You can’t tell the difference.’ That pause again. ‘Listen, take this. Use it instead of the one I left at the courthouse.’

That’s not playing fair. You can’t take it back. What’s in that letter has to come out.

‘Can’t do it. You know what you said.’

‘Don’t matter now.’

‘They already suspect it.’

‘You’re lying.’

I was. Too good of a story not to.

‘You’re playing into his hands. Set the record straight and you’ve got a chance.’

‘For what?’

‘Leniency.’

That awful laugh just like his.

‘You really are something, Hain.’

Sounded like the old Connie but it was a trick.

‘But I’m not going out like that.’

‘Like what?’

‘Rising for the judge, the witnesses, the defending, the persecuting, the questioning, the answering, the testifying – checking and rechecking the facts, swearing against the oath - so solemnly do I swear to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help me God. Let their justice be served. He knows I have no tongue for it.’

‘Then what?’

‘Read it.’

I felt it in my hand. Don’t remember taking it from her though.

‘Now?’

‘Now.’

Don’t take your eyes off her. For your own safety. She’s cornered and knows it.

‘I’ll read it later.’

‘Now Hain.’

I heard it in her voice. It was cocked. The rounds in the chamber pointed at me. Now.

I opened it.

Hain, if you’re reading this then something has gone wrong.

‘Aloud. Read it aloud.’

I cleared my throat to buy time. Move in goddammit. Don’t worry, they said, we’ll be right there. The gun’s pulled on me. What are you waiting for?

To hell with them. I began reading her words aloud:

‘Get rid of the letter like I said. The one I left at the courthouse. Mine not Maggie’s. They don’t need to know. Our family tree is for the living and I’ll be as good as dead any minute now. Burn it. Maggie-Hirst-Maggie-Katarina-Hirst-Maggie-Katarina-Connie-Hirst-mother-daughter-father in one. The trinity stinks. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the impossible nightmare. He knows. He’ll make it right again. The just judges will cower before the new word: she is innocent. A real woman is conscience. She is revelation. She is the end.’

I, Connie, saw him in his hour of trial, in the courthouse I saw him in a vision. He looked on and was silent. His flesh hung pussing from a thousand needles...'

'Come on. You can't expect me to...'
Its cold mouth now pressed against my temple.
'You best do as I say.'

I did not let on about it. Not yet.

'...his flesh hung pussing from a thousand needles, his words swarmed to form not a question but a fact. In his eyes appeared a terrible silence. This is it. Our silence will break his heart. I know. I looked through his eyes at this silence coming on when we think no one is looking, not when we are alone but when we are one in a crowd of others, not standing out from but walking silently among them, mimicking their steps, hundreds, thousands of us looking identical as we brush past one another without a glance, a word, a sign that I see you and you see me and he sees it about to break us. Because if we looked closer at us teeming with this fact block after block through city after city, we would see what he sees: us chasing after one another, a son haunting a mother's footsteps, silently calling for her who has buried his face alive, a woman ravaged trailing after a child, silently begging for the lollipop it waves carelessly in the air, a killer pursuing his grace, silently whetting his blade across America.

Now I know this silence just like he did at the beginning.

Now I know the truth of one fact masked for centuries.

We murdered him with our first breath. We broke his heart long before we hung him for it. Our words awoke on his lips. *Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani*. He spoke out as man and lost.

That was it. He surrendered hope. Since that moment, his word has limped in silence, his tongue has become

granite. The word cuffed to stone like a harlot chained to earth. You look but refuse to see. Man has no real tongue. It is false. It is lies. It is a bastard. It has no mother. Man's word is his end.

My cross is eternal but you will make it look like madness. This is what your justice is. You who cannot call it by its rightful name. Only he can and he has sealed off the word. You are going to kill me, but what am I really saying? You will state the truth and nothing but the truth so help me god it was in self-defense, but how does the verdict really read? There is too much silence between us.

The painting at Adobe de Bene - remember it. It is our portrait. Take a closer look and you will see him for what he really is. At least I saw it with my own eyes. Only a real woman can. Only she knows when it's time to.

I am laying down my cards now, Hain. Hopefully they will not be repeated. At least the ones that are true.

Because it is true I pulled back on the trigger. And it is true you reached for your gun and they both went off.

Done in self-defense they say.

He's got the whole world in his hands. They say that too.

Yours,
Connie'