

I. Allergic to Rain

October, 1987

It was mostly a neighborhood of young black men, skulking past the broken storefronts of Troost Avenue, picking paths through vacant lots, roaming alone or, with strides carefully matched, in two's or three's. Paul joined them in the mornings, turning right from his front door to walk past apartment buildings like the Windemere, the Bainbridge, the Brownhardt, the Wrennmoor—swank addresses decades ago, now wrecked and weary sentinels under a gray Kansas City sky. On the cracked sidewalk, a wide array of leftovers: not just the usual litter of paper cups and styrofoam capsules from fast-food joints but also work gloves, crushed shoes, odd lengths of twine, unidentified rodent remains, and a few dribbles of unlikely-colored glass, like a broken gem. On the wide seats at the back of the bus Paul sat among these black men, noting how each of them almost always guarded his crotch with one or both hands as he stared out the window or eyeballed the women getting on or off. Greeting each other, these men slapped hands or moaned; they slept with their newspapers or lunch bags balanced on the edge of their seats. And they looked back at Paul with no curiosity, pegging him as... what? What did he look like, the white guy with his trenchcoat and felt hat, his *New York Times Book Review* held open at mustache level? The men were so bored when they looked at him, they already knew all there was to know. But he could work that to his advantage, keeping his expression deadpan

as he stared through his sunglasses, noting: their ears, which were so often small, delicate as wafers pressed close to their hair. Sometimes they had full beards and mustaches, sometimes not; but there was always some facial hair, always dense, the same black as the pupils of their eyes. When they laughed, their teeth showed highlights of gold or silver, like the chains that contrasted so well with their dark throats and chests. Lately many of the men wore thin plastic bags over their hair in the morning, perhaps to keep moisture in when the air was cold and dry. The plastic bags might be colorless, or they might be blue or yellow or even pink; but the men wearing them never looked silly, so Paul found it easy to keep his deadpan expression. If anything could thaw his poker face, make him smile against his will, it was the thought that these men did not know his passions, could not imagine his memories.

Trying to explain his mind to Burke, Paul had once said, "The history of blacks in America is heartbreaking, but black American music, art and literature—they've ennobled this country, they're things to live for."

"And what else?" Burke had asked, just short of smirking. "What else you live for?"

"You know what else." Paul went to him then, using his arms and lips, and Burke let himself fall to the bed, pulling Paul after him. Honey-and-cinnamon, that was the name for Burke's skin. He had told Paul himself, quoting *Ebony* magazine, which had once listed all the shades and named them.

Later Paul came to believe Burke was dead—knew it without really knowing, just as he knew that certain other people—college friends he hadn't seen in years, for example—were still alive somewhere. That's how you manage it, Paul thought. Don't we all, especially by the time

we're in our mid-thirties, have a map in our heads of the people we've known, which are dead and which are living? On Paul's map all the dead seemed to end up in the northwest corner, for some reason. A Washington State of the mind. There was Burke, in an unmarked but highly visible grave. No tombstone was large enough to contain the epitaph that would explain Burke's sad life and its end. Paul did not really want to know about the end, anyway. Wasn't it enough that he should be certain Burke was dead? He had even told the very few men he had met over the past year or so that Burke—a.k.a. Mr. Wrong, the man who had lured him to Kansas City for a disastrous relationship—was dead. If he were asked how Burke had died, Paul would shrug and wave a hand. It was enough to know that Burke had made enemies like God made snowflakes; that he had always kept a gun in his car; that self-destructiveness had been the driving force behind the turmoil of his life. The more Paul thought about it, the more sense it seemed to make that Burke had been snuffed out gangland style, his feet in buckets of cement at the bottom of the Missouri River, or his charred corpse found in a car that rolled not-too-accidentally off a cliff, or his nappy head packed in a box and shipped to a fellow grifter as a warning that you did not, could not, treat people like shit.

Such were the morbid fantasies of the dispossessed. As Paul grew more and more alone, Burke became more and more dead.

It was passion that had held them together, their center of gravity Burke's king-size waterbed. Even after Paul said he was leaving, even after Burke began openly hating him, they still slept together, not touching but close, and Paul still saw the bulk of him first thing in the morning. It was a quiet, calm moment, like the eye of a storm; Paul could still love Burke as he

slept, his expression clear of rage and hypocrisy, his bare chest rising and falling with a regularity at odds with his irregular life. That sleeping form was like a landscape Paul could look upon with the assurance of perfect peace. But how could it surprise him when, after asking for the hundredth time if Paul were really leaving, and being told for the hundredth time that he was, Burke said, "Then we can't sleep together anymore. I can't." It was one of the few times Burke allowed himself to show regret, the briefest glimpse of a broken heart; and Paul acknowledged it with a nod of understanding in lieu of the almost automatic sarcasm he'd become so good at.

ELVIS ALIVE ON MARS, read the cover of a tabloid held aloft by a woman farther down the aisle. Paul had formed a habit of seeking out such headlines when he and Burke were still together. He felt drawn to them, not only on the bus but in supermarkets and convenience stores. STRANGE MALADY MAKES TOT ALLERGIC TO RAIN or MIRACLE DIET—EAT MORE AND LOSE were assertions that more things were possible on the spectrum of life than he had come to believe. No wonder people with feet mired in disappointment buried their faces in pulp.

At the ATM in the Crown Center shopping mall, Paul fed in his bank card and pressed the Quik Cash option for fifty dollars from his checking account. Meanwhile three black teenagers walked by. Paul's eyes missed nothing. Then he was startled to hear one of the boys speaking—speaking to Paul, but not directly, his eyes somewhere else, his deep voice just loud enough to carry. "No, sir," he said, "we're not going to steal your money, just 'cause we're black." His tone was bored, sick of the way things were. Only a few seconds had passed, but it would take Paul a full minute to realize what had happened: the boy had caught Paul's furtive

looks and had misunderstood. *Oh, but if you only knew*, Paul thought, staring in the direction of the boy who was already lost in the crowd. *If you only knew that I was looking at your bare shoulders and back beneath your overalls, your fine brown frame as firm and dimpled as a walnut shell...and I was thinking, those are the most beautiful shoulders I've ever seen.* Nearly forgetting his money, Paul turned toward the wall and bit his knuckle. Well, so what? *So what* if the young man had known what Paul was thinking? Jesus, Lavarney, would that have made everything all right, with forgiveness all around because of your crazy kind of love? You'd be lucky if you didn't end up on a gurney in the morgue with a tag around your toe. Oh, it was tragic, it was such a *typically* tragic world, and yet Paul had to stifle a giggle at the absurdity of it, a stubborn giggle that surfaced anyway, followed by another, and another, so that he had to lean over a drinking fountain and pretend to drink so no one would see. And that was the way the world would end: collapsing into its own slapstick, pratfalling into a swamp of mix-ups—not with a bang, but a giggle.

It was only a year ago that Paul had met Burke, in a convenience store around the corner from Paul's apartment in New York, at three o'clock in the morning. Even though it was a Saturday night, Paul wasn't used to being out so late—a headache had roused him from bed, and when he found he was out of ibuprofen he grumpily threw on some clothes and headed downstairs. It didn't occur to him to be especially wary heading out at such an hour, because the chances were only slightly greater than usual that he might be murdered and raped, probably in that order, before he reached Second Avenue. At any rate he had reached that stage of living in

New York where he had learned to cloak himself in a force field of anger, an almost visible aura of rage designed to mow down everything in his path, from routine irritations to life-threatening catastrophes. How effective this would be in a genuine crisis he couldn't say, but at least it kept him moving, mostly free of the paranoia that could keep him prisoner in his own apartment.

As he'd expected, he wasn't the only shopper roaming the narrow aisles of the Open Pantry. Wherever he went, at whatever time of day or night, there was always someone ahead of him, always a line to wait in. No transaction, whether it was buying a quart of milk or cashing a check or just grabbing a newspaper at the corner, could take place without seizing a moment, leaping through a window of opportunity—no wonder this city life was so tiring. Paul found the narrow shelf of over-the-counter drugs, gagged when he saw the price on a small bottle of Advil, picked it up anyway. Standing in line at the counter, he recognized the tall, bushy-haired cashier as the man he thought of as the owner of the place. Good God, surely he didn't have to man the cash register in the middle of the night? Surely he didn't have to be the one standing there at three o'clock in the morning, very patiently trying to explain something to a pregnant Indian woman with a jar of instant coffee? Yet Paul, who had been stopping by this store several times a week for almost seven years, couldn't remember ever seeing anyone else at the post. This was remarkable, and even through his headache and swirling doughnut of rage he spent a moment trying to think of something to say to this man, some neighborly, commiserating comment evoking their shared understanding of tough city life. It was a wasted moment. He felt sure that when he reached the counter he would offer his merchandise and grunt, just as he always did, and the owner would grunt back. Professional urbanites, they had nothing to say to each other.

"Scuse me."

Someone was tapping Paul on the shoulder, an act that always irritated him no end.

Usually it was a panhandler or, in this type of setting, someone trying to claim that Paul had unfairly moved up in line, or that his folded umbrella was dripping water onto someone's feet, or that he was standing in the way of some elderly or disabled person trying to get through. Well, he often gave money to panhandlers, and he would sooner clasp a wet umbrella between his knees than inconvenience anyone else, in spite of his whirligig of rage; and for a disabled person he would throw himself on the floor, risking disfigurement from a walker or quad cane if it would make for a safer passage. But that sharp, shocking violation of being tapped on the shoulder—particularly since the offending finger always found a spot, midway between his arm socket and neck, where he was ticklish—always made him want to kill. Now he cast a dirty look over his other shoulder, the untapped one, hoping that he looked as mean as he felt, and snapped, "What?"

A large black man stood behind him, blinking rapidly as if Paul had sprayed spit in his eyes. "Scuse me," he said, "could you hand me one of those papers?"

Near Paul's feet was a stack of the Sunday *Times*, a commodity that Paul had never purchased, not even once. It was too much, and it expired too quickly. As an aspiring writer he found the concept nauseating. Here's a hundred billion words that you can wrap fish in tomorrow. He picked up one of the ten-pound papers and passed it back to his friend in line, trying to avoid getting print on his fingers. Facing the counter again, Paul heard soft grunts behind him that made him glance over his shoulder once more. The man with the *Times* was flipping through its

sections, his thick fingers peeling them one from another like layers of onion, and he grunted at each one, *hunh, hunh, hunh*, as if he'd never seen anything like it before. And Paul found that, in spite of the hour, his tiredness, his headache and his aureole of rage, what had started out as a mere glance was now lengthening, extending, thickening like a familiar male organ. Soon the glance was sitting up, poking inquisitively into the man's face, growing more excited as it brushed up against the broad, flat nose, the thick lips, everything Paul thought of when he thought of black men, as happened frequently....

Eyes *front!* Paul couldn't believe he had caught himself cruising in the corner market, like some horny out-of-towner who didn't know any better. But even as he faced front he retained the image of the man's face—the dark, heavy eyebrows so neatly balanced out by cheeks that rounded and dimpled when he smiled.

"Scuse me?"

Paul looked over his shoulder again, being careful to scowl as he had before.

"Would you lay this back on the stack?"

Paul raised his eyebrows, conscious of the thick, dark pair he was staring at. "You're not going to buy it?"

The man shrugged. "Just wanted to see what it looked like."

Paul hefted the paper back to its original spot, thinking that his new friend was either crazy or from out-of-town—way out-of-town. Meanwhile the foreign lady at the counter seemed to have finally understood what the owner was trying to tell her; now she was in the hunting-for-pennies stage of the operation, digging deep into her fringed handbag's contents, which clanked

and rustled as if it were wired for sound. Paul sighed. He wished that he were from out-of-town. Just visiting! Soaking up the atmosphere! Wonderful, till you lived here and ended up in a situation like this, standing in line at a convenience store at three o'clock in the morning while the cashier gives an English lesson and some out-of-towner asks you to hand over the Times just so he can "see what it looks like." The more Paul thought about it, the more annoyed he got. He glanced back, very furtively, to his left and right, confirming that the black man's hands were empty. He wasn't even buying anything. So what did he want? Directions? Permission to use the phone or rest room? Regrettably, Paul's thoughts began to wade toward troubled waters—he knew as well as anyone that white-middle-class fear of the young black male, could feel it suffusing his system even as every molecule of his liberal, homosexual, drawn-toward-black-men body resisted it. He soothed himself, as liberals often did, by recalling that there was such a thing as healthy paranoia, a lifesaving acknowledgment of certain facts and statistics, a sensible assessment of dicey situations. In the current urban scheme you did not get to grow old if you tripped down mean streets like Pollyanna. Besides, men were just plain dangerous—not just black men, but men in general. Paul had never been physically assaulted by a man (except in a spirit of fun under carefully controlled conditions, *of course*), but he knew full well the male capacity to hurt. The culture was full of it, movies and books were loaded with it. It was not some radioactive fuel that posed human life's greatest threat, but plain old testosterone.

In this way Paul managed to wonder, without too much guilt, if the man standing in line behind him might have a gun or a knife. He looked around again, very carefully, to see how many other shoppers were still in the store. Surprisingly, he didn't see any—not even in the convex

mirrors overhead. Don't lose it, Paul—you're not in a hostage situation yet. One advantage to looking around, trying to scan each aisle as if to recognize some item he'd forgotten, was that he got a better look at the man behind him. He was dressed mostly in gray, nice pressed slacks, nice sweater, with a lighter-colored windbreaker over it. Meanwhile there was Paul in his sweatpants and old flannel shirt, a cap jammed down over his greasy, matted hair. No wonder he was afraid of getting killed—who'd want to show up at the morgue in an outfit like that?

Thinking, wondering, alternately amusing and scaring himself, Paul momentarily lost track of his surroundings and was brought alert by a hand on his shoulder, not tapping this time, but gently squeezing. Startled, he looked directly into the eyes of the young black man who murmured, "You're next." Was this a threat, a nightmare coming true, or... now Paul saw that he was next at the counter, where the owner stood giving him his hooded, flat-affect look.

"Oh. Sorry." He offered the box of pills that he had been palming like a shoplifter; money was exchanged, the two men grunted at each other. Without looking back Paul pushed through the glass door with its swinging OPEN/CLOSED sign onto the street. His block was momentarily empty, no one else afoot. Even the famous Italian bakery down the street, a trendy late-night spot for cappuccino, was closed. He would be able to make it to his door with no complications, no encounters.

"Hey!"

Paul looked back to see his partner-in-line behind him, near the corner. The man walked with his hands jammed deep in his windbreaker pockets. "Can I ask you something?"

Now Paul had a choice—to speed up and ignore the fool, or stop long enough to let his buzzsaw of rage inflict some flesh wounds. When the man called again—"You mind if I ask you something?"—Paul's rage made the decision all by itself.

"Look, you," Paul said, an admonishing finger drawn like a gun, "I don't know where you're from, but you do *not* talk to strangers on the street around here. You shouldn't even be out this late by yourself."

He expected the guy to turn and take off, but he stood his ground, on a square of sidewalk that looked wet down the middle, as if someone had peed there recently. "Well, you're out by yourself and you're talking to a stranger."

"Not anymore, I'm not." Paul turned and made tracks toward his building, still about half a block away.

"I just wanted to ask you something."

Paul stopped. The man had not moved, but knew how to make his voice carry. Paul scowled. The short walk home, which had promised no confrontations, had now become fraught with decisions to be made. "If you're asking for money, the answer is no. I haven't got any more on me right now." That was true—he hadn't even brought his wallet with him, just a few crumpled singles. The downside to that, though, was that he had no I.D. on him either, in case he should wind up murdered and tossed in an alley. Yet even as he made his remark about money he somehow knew it didn't apply here, that the man was no panhandler or con artist. Paul also noticed his headache was now gone, which gave him an inclination to linger, at least for another second or so.

"I wasn't going to ask you for money," the guy said, genuinely offended. He moved toward Paul again, slowly. His boots made a solid, confident clop on the sidewalk. "I was just going to ask if you had a light."

Paul backpedaled. "I'm sorry, I'm not usually so rude to people on the street, but it seems like you're not from around here and you need to know... ."

"I'm from Kansas City."

"Kansas City?" Paul had once made the plane trip from New York to San Francisco, but had meager experience with points in between. He couldn't resist making a crack, his status as a New Yorker seemed to mandate it: "You mean there really is such a place?"

"As real as you or me. You'd like it." *Clop, clop.*

Paul shied back a couple of steps. The *You'd-like-it* didn't sit well with him; it made the guy sound like some kind of con artist after all. "Well, here's your light," he said, fishing his Bic out of his shirt pocket. "But you still shouldn't talk to strangers."

"Wait wait wait wait." Stepping out of his comfortably-distanced frame, the man reached forward, took Paul by the upper arm and swung him into a doorway. "I was gonna say, I'd share a joint with you if you had a light, but I ain't got it rolled yet." He pulled a pack of E-Z Wider from his hip pocket. "I was out of papers, that's why I stopped at the store."

In spite of his alarm at finding himself in such close quarters with the stranger, Paul was inclined to stay. All sorts of alarms were going off—not only do you not talk to strangers, you definitely don't share their drugs, especially not out on the street like this... . But somehow, knowing what the guy's purchase had been at the convenience store made a difference; it validated

him in some strange way. Paul had bought rolling papers there himself. And there was something else about this guy, the way he spoke, the lightness of his tone, with a tendency almost to giggle... this was a young man, younger than Paul, that was for certain. It explained his lack of savvy, his assumption that Paul posed no threat to him. Maybe, in Kansas City, strangers approached each other all the time.

"Here we go." The man slid down the doorway wall into a sitting position, knees bent in front of him, a small plastic bag in one hand, paper in the other. Paul slid down too, which put them in an odd position in that tight space, one of Paul's knees between the other man's. Paul sensed a foreign body in close proximity to his crotch, and realized that the toe of his friend's right sneaker was nestled just beneath his balls. Paul moved his own right foot slightly to see if it had found a similar resting place. A soft resistance told him it had. As Paul became more awake, more relaxed, these points of contact—his right knee where it brushed against the other right knee, the tender spot near his prostate where the sneaker toe nudged—became erogenous zones clamoring more, more, more. It was a different kind of alarm from the ones that had previously sounded in his head, but it was an alarm nonetheless, with the same message: it's time to get out of here, away from this guy. Suppose this was not a gay encounter in any way, shape or form—suppose the guy, his friendliness to the contrary, were a murderous homophobe with a short fuse? In the shadowbox of the doorway Paul could dimly make out the rolling paper spread on the knee so close to his. Flakes of marijuana (he supposed) tapped the paper ever so lightly. Then there was a humming in the air directly across from his face, a tune he didn't recognize.

Someone passed by the doorway without pausing, either not seeing them or not wanting to know. Curious himself, Paul leaned out far enough to see down the sidewalk; a mere shadow of someone skittered away like a crab, crossing the street diagonally. From the portion of store window he could see, Paul realized they were huddled in the doorway of a new kind of business on East Eleventh Street. Some self-appointed fashion genius had opened a boutique on the block—the kind of shop that offered only one of each item, at outrageous prices. Such signs of gentrification were popping up around the neighborhood like dandelions, robbing it of all ethnic identity. Even the Ukrainian National Home around the corner on Second Avenue was closed now. Thinking of his own gloomy prospects—rents were sure to be skyrocketing soon—made Paul more inclined to stay where he was, in undefined intimacy with a stranger who now offered him a thick joint. Paul took out his lighter and brought the densely packed, expertly rolled weed to life. The smoke was mellow, not harsh, as it traveled down his throat. He could feel the high circulating through him after one toke. "This is good," he said, passing it back. As his new friend took a pull on the joint its glowing tip illuminated his face. The full lips, with a texture of stubble around them, the young man beginning to grow a beard. Then it was Paul's turn again and he took a deeper drag, holding it in till his lungs began to count his ribs. When he let it out there was almost no smoke left and his fingers and toes tingled, not from the cold night air. In no time he had reached that level of stonedness where he needed to hear his own voice, and he asked, "What are you doing in New York?"

He had to wait for the answer, wait and listen to the stillness as the other man held his breath. It got let out in a long, shrill sigh that was almost a whistle, followed by, "I just came up for a few days. Staying with my uncle. He lives over in the Village."

"Hey, this is the Village, too. The East Village. What brought you over here?"

"We saw a bitchin' play, right over here, a few blocks down that way. Oh shit, what was it called... ."

"*Little Shop of Horrors?*"

"That's it! Brother with a deep voice: *Feed* me."

Paul laughed. "You sound just like him!" He thought about the play, which he hadn't liked—too silly for him, he thought at the time. But the carnivorous plant's deep African-American voice had been pretty funny. He wondered how he'd feel if he saw the play a second time. He wondered, too, how the joint, now smoked three-quarters down, had ended up in his right hand without his noticing. Had he just taken a drag? He took one, a small one anyway, just in case, and passed the joint back. The lull in conversation had lasted a minute or two, or maybe ten, and so he asked: "Where's your uncle now?"

Another long exhale, followed by a snort. "He went home right after the play. He's old as dirt. Told him I'd be all right by myself."

"And are you? All right by yourself?"

"Shit, I'm better'n all right, I'm fantastic."

Paul grinned, wondering how much of his grin could be seen by his friend in the dark. That wonderful male brio, that I'm-fantastic attitude... it flirted with his whole system, the way pot did.

He circled back to where he was a few minutes ago, wondering: is this a pickup, or what? He tried to think of something to say, and before he knew it he was hearing himself ask, "Who are you traveling with? Your girlfriend?"

Another snort. "Hunh. I ain't got no girlfriend."

"Hunh," Paul said. Again there was a lapse, minutes passing, no way to tell how many. He thought of trying to read his watch, tilting its face to catch any available light, but it was too much trouble. Just tracking their stop-and-go conversation had become difficult enough. A minute ago, for example, or maybe ten, someone had said something about a girlfriend. Then he remembered his question, and had to laugh. The old are-you-with-your-girlfriend line... God! He pressed his wrist against his mouth to keep from really howling, but he let out one really loud laugh anyway. To him it sounded like *Haw haw!*

"What's so funny?" But the other man was laughing too, a sweet quick laugh that was more like a giggle. The joint's spark flared up again, then went out for good.

Paul forced down a few gulps of night air. "I was just thinking of something funny, but now I can't remember what it was." That was a lie that, even as he spoke, changed to truth. His mind was blank, comfortably so. "Well, listen. Now that we're stoned out of our gourds we might as well exchange names. I'm ... wait, let me think. I'm Paul."

More laughter. "You're not that stoned. I'm...burp. Excuse me."

"Burp? That's your name?"

"It's Burke."

"How did you get a name like Burp?"

"No, it's...don't confuse me, now...Burke. With a 'k.' 'E' on the end."

"Oh. I thought you burped."

"I did burp, but...don't fuck me up, now! I don't want to go around the rest of my life thinking my name's Burp!" He laughed, shaking his head as he laughed, tilting his left ear toward his shoulder, as if to clear water from it.

Paul laughed, too, but with a vague awareness of other things going on inside, a whole slate of concerns and events:

1. Was this Burke gay, or wasn't he? If he wasn't, it would be best to end this encounter soon, before Paul's aching erogenous zones began clamoring for attention without his permission.
2. What if this Burke was now too fucked up to get home by himself? Paul had only a half block to go but felt it would take an entire expedition party to get him down the street, up three flights of stairs and through the double locks into his apartment. Now he could ask Burke to stay at his place, in which case the gay-or-straight thing would definitely have to be worked out... but *No! No! No!* went all the bells and whistles: you just didn't invite a stranger, especially a really strange stranger that you just met on the street, up to your apartment. Maybe, if he had to, Paul could put the guy in a cab.

3. In yet another ring of the circus in his mind, a replay of the *Little Shop of Horrors* musical was proceeding, maddeningly vague except for that deep masculine rumble going *Feed me, Seymour! Feed me!*

4. And in another area, on a smaller, dimly-lit stage, Paul Lavarney's love life, or lack of same, was being drearily enacted as an endless loop of mostly short scenes, all ending unexpectedly and with no entertainment value at all. For obvious reasons the only person watching this show was Paul, and it was against his will that he had to follow all of these mini-non-events, pondering clues to hidden meanings that didn't really exist. The actors desperately needed a break, and kept glancing in the direction of Burke—he of the cute face, infectious laugh and excellent weed. Suddenly they were all chanting under their breath: *Don't let him go, don't let him go....*

"Uh," Paul said.

"Huh?" Burke said, raising his head so fast his neck made a popping noise. "Did you fall asleep?"

"No, you did."

"Damn! What time is it gettin' to be?"

Paul leaned outside the doorway to find that the sky was still the color called midnight blue. "It's a miracle nobody's stopped to pee on us." In addition to his erogenous zones, his cramped legs and back were now calling for attention. "I have to stand up." This was a gradual,

painstaking process that involved sliding up the wall he had earlier slid down, without the help of gravity now. Once on his feet, he leaned his watch out to catch the glow from the street. "It's three-fifteen," he said. "That's funny, I thought it was three-fifteen when I left home."

"Maybe we've been in a time warp."

"Or my watch stopped. Here, let me give you a hand." Paul reached, Burke pulled, and in a minute the big man was on his feet. Lordy, lordy, Paul thought. Heavyside black male, over six feet tall, with very sexy eyebrows. "I was wondering, sort of, why you decided to follow me, to call after me. Was it just that there was no one else around at the moment?"

Burke stood still, absolutely still. It seemed, for a long moment, that there might actually be something wrong with him—his petrified stance hinted at paralysis, even death, the kind of death one would find at the north pole, solid popsicle death. Still standing in the doorway, Paul took a step toward him, somehow unable to ask if Burke was all right but thinking he could tell, by moving close but not too close, if the man was breathing. This impulse connected with his hand, which he raised, useless, in the air between them.

Suddenly Burke's hand enfolded Paul's, encasing it as though it were just another small, white thing, like a marshmallow. Paul felt his heart turning over, turning over, determined to find and catch a rhythm but not quite making it. He was being pulled forward, a large part of him reluctant, and his heart was chanting *this-is-it, this-is-it*, not in the sense of *this is it, true love at last*, but more like *this is it, moron, the violent death you've so strictly guarded against*. Yet Paul was as supple and yielding as a heroine in a costume drama, never mind that his costume was sloppy sweatpants, untucked shirt and uncombed hair; for it wasn't a club or a fist coming down

at him now but a face, a face unseen with no room for light to creep in between them, a face that announced itself with a puff of warm breath before sweet lips covered Paul's.

There was another interval when time stopped. Among Paul's mass of thoughts was the notion that perhaps his wristwatch had not been stopped by a weak battery or city grime, perhaps it was a magic watch that had created this whole encounter out of nothing, beyond physical laws, "off the clock." Nevertheless he feared the clock would run out. He was all urgency, his body lunging forward and upward, pressing against this stranger who pressed back with only his lips. Now his heart was going *ca-chug, ca-chug, ca-chug*.

He couldn't have been more surprised when the kiss ended and he came down flat-footed on the concrete, his heels stinging, his left hand suddenly free and cold. Now, as before, a figure stood tall and rock-still across from him, and it could be that the kiss had never happened, that he had warped in and out of time again. A rush of emotion filled his throat; he couldn't speak, even if he could think of something to say. Was there nothing left for him to do but edge out onto the sidewalk?

Then Burke's deep tone broke the silence. "I think you're cute," he said. His shoulder, arm and hand moved as he dug into his front jeans pocket, and then Paul's left hand, which had been feeling so abandoned, was taken again, a slip of paper pressed into its palm. "Call me," Burke said, and he slipped from the doorway with unforeseen gracefulness.

Out on the sidewalk, Paul watched him walk away, his steps steady and confident. He would find his way back to his uncle's with no problem. It's myself I have to worry about, Paul thought, for I have turned to mush from my heart down. He staggered closer to the streetlight to

read the folded note in his hand, barely making out the block letters in pencil: Burke M. Robbins, III, followed by an address and phone number with a foreign area code, 816. He looked toward Second Avenue, saw that Burke was now gone from sight. As he stood there looking at nothing, the cynical part of Paul's mind, grown brawny and bold through frequent workouts, tamped down his light-headedness, cooled his erogenous zones, and made him wonder how many of these slips had been given out over the past few days. He turned toward home, finding his legs surprisingly steady after all. It had been an interesting encounter, nothing more; he wasn't about to call or drop a line through the mail—wasn't about to try to get involved with a man who lived half a continent away.

And he never would have called Burke if it hadn't been for Richard.

They met through a personal ad Paul had run, using a new service that allowed you to record your ad by speaking into your phone. Callers could then review several ads by dialing a number and listening. Paul listened to his own ad only once, to make sure he hadn't stuttered or stammered. He hated the sound of his own voice; it sickened his ears. Feeling foolish and hopeful, as he always did after these ventures, he tried not to look forward too much to battling his mailbox at the end of the day, its thin key nearly bending in half as he forced the rusty door open. There was no flood of mail, as he knew there would not be; but he was surprised when a week had gone by and he hadn't received one letter. Then, on a Saturday, it came—single-spaced, typewritten, two pages long, a letter from this guy Richard who lived in Brooklyn. As chatty as the letter was, it was still the kind that needed to be studied for clues: Richard was able to go on

and on without giving any real information—the sign of a good fiction writer. But though the letter didn't mention what the guy did for a living or what motivated him to answer Paul's ad, Paul could see that at least he wasn't afraid of words, and had a sense of humor. So he made a call that evening, and found Richard to be as reticent on the phone as he was talkative on paper. It could be that he lived with his parents and wasn't free to speak, or it could be that, like Paul, he wasn't really a "telephone person." By way of a conversation made up mainly of monosyllables, they set a date for dinner a week later.

There was no intercom or buzzer system in Paul's building— nothing more modern than the incandescent bulb, for that matter—so Richard called from the corner when he arrived in the neighborhood and Paul met him on the street. Richard was about Paul's age, early thirties, and had that aggressively ethnic Brooklyn look, unruly hair parted in the middle, large rimless glasses, a nose that seemed proud of its size. Paul decided to ask later how to pronounce his Polish surname.

This first week in December the wind roared bitterly down Eleventh Street, and Second Avenue wasn't much warmer; after shaking hands they trudged along silently to the Kiev, the Ukrainian coffee shop where Paul spent most of his eating-out money. They were seated in the white glare of the front room, across from the take-out counter and next to the plate glass window that gave off a chill of its own. The place smelled of steam and gravy and pierogi. Paul piled his heavy jacket into the chair next to him; across the table, Richard did the same. They opened laminated menus that hid half their faces.

"So," Paul asked, "did it take you long to get here?"

"I'd rather skip the small talk until after we've ordered, if you don't mind."

Paul looked up to find blue eyes made small by thick lenses, eyebrows crimped together in annoyance; then Richard ducked behind the menu again and Paul did too, grateful for the barrier. What had he gotten himself into now? Paul had promised himself, privately, silently, that if this Richard turned out to be weird then he was going to be the final one, for Paul had been involved with Richards before, always to his regret. First there had been Richard the Wall Street banker, an older man who lived with his mother in the Bronx. A witty, nonstop talker, he had wrapped his tongue around Paul and seemed unwilling to let go; and just when Paul had decided he didn't want to be let go Richard dropped him. He couldn't leave his mother or disrupt his closeted life in the Bronx by taking on a steady boyfriend after all. Stunned, Paul reeled into the arms of the next Richard, a financial analyst who lived near Lincoln Center. This Richard, also an older man, devoted all of his spare hours to the pursuit of sexual pleasure. He quickly learned how to play Paul's body like an instrument, keeping him both sated and stimulated to the nth degree. Throughout this weird period Paul had an almost constant erection, and dreamed night and day of Richard's mouth and hands. The man was like an injectable drug that had Paul physically hooked, but just when he was on the verge of priapism and multiple orgasms Richard dumped him, all phone calls unreturned. It was one of those no-way-of-knowing situations, and Paul, as heartbroken as only a discarded sex toy could be, concluded that Richard suffered from the fear-of-intimacy syndrome. Besides, there was an unlimited number of sex toys in New York, and so little time; why stay hooked up with one? Stunned again, his erogenous zones aching from withdrawal, Paul stumbled into the arms of Richard the Third, a reformed alcoholic with beautiful

chestnut hair that turned out to be a wig. He had tamed his addiction to alcohol, but was now addicted to telling stories about the awful things he used to do when drunk. After several nights of horror stories Paul exited from the relationship as gracefully as he could. By then the reality of AIDS had arrived, and Paul let his love life cool down. Unfortunately it cooled down too much, lapsing into suspended animation for a few years.

It wasn't that there was anything wrong with the name Richard, it was just wrong for Paul. Through some trick of karma that he was not meant to understand, the name Richard was just unlucky for him—likewise Rich, Rick, and even Dick. That night at the Kiev, though, he still had hope that his luck could turn. He ordered kielbasa and eggs and coffee, and so did Richard. As they sat silently, Paul was intensely aware of their reflections in the plate glass beside them. Absurdly, he moved his right hand a few times, just to see if his reflection would do the same. Meanwhile Richard, with no menu to hide behind, studied the diners who came and went, his head turned to the right, his hands lying inert on the tabletop. Sensitive-looking fingers, Paul thought, like a piano player's. But so terribly white, so white they were almost blue. Now was not the time to be meditating on whiteness, on why it did not appeal to him—white skin, white politics, white music. White was his destiny. He applied himself, for a few moments, to imagining what Richard looked like naked. On a gay date this seemed more like a practical concern than a feverish obsession; it always came sooner than later—the undressing-each-other-with the eyes—and could be done with perfect courtesy. But Richard was a mystery. He would yield no images from the neck down. And from the neck up—that continued to be a mystery, too. Paul thought of all the resources at his disposal, his knowledge of various subjects, his way with words, his talent for

making amusing observations. He was a good listener, too. But it took two people to make use of those resources, and he wasn't sure that qualification was met here. Rather than two men on a date, they seemed more like two strangers waiting in a bus terminal, absorbed by their separate itineraries.

The food came, providing a natural topic for conversation. "This looks good," Paul said, inspecting his plate. Richard grunted. The eggs were hard scrambled with slices of kielbasa cut as thin as pepperoni on a pizza; the fried potatoes were savory, and they each got a plate of thick, eggy challah slices. Richard applied salt and pepper to his eggs and his fork began to move like a metronome between plate and mouth. A few times his eyes jittered toward Paul's, then skittered away Jitter, skitter. Paul tried to keep smiling, sensing the importance of not scaring Richard off: if startled, the guy might pitch himself through the plate glass window. "I eat here a couple of times a week," Paul said. "Everything they have is good."

Richard nodded, chewing. Or maybe he was just chewing. His hand trembled as he raised his coffee cup. The harried waitress, dark curls leaking from her white cap, refilled their cups and left them separate checks. Paul reached for his, only to find Richard's long fingers snapping the check up like a card from a trick deck. "Let me," he said, his first intelligible words since the meal began.

"Why, thank you, Richard." Paul now had some hope for the rest of the evening. So Richard hadn't said much during dinner; big deal. Maybe he didn't like restaurants, or maybe he had "issues" with food—Paul knew what that was all about. Once they were out on Second Avenue again, Paul, intuiting that Richard was a bookish sort, suggested they walk down to the

Saint Marks Bookstore. Richard blinked at Paul, then blinked around him, as though he had no idea how he'd arrived at that particular street corner in Manhattan. Then he shrugged and led the way to St. Marks Place, keeping a few steps ahead of Paul—another means of dodging conversation? But it was difficult to walk and talk, anyway, on Second Avenue on Saturday night. It was noisy, and there were dozens of street vendors with their blankets spread out, making the sidewalk an obstacle course. They sold everything from porno mags to military medals to flatware and cutlery, but the blankets that always caught Paul's eye were the ones that seemed to hold little bits of everything—a few books, a few pieces of jewelry, maybe a portable stereo and typewriter, often presided over by some guy in sideburns who looked around nervously, chain-smoked and stomped his feet, though it wasn't that cold. It seemed obvious that these possessions all came from the same robbed apartment, and Paul felt he was looking at an individual's whole life spread out against gray wool. With a few minor adjustments those could be his personal belongings, just about all of them. Any city dweller could vividly picture this scene: the security gate wrecked, window smashed, a living space reduced to nothing but linoleum and dust. Next thing you knew, your cherished typewriter was being sold on the street. Paul wondered if Richard was having similar thoughts—or any thoughts, for that matter—but it was all he could do to track Richard's peacoat some distance ahead of him, a black spot weaving through the bright colors of the crowd.

The bookstore was a warm, secure place, with comforting smells of fresh wood and paper. As usual there were quite a few browsers on a Saturday night and Paul fell in with them, circulating around the sale tables. He had spent a significant part of his income in this place, but though it was probably his favorite bookstore in Manhattan there was still an impersonal quality

to it; all the clerks wore that New York shield which, ultra-thin and invisible as it might be, spoke as plainly as a sign hung around their necks: *Don't stand too close to me. Don't ask too many questions—in fact, make no demands on me at all. Time is too precious to be shared. Information is never free. I have a whistle around my neck, Mace in my pocket, and a ferocious will to live.* After one try at obtaining a book through special order Paul never tried again.

Often, though, there were some worthwhile remainders on the sale table. This time around he found *Water Music*, by T. Coraghessan Boyle. The cream-colored dust jacket had a pleasant texture, the book had a nice heft: no floppy disc could ever replace these pleasures. He returned the book to its stack, though, intending to come back after his next paycheck. Then he exclaimed under his breath, causing a fellow browser to glance up at him: he had actually forgotten about Richard. He glanced around the large main room, headed toward the shelves at the back. This could be the first time he'd ever lost a date. But there was Richard, diligently fingering along a shelf in the Philosophy section, the tip of his tongue at the corner of his mouth, the very picture of the bibliophile at play. Paul had to smile. "There you are."

For a moment Richard's small blue eyes appeared above the frames of his glasses. "Oh. Hi." It seemed he had forgotten Paul as well. Could there be a clearer sign that this date was a disaster? "Let's go," Paul said, determined to say good night now, in the spirit of damage control. Richard followed him back toward the main entrance. Then, "Wait, wait," Richard said, pausing by the table of sale books. "I didn't see these before."

Paul noticed something he had overlooked earlier, copies of *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*, by Leonard Michaels. "Oh, I've read this. Short stories. It's a good book."

Surprisingly, Richard snapped the book up. "If you say it's a good book, then I'm going to buy it," he said. He paid at the front counter, solemnly drawing bills from his wallet as Paul stood nearby, feeling warm all over. He didn't know anyone else on earth who would have taken up his recommendation so fast. Perhaps the date wasn't over after all.

When they were out on the street Paul asked, "Want to come up to my place and smoke some dope and listen to music? I've got a tape of some early B.B. King, it's great."

In Paul's living room Richard sat on the sofa that wasn't really a sofa, just two large cushions, one on top of the other, with pillows against the wall for support. Paul sat in the rust-colored overstuffed chair which, like the cushions, had been hauled up from a street junkpile years ago. The only furniture in the room Paul had actually bought was the sturdy folding table, purchased in Chinatown, that supported his typewriter. Across from the sofa was the bookcase with Paul's portable stereo on top. A tape was playing, a recording of a radio program featuring the early works of B.B. King. Under the strong light from the desk lamp, using the seat of his desk chair for a surface, Paul was rolling a joint. This grass, which he'd obtained through a little-known delivery service, was moist and sweet-smelling, a beautiful golden green. He lit up, took a deep drag and handed the joint to Richard, who hadn't said a word since entering the apartment. Come to think of it, he hadn't said anything on the walk from the bookstore either. Paul had made some attempts at conversation, none of them having any more effect on his companion than the traffic noise. Now came the real test: would it make any difference having Richard with him here? Suppose he continued to say nothing, to carry on his impersonation of someone with severe brain

damage—would it make a difference anyway, just having another warm body around his apartment for a while? Forget about everything else—the brilliant conversation Richard's letter had hinted at; the sex that now seemed laughably unlikely; the brief points of contact, like the one in the bookstore, which seemed to stand no chance of recurring: would it make a difference just having another human being nearby while Saturday night crept into Sunday?

"Listen to this," Paul said as "Three O'Clock Blues" came on. In recent decades King had become a sort of goodwill ambassador to the world; there seemed to be nowhere this charming, self-effacing man couldn't go, to the delight of everyone he met. But his fame was built solidly on the fact that he could *wail*. In these early recordings his voice reached an intensity that balanced joy and pain on the head of one pin. "Pain because that's what he feels," Paul said, "and joy because he can express that pain." He glanced at Richard, who was nodding, his eyes closed, his left foot moving silently to the music. Here was a man in his mid-thirties who lived in Brooklyn with his parents, who was gay but also too shy to do much about it, who lived in a world of his own where others were seldom allowed. Suddenly Paul wanted in. He had to get in, or all would be lost. Slowly he leaned forward, reached and placed a hand on Richard's knee.

Richard pulled back, scrambled toward the pillows till his shoulders hit the wall. His look was ugly, open-mouthed, lips twisted, and he actually made a hissing sound, like a cat. The ferocity in his small blue eyes was startling. Paul, his hand in the air between them now, could hardly move, not knowing what to do. "I'm sorry," he said. "I was just going to ask if I could get you something. Something to drink?"

Richard blinked, twice.

"I'm going to make some hot tea," Paul said. "Would you like some?"

No answer.

Paul moved unsteadily toward the kitchen, where he used his drip coffeemaker to prepare hot water. It was good to be alone for a minute, and he realized, sadly, that it would be best if Richard went home soon, leaving him alone for the night. He chose some soothing herbal tea from the cupboard and took two mugs back to the living room. It was an opportune time to sit down again, for "Sweet Sixteen, Parts 1 and 2" was coming on, and Paul closed his eyes, concentrating, the intensity of that voice making his pulse race, then slow down, then race again, exactly as a rollercoaster ride would do. As always, by the end of that song he felt he had been through something, and he opened his eyes and looked at Richard to see if he felt the same. But there was nothing to be gained by looking at Richard. Maybe the grass was part of it—another bad idea, Paul—but the guy was totally withdrawn, sitting with his knees bent to one side, his lower legs drawn up onto the sofa, a somewhat skewed fetal position. "Richard? Are you all right?" Paul left his chair and knelt down to look Richard in the eye. "Richard?" He got up and turned off the music. Richard's eyes looked glassy, and all sorts of possibilities raced through Paul's mind: the guy was having some kind of fit, was in a fugue state, had a bad reaction to the grass, or had forgotten to take some essential medicine. He'd never had an emergency medical situation in his apartment before; if he dialed 911, what ambulance would come, what hospital would they take him to? Would Paul have to call Richard's parents? Paul knelt before Richard again and heard himself utter a yelp of panic.

"I'm all right," Richard said, only his lips moving, as little as possible.

Paul stood up. "Are you sure? Can't I get you anything? You've hardly touched your tea."

"I'm all right," Richard whispered.

There was nothing to do but sit down again. First he put some more music on—a Keith Jarrett album this time, something relatively soothing. He made a conscious effort to relax, all the calming effects of the joint gone now. The fluorescent lamp on his desk was better than the incandescent ones in that it didn't throw off so much heat, and made his workspace more bearable in the summertime; but its light was harsh, sparing nothing in the room, giving each small object a knife-edged shadow. In a few minutes Paul got up again and lit some candles and turned off the light. That was better, the candles and the light coming in from the kitchen were enough. He closed his eyes, just for a minute.

When he opened his eyes again the music had stopped, and the candles had shed large pools of wax into their glass holders. "Oh ... gosh." He slid forward in his chair, took off his glasses and rubbed his face. He expected that Richard had fallen asleep too, but he could tell just by the other's posture that he hadn't. Still in his half-curved position, Richard's shoulders were squared off against the wall. "Richard?"

No answer.

Paul snapped on the desk lamp again, wincing at its brightness. But Richard neither winced nor blinked, just fixed his small blue eyes on Paul.

"Well! Richard." Paul clasped his hands and held them before him, as though drawing a satisfactory evening to a close. "Looks like it's my bedtime." When this got no response he

phrased it a different way: "I have to go to bed now." Finally he knelt down again in front of the sofa. "Richard? Can you hear me? Are you still all right?"

Richard nodded, slowly.

"Will you be able to get home all right?"

No response.

"I know!" Forcing a smile again. "Let's make a plan. Maybe we can go to the Met sometime, you and me. To see the Caravaggio exhibit. Would you like that?"

Now Richard's voice rose barely above a whisper. "That would be very nice."

"Good!" Paul got to his feet and clasped his hands again, feeling somewhat ridiculous, like a game-show host. "We'll do it. Call me? Will you call me, Richard?"

No response.

"Oh, God, Richard." Those small blue eyes made Paul forget, for a moment, the dimensions of his own living room, and he stepped back flat into an unexpected wall. When he could look no more, he moved his own eyes away, toward the floor. "I don't know what you want from me, Richard. I can't ask you to spend the night, I honestly can't. It's nothing personal, it's just that... I'd rather you didn't stay. Not even sitting on the sofa all night. So please, please go. I'll call you a cab, if you want...."

When a minute or two had passed, Paul forced himself to look toward Richard, if only to stop the feeling that he was talking to no one, that he was hallucinating, that Richard had actually left long ago. He gaze stopped at Richard's shoes, the soft tan kind they used to call desert boots.

"Richard... I know, I think I know something about what you're going through. You're just..."

paralyzed by loneliness? Is that a fair way to put it? And believe me, I understand....But I'm not the person to help you."

No response.

"You see what it is, I'm not that good with people myself, Richard. Most of the time it seems I can barely keep myself going, let alone... . It's not that I don't want to help you, I just ... can't." He closed his eyes, fighting back a tear. The harsh light pulsing against his eyelids made him feel pinned to the wall, he wasn't sure he could move if he wanted to. "I can't, I can't."

In a minute or two he heard Richard move on the sofa. It sounded as though he were dragging his body across the cushion, like a sack of clothes; Paul half expected to hear him hit the floor with a thud. Instead, the locks clicked open on the hallway door, which soon closed quietly. Paul looked, wincing again, to find that Richard had gone, that he had not forgotten to take his book with him. Somehow that detail—that Richard had remembered the book he'd bought—reassured Paul that Richard would get home all right.

To be reassured of himself, though, was a taller order. No doubt about it, he was shaken. And no matter how he tried, over the next several hours, to encapsulate the experience, to turn it into an amusing anecdote—Bartleby in the East Village—he was still shaken, unable to forget the small blue eyes, the lips that would not speak. Perhaps that was the power of the confessional: not the presence of the priest, but the looming silence demanding to be filled.

The next day he called Burke for the first time.

"Burke? This is Paul, from New York."

Burke didn't miss a beat. "*Feed me!*"

ROCK STAR BIGAMY SHOCKER. FACE OF JESUS APPEARS IN HUBCAP. At the end of his workday at the hospital Paul was on the bus again, surveying the tabloid headlines around him and noticing, whenever he turned to the gray urban scenery passing by, how much earlier the sun was setting these days. It didn't help that the day was overcast in the first place; now it looked like a shower might be starting up. From the way one young man frantically sought cover under an awning, and another yanked the hood of his sweatshirt into place, you'd think they were allergic to rain.

Paul was sitting on the wide seat that spanned the rear axle, and directly across from him was a particularly handsome black man, with a stubble of beard and bright green eyes that were almost impossible not to stare into. That was something else that Burke used to say, that he wished he had green eyes, because the combination of green eyes and dark skin was irresistible. As if, Paul thought now, Burke had needed to be more irresistible than he already was, more able to cause trouble in the world.

Paul walked the few blocks from Troost to his apartment on Armour without an umbrella, which didn't matter much since the rain was light, almost a drizzle. His head was uncomfortably wet by the time he reached the lobby, but his suit jacket had not soaked through. He stopped at his mailbox to remove some bills, then rode the slow elevator to the eighth floor, looking forward to toweling his hair and changing clothes.

It wasn't much more than an hour later, as he stood in his pullman kitchen browning hamburger in a skillet, that the phone rang. It had to be his mother, who always called at odd times. (If she caught him when he was off guard, she might reclaim the Paul she used to know, the one who lived closer to home and had no use for the Midwest.) So, thinking that it was his mother and the call would be brief, he moved to the living room area of the studio, intending to cut off the answering machine, when he was stopped dead in his tracks as Burke's cool, calm voice appeared, tinnily amplified yet unmistakable as it issued from the speaker. Burke was leaving a message, just his name and phone number, as though Paul had been expecting the call.

As the line disconnected Paul sat on the sofa, realizing too late that he still held the spatula, dripping grease onto the carpet. A little hello, his name and number, and nothing more, but it was enough to keep Paul sitting for some time, wondering and not wondering what Burke wanted—wondering because he couldn't imagine any motivation for calling after so long, and not wondering because, if Burke wanted anything, it was the same thing Paul wanted with a strength and clarity so sudden that he dropped the spatula, let the carpet soak up grease and the hamburger burn on the stove, and cried out into his cupped hands as he had more than once cried out from the fleeting but well-remembered joy of physical passion.

He did not, could not return Burke's call, or even write down the number Burke had left on the answering machine. And because he was afraid, because he didn't want to risk as much as an open phone line between himself and Burke, he had his number changed to an unlisted one.

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