The Last Days of Monkey Zak

A Novel Serialization

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Contents

Part 1

> And while law enforcement officials say there are still vestiges of the Mafia, they say its influence in New Orleans has been reduced through attrition and tectonic shifts in the criminal landscape
>
> —*New Orleans Advocate,* July 23, 2014

The varied grips la Cosa Nostra once had on New Orleans were largely broken long ago, but even well into this millennium Lino Puglisi remained somewhat powerful in his own (localized) way. The obese, pushing-eighty, pants-to-his-tits youngest of maybe three hand-to-God oath-of-omertà geezers still shuffling around as free, if discreet, men within the 504.

For almost two decades, the latter half of the 1975–2015 First Life of Mikey "Monkey" Zak, Lino was his boss. Not *the* Boss—again, New Orleans isn't a town for such a closed-city, territorial-rights king anymore—but a boss nonetheless. Lino's only son became a Los Angeles entertainment lawyer, raised from birth to step outside and upward. Mikey, he was an errand boy for a muffuletta dinosaur.

As for yours truly, Reader, I am the fly on the wall, the mouse in Mikey's pocket. More about me will be revealed eventually, but for now I'm an invisible narrator telling a story. His story.

So the final September of that First Life, to begin near the end. Mikey alone with Lino. Sitting across from him in the modest, on-the-quiet office the old man kept in the back of a Royal Street antique shop.

"Monkey," said Lino, wheezing the word out, "you're a sorta Jew, right?"

Lino's thing, or at least one of his things, one of his senior-citizen quirks, was asking questions to which he already knew the answers. Sure, he had indeed persevered well past even the twilight of LCN relevance and clout in his hometown, no minor feat, but the unenlightened and incognizant frequently underestimated him. He used that to his advantage.

And this—that is, the benefits of hovering under the radar—was perhaps the most valuable lesson Mikey ever learned from the guy. So Mikey just scratched at his beard and sat there, waiting for Lino to tell him why he'd been sent for. The office in Bonsoir Antique had no windows and was a perfect ten-by-ten-foot square. An exposed duct ran across the ceiling, and Lino's desk was situated under a vent. Late summer, but as always Lino was dressed like a hatless chauffeur. Air from the AC was riffling some of the newspapers stacked in front of him, and the few thin strands of hair left at the sides of his bald dome were dancing. This room a cube of cool in a lake of Vieux Carré lava.

Lino stood and waddled over to a wall calendar. "Saw tonight begins your Rosh Hashanah, rabbi. All I'm getting at." He stabbed the September Sunday with his finger. "What's with that, really?"

"The new year, I think," said Mikey, without actually thinking. "And Adam and Eve somehow."

Lino grunted in a way that suggested even he—a Catholic, of course—could do better, but when he realized his minion wasn't about to ask for a theology tutorial he trundled himself back down. There was a small towel on his desk. He used the rag to mop at his sagging neck, looking tired from the effort of trying to educate a Hebe simpleton.

As I said already, even twilight was yesterday for that clique . . . but however loose-knit things had become, nicknames were still common. And yet, incredibly, Lino Puglisi lacked an aka. "Fat Lino" would have worked, obviously. Or "Sleepy" Puglisi, on account of the permanent circles etched under his somnolent eyes. The Panda, Mikey often thought, to my Monkey.

"You have a car?" Lino asked.

"You know I don't."

"Don't tell me what I know, okay?"

"I don't have a car. Just the motorcycle."

"A grown man on a bike." Lino shook his head. "Rent you a car."

That caught Mikey's attention. It had probably been a year since he'd ventured more than fifty miles beyond Orleans or Jefferson Parish. "I'm going somewhere?"

"Missouri. Tomorrow. And nothing caviar—ask the Mez for a cash Kia or such. Tell him no paperwork."

"Missouri?"

Lino smiled, baring milky teeth that, to Mikey, looked fake in that big, liver-spotted face. Maybe they were.

"The Show-Me State," said Lino. "Heard of her?"

The Mississippi River makes a sharp turn to the north as it crescent-cradles New Orleans, and though to the eye the chocolate current keeps sliding by, going up for a mile before rounding the horn at Algiers Point, Mikey had been told that here—but far beneath the surface, two hundred feet down, the deepest soundings on the entire river—the Mississippi is a confusion. That the water closer to the bottom loops back on itself in a vortex along this stretch. That some ancient, sodden logs have been locked in sunken orbit there for centuries.

Sal Paradise, the Jack Kerouac *On the Road* stand-in, riding the ferry to sleepy Algiers: "On rails we leaned and looked at the great brown father of waters rolling down from mid-America like the torrents of broken souls—bearing Montana logs and Dakota muds and Iowa vales and things that had drowned in Three Forks, where the secret began in ice."

And those logs of legend had Mikey wondering about the English girl. For a while he'd thought of her as somewhere out in the blue of the offshore Gulf. Tumbling like a killed mermaid among dolphins and sea turtles and tuna. But now—packing his

duffel bag, waiting behind a texting family of pasty androids at Messina's Rent-a-Car—he was picturing her as trapped in a sort of New Orleans purgatory. Five weeks earlier she had dropped from one of the twin US 90 bridges that form the Crescent City Connection. Tied as the fifth-longest cantilever bridges on our planet, and the final two spans over the whole of the Mississippi. Slapped unconscious, the girl floated north as she drowned but was then sucked into the circling under-under and dragged upstream to where she'd started, the CCC. Then again she went north and again she went south. She was stuck traveling that mile of tortuous river forever, though on each melting revolution there would be less of her. In due course she would only be a carousel of bones, and a day would come when she would be nothing at all.

Mikey had recently learned that bit of perhaps true, probably not even close to true, trivia regarding the Mississippi's hydraulic workings from a bovine tugboat captain named Charlie Flynn. A man who, when he wasn't placing reckless bets, specialized in carrying on about: (1) moving to Tamarindo, Costa Rica; and (2) other things nobody cared about. Charlie Flynn was a bum. Mikey was constantly having to track him down for money, but Sorry Charlie got his revenge. He planted the seed that sprouted the ensnared-and-rotting girl simulacrum in Mikey's head, and Mikey was afraid that might be his to live with until he was as dead as she was. Sorry Charlie Flynn, voodoo priest.

In those First Life days Mikey Zak was what a cop on a cop show would dismiss as a "small-time hood" or mere "mob *associate*." (And the second only if said cop was being overtly and overly sensational. A TV cop insisting, incorrectly, on still referring to New Orleans as a town with a "mob.") He had a normal forename—Michael/Mikey—yet to much of his world he was Monkey (though never once had he introduced himself as that). And while, for most, his last name no longer registered on the respect scale, it was one certain geriatrics recognized and assigned weight to.

As a Prohibition teenager in Manhattan, Mikey's grandfather Zuriel "ZeeZee" Zak had come on board for the concluding years of the Bugs and Meyer Mob street gang, then rose through the Jewish Mafia, Kosher Nostra, ranks under Meyer Lansky himself. Two Russian-born landsmen from the Lower East Side . . . Lansky some fifteen years older but seeing promise in young ZeeZee . . . beytsim but also brains . . . and so, in the forties, Lansky sent ZeeZee to New Orleans to keep an embedded eye on his stake in the gambling racket there . . . a racket born of a deal to bring slot machines to New Orleans negotiated, at Lansky's direction, between Senator Huey Long and actual, Jews-need-not-apply Mafiosi (i.e., NOLA boss Sylvestro "Silver Dollar Sam" Carolla and the Luciano crime family in New York) . . . a racket overseen by Luciano padrone Frank "the Prime Minister" Costello's transplanted-to-the-South associate Phillip "Dandy Phil" Kastel and, eventually, by Carolla successor Carlos "the Little Man" Marcello, a Tunisia-whelped, Louisiana-raised five-foot-two Sicilian who spoke in a subliterate Cajun-flavored patois.

So ZeeZee went, a Lansky-loyal Jew allied with Kastel and then pockmarked, neckless Marcello, who soon became the last genuine don of New Orleans, and most books

about the golden era of organized crime in the city will likely come around to mentioning Zuriel Zak at least in an offhand way.

But Mikey never knew him. In '63 ZeeZee, along with Mikey's grandmother, died intestate in an early-hours Elysian Fields house fire. That went down three days before President Kennedy did, and within the tinfoil-hat set, some exasperated Marcello-waxed-JFK people think those Zak deaths must be significant. Who can say? That's just more trivia.

My point is this: given Mikey's pedigree he was only small-time because of the bullshit times he was brought up in. He was born in '75, so yes, he never knew his grandfather. Never had ZeeZee there to coach him, groom him. But Mikey did know Reuben Zak, sole child of Zuriel and Rashel Zak. A sixteen-year-old kid when he was orphaned, in a partial but undiagnosed state of shock for the rest of his life, any substantial possessions/monies he might have inherited either incinerated or hidden without a treasure map for him to follow, the suddenly destitute Reuben took every handout he was offered; dropped out of high school; found an apartment in Gentilly; worked menial manual labor into his twenties, shuttling around slot machines, jukeboxes, and coin-operated whatnot for Marcello's Jefferson Music Company; got drafted into the Marine Corps at twenty-two—but never really did become a man. All Reuben ever said to Mikey about the fire was that he thought he heard his parents in the front yard, calling for him, before he bolted outside. He never would have left them otherwise.

Mikey loved his pop, but Reuben was famously dull-witted. A guy who convinced himself at the start of each and every football season, for example, that the Saints would win the Super Bowl. A guy who couldn't even come up with a middle name for *his* "sole child." So a damaged and unskilled laborer, at best. But once Vietnam was through with Reuben, the Creole tomatoes of New Orleans—Carlos Marcello and that lot (probably as a mitzvah for retiree/fugitive Lansky, then very much occupied with resisting Israel's attempts, the Law of Return be damned, to deport him to the United States)—continued to watch out for him, putting Reuben in a job over at the Fair Grounds that didn't require him to do much of anything.

Then at the dawn of the disco days Reuben got a Cajun/Chitimacha girl who worked the betting windows pregnant. They married, bought a house in Mid-City, had Michael _____ Zak. And though it's possible they never copulated again, they somehow stayed together. In '93, Mikey's senior year as a "white boy" at 99 percent black Warren Easton, and ten years after Lansky kicked the bucket in Miami Beach, Reuben died of pancreatic cancer—still at the track when he got the stage IV death sentence, attending to this, that, and whatever even at forty-five. A charity case, just as his hoodlum son would become.

Which, when she paid Mikey any attention at all, was the type of barb his coonass-Indian mother liked to stick him with. He had her to thank for "Monkey." C-sectioned Joan Zak (née LeBlanc) saw his matted head of slimy hair, and though Reuben never realized it, don't think that mean woman wasn't being hateful, getting one of her digs in at Reuben, when she dubbed her own son that. Monkey, as in Jew Monkey, even if

Reuben wasn't all that hairy himself. And so her OR slur became the baby's pet name, then nickname. A nickname spread far and wide by naive Reuben and diabolical Joan before panicking kindergartener Michael was able to fully appreciate what was being done to him and ask, in paraphrased essence, Why the ever-loving fuck, Daddy? Can't you and Mama just go with "Mikey"?

And they did, even Joan. But too late for too many. That Italian crowd, in particular. You get called something as a little boy and think one day you'll grow out of it, but that wasn't what happened for Monkey. If anything, he grew into the name. Ape-armed and bow-legged. Small dark eyes and an unruly mane of fluffy curls. Handsome, but in the style of hockey players and longshoremen. Those same geriatrics I spoke of would say that Reuben was a mirror image of wiry ZeeZee but that neither of them ever much resembled this descendant. Even in 2015, full-bearded and on the cusp of middle age, Mikey could out-tussle most any man and, until he was thirty-five or so, stand flat-footed and do a backflip. There's no way around it. See rugged Mikey come traipsing down the street—six feet tall, 220; thirty-two-inch waist and size 44 jacket—he looked quite simian.

Anyway, due to a continuing sense of responsibility on the part of a few nostalgic old-guard crooks (Lino Puglisi, first and foremost), after a high school career marred by various acts of delinquency, and no college, then some rambling and a turn in the military, Mikey gave up trying to make his own way and was taken under a similar wing as his pop. Allowed, even, to live for the next nineteen years in a tiny but furnished, gratis-save-for-utilities apartment in a quieter section of the French Quarter. The pied-à-terre of a ruthless, locked-away-in-a-federal prison, Greatest Generation scamster Mikey thought of as the Horse Killer.

Mikey was a flunky. A gofer and a schlepper. One day selling cartons of smuggled tax-free cigarettes for the bars to toss at eight bucks a chop, on another catering a high-stakes Royal Sonesta–suite faro party for a debauched subset of Pickwick Club douches. Montecristos and Cohibas. Bourbons and single malts. A professional dealer from Harrah's to fling cards for those wilding Southern gentlemen. (And moonlighting Rick's Cabaret courtesans to flirt with them, maybe take them into bedrooms later for a good pickwickin'.)

So a flunky but also a bottom-feeder. The Quarter, Mikey's gingerbread sewer pond. Yes, instead of a car he had a dual-sport Kawasaki parked in the ceilinged brick passageway that ran, like a culvert, alongside his beneath-a-balcony-apartment apartment—but he had no need, or want, for a car. He made around fifty thousand a year, entirely in cash, and that was plenty for a rent-free monkey like him.

And Mikey didn't really mind that most of the money he handled got passed on up the line. If he had any complaints as that summer of 2015 wound down they had to do with feeling bored and lonesome and caged. Forty is often the age when such an anxious malaise hits men the hardest, and that unexpected inclination toward despondency is no doubt what had him so fixated on the girl in the river. She'd been

underwater since August, but he couldn't stop thinking about her.

Missouri is a fairly straight shot north on I-55, and Mikey left New Orleans on Monday morning, driving a charcoal Ford Focus, playing the ill-informed package boy. He'd been entrusted with the transportation of a shoebox to New Madrid—an on-the-Mississippi town roughly a hundred miles above Memphis. Fifty grand in neat twenties stacked in an orange Nike casket. Two thousand dollars in each purple-banded shingle. That was about all Mikey knew of the matter, and that was all Lino wanted him to know. Drive to New Madrid, drive back, then Lino would throw him fifteen hundred bucks for his sweat and expenses.

It wasn't even clear to Mikey whether he was breaking any laws, and that's what I meant when I called him small-time. Pugnacious ZeeZee Zak once assisted, while on a business trip with Lansky, in the bouncing of a blitzed Papa Hemingway from the Hotel Habana Riviera casino. Grandson Mikey? He drives for a day to give a shoebox to some hick named Woody Coyne—reflecting, sporadically, on the fact that the fifty thousand (again, all the money he himself made in a typical year) took up no more space in the world than a pair of Jordans.

Ten o'clock, Mississippi. Two o'clock, Tennessee. In Memphis the interstate crossed over the river into Arkansas. To the green east was all floodplain farmland, and Mikey saw a tractor bogged down in a field, a man in full denim just standing there gawping at his Kubota, praying for a miracle. Mikey rolled on. Even minding the speed limit he would be in New Madrid in two hours. He couldn't see the river anymore, but he could smell it. The smell of mud.

The English girl had been one of those malnourished Jackson Square gutter punks. Scuzzy dreadlocks. Marker-scrawled army fatigues. Her grubby face pincushioned with metal studs and bars and rings. She was maybe eighteen, and Mikey wouldn't have even noticed her, had she not tried to lift his wallet. New to the Quarter, probably. Didn't yet savvy who best to rest crosshairs on and who best to let walk. And though gutter punks tend to covey, she was alone on that night.

A weekend, late, but the Quarter was still busy. The Thai Wet Massage sat above a daiquiri shop, right on Bourbon Street, and Mikey would swing by there twice a month to collect for a silent partner of the nocturnal mama-san. And he was done and hiking for home, weaving through a swarm of conventioneers and SAEs, alcoholics and bucket drummers and sloshed bachelorettes, when she tried sliding her hand into the hind pocket of his jeans. Mikey grabbed her wrist and spun her around, sent her stumbling into a Lucky Dog cart. He was more annoyed than mad, and since he had a bundle of rub-and-tug bills on him he wasn't looking to make a scene. He just kept on heading to his Dauphine Street apartment, away from the bacchanalia, and it was not until he'd gone a few blocks that he realized she was following. Lagging back, but shadowing him all the same. A mad gutter punk will do some ghoulish shit, slice you with a box cutter or jab you with a needle, so Mikey kept one eye on her as they paraded.

Dauphine was empty, and before long the girl knew Mikey had made her. She started screaming, calling him a cunt, telling moon and stars he was ripe for a bashing.

Like over a hundred and fifty thousand other residents of 2015 Louisiana, Mikey had a concealed-carry permit—and unless he planned on drinking, he concealed-carried a tucked revolver much of the time. A compact, hammerless, in-case-of-emergency .38 S&W. Two-inch barrel, the five-shot cylinder loaded with hollow points. But if he drew his dwarf wheel gun on that berserk Brit she might force him to shoot her. So all Mikey could do was continue easing toward Dauphine, letting her shriek enraged-nanny things, his pride not allowing him to run and promptly lose her. She'd know where he lived but, well, he had cop friends in the 8-D. If Mikey leaned on them to hassle someone, they would.

What Mikey didn't count on was her pushing the issue. He was about to open the gated passageway leading to his apartment when he heard her black soldier boots smacking the sidewalk. The key was in his hand, but since he didn't think he could be quick enough with the lock he whirled around to meet her. He was up on his toes and dancing, like a wrestler, like an ape man, and there she was, weaponless but coming. And she was almost atop him when he did a sidestep and put out his foot. She went sprawling, ass over elbows till she was flat on her back.

Mikey stood there watching, waiting to see what she might do next. "Fucking A," he said. "Settle. I'm buds with Nomad, know him?"

And then—even though Nomad, lord of the local gutter punks, quite possibly only knew *him* as Monkey, willing fencer of shiny items—Mikey added, not unkindly: "Tell him you tried robbing Mikey Zak. He'll set you straight."

"Piss off," said the girl, sucking air from her short dash. "Piss off, piss off, piss off."

There were at least a dozen steel beads welded into her face. Her lip was split, and Mikey could see blood on her teeth. He had decided, on a hunch, and despite never having been to England, that her accent was what gets called Cockney. She looked like an alien, dying.

"This was an awful choice, Mary Poppy." Mikey unlocked the gate, so should conditions continue to deteriorate, he could duck inside the passageway in a hurry. "You ought to be nipping tourists. Let them sponsor your next fix."

The girl sat up, spat gore at his Top-Siders, and began wiping her mouth with the frayed cuff of her army jacket, those piercings catching threads. "I need a hotel room. A loo with a shower."

"You think you're on holiday? Ring Mum, love."

"I got raped," she whispered.

If there was a rule Mikey lived by in New Orleans, that he thought he must live by, it was this: don't ever get involved if you don't have to. Nothing original or profound, but that one rule had kept him out of dutch for most of his miscreant life. Other than some messiness during his brief military stint, he was a known criminal with no criminal record. That's not easy to pull off.

What I'm saying is Mikey didn't do anything for the English girl. Instead he slipped behind an iron gate and shut her off from him, and though at some point she obviously gathered herself up and went hobbling away, he wasn't there to see that.

Maybe she was the same girl, maybe she wasn't, but a Jane Doe would be dead before sunrise. That much is certain. Traffic came to a stop on the eastbound CCC that night, horns blaring as a young woman parked a stolen car to mull doing what she'd come there to do, the streaking Mississippi a hundred and seventy feet below her. Then she jumped. Mikey read about the leaper a few days later. There wasn't a photo. There wasn't an age or a name or a body, even—but he hadn't seen the English girl since, and in his mind Jane Doe was her.

And if he was wrong it didn't matter. If she wasn't dead yet, she was as good as dead. He could've helped her, but now it was as if she had never existed.

Still, I think primarily it was that malaise I mentioned, not guilt, that had the English girl haunting Mikey even before Sorry Charlie Flynn's lecture on the paradoxical, south-to-north eddies and currents between Gretna and Algiers turned her into an aquatic phantasmagoria. A realization he moved through the world as a man of no consequence. That people who bumped against him were usually left neither worse off nor better off. The English girl is irrelevant. I'm only using her to show how Mikey used to be. Who he used to be. What he used to be. That he was a spectator. All around him folks were living their lives. Some were content, and some, like her, were doomed—but Mikey was simply going through the motions.

On the Road Sal Paradise, leaving Algiers for French Quarter bars: "Strange to say too that night we crossed the ferry with Bull Lee a girl committed suicide off the deck; either just before or just after us; we saw it in the paper the next day."

Yes, that's enough talk of the English girl. There isn't anything more to say about her.

Welcome to New Madrid. On Mikey's same river, but a nothing town of three thousand people. Main Street was a row of low-slung buildings that ran from the levee for several blocks, and Mikey pulled over across from a funeral parlor to get his bearings.

The scribbled address Lino had given him, long since memorized and thrown away, was for a house on a Virginia Avenue. Mikey's citizen smartphone was in New Orleans, innocently pinging a CBD cell tower, but he'd done enough Google Maps homework to take it from here. One man's cut-corner convenience can wind up being another man's evidence, so every month Lino had him buy two disposable prepaid burner phones from the sad, soul-crushing RadioShack on Canal Street for their shady and sensitive matters. A new burner and a new number for Mikey. A new burner and a new number for Lino. No need for them to leave any tracks they could avoid.

Mikey drove on, businesses succumbing to homes, and there it was, the very next street, Virginia Ave. A right, then a stop sign later he saw a dented mailbox with the number he was searching for.

La Casa de Woody Coyne. A white clapboard and a weedy lot. A red Chevrolet 4x4 parked in a gravel driveway. Linger too long on a microscope slide like New Madrid, and the villagers begin to notice you, so instead of making stakeout circles Mikey just backed the Focus into the driveway, parking a few feet behind the pickup.

The Focus had proven to be a sipper, and this was the first Mikey had been out of the car since refilling the tank at a Faulknerian Phillips 66 west of Ole Miss. Gas, then a gritty Whopper in a less-than-regal Burger King. It was five o'clock now but almost as hot it had been in Yoknapatawpha. As windless and roasting, the Hawaiian shirt Mikey was wearing already sticking to his back. That shirt and a pair of Levi's; leather boat shoes and a rental car—if necessary he was merely a lost, black-bearded traveler. I'm looking for a clean motel around here, sir. Any assistance would be much appreciated, ma'am. Depressing river towns of the Lower Mississippi are my freaking jam, officer.

The house had three concrete steps leading to a screen door slanting crooked on the frame, and Mikey was nearing when hinges screeched. The guy peering out at him was just a twenty-something kid with bloodshot eyes and stringy brown hair to his shoulders. Shirtless and barefoot and shivery. Blue jeans cuffed up his calves. Cheeks rat-shot with acne. Meth. You wouldn't have to be a whiz to see that. Tough times are tough times for most everybody, and you have to change with the times, but Mikey was definitely surprised. As in, what possible commerce could old-school "leave the junk to the moolies" Lino have with this twitchy mongoose? Evolve or die, as they say, and evidently gluttonous Lino was branching out. Trying new tricks. But if Mikey would be returning home carting nothing after this give, who would be making *that* give?

Those cherried eyes swept slowly across the ugly yard, then darted back to Mikey. The kid had one hand on that flimsy screen door, but the other was hidden behind him. He'd been awake for God knows how long.

Mikey smiled. "New Orleans has cometh. Rejoice, Woody."

The kid flinched when Mikey said the name, but then he collected himself. Sort of. He still looked like a diseased and frazzled critter. "Lift your shirt," he said. "Spin around."

The snub-nose .38 was in the glovebox (and the fifty large in the trunk), but the only mortal Mikey was willing to let boss him around was in New Orleans. He smiled even bigger. "Not the way danger comes for you, child. I'm just the mailman in whatever this is."

"My bro said you'd be coming on Monday. I should call him." Then the kid looked up at the sun for some reason. "Fuck. Is it Monday?"

So a collaborative enterprise with some brother or bro person, but Mikey wasn't about to let things complicate. "I must have the wrong house," he said. "Take care."

Mikey had started walking to the Focus but didn't get far. The kid was down the steps now, no gun in his hand after all. Or not anymore. The thought of Mikey driving away with thousands had him scared even worse than the thought of this visitor shooting him did.

"Whoa!" the kid hollered.

Across the street was a trailer with a don't-tread-on-me Gadsden flag in the window—a woman in periwinkle velours sitting on the porch, swaying gently on a swing and watching them, calico cat by her side.

"Whoa to you. Keep your voice down."

The kid spotted the woman and nodded. "Okay," he mumbled.

"Deep breaths, relax, be smooth."

Another furtive, ferrety nod.

"Terrific," said Mikey. "Here's how this unfolds. First, I have to be sure you are who you are. Go inside and come out with your driver's license. Got one of those?"

"Don't fuck with me, dude. I'm the brother. I'm Woody."

"Nobody's fucking with nobody. Now git."

Once he was gone Mikey went to the Focus and popped the trunk, blocking watchful Velour Woman's sightline, then he looked around to see if anyone else might be tuned to this channel. Didn't seem to be, so Mikey placed the Nike box in the bed of the Chevy.

The kid returned wearing work boots and a Mizzou T-shirt. Neither "I'm Woody" nor Mikey wanted to be any closer to the other, but at last the kid moved next to him and slapped a license in Mikey's hand. WOODROW KEVIN COYNE, JR. BIRTHDATE 02-15-1992. The photo was of a past him. Groomed, healthy, cheery. But on 09-14-2015 Woody smelled like fast food and wet cigarettes, twenty-three going on river-trash zombie. He wasn't quite ready to be a before-and-after FACES OF METH billboard yet, but give him a few more years.

"Congratulations," said Mikey. "It's in back your truck. Remember to tithe."

Woody shoved his license into his jeans. "Hold on—"

Mikey could guess what Woody was about to say, so he cut him off. "I know it's there, and I also know it's all there. I'm the one my master trusts, Woodrow. Not you."

And then Mikey disengaged, withdrew. He was in the Focus and part of him was thinking, Great, mission accomplished, I can make it to Memphis before I'll have to rest for the night. By lunchtime tomorrow, the apartment in the Quarter, and maybe he'd ask if Lino would limit Monkey Zak participation in this shameful new mischief because, well, consorting with chemical cases is like trying to dance with someone who can't hear the music.

Mikey was turning from the driveway onto Virginia Avenue when he checked on Woody. The kid was dangling over the pickup bed, stomach balanced on the tailgate, boots in the air.

A boy falling into a hole. A boy disappearing.

Mikey had said goodbye to New Madrid—hopefully forever—and was on the along-the-levee highway that would take him to the interstate when he began to wonder if, today, his mother had rung the citizen smartphone again. Whether she had made another unexplained call to New Orleans. She and Mikey had "important stuff" to

discuss, apparently. At least according to the irritated voicemail she'd left over the weekend from her home amid Central Florida pasturelands.

But after nearly two years of not speaking to her, Mikey hadn't much cared.

Following Reuben's death Joan had successfully spliced herself to an elfish and jug-eared, but fetchingly prosperous, jockey she'd met at the funeral. A man who soon hence, upon wrecking his back in a sloppy-track spill, and hanging up his silks in perpetuity, would move his widowed fiancée to horse-farm-abundant Ocala in order to pursue a second career as a freelance pony trainer. Ah, Mrs. Bill the Hoof. Mikey had gone the entire summer without purposefully thinking of her—but something about that Missouri town now had Florida Joan blinking on his dash, demanding his attention. She was from a nothing place herself. Drop New Madrid into the Atchafalaya Delta, swap a redneck with a Chitimacha LeBlanc, and that swinging Velour Woman could've been a long-lost SISTER OF JOAN.

Reuben Zak had been a flunky same as Mikey, but nobody could deny he hailed from a rich and interesting history. Joan? She was mostly an enigma. Mikey didn't know the specifics about her parents or her past, about what she was fleeing or leaving behind when she came to New Orleans from St. Mary Parish as a teenager. And though Mikey suspected his looks had a lot more to do with her genetic code than Reuben's did, she never would have admitted that, of course.

The Italians thought of Mikey as Jewish, but in fact they were wrong there. To Jews you are what your mother is, and his father appeared to have agreed. Because until Reuben found religion in his final few, desperate, postdiagnosis months, hospital-circumcised Mikey had never been inside a temple or a synagogue or the JCC on St. Charles. His last name, the one he was born with, was the only connection he had to any of that. Yes, Mikey mostly owed his strange modus vivendi to his father and grandfather—but, lately, a growing sense told him he was indeed his mother's son. A shape-shifting escape artist biding his time. That despite his present inertia, on some without-warning day he too would pick up and run.

Mikey drove with one hand as he punched around for the lone number programmed into the burner. He would tell Lino the drop was done, and if that was that, they'd both send those current RadioShacks to cellular heaven. Mikey also deciding, in a compromise with himself, that once he was back in New Orleans if his mother did ring the citizen smartphone again he would answer—but he would not call her. This was mostly him being passive-aggressive . . . though calling her did mean Bill the Hoof might catch the phone, and a conversation with croaky, two-packs-a-day Bill had always been rough sledding.

Five rings, then Lino—"Well, Monkey?"—just as Woody's red truck showed up big as a strafing spaceship in the rearview mirror, headlights flashing.

"Shit," said Mikey. "I'll call you back."

He tossed the RadioShack aside and tried to get moving. It was souped, that truck, and the Focus didn't stand a chance. Woody swung wide, surging Missouri-bushwhacker level, and Mikey slammed on the brakes half expecting a shotgun-blast

Easy Rider death. But instead the Chevy swerved to rejoin the right lane after the pass, then went fishtailing off the shoulder and into the grass. Mikey was at a complete stop in the road, and he watched Woody and his long hair come jumping from the cab, arms out like a crossing guard, gesturing for him to pull over.

Mikey reached into the glove box for the .38 and, creeping forward, spun the little Smith once or twice like a toy in his hand, thinking that acting the part of icy-veined gunslinger might calm him. He could have driven on by, but it was his sacred duty to Lino to find out what this was about.

(And also—I believe—because he had been pushed too far in a dark, Joan-still-on-his-mind moment.)

Mikey idled to the shoulder and pressed his left foot on the brake, keeping his right touched to the gas in case he needed to scoot. Woody was already midway to him, coming through the dirty cloud raised by the truck. Just like that, Mikey reckoned, after all these years, his first killing, self-defense or otherwise, might be of a kid with Jesusy hair. He rolled down the front windows and pointed to the other side of the Focus, the .38 resting on thigh when Woody latched on to the window strip and poked his bedraggled face into the car.

Woody immediately spied the pistol. His hands stiffened, and Mikey saw nickel-sized knuckle-scabs rupture blood. Stigmata.

"Dude," said Woody. "I called Cripper. I just gotta talk to you."

Mikey shook his head. "No. All we need is for Barney Fife to coast by."

Woody was sweating like a spent Olympian, as if driving fast had somehow sapped him, and Mikey was wishing for a .44, figuring it could take a brain shot to stop this tweaker with a .38.

"Tell me that money isn't in the truck, Woody."

"So what if it is or ain't?"

"For fuck's sake. Say what you have to say, but quick."

"Cripper's in the Zarks cooking," said panting Woody. "But he done had to swap kitchens twice since Friday. And that runner he was gonna use for New Orleans, that hillbilly's been flaking. All that got Cripper behind schedule, meaning he's sorry but delivery tomorrow's not gonna happen but give him through the weekend for the batch—cool?"

Mikey laughed. Among the few gifts he had was an ability to separate what he needed to know from what he wanted to know. A survival skill. They say knowledge is power, but Mikey understood that isn't always true. Knowledge could put you in the ground, return you to the dust.

"Yeah, yeah," said Woody. "So, yeah, he needs another week to get that shipment down there."

"But you'll be keeping the fifty?"

"Right."

"Want some advice?"

"Not from you."

Woody backed away from the car, but he wasn't looking at Mikey. His eyes were on the horizon, in the direction of the river, above the levee that traced the highway—as if he were actually wise enough to be searching for what might soon be coming for one or both Coynes. Not an ordinary monkey next time. No, a winged monkey. The avenging angel who might descend upon Missouri.

"You sure?" Mikey asked. "Play stupid games, win stupid prizes."

Woody didn't answer straight away. Instead he got himself all worked up jabbering about the Brothers Coyne leasing land across that river. Kentucky acreage where they hoped to raise cattle. Angus, Herefords, maybe Beefmasters. "But, dude, we really need the cash," he said finally.

Even citified Mikey supposed there was no money for the little guy in growing steaks anymore, yet Woody wanted to be a cowman. Mikey looked past him through the open window of the Focus. The sky was enormous and slightly dimming. This Woody was the only other person with drone-strike certainty as to exactly where Mikey Zak was right then, and Mikey had never felt smaller in his life. He didn't know it at the time, but he could feel it: Woody was him and he was Woody. Two bedeviled primates on the side of a Monday highway, opposite a levee, a short ways from a river neither of them could see.

"Oh, child," said Mikey. "This is breaking my heart!"

They were in the puny courtyard of ferns behind newly separated Hank Robertson's newly acquired apartment on Chartres Street. Mikey, Hank, Edmund Gremillion, and Wes Locatelli. Just room enough for a wrought-iron table and four wrought-iron chairs, a concrete fountain no bigger than a bird bath. Hank had brought out a stainless-steel bowl of ice cubes and cut lime, then a tray with rocks glasses and a black bottle of Hendrick's, squat duckpins of Schweppes.

Mossy bricks and babbling water, the coolness of a shadowy courtyard at the onset of evening, those spidery ferns pressing against them. They were colonialists in the near tropics, dosing themselves with quinine, calmly discussing the recent unrest after another sweltering, powder-keg day.

This was their Lonely Fools Club thing, to meet once a month, always on a Wednesday, and after ten years the gatherings themselves had become regimented and predictable as well. Personal status reports followed by a rundown of current events local, regional, and national. Alcohol-fueled nostalgic reminisces of Hurricane Katrina times before, finally, protracted debate between Edmund and Hank over the itinerary, and date, for the next month's Wednesday. Typically that meant a bar for predinner rounds, then Muriel's or a Brennan restaurant—but Hank had been eager to show off his green thumb, and his autonomy, so there they were in that brick box of a courtyard.

Though Mikey was no society-page popinjay, had no real thirst for things fancy, he could already tell they had chosen badly in agreeing to this. That the fernery of a gone-stag one-bedroom, one-bath had little to recommend over French 75 or the Napoleon House or even the breezy balcony of the Pontalba apartment Hank had fled from. Hank

was unabashedly pleased to be presently, maybe permanently, free of marital bonds—and therefore had yet to recognize the dumpster-fire mistake he was making. But for now Mikey, Edmund, and Wes were more or less biting their tongues, drinking what Hank felt like they should all be drinking on a late-summer late afternoon, feet tucked under them in the manner of crouching gargoyles and schemers, elbow to elbow around a small table that jostled with any grand movement or gesticulation.

In truth there was no good reason for any of these four to be friends other than the fact they were all fairly longtime residents of the Quarter who had whiled away the hours together, and aided each other in various (mainly trivial) ways during those three weeks in '05 when their historic streets were a sparsely populated island of humming generators and nonevacuating flashlight people. There was plenty of chaos and depravity to be witnessed in New Orleans during that Katrina tenure, but Mikey's memories of those days still tended toward the sanguine. About the closest thing he had ever known to the mankind-affirming pleasures of communal living. And though Mikey knew being fortunate enough to say such a thing marked him as a tone-deaf asshole—lucky, at least, if not all that monetarily privileged—not everyone has a rising-waters, ax-in-the-attic Katrina horror story, even those who tell you they do.

So yes, by and large, Katrina wasn't something Mikey would like to do again, but a positive experience for him all the same. Perhaps the best vacation of his life, and *from* his life, up to that point, and these were the guys he had shared it with.

And yet, that being said, their monthly get-togethers likely would have come to an end years before, or never even have come to pass, were it not for Edmund and his la-di-da penchant for fraternal alliances, both formal and irregular. Edmund Gremillion. A rod-and-gun outdoorsman, but there's your Perlis, fleur-de-lis popinjay. Though most of his breed lived in oak-tree New Orleans, he was the founder and all-intents-and-purposes head of the Lonely Fools Club—and, at forty-eight, the oldest of what had tragically become (on Mikey's big-four-o birthday in May) a quartet of forty-somethings. Edmund was a gentleman stockbroker like his father and grandfather before him. Boston Club, Mistick Krewe of Comus, Easter to Labor Day seersucker. Tall, tan, and trim with bouncy chestnut hair, he was of that cultured, persnickety, dilettante species of aging Southern bachelor many assumed to be a closet case. Mikey had seen enough New Orleans ladies sashay by on Edmund's arm to occasionally question that—but who knows, who cares. This witty man-about-town was always good for a laugh or bit of honest assessment. One Katrina morning, Mikey and Edmund watching from a rooftop as National Guard peacekeepers came marching down St. Philip: "Quick, pimp," said Edmund. "My spyglass."

If Edmund was the aristocrat and Mikey Zak the criminal, the underworld ambassador of the Lonely Fools Club, then Wes Locatelli was its blue-collar representative. A bullnecked cinder block of a cabinetmaker, finish carpenter, and LSU fan. The type who could mosey through the Home Depot on Claiborne with complete confidence and comfort—"Tapcom screws? Aisle 13."—sipping black coffee and knowing the names of things. And with a handle such as "Locatelli" Wes also couldn't avoid knowing of Lino

Puglisi . . . but just by reputation and Sunday Mass at St. Louis Cathedral. To be crystal clear, Reader: the Department of Justice has estimated that fewer than .0025 of Italian Americans are involved in organized crime, and in *his* business dealings measure-twice, cut-once Wes was as upright as they come. A definite 99.9975 percenter. Sure, he made money hand over fist after the storm like all his sawdust-guild brethren, yet Mikey had never heard anyone complain about the caliber of Wes's work or character. Wes was "the Wank," Westbank-reared but lived with his wife, Roxanne, and their teenage son, Wesley, in a partitioned loft above his shop across from the French Market. And, for Mikey, monitoring young Wesley's Quarter adolescence was like having front-row seats to a cat swim. I'm in Mexico, Dad. Help me! Those kinds of phone calls. And of course Wes dieseled up his white truck and got rolling to Boy's Town that same night. Nothing he wouldn't do for his wife and his kid.

That brings me to Hank Robertson. Midforties, like Wes, but different in most every other respect. Despite his league-bowler name, Hank was their nerd bohemian. A trilby-wearing, Tulane-alum black man from San Francisco who frequented the art galleries, bookstores, and music spots. Rail thin and preferably dressed in the wrinkled suits of a Cotton Club trumpeter, that airy Home Depot would have been his idea of halogen-lit, Geaux Tigers hell. As an out-of-nowhere twenty-seven-year-old Hank had written a race-in-America novel—*The Wandering Beat* by H. T. Robertson—that people still remembered and asked him about. Followed, at long last, ten years later, by a mopey, rather monotonous, and mostly unnoticed Quarter-during-Katrina memoir that was lost in the deluge of grim literature milked from the storm. But if Hank was still trying to write books, that was his secret. Near as the other Lonely Fools could tell, both Hank and his interior-designer wife, Susannah, must have been born into money. The class of family in which children choose passions instead of mere occupations to engage them from graduation to grave. And there are decent odds Hank and his Garden District–cultivated, decidedly un-nerdy Susannah—mother to Chance and Marcus Clark-Robertson, their six-year-old twins—were the first African Americans ever to own one of those hallowed, Jackson Square–overlooking apartments in the Pontalba.

But now here Hank was, by his Hank self in a month-to-month rental and three weeks into dating a third-year UNO grad student he'd been exchanging flirtatious emails with ever since the New Orleans Film Society gala that March. A young woman who: (1) paid *her* bills guiding Vieux Carré ghost tours; and (2) looked like a Caucasian anime sprite.

All because in August, Hank Robertson and Susannah Clark, ever the avant-garde couple—feeling the Clark and Robertson marriage slipping into something more like androgynous siblinghood, seeing the writing on the wall—had recalled a "Modern Love" article in the *New York Times* about "open separations" and reached an agreement. Hank and Susannah would give each other until the end of the year to decide if divorce was really what they wanted. Courting and fucking around with impunity, their

wedding rings in a drawer, but per the guidelines of that Modern Love article, staying away from anyone who was friends with the other (which, as to Mikey, was the rub).

And month-to-month Hank seemed pretty damn happy with his rumspringa, smoking hash and watching the Criterion Collection beside a pajamaed film-production scholar. Or that was how Mikey imagined their nights. None of it made sense to him. In *The Wandering Beat* we meet an affluent, erudite, and road-tripping hip-hop DJ MC from Sausalito who is light-skinned (like Hank, but more so) enough to pass as white (unlike Hank). A blessing? A curse? Neither? Trust-fund Terrence Conroy is twenty-one and conflicted. An Atlanta-bound rhymer and record scratcher whom I have come to see as a latter-day Kerouac, or even Tocqueville, taking the temperature of America as he bears down on the get-crunk ATL, his T-Con demo tracks at the ready. But in a moonlit pinewoods-and-kudzu honky-tonk he finally detonates after talk turns to black women. "Shebas," a peanut farmer calls them, saying: "Think about how so many bucks go for white girls but not so many white boys go for twerking sistahs—don't get me wrong, I'd fuck the dog shit out of Halle Berry but she ain't no pure-blood Sheba anyhow so give me a Georgia blonde any day."

Then the bottle-struck peanut farmer dies, killed by Terrence, the covertly (since Tamalpais High, at least) biracial, Budweiser-brandishing son of a (black) Marin County congresswoman and the (white) San Quentin escapee who had raped her. There's a trial, more things happen.

Mikey hadn't bent a novel since his own high school years, but because Hank was his friend, as well as husband to a woman Mikey had been obsessed with for a considerable chunk of that friendship, he eventually read *The Wandering Beat.* ("This month we lost Burroughs—and in April, Ginsberg—but the Beats go, and wander, and live, on. Fierce and wrenching, electric and thrumming . . . a racially charged book that asks many important questions."—*Chicago Tribune.*)

And you'd think (white) Mikey would also have asked himself a racially charged question or two. Might have questioned why, the winter following Katrina, with his first sight of (black) Susannah Clark on a Pontalba balcony, vintage ermine stole draped over her shoulders as she surveyed the square from on high, he'd been so completely and specifically captivated by her, an older-woman gal he didn't know from Eve (or Sheba). Yes, that important question might have made him—should have made him?—squirm. But no. Not mellow Mikey Zak. White, black. He just thought she was hot. Hot and, as he did get to know her, growing hotter. Her irreverent brassiness and intimidating intelligence. And sexy, sexy, sexy. Chic, clingy dresses. That big ol' Nubian ass—a racist joke, *their* racist joke, because in actual fact she was a classy and refined Ursuline Academy, Howard University lady who was built like an acrobat . . . but a jesting pillow-talk thing that Mikey, lying across tangled sheets with Susannah in his apartment, would say to make her bite at his chest and laugh. Snowflake, she would call him—her pet gorilla. Susannah already knowing, from Hank, that people throughout New Orleans had a similar spirit-animal sobriquet for him.

Their affair (dalliance? fling?) lasted two months before Susannah put a stop to it—telling Mikey, with the rationalizing perspicuity of many a straying spouse before her and since, that she had been able to live with herself because those two months had felt like an exciting and reinvigorating farewell to the grueling, desexualizing, infant-to-preschool interlude that had followed the birth of the twins. Exciting and reinvigorating until, that is, she *couldn't* live with herself, and the time came for that farewell to conclude. We have to chill, boo.

Poor Mikey, poor Mikey. But now, three years later, with this open separation between Susannah and Hank, those soul-searching libertines, an unexpected crack in the door? Something like hope? Was a suppressed longing—both for Mikey and for her—about to be unleashed and rekindled?

Again, Katrina was responsible for the Lonely Fools Club . . . the reason they all first met, ten years earlier, *thirty*-somethings then. Mikey was living alone in the apartment on Dauphine. Edmund was living alone in his St. Philip condo. Hank, Wes—their families (Hank's pre-twins Susannah; Wes's Roxanne and seven-year-old Wesley) had been sent away to tarry with relatives in Baton Rouge and north Louisiana, respectively, before the storm made landfall. Wes staying behind because the Locatelli Cabinets and Finish and Trim shop, beneath the Locatelli loft, contained umpteen thousands of dollars' worth of carpentry equipment and wares; Hank, no doubt, because he felt as if bear-witness slumming was the shrewd thing for a writer with embryonic designs on a memoir to do. A book about him that could also be a book about Katrina, giving it that "me and something else" I've been told all great memoirs require.

So four "lonely fools," but, to be honest, remaining in the Quarter was no extreme act of bravery, or even stupidity, because in New Orleans there is a high-ground explanation for why the oldest neighborhoods are the oldest neighborhoods. And for the Quarter that meant the Monday morning Katrina swept by (the storm now a downgrading Cat 3 trained on Mississippi) was mostly a wind-and-rain, but light-flooding, event. That, even once levees began to breach in Gentilly and the Ninth Ward and Lakeview, this eldest area of the city would endure. The power failed early on but Mikey figured, as many of the Quarter ride-outs figured early on, he'd just have to spend a day or so running his fridge off a generator, drinking bottles of Kentwood water, and sweating, definitely sweating, but sitting atop enough food and supplies to be more than fine for the most part.

And such was the case for all four of them, hibernating in self-sustaining lairs, similarly situated but still unknown to one another. But there's more to life than food, water, shelter. A hundred-handful of Quarter others had also remained, and while the lushes and übereccentrics and ferals were overrepresented and as nettling as ever, I suppose it says something about humans that with no TV, Internet, or consistent radio only a reclusive few of us can shut ourselves off from gossip and colloquy for any significant stretch.

Which explains why, very soon, once that strong rain and strong wind quit on Monday and hoary, anemic skies arrived, Mikey was outside roaming the streets of a New Orleans without tourists. Yelling up at a chinless, mayonnaise-legged, bathrobed patrician wanting to chat with him from a dripping balcony. Hearing this rumor and that rumor from a paint-flecked artist-tramp wobbling along beside him on a corroded bicycle. Haggling with gutter-punk Nomad for a jerry can of Marigny-siphoned gas to feed that four-stroke Honda generator—Mikey now concerned about petrol because, as he was slowly but steadily ascertaining, things elsewhere in the city were much, much worse than he had thought. Days might be weeks.

Plenty has already been reported and written about Johnny White's, the twenty-four-hour Bourbon Street trough that stayed open all through Katrina and her aftermath. And because when Mikey drank he preferred not to be in an empty, stifling apartment, he passed his share of aft-storm time in Johnny White's as well. And it was there, on Katrina Wednesday, enjoying ice-cooler-cold beer by candlelight, that a stocky, flat-topped carpenter with hands like mallets slid onto the stool next to his. Though the man looked familiar, Mikey didn't know him—but as in the auld lang syne, when there were no e-leashes to stare at, and still the occasional saloon that didn't have a television, they got to talking.

Mikey's vague answer for normals and the IRS as to what he did for a living was "property management"—

Cf. "Obituary: Carlos Marcello, 83, Reputed Crime Boss In New Orleans Area," *New York Times,* Mar. 3, 1994. ("By the 1950s and '60s, the police and national publications were calling him the head of organized crime in Louisiana and along the Gulf Coast, although he always insisted he was just a tomato salesman.")

—and though I'm sure "property management" is an honorable profession for many, Wes Locatelli was perceptive enough to suspect, appropriately enough, monkey business. Or maybe he had heard of Mikey "Monkey" Zak. None of the Lonely Fools (not Wes, not Edmund, not Hank) would ever ask Mikey much about his work beyond the most elementary of questions. (Unlike, later, Susannah. Susannah wasn't shy.) And because they weren't honest-to-God fools, or lacked curiosity in general, to Future Mikey that would suggest they had a grasp of the basic score.

Anyway, that Wednesday, Mikey drinking beside Wes. Day Three, poststorm. Air Force One does a flyover. Eighty-five percent of the city is flooded (nearly 10 percent of the Quarter, even). Cell service wonky, of course, but back at the loft, with an assist from a borrowed satphone, Wes had gotten through to Roxanne. Had learned that a homeowner association in Bossier City was accusing their second-grader (!) of bobsledding a zero-turn mower into a retention pond.

"Wesley the friggin' hellion," Wes was saying now, "so that's one more thing"—when there was a commotion out on Bourbon. Escalating voices, two people motherfucking each other at dusk. Something to see, so Mikey and Wes went to go see. And there, another familiar-faced stranger. Trilby Hank. He was standing in the middle of the darkening street in one of his darker suits, hollering at a sawed-off Yat in a Saints jersey.

They'd been gabbing about happenings in the convention center and the Superdome, the Lower Nine, and the Yat was of the opinion, brah, that the wet-city hordes would be coming to loot and burn. That, be ready, we about to find ourselves on the wrong side of a war been a long time coming . . . but my Glock be waiting, ya heard?

("Yat," Reader, as in a native speaker of the celebrated Yat dialect of many New Orleans working-class whites. And while that selfsame diction, syntax, and accent could certainly be detected in the speech of Mikey and Wes—and even, slightly, in that of African American transplant Hank Robertson and crisp stockbroker Edmund Gremillion—a distinction is being made here because with some, as with this Saints zealot, the Yat talk, and walk, is "Who dat?" supercharged. For the uninitiated, a line from *A Confederacy of Dunces:* "Mrs. Reilly called in that accent that occurs south of New Jersey only in New Orleans, that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico." Or, decades previous, this quote from William S. Burroughs: "The New Orleans accent is exactly similar to the accent of Brooklyn.")

And though the Yat was voicing a possibility all of them, including Hank, had been contemplating, hearing those fears out loud meant hearing how they sounded. The us-against-them of them. Hard not to be feeling some survivor's guilt. Hard not to be feeling as if they should be rushing toward the unlucky neighborhoods, trying to save lives (or trying, at least, to spread a dab of good). But then, from a barstool, some inebriated vet or other expert on crises and natural disasters would argue the best thing was to stay out of the way and let the cops and firefighters and military and what-all first responders and soldier-of-fortune security contractors do their jobs—and one by one all would nod at the practical wisdom of that.

Yes, obviously, the right and proper thing was to sit there drinking in stoic camaraderie, Quarter folk looking out for Quarter folk and beating the laissez les bons temps rouler hurricane party drum.

But the Yat was no artful debater, and a heavy reliance on words such as *thugs* and *bangers* and simply *dey* and *dem* had Hank seething. The Yat upping the ante with "fuckin' savages," which led to Hank woodpeckering an index finger betwixt the gold *5* and *7* on the Yat's Rickey Jackson throwback. And sawed-off or not, once you put your hands on a drunk Yat, well, he might do anything—this one entering into a weird, arm-swinging, figure eight of a capoeira dance, then hurling himself at skinny Hank like an Acadiana gamecock. They clenched and went to the ground.

On any other August 31st this would have been excellent entertainment for the crew at Johnny White's, and after a measured-in-seconds spell of uninspired grappling, NOPD gendarmes would push through a throng of whoopers to separate and cuff exhausted, Bourbon-grimed combatants now destined to wear orange togs in central lockup, peeling at Saran-wrapped bologna sandwiches while they waited for their arraignments. But on that night? No whooping throng. Just Mikey and Wes and a dozen other hushed Johnny White's patrons. And as for NOPD, even if there had been any prowling nearabout, they had bigger wrongs to right in the new Atlantis. You can forget about any cheering, or cheer even, because watching the scrawny black

man in the black suit and the short white man in the white Saints jersey roll around and growl wasn't doing anything but making everyone sad. The grand Quarter-as-cooperative experiment was already in peril.

Not that Mikey et al. were willing to get their hands dirty and intervene. Often as not, breaking up a fight means enrolling in that fight, and since it seemed unlikely these evenly matched warriors would to do any real harm to one another, Mikey was content to head inside and reclaim his spot at the bar.

Or that's where Mikey was angling when he heard the telltale clattering clack of hard plastic hitting hard asphalt. No cops around but a cop-popular heater, the vaunted Glock 22 itself, once shrouded by that blouse of a Saints jersey but now lying beside H. T. Robertson and the beta (and honky) Rickey Jackson. Hank had the Yat's left arm cricked in a sort of chicken-wing hold, but the Yat was reaching out with his right, trying to get at the pistol and turn a mild playground wrangle into at least a picayune *Times-Picayune* footnote for that day of woe. And though, in his defense, despite bragging about the precious Glock in an abstract way, the Yat hadn't done a quick draw to open things, appearances implied he was done fighting fair. So, for maybe the first time, but only because to pick up that Glock before the Yat did seemed sage, the sole way to guarantee Mikey wouldn't be catching a .40-cal. round to the heel during some prying-fingers-from-the-trigger struggle, Mikey stepped forward when everyone else stepped back.

And there was Mikey, figuring he now had to call it a night—the .38 at the apartment, concealed-carry permits being meaningless in bars (a law that, like most laws Mikey deemed to be in his own best interest, he obeyed . . . even Katrina wouldn't change that)—but walking off with a gently used Glock in recompense, knowing there was street money to be had for a throwaway piece of such rank, when he heard another telltale reverberation. Onomatopoeia again. The meat-hitting-bone *Bam!* of a fist to the jaw. Apparently the Yat had un-chicken-winged himself from Hank and started coming for Mikey in a silent charge. And since Mikey's new shirtless-under-overalls chum Wes Locatelli didn't want to risk stopping a stray shot with his Achilles, or elsewhere, any more than Mikey did, Wes had gone ahead and ambushed Mikey's would-be assailant before there was any Yat-on-the-back silliness.

Mikey spun around. The Yat had taken what had sounded like a stone-crusher of a punch amazingly well, only went to one knee, hand to chin like the thinking man cast by Rodin. "Brah, just give me my Glock," he was saying. "That's mine." And since the fight seemed to be out of him, and because otherwise the Yat would probably still be there today on the seven hundredth block of Bourbon, ranting and raving from St. Peter Street to Orleans Street about weapon theft and race relations, Mikey went ahead and skated the magazine into a burbling storm drain, jetsam detritus for Mistress Katrina, then laid Glock at Yat feet. No bullet had been chambered, so in the end Hank had perhaps been more in jeopardy of being pistol-whipped than shot—and the last any of them ever saw of the Yat he was corkscrewing his way down Bourbon, into the shadows with the empty cop gun holstered, jersey bloodied as if he were two

sacks and ten tackles into a slobberknocker with the Falcons, off to the locker room and in need of a brain scan. No 911 calls, no sirens, no police, no nothing. One of the most famous streets in the world was now largely boarded up and all but deserted.

Fast-forward fifteen minutes. Full dark, the Yat gone. All safe and joyous again in candlelit Johnny White's. After closer review, perchance this social experiment was on the right track. Justice had been meted out. Order had been restored. And Mikey and Wes were feeling especially good about themselves. Wes, especially, especially—being long past the age when a person can punch another person, deservedly or undeservedly, and not expect consequences and court dates to rain down. Wes couldn't stop grinning. He was a brawling Wank teenager anew, feeling the Axl and Slash, pre-Nirvana days when those Thor mitts wreaked havoc in Solo-cup-strewn lawns all across Westwego and Harvey and Gretna.

And Mikey was telling Wes if that punch was indeed "it" for him, his last real session of best-a-Yat violence, then in Mikey's biased and appreciative estimation he had gone out on a great note. So yes, all was secure and jolly in Johnny White's as the city around them drowned. Even Hank, the rawboned Spartan in the ruined suit, was one elbow on the bar with a Scotch neat, hand-painted tie loosened like Kid Denzel Sinatra as he tipped his street-dented trilby and thanked them for meddling once a gun got dropped into the mix. Hank pleased enough to have had something like a Neal Cassady, Dean Moriarty moment to not care, all that much, that he'd been less than triumphant even before that clack on the asphalt sent Mikey into gallant motion. The three of them were swapping turns buying, bathed in flickering and buttery light, the conversation and laughs coming easy, and by and by a tall guy dressed in what looked to be saltwater fishing apparel from Orvis or Puglia's asked if he might join them. Just one more example of that communal vibe I was speaking of before.

The man in quick-dry, wicking pastels was, of course, Edmund Gremillion. He'd missed the earlier excitement. Had only sauntered down to Johnny White's seeking, like all of them, a little fellowship and any intel that might have filtered down from the frontlines—and presto, one stool over, the lone free seat left in the place.

"Sure," said Wes. "Take a load off, Annie."

"Fanny," said Hank.

And forthwith, because Wes was still thumping with testosterone, he couldn't resist busting this rich fop's balls further, unaware that in due course they would be fast friends and even business partners: "Land any tarpon, cap?"

They were so young then! Wes kicked the vacant barstool, yukking affably, and Edmund sat, tossed his shuck of bangs, smiled. "Tarpon? Nice overalls. How's the coon hunting?"

"Uh-oh," said Hank. "Careful. Coon meaning raccoons?"

Edmund twirled a finger. "Raccoons indeed, sir. Sharp chapeau. Meyer the Hatter?"

"Oui, monsieur. Oui."

They looked at Mikey. He wearing what he almost always wore: faded blue jeans and ratty, three-eyelet Sperrys; a plain T-shirt or, as in New Madrid, a short-sleeved button-

down with not-observed-in-nature floral patterns. And perhaps, though probably not on that steamy evening, a brown-leather, artifact-from-the-seventies racer jacket he had salvaged from an abandoned house before burning the place to the ground (thereby concluding his management of *that* property). Mikey's first and only foray into arson, and somewhere in the top five worst things he had ever done. No one got hurt but Allstate, and no one but Allstate was supposed to get hurt. But still. Flames licking skyward from a big camelback shotgun on a blighted Bywater corner. Memories of his traumatized and pyrophobic father. Of Lino smirking about Jewish lightning. Mikey had nightmares for weeks about some imaginary, hide-and-seek kid he'd somehow missed. A child cowering in a closet, smoke sliding under the door.

"Bring it on," said Mikey. "The old Cat Stevens?"

"Can't see that," said Wes.

Hank shook his head. "Frank Serpico, more like."

"I'm Edmund," said Edmund, and the four got acquainted. Stockbroker, writer, carpenter, property manager. But Edmund wasn't just there for companionship and tittle-tattle, actually. "So," he said, "the thaw wars. You gents know anything about generators? I can pay, of course. Or wine and dine, at a minimum."

And that is the why of why, with nothing better to do, their party of four trekked from Johnny White's to Edmund's condo on St. Philip. Wes on one side of a balcony, turning wrenches; Edmund on the other, grilling last year's Folsom-shot dove over charwood. Mikey and Hank (the once-meteoric, cub-lion novelist Mikey would later cuckold) between them—talking about the memoir Hank was, now, absolutely planning to write. The memoir that soon, sure enough, Hank would in fact write, devoting several pages of *A Boy Never Wept* to portraying that Bourbon fight as a much more enthralling episode than it had been in the real . . . in a chapter in which Edmund and Wes would be introduced by name . . . in a book that Mikey "Monkey" Zak, as a result of sitting Hank down one day to make a delicate but insistent request, would never be mentioned even by alias or pseudonym . . . Mikey erased from moment after moment in which he had been present . . . many of his deeds, actions, and commentary integrated into the *A Boy Never Wept* "character" of Wes Locatelli.

But for now Mikey was only half listening—instead standing there during a catastrophe and smelling bacon-wrapped dove breasts, drinking pinot and still existing, not yet erased, pondering when he would be returned to air-conditioned regularity.

Which is to say (and as he would admit): if Mikey was selfish and self-centered at forty, hell, you should have seen him at thirty.

They were on their second microcourtyard progression of what Edmund insisted on plurally referring to—incorrectly, Hank kept telling him—as *gins* and tonic when a triangle-shaped face appeared in the porthole window cut into the back door of Hank's apartment.

Tuyen Phan. MFA student, home wrecker, ghost-tour shepherdess. She had been tucked away in the bedroom, Mikey realized, hidden like a twenty-six-year-old version of that Bywater scamp he'd immolated in a hundred nightmares.

Mikey had met her already, had happened upon Hank and Tuyen that very morning—the two of them strolling across Jackson Square after eating beignets at Du Monde. A hackneyed rom-com take on the Big Easy, just begging for work-from-home Susannah to happen upon them as well. And the six-year-old he-twins too, for that matter. (Rubbing Clark and Clark-Robertson noses in the powdered sugar on Tuyen's pert chin, basically.) But until now Tuyen Phan had just been a name to Edmund and Wes, so engaged in side-hustle shoptalk, earlier, about: (1) their newly formed LLC; (2) the flipping of real estate; and (3) a condemned Algiers bar . . . Edmund as purchaser, Wes as renovator . . . that Mikey hadn't had the chance to gleefully describe all her bizarro glory to them from behind the indigo-suited back of their host.

Edmund's brow furrowed. "Wait. That's her? She's white?"

"Christ," said Wes—who, though forty-five and still flat-topped (and now modeling, like Mikey, his oxford, blue-blazer, and blue-jeans best), was an aficionado of heavy metal and evidently, to some extent, third-wave feminist punk. "She's a damn riot grrrl."

True enough. A white girl with longish jagged black hair streaked with pink, much of the right side of her head shaved down to her natural-blond prickles so as to flaunt a full-scale tattoo, seen that morning by Mikey but not yet within view of the others, of a curled shrimp done in Mardi Gras dyes. A good-sized shrimp. Sixteen to twenty count, Mikey reckoned. The girl had a boyish body but pale, dollish features. That triangular face with eyes like a tragic kitten. Earlier she'd been wearing a plaid dress—but now, staring at them through the round window, just a comely, if dystopian, visage.

Hank lifted his trilby and beckoned her. Poof, she disappeared.

"Later on," said Mikey.

"Shoot," said Hank. "She must be writing."

"Writing what? Potions?" Wes stirred at a pretend cauldron. "Feels like haint just passed through me."

"We're doing a screenplay together. Man, I done gone over this."

"No," said Edmund—bow-tied, thrilled, and already on record that self-respecting couples have affairs, not "open" anything. "You done not."

Hank looked up from the sheet-score clefs and notes boogying on his own silky (but Windsored) tie. "Well, we are. And I apologize, but Tuyen can be intro with strangers."

"Intro?" Mikey asked.

"Introverted."

A peculiar quality, Mikey thought, for a gal who, even with the recent arrival of rich (boyfriend?) Hank, screamed goblin stories at rum-swilling tourists for her income. But, indeed, she hadn't said three words to Mikey in the square.

"Xin chào," she had said.

"Hola," he had said.

Mikey leaned back in his chair, ready to enjoy the coming interrogation but also wondering whether he shouldn't be pulling for Tuyen to eventually win across-the-board acceptance and approval. Whether, in his perfect world, she'd be in Hank's life to stay.

Then Hank, lest the others think this screenplay business was a fifty-fifty effort between artistic equals, began to elaborate. "The plot's all mine," he said. "But film, telling stories visually, is a new medium for me. So Tuyen's right there to help with the formatting and such. There's special screenwriting software, for one, and, you know, other things most prose writers don't have much experience with, and—"

"Cut," said Edmund. "You told us she was Vietnamese."

"I told you her *name* was Vietnamese." Hank had switched to his dad voice—the tone both patronizing and scolding. "She was adopted. People of color are allowed to adopt white children, believe it or not."

None of them said anything for a moment. But then, Wes: "No, they aren't."

"No?"

"Never seen it. Where was this? Canada?"

Hank stopped feigning aggravation. "She's a unicorn," he conceded. He turned to Mikey now, and like every time Hank focused on him, Mikey partly expected to be asked how it felt to fuck another man's wife. "A unicorn, I should add, who had me promise to put her in touch with you."

"Me? Why?"

"Let's rap later. After dinner."

Edmund huffed. "More secrets. He means once you and I are gone, Wes."

"Yup," said Wes. "Rude."

Here it is, Mikey decided. The girl with the shrimp tattoo was a violation of some small-print open-separation prohibition against May–December romances, and Susannah, learning of this infraction, had launched the warhead she'd been hiding from Hank ever since that Friday, three years back . . . self-employed Susannah flying solo at Jazz Fest 2012 . . . Hank at home, parenting . . . Mommy's day off . . . Susannah smiling tipsily as she spots Mikey up by the Congo Square Stage . . . a tallboy raised liberty-torch high in her hands . . . Susannah nudging her way his way through a crowd gathered to hear Ziggy Marley . . . then pressing herself to Mikey when she sees he is alone too . . . her sticky knee between his own sticky knees . . . her beery lips at his ear . . . the music so loud, so loud . . . "Is This Love," the son covering the dead father à la Mikey with Reuben . . . Susannah saying, I've noticed how you look at me . . . Dance, Mikey, dance.

Or had she said Monkey? Regardless, he came back at Susannah in kind—ultimately taking her for a dicey motorcycle ride that would precurse rough, up-against-the-bricks sex in the mildewed passageway to his apartment.

2015 Susannah to 2015 Hank: Chew on that while your film minx is outgrowing ya, my hubby.

So, bombs away. DEFCON 1 initiated all because Hank had gone wild *this* year. And in this Tuyen-intensified state of apprehension concerning his Susannah liaison (yet, oddly, zero guilt still) Mikey couldn't bear the thought of suffering through dinner on edge, waiting for the "later" when Hank would take a limp swing at him, and/or demand he confess his sins, and/or call him a scumbag sociopath, and/or whatever else Hank planned on doing once *they* were alone together.

Mikey sighed. Time, finally, as Bob Marley wrote and Ziggy Marley sang, to throw his cards on the table. "No," he said to Hank. "Now's fine."

"Yeah?"

"What's this about?"

Hank shrugged. "Okay. You collect the rent from that fish market on Rampart, don't you? This hits on what you do for a living. People you could know."

Another slight sigh, but one of relief. Not that Mikey would permit this to become an interview—name any names that mattered, etc.—but going down this road with Hank for a few more steps was certainly better than the path Mikey thought they might be taking.

Edmund rubbed his long hands together. "Fantastic. I may have inquiries myself. Wes?"

"Not me." Wes covered his ears. "Locatelli was never here."

"Go ahead, Hank."

"Have you heard of Mancuso Seafood?"

"In Chalmette?"

"And some things on the Northshore."

"I've heard of them."

Hank nodded. "Well, Tuyen's family, her *Vietnamese American* family, they're shrimpers. And I guess her brother had a falling out with the Mancusos. A misunderstanding she was hoping you might be able to smooth, you know, in the off chance you and the Mancusos had friends in common or you—"

"Cut," said Wes. "She was adopted by boat people?"

Edmund laughed. "Now I'm with Wes. Impossible."

But Mikey wasn't laughing. "Let me ask this, Hank—you been telling your girl about me?"

Which, as a thing to say, sort of quieted the courtyard.

"Man, only for my movie," said Hank. "But it's set fifty years in the future. A destroyed New Orleans. Anarchy. Interesting peeps of various stripes. Resourceful peeps. So you aren't a character or anything, Mikey—but yes, there is a character, a character who very quickly became very, very different from you, but who, in the beginning, yes, was nonetheless inspired quite a lot by you. As a starting-off point in the creation process, I mean. So okay, yes, mea culpa. Maybe in spitballing with Tuyen I did say more about you, the actual you, than I should have."

"Because you're in love with her." Wes lifted his glass, clearing the air with a grin. "May their first child be a masculine child."

Hank reached over and put a slender arm around Mikey's shoulder. His breath was cold, smelled like juniper berries and lime. "So would it be copacetic if she called you? I *am* sorry—but, honestly, I couldn't have told her much, am I wrong? I think we can all agree you've never shared a lot there."

Edmund nodded in solemn solidarity. "Agreed."

(And Wes, Wes was being Wes, not letting it go, muttering, Get real, no US of A adoption agency would give a white baby to Asian shrimpers.)

Mikey, though, had tuned out. Hank wasn't wrong. They hardly knew shit about him as a pseudo-"mob associate." Mikey had always made sure of that. So this seemed harmless enough. No serious breach of confidence or trust. (Not that Mikey was one to chuck stones—i.e., Susannah.) So yes, sitting there, Mikey wasn't feeling peeved anymore. He had no right.

Instead, Mikey was feeling surprisingly flattered. Flattered that Hank saw him as resourceful. Of the type who might still be standing during the toxic end of days, when a talent for getting by and surviving would become the most important skill set to have.

Purely hypothetically: Under apocalyptic circumstances, even if just a fiction, what more could Susannah want in a man?

Part 2

> All you have to do is recognize an opportunity.
>
> —Meyer Lansky

Thursday, and Mikey was waiting for Mr. Yarbrough in the glassed patio of a neo-plantation house of a home. But beyond that glass, instead of genteel CSA cotton fields was the wide fairway of a par five—a replica of some paragon hole in faraway Scotland. Morning dew on the ground. A white flock of cattle egrets. Grass as green as pond algae.

Metairie Country Club. Carlos Marcello—a criminal, a dago, a son of a farmer—had joked: "You gotta die before you can get in there." But in this, the last lustrum of Talbot Yarbrough's lengthy life, he'd managed what Marcello never would have been able to pull off. Years pass, memories fade, and over time Mr. Yarbrough's law firm had grown reputable enough to soften the concerns of MCC bluebloods.

As for Mikey, Mikey and his Nigerian-immigrant cabdriver, he was only there because he'd been summoned. Yesterday, eating in casual fine-dining clothes at Muriel's with the Lonely Fools (but still secretly, and paradoxically, both meditating on Susannah Clark and trying not to think about her), a before-the-bread-pudding phone call from Mr. Yarbrough because:

The notorious Horse Killer—Mikey's absentee landlord, one of Mr. Yarbrough's most dubious clients—had unexpectedly lived long enough to be medically paroled,

come October, from FCI Oakdale . . . and would finally be returning to New Orleans after nearly two decades in that southwestern Louisiana prison, mangling crossword puzzles and cheating at bourré, having paid his debt to society for orchestrating a shock-the-conscience Thoroughbred equinicide in the Gay Nineties, part 2. Racketeering. Insurance, mail, and wire fraud. Animal cruelty. That last one (and the whiff of Cosa Nostra about him) sealing his throw-the-RICO-book-at-him fate, the renowned and silver-tongued Mr. Yarbrough in his corner or not. The Horse Killer an eighty-five-year-old yardbird who now, cage set to open ("Sorry for the inconvenience, Monkey"), wanted his goomah-fondling hideaway back for himself, certain he could have at least a few years of lecherous him-and-his-live-in-nurse-Consuelo freedom in the Quarter until the time came for hell, the ultimate prison, and an eternity of torture-tramplings administered by vengeful, sharp-hooved herds of unshod Satan stallions.

"Come see me tomorrow morning," Mr. Yarbrough had said to Mikey on the phone. "Finish your supper."

An embarrassment, a humiliation, for Mikey to be sitting here now, in his Lonely Fools "oxford, blue-blazer, and blue-jeans best," gelled and combed but soon to be homeless, eschewing a short but perspiratory journey on his Kawasaki because he wanted to look ironed and presentable—hoping some thought had been given to the financial hit he'd be taking as a result of these developments. He was a parasite rejected by a host. A tick torn from an ankle.

Mr. Yarbrough entered that patio vivarium in the same plush robe and slippers he'd answered the door in. He still had his sweep of ivory hair but was otherwise a shrunken widower mutation of the social-climbing man Mikey had fetched towels for as a schoolboy pool boy at Southern Yacht Club. Mr. Yarbrough had a porcelain mug of coffee in each shaky hand, and big Miss Hattie (*his* live-in nurse) was watching, frowning, from the living room—as if this effort might kill her golden goose.

Mikey made to stand, but Mr. Yarbrough flapped an elbow, motioning for him to keep seated. "I trust straight is acceptable," he said. "Only way to drink quality chicory."

Porcelain on a sinker-cypress table. The scraping of a chair across stained concrete. Mr. Yarbrough was rarely seen downtown anymore, but on occasion Mikey was farmed out, by Lino, to do surveillance work for some of the firm's associates and lesser partners. So Mikey knew that at the office, in private, they often called Mr. Yarbrough "the Fixer." In jest, but not totally, because Mr. Yarbrough was indeed a well-connected relic of times most of those juris-doctorate esquires never got to live. Friday lunches in the no-credit-cards Galatoire's and hotel Sazeracs at the first-era Roosevelt. Christmas envelopes for the clerk-of-court gals. Canal Street more like the Champs-Élysées than the drab traffic choke it had become.

Mikey cradled a mug in his hands. The coffee was oily and fuming. "Yessir. Thank you."

"Not at all, Monkey. Things busy?"

"Seem so."

"Très bon."

"Nineteen years I've been living there, Mr. Yarbrough. He wants me out in two weeks?"

A gasping sound—Mr. Yarbrough, sighing. "And I'll assume you've been a superlative caretaker." He shrugged Larry King shoulders. "Disappointed, I could understand. But indignant? He could have rented the place for good coinage. Sold it, even. So break out the classifieds. Dip into all that money you must've hoarded since . . . when'd you move in? Was it,'95? '96?"

Mikey toyed with a blazer button. A bit sheepish because, admittedly, "all that money" did amount to about sixty-five grand in a Whitney Bank savings account, plus another twenty stashed in a safe deposit box. Spurious "property management" earnings that thus far had not, knock on cypress, drawn the attention of the IRS. But, still, there's no beating free.

"All right," said Mikey. "But two weeks? And out of nowhere? With all due respect—"

Mr. Yarbrough laughed and then coughed as he tugged at the sleeve of his robe. "*With all due respect.* Know what the judges say? They say they hear that, what they in fact hear is, Your Honor, just who did you suck to get that black dress?"

"Well, that's not what I meant."

"Surely! Just a mot I remembered from the Pleistocene. But better to say 'with respect' or 'with all respect' or 'respectfully.' Least if you catch yourself in a courtroom."

Two red dogs, Irish setters, were running loose on the fairway, no owner in sight. The cattle egrets lifted, and the golf-course gundogs went to their haunches, watching the flock sail a turquoise sky.

No, Mr. Yarbrough wasn't wrong. Mikey got that he was being ungrateful. There might be a storage unit and some couch-crashing in his future, but he'd be able to find another (albeit not rent-free) place in the Quarter or, at worst, just across Esplanade in the gentrified or gentrifying Marigny. Below-market friend-of-a-friend digs. And though he had always expected his eviction to come with the Horse Killer's death versus a compassionate-release emancipation, it was not as if Mikey hadn't fathomed he would be booted from that apartment eventually.

So what was really bothering him? Maybe the nagging sensation that, little by little, there would be fewer and fewer crumbs to feed on. All these dying old men, no next generation waiting to replace them. No one who would feel any particular obligation to serve as a Monkey benefactor. Any need to keep his pockets lined or a roof over his head, the Zak name be damned. Mikey had turned forty, and things were mostly okay. But what would fifty look like for him? Sixty?

Mr. Yarbrough smiled. "And it's thirteen days—not two weeks. With respect, start clearing your shit out. Yes?"

Bleak, that's what. Crumbs all gone, Mikey would wither and waste away. He didn't know it in that moment, sitting in Metairie Country Club and drinking quality chicory, but his First Life days were, also, already numbered.

A cab to RadioShack, a walk to the apartment, and then, that afternoon, shedding his Metairie Country Club groveling attire for older jeans and a Thomas Magnum shirt, Mikey went to see Lino at Bonsoir Antique. Partly to drop off a new burner and get paid for New Madrid. Partly to gently protest the shoddy treatment coming from the Horse Killer via "my hands are tied" emissary Mr. Yarbrough.

Dieter "Deet" Traeger. Former Army Ranger, only three years retired. Six-foot-four Schutzstaffel looks and a closetful of Adidas tracksuits. He was parked in a claw-footed chair between an armoire and a coffee table, in the polished-and-varnished bowels of the mishmash store, reading a paperback while defending the door to Lino's office. Traeger, like Mikey, wasn't made—not a smidgen of paisan blood in either of them—but he was still Lino's choice as to muscle and non-Mikey whatnot. Mikey and Traeger had an odd and sometimes testy relationship, but not an acrimonious one. Had been known to grab a pint or even a Saints game together.

"Where y'at and where you been, henchman? You seem grumpy."

"Vacation," Traeger muttered.

"Der Vaterland?" said Mikey. "Berlin? München?" And then, because Mikey sensed that Traeger—who could be persuasive, and who regularly bitched to him about their boss's archaic business model—was somehow behind Lino's goat-fuck toe-dip into the methamphetamine trade (thus making it Traeger's mess to scrub), Mikey added: "Or Missouri, perhaps?"

Traeger looked up, at last, from his book, contemplating him without speaking. He wasn't much older than Mikey, but tan-beret "Rangers Lead the Way" arrogance doesn't get turned in, at retirement, with the primo weaponry. Mikey liked to think of Traeger as the world's cockiest antique-shop security guard. The best method he knew for not being cowed by him.

"He around?" Mikey asked.

Traeger butterflied glossy book atop glossy coffee table. "Yeah, Monkey."

"*The Big Sleep*. Just watch the movie, Deet. Bogart, Bacall. A classic."

"You don't say. And here we are surrounded by antebellum TVs."

"The butler did it. Him or maybe that Carmen babe."

"Prick."

"Back off, Warchild. Seriously."

(Said Mikey—who, for whatever Mikey reason, made a habit of peppering Traeger with Bodhi and Johnny Utah quotes from *Point Break*.)

Traeger raised his chin, flexing his combat-vet neck to steroidian, touch-gloves girth. "Fear causes hesitation, and hesitation will cause your worst fears to come true."

"Huzzah! Nice!"

But Traeger was already reading again, so Mikey walked past him and knocked before easing the door open. Lino was at his desk, eating Pringles from the tube. He sat there blinking at Mikey, fingers and lips sheened with chip schmutz.

"Got a sec?" Mikey asked.

Lino wiped down with his sweat rag and nodded. "Coincidenza. I actually wanna meet with you about something."

Mikey closed the door, placed the fresh RadioShack on the desk without comment.

"You first," said Lino. "Talbot bullying you? Hurry up and tattle."

"So you know?"

"That's your news?"

Now Mikey felt like a pansy, a wuss, a mama's boy—but he pressed on. "I'm a little blindsided, Lino. Putting me in that apartment was your idea, right? To sweeten my salary or whatever?"

"Salary!" Lino capped the Pringles can and shook his head.

"Forget it," said Mikey.

"Any other calamities?"

"I don't guess."

"Chrissake." Lino opened a drawer and pulled out a bank envelope. "For Missouri. Have fun up there? Kid sounds like a real mamaluke."

Mikey had rung Lino on the way back from New Madrid to issue a truncated field report (i.e., Woody Coyne wants "another week"), and to complain about that sketchy experience in general. (As much as would be permitted, that is, and without letting on that Woody had mentioned a brother Cripper, the Ozarks, cook kitchens, etc.—Woody more or less painting a full picture of exactly what Lino's money had been for.) But deaf ears from Lino on such topic as well. And Mikey had then hurled *that* RadioShack off the I-55 Memphis and Arkansas Bridge, into the Mississippi, within sight of the slack-water channel where, in '97, Leonard Cohen "Hallelujah" virtuoso Jeff Buckley drowned. That final image of beautiful Buckley wading into the nighttime river clothed and singing the chorus to Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love"—and perhaps air-strumming the AABA guitar riff Jimmy Page had composed on a houseboat on the Thames—now the stuff of rock legend. From a river the song came, to a river the song went.

Lino passed him the envelope.

"Thanks," said Mikey, still aping confusion but indifference as to Lino's dealings with, yes, a mamaluke like Woody Coyne.

Then Lino told him that Woody, the budding meth-head youngster Mikey hoped he would never have to lay eyes on again, was coming to town. That Mikey would be meeting him tomorrow. That Woody would be giving back the same fifty thousand Mikey had driven up to him three days earlier.

Which could only mean, of course, that whatever deal had been made had been canceled. That on Tuesday, more than likely, somewhere along I-55 between Memphis and New Orleans, a homeward Mikey and a Missouri-ward Traeger *had* whizzed by one another. And yet, even knowing this, Mikey couldn't help himself. "But what do I give Woody?" he asked, just for ape-fun.

"Nothing. Go get me what's mine."

So other than a quick excursion out of the parishes, and suddenly having to prepare for his eviction, a solid representation of a normal workweek for Mikey. Go here, go there. Do this, do that. *Why* ain't ever your worry, Monkey.

And to be honest, I question whether Mikey Zak would, in his heart of hearts—despite some recent conundrums and perplexities, and despite some very uncharacteristic, examined-life living on his part—have had it any other way. Inform most men they'll be losing their home at the end of the month . . . well, for a few hours Mikey had felt the stress, the weight on the chest. But now, with new orders to carry out, he'd been restored to factory settings. A compartmentalized leaf in a stream, buoyant with the risky faith he'd be looked after, come what may, for as long as he did as he was told.

Mikey blew past Traeger, barely avoiding a ranger-smash dick slap, then stepped into the Royal Street, demon's-breath heat with a $1,500 bank envelope fattening his wallet and a vague (but again, not terribly pressing) awareness he should probably begin packing. Moving wasn't going to be a big production. Thirty or so boxes, Wes's pickup, and someone—hopefully Wes—to help with the middling pieces of furniture that didn't belong to the Horse Killer.

No, factory-setting Mikey typically didn't think hard about anything unless (or at least until) he had to. And he was rounding onto Canal, aiming to play twenty-one at Harrah's and have a beer, when he saw Tuyen Phan, Hank's concubine, walking out of the CVS across the across. She spotted Mikey about the same time he spotted her—and he signaled for her to hold up while he frogged through three lanes of Canal traffic, the neutral ground, then traffic.

Some substantial and surprising eagerness here. Almost as if Tuyen were Susannah. Almost as if Mikey were on a mission. Almost as if there were indeed thoughts in his head that he could not ignore, box, or push away.

Tuyen Phan was either sporting the same sleeveless belted plaid dress she'd had on when Mikey first met her yesterday morning, or one that looked exactly like it. And maybe she *had* been "intro" on Wednesday, or just in a sour mood, because she was all smiles today. As though instead of batteries, tampons, or a TriNessa dial, the CVS bag she was clutching contained a remedy to all ailments. Even her purple-green-gold head-shrimp seemed to be Mardi Gras grinning.

"Heya," said Mikey, slightly out of breath from his Canal crossing. "Hank—"

"Yes! Thank you!" said Tuyen, chipper as a twenty-six-year-old should always be.

"Don't thank me yet." Mikey pointed down the street. "But I'm off to Harrah's if you wanna join."

Tuyen pulled the half scalp of black-and-pink hair over the front of her left shoulder, began milking the strands with her fingers. "Sure you don't mind?" Boyish body or not, she was definitely pretty. Another Disney Channel alum gone rogue, flicking off the paparazzi and breaking up marriages. Team Tuyen. Team Susannah.

"So far I don't. We'll see."

"Peachy."

Then Tuyen yanked a phone, which Mikey never heard ring, from a beaded wristlet purse and took a call. She had started for Harrah's without him—her hint, Mikey figured, for him to get moving as well—and he walked along beside her in silence as she spoke to some person named Conrad about the best way to depict a lengthy telephone conversation in a film.

And this telephone conversation about telephone conversations went on for longer than Mikey could believe. Canal Street. Up the steps of Harrah's. Past the annoyed guard, grumbling about bad manners and millennials, who checked her ID at the door. Past line after line of clinking slots and beeping video-poker machines. Past the eye-fucking glances coming from motley semicircles of men grazing on green felt—because in their lewd guesstimation, any girl with a shrimp tattoo on her noodle likes to bone and bone well.

Just beyond the Hoodoo Lounge Mikey found an unoccupied and out-of-the-way spot to hunker. Two fabric chairs large enough for wolfhounds to curl up in. A knee-high and yard-wide cylinder of laminated wood for a table/footrest. One of those somewhat quiet casino corners where sad sacks go to drop their heads in their hands and ask themselves if that really just happened.

A permed and horn-rimmed matron of a cocktail waitress materialized. Tuyen slid the CVS bag under her chair and, finally, put her phone away. Mikey ordered an Abita. Tuyen a screwdriver with no ice. Exit waitress.

"Sorz," said Tuyen. "Conrad is such a pussy."

"Sounds like it."

"Thesis"—she made air quotes—"*emergency.*"

"He's writing a movie about a phone call?"

Laughter. Black lipstick. White teeth. "No."

"For what it's worth, what you were telling him seems right. He should just make it nose to nose. Have the characters meet up somewhere interesting. Same as how the people in movies are always more interesting than real people."

"And better looking."

"Aye."

Tuyen crossed her legs and pushed back in the chair. Captain Kirk at the helm. The Khaleesi on her throne. "I agree. But verisimilitude is critical for him. He's adapting a true story. Doesn't want to stray too far from the facts."

"Verisimilitude. That's the word?"

"Yeah."

"What's the true story?"

"He made me swear not to tell anyone."

"Pussy."

"Told ya." She shrugged. "The Vietnam War. I try to be a sensitivity reader for some of the cultural stuff. Don't know where a long call comes in. A marine phoning a journalist chick, I think."

"Semper fi."

"Oh. Were you—"

"Only for a minute. My old man, though."

The cocktail waitress who looked like a librarian brought their drinks. Mikey passed her his singular credit card and asked to keep the tab open, said he'd pay later with cash (as, except in rare instances, was his way). Exit waitress.

"I should be buying," said Tuyen. "But thanks."

"Nah. I'm rich at the now." Mikey smiled. "So what's this all about?"

Turns out Hank hadn't given the other Lonely Fools the most forthright summation of Tuyen Phan's background. Yes, that was the name she went by. And yes, she claimed to belong to a Vietnamese American family in Empire, Plaquemines Parish, near the cane-marsh finish of the Mississippi. But for the first twenty-two years of her life she had answered to a different name in Ohio. A birth name she didn't seem inclined to share with Mikey at Harrah's.

Things Tuyen *did* share: (1) foster home after foster home; (2) a high school guidance counselor who "got" her; (3) THE Ohio State University; (4) a philosophy professor who "got" her; (5) her Teach For America hitch in Louisiana, serving time at South Plaquemines Elementary; and (6) the benevolent, yet no doubt bewildered Vietnamese-refugee patriarch she persuaded, each of those two TFA years, to rent her a bed in his four-generations-under-one-roof house off Doullut Canal.

She wanted to live with people who would stimulate her and take her out of her comfort zone, perhaps absorb a new language.

Still unclear to Mikey: whether Tuyen had been technically adopted (improbable) or, rather, had simply changed her name as some kind of tribute to her new (even further bewildered, Mikey reckoned) father and clan. So, depending on your perspective—and level of calcified cynicism, ironic detachment—a wonderful, vocal-fried testament to social holism or an outrageous display of appropriation. A term her lover Hank, it should be noted, threw out whenever he saw a souvenir-shop voodoo doll or a jazz funeral for a "white-privileged" hipster.

Whew. Mikey was fading. A long hump getting to the reason Tuyen wanted his help. And then, non sequitur of non sequiturs, this girl from Ohio asked him what he knew about crabbing.

Mikey squinted at her. Color him confused. "Chicken necks, dip nets, the Pontchartrain. On the lakefront, Pop and I would . . . huh? Why?"

Tuyen nodded. "Okay, cool. But I have a younger brother—Trang. The men are all in shrimping mostly, but after high school Trang wanted to try something different. He went to Father for a loan. Enough money for a skiff, traps."

Mikey sipped his beer, listening as Tuyen provided a primer on the economics of the South Louisiana blue-crab fishery. Albeit, Reader, one that I, full disclosure, have supplemented quite a bit with information and minutiae gleaned from research and Mikey's memory of a "lengthy telephone conversation" he wound up having later that night with an angry, then pensive, then appreciative, Trang Phan himself.

Trang Phan—South Plaquemines High, class of 2013, the grandson of, yes, Wes, "boat people" able to evade South China Sea pirates long enough to be resettled in Louisiana—graduates and begins moving four hundred wire-mesh two-by-two-by-two-foot crab traps from his mouth-of-the-Mississippi parish to the small town of Lacombe on the northern shore of brackish Lake Pontchartrain, the best blue-crab waters in what has become, by far, the blue-crab-catchingest state in the US. He finds a slip at a shell-road marina for his fantailed Lafitte, rents a trailer on stilts down the way. And just a little farther along that Northshore road: Pontchartrain Crab Company, wholesale crab buyers and crab sellers, crab processors and crab distributors. Owned and operated by one J. B. Mancuso as a St. Tammany Parish branch of Chalmette-based Mancuso Seafood since the midnineties, when the revered Chesapeake Bay crab fishery began its decline in earnest. Crab-mad Maryland relying, for decades now, on Louisiana crabs often sold as Maryland and Chesapeake crabs in order to meet the impossible demand for local blues. Every day, before dawn, a refrigerated truck leaves the PCC loading dock for the New Orleans airport, laden with zip-tied fifty-pound boxes of No. 1 males, six inches or better from point to point, dormant in the cold but alive, bound for Baltimore-Washington International and then some waterfront restaurant where, at wooden tables overlooking the Chesapeake, merry Marylanders and tourists await them. And other than the set-free less-than-five-inch crabs (illegal) and egg-mass "sponge" crabs (very illegal), most everything else—i.e., the between-five-and-six-inch male crabs and the light-in-meat "kite" crabs; the greater-than-five-inch female crabs full of delicious, carroty roe that Yankees nonetheless cringe at for some reason—gets hauled into the PCC processing plant to be steamed . . . then picked and sorted in a sterile, chilled room into quarts of lump and jumbo lump, backfin, and claw. The paid-by-container, carpal-tunnel labor of Latinas in hairnets and surgical masks, lab coats over white Walmart sweats.

So into an ecosystem of predominately coonass and redneck Pontchartrain crabbers comes Trang Phan. Working alone, learning strange waters, exhausting body and mind. Within a few weeks he has constellations of buoy-marked traps lined throughout the northeastern Pontchartrain, checking and rebaiting a third of them each morning on a steady and profitable rotation. Two years pass, and already Trang has paid Father all of what he owes him. Money is coming in, life is hard but good. On a typical day Trang is parked at Buck's Marina and on the water by first light, his soggy flats of meaty, fish-farm catfish heads or oleaginous pogeys slowly defrosting in the sun. By noon the bait is gone and he is heaving slatted, burlap-topped crates of crabs onto his truck. Maybe seven crates of factory crabs; two crates of No. 1s; a quarter hamper of turning-softshell busters for the shedder tanks. Then he is off to the PCC loading dock to be weighed and paid. Trang buys more and more traps, hires a cousin to run a second boat.

Tuyen clapped her palms together like a croupier leaving. The hollows of both armpits were a whiskery blond thatch. "Small world, but you told Hank you might know the Mancusos?"

Hank and his embellishments. Mikey shook his head. "Not personally. But yeah, I said I might know people who probably know them. So what?"

One afternoon Trang is beneath his stilt-trailer, in the shade, pressure-washing the muck and lake grass off some traps, when J. B. Mancuso comes honking along. J. B. wants answers as to why Trang's factory boxes are entirely kites and five-to-six-inch crabs—and devoid of the fat greater-than-six-inch females that increase the picking-plant yield (or wind up being shipped live to Asian population centers on the West Coast and abroad). That is, the big, fat females justifying the per-pound price J. B. pays for factory crabs. And because young Trang doesn't realize he's been doing wrong he tells J. B. the truth. Being ambitious, and entrepreneurial, he had cut a deal with a boiling house over in Mandeville. Most Louisianans (like most Asians, apparently) are fine eating lady crabs—prefer them, even—so the Fin and Claw would take as many big, fat females as Trang could catch . . . at prices almost three times what he'd see selling them to J. B. as factory-crab includes . . . which means J. B. has been receiving pecked-through crates of factory crabs . . . which means J. B. isn't interested in *any* crabs from Trang going forward.

Good luck only peddling to your Mandeville Fuck and Clap—I don't make an example of you, everybody will be pulling this. You sell to me, it's all or nothing. Di đi mau and sayonara. None of that crate-skimming BS allowed.

And now no one else in Lacombe or thereabouts would buy factory crabs from Trang either. Not at the prices PCC paid, at least. So Tuyen, reasonably enough, was hoping Mikey or some Mikey confederate could maybe speak to J. B. Mancuso on Trang's behalf, resolving what to her seemed to be an honest mistake made by an honest neophyte still mastering the ins, outs, customs, and expectations of a new industry and a new parish.

Somewhere a jackpot siren went off. Jazz hands from Tuyen—as if she'd won through a surrogate. "Ridic thing to get blackballed over, right? Trang already had to send our cousin back to Empire."

Though Mikey was no genius, he had a knack for seeing angles. He stationed the Abita bottle between his decaying Sperrys, emptying his own hands for a sermon.

"Fancy this," he said. "You're a crabber, and a kid—a Vietnamese kid, no less—shows up and kicks ass, outworking you on a lake you think of as yours. No huge worry because as of now there's plenty of lake and plenty of crabs. But one Vietnamese crabber becomes two Vietnamese crabbers, and who's to say two won't become three, four, five, twenty, because—"

"Racism."

"Racism, capitalism. A lot of the *isms.* That St. Tammany navy had been belly-aching for some time, is my guess. Then a Boudreaux hears a Thibodeaux chattering about Trang-and-a-restaurant scuttlebutt and snitches—and J. B., though not really, really mad, suspects the best way to keep the current majority happy, and the status quo, is to cut ties with Empire Trang because if more and more Vietnamese move in soon they'll not just be catching crabs but buying crabs too. Then J. B. isn't set-

ting the price anymore. So the crabbers don't want competition, and J. B. don't want competition."

Mikey picked up his beer and drained it. "So this problem is bigger than you might think. An unfixable problem, in my opinion. Palestine unfixable. And, sorry, nobody I know would care."

"Nobody?" Tuyen looked crushed. "Where's that leave Trang?"

"Search me. But I can tell you what I think he should do."

"Okay."

"Go see J. B., hat in hand, and say he's decided to get out of the crabbing business. Ask J. B. to spread the word. Hell, maybe he'll even find some buyers for all Trang's equipment and such. I doubt that would be an issue, so now your brother has bank for a fresh start at something else, somewhere else."

"That's what this was. He didn't want to be a shrimper."

"Shrimping. Crabbing. No real difference. Naw, this was a failure of imagination."

Trust me, Mikey thought, I would know. Yet another boy trying not to be his father yet being him. Preacher heal thyself—but instead Mikey kept holding forth.

"Trang needs to blaze his own path. Things were going good, but in that trick you're just a hurricane or a hernia away from welfare. Or those other crabbers get nasty with him? Yeah, J. B. did him a favor. Remind the Trangiac he's still a puppy. Tell him to take the money and jet. Help him understand he doesn't have a choice."

Tuyen began to say something but stopped. Mikey had given many versions of this speech to many versions of aggrieved and resentful people over the years. Don't fight the inevitable, quit thinking about what is and isn't fair. Part of his job description. And he had heard as much himself from Mr. Yarbrough, and Lino, that same day. Eaten his own ration of shit. So he felt confident he'd read the situation correctly, given Tuyen some good advice to pass along to her ostensible brother.

Or not. Because later on—and this was blowhard Hank's fault, bragging about his criminal friend, Mikey's rumored .0025-percenter links—Tuyen must have pulled a one-eighty, deciding she should have challenged Mikey when he had told her, quite sincerely, he didn't "personally" know any Mancusos. So Tuyen gave Mikey's number to Trang, and Trang called him. Nighttime now. Mikey still at Harrah's but alone. Trang wanted to vent. Rise to the challenge and tell J. B. Mancuso, via Mikey, that he could go fuck himself. Mikey was fare-thee buzzed when Trang called, sort of enjoyed having someone to yak with as Harrah's jangled and whirled around him. By and by Mikey was able to calm him down ("It's Trey," said Trang Phan. "Only my parents and Tuyen call me Trang.") and receive a more detailed account of those Lacombe troubles. Then Mikey shared more details about *himself* than he probably intended. Not about how he made his own living, of course, but about how he knew what it was like to be taught, also as a pup, that the world has even less intention of playing nice with you than a casino does.

The year is 2026 now, as I write this, but I can report that, thanks to Mikey or not, by the spring of 2016 Trey Phan was a walk-on shortstop at Delgado Community

College. A good-looking jock with new dreams, smashing baseballs and schoolwork and Dolphin batgirls. Reuben Zak used to say he learned more in a 'Nam month than in the whole of his life. So for Trey, those two years in Lacombe as a crabber: his Vietnam, right down to the defeated retreat.

But first Mikey and Tuyen had a few more drinks, shooting the breeze about nothing important. And then, in the bright outside—Mikey coming down the steps of Harrah's with her as if they'd just gotten married and were leaving Gomorrah's city hall, Tuyen glassy-eyed and smiley and swinging a CVS bag (but that one-eighty en route to distrust already in motion)—she said, "Be straight with me. Promise?"

"Sure."

"Does he miss her?"

Took Mikey a beat, but he realized she was talking about Clark and Robertson. Tuyen stood there staring, waiting on his reply, and while being stared at Mikey remembered what he'd forgotten. That he had meant to gamble some of his Thursday away. He began floating backward, like a blue crab escaping, back up the steps, headed for those felt tables.

"Run along now," he told her. "Run along, run along, run along."

Yes, Reuben Zak had the jungles of Vietnam—and Trey Phan, yes, the shallow waters of the Pontchartrain—but Mikey, Mikey spent a portion of his own salad years on something of a searching-for-himself rove. Give a boy a mother who seems to hate him and a father who dies too soon. Watch that lad drift.

So, in 1993, Reuben's funeral at Hebrew Rest in Gentilly (a month after Carlos Marcello's Jefferson Parish funeral), then Mikey's high school graduation, and then: an ill-advised and disastrous, but all-expenses-paid Taglit-Birthright Israel trip that terminal Reuben—at the urging of Besthoff the Elder, a hospice-trained mensch of a rabbi emeritus who had known ZeeZee, having been the mohet at Reuben's brit milah and therefore present for both the start and the finish, Reuben finally embracing Judaism now that death was embracing him—had made Mikey agree to, swear to.

A ten-day summer tour that saw Mikey, at Ein Gedi Kibbutz on Night Eight, saying fuck you and so long to his group of "young adults of Jewish heritage, aged eighteen to twenty-six, hoping to discover new meaning in their personal Jewish identity and connection to Jewish history and culture."

A self-banishment from his diaspora cohort that had Mikey taking a succession of Egged buses to Tel Aviv, where he guzzled Goldstar lagers alone and unshaven on a brown beach for the one day and one night until the flight back to the States . . . a flight that consisted of eleven hours on an El Al plane with his former comrades in faith gibbering and sparkling from their experiences and awakenings, but shunning sandy, stubbled Mikey Zak, the Philistine, the black sheep, the apostate . . . even heavy-breasted Mitzi Wasserman and heavy-breasted Maya Wexler, from Scarsdale and Hartford, respectively . . . the flouncy and perpetually tank-topped Brandeis undergrads who'd sold him down the river, lying as they had about whether they knew

Mikey was in the closet of their hotel room on that Ein Gedi desert-oasis evening, his pockets stuffed with strawberry-flavored condoms and mini-bottles of absinthy arak . . . items the three had in fact purchased together on a horny adolescent whim from a Jerusalem Super-Pharm on Day Six.

And then, after that, after all of that:

Resolute Gen Xer Jews starbursted home from JFK, and dissolute Mikey was restored to New Orleans, stung by the injustice of his well-nigh herem but relieved he hadn't been detained as some international, strawberry-fetishizing Amer-Jew night stalker by the Shin Bet—and later that very same summer he bought a backpack big enough to hold his universe, then thumbed west through Louisiana to the Atchafalaya Basin and Bayou Teche, St. Mary Parish, to find his mother's tribe and the place Mikey had always hoped might help explain Joan, and therefore himself, never forgetting a Chitimacha story that, either to frighten him or simply because Joan was an expert at being an unsuitable mother, she had sometimes told him when he was a child.

How before the Spanish, the French, the English—before Louisiana and before America—Bayou Teche was born from the death of a snake. An enormous moccasin that stretched for miles. A rippling ridgeline of scales. Braves raced for the high piece of land that held their village of palmetto huts. An evil thing is coming, they announced. The approaching thunder you hear is her journey toward us all.

They were still a strong tribe then. Pre-Columbus. Pre–de Soto. Pre-genocide. But the Chitimacha chief decided they should hide in the surrounding swamp until the colossal mother-snake had passed. Night fell, night lifted, and they watched from the safety of cypresses as she pushed her monstrous head into the village, her forked tongue tasting the air. The snake was waiting for the Chitimacha. So a second dark night, and refusing to run or stay hidden, at midday every man, young and old, went at the sunning snake with bows, spears, clubs. And though many Chitimacha were lost, an arrowhead fashioned from the large bones of a garfish finally slit a slit pupil, the snake carving a deep and winding trench into the earth as she twisted and coiled.

And this trench became their bayou.

Mikey was sure (or was he?) there must have been other, gentler bedtime stories from Joan, even flashes of kindness, kisses to the forehead, moments of cuddling, but this was the story that imprinted. Generations and centuries later, and at last he saw Bayou Teche for himself. The village now a reservation—several hundred acres against that shining serpent of water. Less than a thousand Chitimacha alive and almost half of them here, nestled by the bayou. The hitchhiking boy saddled into his massive backpack, then walked from the highway onto the reservation. Broad-shouldered and determined. A spill of curling, crow-feather hair. He was dressed in jeans and a sweaty undershirt. No dollars to his name due to the predations of a Morgan City truck-stop locker-picker, Mikey's wallet well-riffled while he took a sawbuck shower.

A tribal policeman was his welcome, and Mikey told the friendly but circumspect Sergeant Millet that, regardless of the Zak name on the driver's license, he was part

Chitimacha. I'm a LeBlanc, said Mikey, but on my mother's side. I am Joan LeBlanc's son.

But the Chitimacha only knew Joan LeBlanc as the rowdy, wayward girl who had left the reservation in '73 and vanished into the world. Mikey was told that both of Joan's parents had long ago died, and no '93 Chitimacha were willing to treat a wild-haired half-Ashkenazi as their own. (That summer also being a time of great suspicion of ancestry-asserting outsiders, those last few months before the Cypress Bayou Casino would open.)

A day in an unlocked cell at the single-story station house, Mikey an unsettling presence who said little and did little while a collection was gathered. That night Sergeant Millet watched him step onto a Lafayette Greyhound, a fistful of philanthropic bills clutched in Mikey's hand—then Mikey Zak became another Chitimacha story, never to be heard from on their reservation again.

And he never tells Joan, even as an older man, that he had been to the black bayou of her youth.

A peripatetic ward of America now, instead of returning to New Orleans Mikey kept west, still playing the searcher, the seeker. His grief for his aloof but guileless father like some clumsy and confusing thing he could not find a place for. Mikey's Holy Land dabblings with religion, and hedonism, had brought him no comfort or pleasure—and so began his foray into what he might have called secular asceticism, had he ever acquired those words. His decision to pursue the harshest life he could create for himself . . . at least until he had the epiphany, the revelation, the insight he was so desperate to have.

First, Houston. Houston, where his Chitimacha money was quickly spent. Where he slept at night among the vagrant and the insane in a shelter run by Dominicans. Where he passed days pleading for change in dryer-vent carbon-monoxide canyons of concrete and glass. But even that wasn't austere enough for him, and his highway wanderings resumed. Asphalt mirages. Infinite skies. He raked pecans in the Rio Grande Valley, picked citrus in Arizona, cut lettuce in Monterey County. A sturdy, sunburnt drifter-lad moving somnolently beside the undocumented. Liking them, learning their Spanish, but never becoming more than an interloping curiosity, a misery tourist. Soon, to be a creature apart was all that he knew.

And in this way two full hobo-years slipped by. A knotted chunk of muscle following the harvest trail. A ghost on the shoulder of the road. A train-hopping phantom. Always alone until the next job. New England apples and blueberries. North Dakota sugar beets. Gutting sockeye on the slime line of a Bristol Bay factory ship. Then, with the country consumed, so many of her mysteries revealed, any romance well killed, Mikey renounced renunciation and peregrination, and despite Israel, despite the Chitimacha, made yet another attempt to connect with something bigger than himself because in truth he had never stopped wanting that—and because one morning, on a smoke break from a ship belly, watching at the rails as Kodiak cubs skirmished on a beach of stones, he'd finally had that epiphany he was seeking. Remembering, in a perfect model of

circularity, some words from a shriveled, Treblinka-survivor IDF chaplain, words that had meant nothing to Mikey at eighteen in Israel but now seemed to him, a teenager no more, to be the secret to salvation, religious *or* secular:

"Son, smile. Leave room for joy. One of God's greatest hopes is for you to be in good spirits when you pray."

Mikey had long since forsaken any speaking at Yahweh, but enough with misery. Or with misery of the selfish sort. Instead, a chance to serve, to be a soldier. No, a marine, as his father had been. A different childhood dream revisited, and on this occasion he wasn't turned away. 1995. Winter boot camp in San Diego. Infantry school at Pendleton. The black beard gone. Every jarhead, first and foremost, a rifleman. And so it was for Mikey. Popular with the enlisted equals for his newfound easygoing nature and what one (less-enamored) logophile officer called "laconic insouciance," Private Zak also had skills and intelligence he never realized he possessed—or at least had never truly tested. But in that brief window of Uncle Sam history there were no wars for Mikey to fight, and the childhood GI Joe dream had rarely involved mop buckets and peacetime.

Twentynine Palms, then. The Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center. Weeks of ever-increasing hunger and disquiet. Of his restlessness steadily returning. At dusk he would look out over the Mojave toward the Three Sisters, at the sun setting behind that crust of mountains, the khaki desert made luminous, and recall another desert and another sunset. The Negev and a Birthright trust circle, a campfire already crackling and Mikey from New Orleans—the kid with the dead father, no designs on college, never even bar mitzvahed, thousands of applications, imagine all those nice Jewish boys and girls snubbed for a hard-edged ruffian (someone high up must have definitely pulled strings) who had sniggered, for instance, at their argument over the *Are swordfish kosher?* schism—this Mikey suddenly talking, out of the blue, about how he didn't know if he belonged there either. If he wanted to be a real Jew, or even if the Jews should want him. Braless Mitzi and Maya beside him, his on-the-down-low, land-of-milk-and-honey girlfriends wishing they could jump him right then and there without causing a scandal, their sensitive, half-formed Crescent City lout. And even before everything fell apart the next night in Ein Gedi, and an apoplectic madricha dislodged him from a kibbutz closet, Braless Mitzi and Maya now Mitzi and Maya the Betrayers, Mikey knew he had taken a wrong turn at that Hebrew Rest funeral. That he never should have promised Besthoff the Elder he'd keep his word to Reuben and put in for this. That Jewish community, *that* tribe, was not for him, not yet at any rate, and in that clarity there was something like resolution, a turning of the page.

So yes, another rejection, later, by another tribe—the Chitimacha—and, eventually, another desert and another moment of resolution, another turning of the page. The AWOL getaway from Twentynine Palms to a crash-course Baja "surf school" that, a month post graduación, pummeled by a migratory SoCal gang of much more advanced *Point Break* wannabes whom Mikey had chastised for repeatedly cutting the lineup at

Punta Camalu, would earn hospitalized and deported Private Zak thirty-eight days in a military prison, a special court-martial, and a bad-conduct discharge.

And such was Mikey's end game. That discharge, I mean. Because as bats flittered across a bone of Mojave moon he had been thinking of you-ever-need-nothing-call-on-us Lino Puglisi crushing his hand after Reuben Zak was laid to rest in the same ground as Zuriel and Rashel (alongside an empty plot that Joan, Mikey knew even then, would promptly sell back to the cemetery). A sizzling, waterlogged city of mausoleums and tombs that cooked corpses like ovens—but Jews buried there in the inky dirt of Gentilly Ridge, topographic remnant of a primordial, antediluvian distributary of the Mississippi, because all come from dust and to dust all should return.

Twenty-one years old. Time for Mikey to go home and be a kept monkey.

Later on, after Harrah's, was one of those nights Mikey could only download in fragments. The main fragment being him . . . flush with cash due to an epic, supper-skipping, pause-for-a-paternal-chat-with-a-boy-crabber, lightning-in-a-bottle run on the blackjack tables, turning fifteen hundred bucks into almost five grand (but ultimately, to just three grand) . . . stumbly from seven or eight hours of (what had become) comped Abitas, then saccharine Old Fashioneds . . . sopping wet in a summer squall, eyes fixed on a top Pontalba balcony from empty St. Peter Street, thirty feet below . . . well after midnight but Tuyen's parting question about Hank and Susannah still ringing . . . when, as if invoked, sure enough (like, Mikey thought, an *Essence* photo-shoot Juliet) she stepped forth in a white nightgown, perching her ass on the paisleyed iron railing to take vespertine tokes from a one-hitter and listen to the rain . . . Susannah not showing him any interest at first, no doubt assuming he was just some straggling reveler . . . a slack-jawed, untethered imbecile from the hinterlands . . . her perhaps recollecting that myth that gets spread about farm turkeys, how they're too stupid not to stare up at a tempest and drown . . . until Mikey called her name through the storm, saying *Oh Susannah!* in a shouting and serenading whisper . . . and she broke from thinking of field poultry or Shakespeare or whatever and stood for him . . . her withdrawing from the balcony, her there with him on the dark but glistening street.

"Aw, Mikey," she said. "You're soaked."

"That balcony's the first place I ever saw you," he said, turkey stupidly.

Mikey awoke, hungover, the next morning in a bunk bed (of the twins), rocket-ship comforter (of a twin) swaddled around him, wearing a too-small Tulane T-shirt (of Hank) and too-small gym shorts (of Hank). He peeled a sticky note from his throbbing forehead, saw red ink on nuclear *Miami Vice* magenta:

> *Went for breakfast chow, so stay put. (And don't spaz—M & C are at my parents.)*

A chaste night, evidently. Though Mikey was confident he had tried for otherwise, was foggily cognizant of Susannah having stomped on his foot when he tried for that

otherwise, a chaste night. Which was to be expected because all between them had been chaste since those fast and furious two months of madness three years prior, that Susannah (being a woman, being smarter in such matters) generally referred to, when she referred to them at all, as "our slipup." A slipup that ended almost as swiftly as it had started. Susannah saying, insisting, they had to stop while they were ahead. That they'd gotten away with something folks hardly ever get away with. In another life, etc.—but we can't raze *this* life just for a lark. So let's quit now, as friends, and enjoy all those sugar memories.

Our slipup. A lark. Friends.

More accurately, *secret* friends. Because also, Susannah didn't think it would be bright for them to call/text/email anymore. And with Hank, the rest of the Quarter, everyone, unaware Mikey and Susannah even knew each other all that well, Mikey mostly just saw her when he saw her. In bars (with Hank). In restaurants (with her family). Out and about (with the twins and/or Hank, typically).

And yet, not often but sometimes—that past July, for example—Mikey saw her jogging on the new levee path in Algiers. A thing they both liked to do. Susannah a Lycra figure in leggings and a strappy sports bra. Her catching up to him or him catching up to her, keeping pace together for a spontaneous mile, then coming to a walk. Sweating, hearts pounding, feeling good. So good that on the ferry back to the city Mikey would find himself afraid to risk popping that bubble by making mention of their two months. The fact they were once lovers no longer the default setting for his thoughts, but still very near the front of his brain. Despite her talk of slipups, larks, friendship, if Susannah ever gave him the green light again he would tackle her. Go rolling off a ferry or down the grass of a levee, teeth clicking against teeth. Mikey kissing her as many times as he could before they hit the water, the river.

The Pontalba Buildings form two opposing sides of Jackson Square. Four red-brick stories with shops and restaurants on their bottom floors—but in the above (balconied, then balconied, then unbalconied) floors: "the oldest, in some ways most somberly elegant, apartment houses in America," wrote Truman Capote, the droll imp, in a moment of earnest sincerity. So matching Parisian-style buildings, one fronting St. Peter and one fronting St. Ann, flanking the square with metal General Jackson on reared metal horse. Old Hickory doffing his hat like an exiting Lone Ranger, telling the noble steed, Hi-yo, get going.

But inside the Pontalba, no real sense of that lineage. Or at least not in the recently refurbished, and continually redecorated, Clark and Robertson apartment. Take the kitchen. A twenty-first-century room of granite countertops and brushed steel, a full set of copper cookware hooked to a ceiling rack—a Williams-Sonoma demo kitchen in a haunted castle. Mikey boiled a kettle and dumped finely ground coffee into a French press, his headache already lessening from a ten to a seven.

Then there was a sound like a ray gun, and Mikey, finally comprehending, moved through the apartment until he found a washer-dryer in a wide closet at the end of a hallway. His Levi's and Hawaiian were laundered and warm and waiting, and

his bulging wallet, citizen smartphone, RadioShack, and keys were stacked one atop the other on a Whirlpool. He changed and splashed water on his face, scrubbed his (unclicked) teeth with a Crest-dabbed finger—and had just finished pouring coffee when a lock ratcheted open and Susannah came through the door. All five foot three of her, paper sack from the Royal and St. Peter midget Rouses cradled in a toned arm. Mikey was framed in the entrance to her kitchen, with a damp beard and a mug of coffee. As if this were his kitchen too. *Their* kitchen, *their* apartment. None of this Hank's. Mrs. Zak home, breakfast soon, a vision of them, Mikey and Susannah as a couple, living in domestic bliss.

She looked amazing, as usual. Always stylish, even in the simple jade sarong she was wearing like a halter dress. No, especially in that simple sarong. With her giant tortoise-shell sunglasses and her red nails and red lips and busty-yet-petite yoga-superhero body. A new hairdo every year—in 2015 a cola windswept bob a few shades darker than her skin.

"Good," she said. "You're still here." She kicked the door shut and walked his way, bumping him aside with the flat of her Virabhadrasana-hardened hip, then laying her groceries out across a butcher block in the center of the kitchen. A loaf of French bread and a knob of chèvre. A half-dozen brown eggs and a vacuum-sealed sleeve of pancetta. She removed her glasses, kept soft but wary eyes aimed up at him. "Weren't you nice and turnt last night."

"Where are my shoes?"

"Bathtub. I done blow-dried 'em good, suh."

Mikey left and Sperry'd and returned. Susannah was at the butcher block now, cracking cage-free eggs into a bowl. A frying pan, already salted and peppered and oiled, was heating on the Viking range beside her. Mikey came closer, lurking like a morning-show anchor during a cooking demonstration, watching the professional chef, unsure what to do.

"Sorry," he said. "I don't remember much."

"What *do* you remember?"

"You giving me a PE uniform and a bed."

"Then you remember almost everything, Sleeping Beauty." She slapped him on the chest with a whisk. "But now we're gonna have real talk."

"I figured."

"Yeah, you figured." She tilted her head, cocked an eyebrow, began thrashing the eggs. "Because me just happening to be on the balcony in the middle of the night, which I occasionally do, yes, but lo and behold, there you are gawking, hollering my name like I'm Stella. So I'm wondering what's more probable. That I just so happened to spot you the one night you just so happened to be standing there, or that you've been standing out there more nights and more hours than I care to know. But that would be creepy. And you aren't creepy, right?"

"It's first thing you said. The 'just so happened' thing."

"Mm-hmm."

"Promise. I was being sentimental, I guess. Drunk."

"This isn't something we need to discuss?"

"Nope."

Susannah sliced at the pancetta sleeve with a Japanese knife. "My life is complicated enough right now," she said. "Okay?" But then, in practically the same breath: "Still seeing the stripper?"

"Who told you about her? Hank?"

"Obviously."

"Well, she was psycho. So no."

"Crash-your-apartment psycho?"

"That's the playbook, page one." Mikey broke into a lopsided grin. The rakish desperado, impudent and brazen. "He's having fun. Shouldn't you be?"

"Who says I'm not?"

He kept smiling, but the thought was a gut punch.

"And you don't need to narc on him, Mikey. I know about his pixie dream girl."

"You do?"

"We talk every day, cuz."

Mikey grunted. Jesus, *New York Times.* Modern Love? A fucking "open separation"? She should be divorcing that extraordinary idiot.

"She's not half as sexy as you," he said (finally).

"Who? Your stripper?" Susannah slid the beaten eggs into the hot pan. She was rolling her eyes, but Mikey could tell she was pleased. Not that she was wanting him to commence pawing at her jade fabric—but yes, pleased.

Save for his hangover, the best morning for Mikey in as long as he could recall. An overstuffed couch in the living room of a building not all that much younger than the entire blessed country, eating posh breakfast po'boys slathered with Creole mustard. Jawing, laughing, flirting. Melamine plates in their hands. Susannah's smooth legs folded under her. She didn't bring up Tuyen Phan again, so neither did Mikey. And definitely not that he'd been at Harrah's with her the day before—or Tuyen's out-of-left-field, ghost-tour-guide voice: *Does he miss her?* Words Mikey was choosing not to ponder at the moment because, even after three virtuous, platonic years, there was no person he enjoyed being around more than Susannah. Though whether this was *his* version of modern love or simply coming from a place of pent-up lust, he couldn't be certain.

Is this love? Is this love? Is this love? The gnarly Marley question, earworm, that had been there from jump. As for me—man, Reader, I don't know what it was either. But, for Mikey, trying to find that out had begun to feel like the true purpose of his life.

He glanced at his watch. "Dammit. I have to go meet someone."

Susannah threw a wadded napkin at him. "I was about to eighty-six you anyhow."

"Get in line." Mikey had already told her he would be losing his apartment soon. That (hyperbole, sure) he was about to be put on the street. He fired the napkin back

at her, and then—though he thought he was still exaggerating for effect—he in fact predicted the future. "But maybe," he said, "maybe I'm due for a change."

"That a threat?"

Susannah shimmied over for a long couch hug. The rich, unshowered smell of her. Talc and gardenia and Zatarain's mustard. Coffee and deodorant and breakfast steam. Her hair in his mouth. She pulled away but tugged at his beard.

"Call me," she said. "Fuck it." She shook her head, then nodded. "But look twice leaving, Mikey Boy. Look twice and don't dare be seen."

Four days since his return from Missouri, and Mikey was no less curious as to what *exact* sort of job he'd been sent there to do. Not snooping-curious—just curious. A line Mikey normally was careful not to cross. Thinking about whether Susannah ever had Mikey Zak daydreams was curious (and largely harmless). Planting himself outside her apartment last night was snooping-curious (and not harmless).

But, but, but . . . *Call me* . . . *Fuck it* . . . maybe being harmless was overrated.

So here it was 11:00 a.m. Friday, and Mikey was sitting in the food court at the Mississippi-fronting Riverwalk, the most somberly elegant indoor outlet mall in America, drinking a strawberry-banana smoothie with the early lunch crowd, his affinity for bananas yet another secret and embarrassing shame. Still appreciably hungover and still in his (albeit clean, courtesy of Susannah) Levi's and Hawaiian from yesterday. An oddly public place for this sequent appointment with high-pitched and measle-faced Woody Coyne, but Lino had assured that the kid knew to follow Mikey's lead. Clearly what Mikey had figured would happen, had happened. Screws had been tightened. Woody was begging and bargaining now. Attaboy, Traeger. Well done.

Don't get snooping-curious, Curious George . . . at least not in this affair. Just do the thing, *then* try to decide if Susannah telling him to call meant there might be a sequel in the works for them too.

As for Woody, he'd been standing inside the Nordstrom Rack and watching Mikey for ten minutes. The boy wonder—Tuyen Phan, good grief, was older than him—looked much worse off than even dragging-ass Mikey did. As greasy, fidgety, sleepless, and scarecrowy as he'd been up in New Madrid. Torn jeans and a John Deere cap. An Ozark Harley-Davidson T-shirt. Perhaps the outfit he would most prefer to die in. The brands he wanted to be repping at the pearly gates. Please lemme in, Mister Petey. I'm 'Merican made.

Mikey, knockoff Ray-Bans on, was slyly watching his watcher, interested how long Woody would spy before saying hello, but finally he hooked the phony Wayfarers to a belt loop and waved at him from the table. Though fifty grand is surely beaucoup money—and indeed, between the Pontalba and here, Mike had swung by his apartment for the concealed-under-his-Maui-shirt .38—this didn't have to be a Bourne movie.

At first Woody turned his back, pretending not to see him, but then he steeled himself and began a slouching walk from the excess-inventory Nordstrom into the food court, his lank brown hair tucked under that lime-green Deere hat. He had a five-and-

dime yellow backpack hanging from one shoulder, and Mikey was thankful baby sketch had known better than to glide into the Riverwalk carrying a shoebox full of cash.

Still, Bourne movie or not, there did need to be a handoff—and Mikey didn't love the idea of being caught on a CCTV camera. So Mikey stood, tossed his emptied smoothie into the trash, and did a little jerk with his chin so Woody would (hopefully) understand he was supposed to tail him to greater privacy.

Outside. Down an open-air escalator, through a glittering parking lot. Mikey walked toward the convention center, that Katrina pen of panic, then stopped across from the jambalaya-slinging, Cajun-music-nightly, tourist-trap pen of panic, Mulate's, on the corner of Julia. Woody was yards, yards, yards behind, and like the Jayhawker chasers he had no doubt descended from, he bowed his head and pumped his arms, breaking into a loping sprint. Mikey was flagging down a cab when Woody reached him.

"In you go, child," said Mikey.

Woody shrugged the backpack off. "I'm parked there," he said, pointing at the lot they had crossed.

"Come on. Just around the block is all."

The cab was one of those minivan taxis, and Mikey coasted the door open. A black driver with short gray hair. A pullover dashiki in Pan-African colors. Nigerian Afrobeat on the radio. Miracle of miracles, the same singsong, sweet-natured hack who had driven Mikey to Metairie Country Club yesterday for his eviction notice—but the guy didn't seem to remember or recognize him. Possibly the utmost coincidence of Mikey's summer, wasted on this useless bit of cosmic kismet. Mikey hopped in first, then waited on Woody.

But Woody only stood there, looking up and down the street, cradling that backpack, not paying Mikey or the cab or the cabbie any mind . . . until, snap, he started to sputter and stutter and scream. "That thing with Cripper," he said, his reedy voice rising from shrill whisper to sonic shout. "Your guy broke his fucking kneecap! His own goddamn army buddy! Y'all gonna burn!"

So yes, Traeger had been sent out on the warpath. A fresh, confirmed puzzle piece to attach to the ones from Mikey's New Madrid Monday—but now the benign cabbie was veins-in-the-forehead pissed. "What!" said the cabbie. "What!"

"Yeah," said Mikey. "What the what?"

"I'll beat you!" the cabbie yelled, as riled as Mikey had ever seen anyone become over the blatherings of a lunatic. Maybe it was the burn-in-hell thing. Maybe here was a man who, long before winning a visa lottery, had been made pious by beatific proselytizers on loan to West Africa from our Bible Belt. Who knows?

"Not talking to you, nig," said Woody to the cabbie.

Then Woody reached into a jean pocket so fast that Mikey almost went for the .38. Jesse James says, "That picture is awful dusty," and stands on a chair, gets shot in the back of the head by a young coward. And here is how that happens, Mikey marveled (for the second time in two encounters with herky-jerky Woody). Out of nowhere when you think you're in control but are actually unprepared, guard down,

driving a rental car on a Missouri highway or hunched over in a United Cab minivan. But when Woody's scabby hand reemerged all he was holding was a crooked cigarette, pinched between thumb and forefinger. An unfiltered Camel he was squiggling like an artist's brush.

"I don't even care about me," said Woody. "But stay away from my brother. Don't think I can't come find you and kill you."

From behind the wheel, the tape-delayed cabbie: "Oyibi! What! You call me a nigger?"

"Suck this dick," said Woody.

And now the cabbie was broadcasting live, seatbelt off, door open, coming around the nose of the minivan on a tear, attacking. Perfecto, Mikey was thinking, a melee on Convention Center Boulevard—but Woody spun away from the cabbie and threw the backpack into the minivan, a from-the-chest heave as if passing Mikey a basketball.

Then Woody was running again, the unlit cigarette in his mouth, untied Red Wings nearly spiraling from his feet.

The cabbie, thus eluded, shook his fist at retreating Woody before turning his rage toward Mikey, still sitting there in the minivan. The other arm lifted, and Mikey saw a can of pepper spray aimed at his face. So a Missouri-'Merican, and now a Nigerian American. A nation of bent-out-of-shape people taking turns getting the drop on him.

"It's cool, it's cool," said Mikey. "Fuck that kid." He took out his wallet and slowly, carefully, showed a wedge of blackjack Benjamins. "But his flaming asshole of a truck will be pulling out of that parking lot up there. Can we bop along for a bit?"

The cabbie glanced at the money but kept the pepper spray trained on Mikey's eyes. "He is not your friend?"

"No way. I hate him. Hate him so much I wanna make sure he's leaving for real."

What else could Mikey do? He didn't take threats from the unstable, of any age, lightly. Despite himself, he'd gone and let Woody Coyne get him snooping-curious.

Which is why, later that day—at a time when Mikey thought he'd be phoning Susannah Clark to ask how she felt about a jaunt to the oaks and cracked sidewalks of Uptown . . . cocktails at the Columns or beers at Cooter Brown's . . . oyster spaghetti at Vincent's or barbeque shrimp at Manale's . . . brassy music at the Maple Leaf or funk at Tip's or Prytania Theatre moviegoing . . . your call, Susannah (not that he cared who saw them if she didn't, but it need not be the Quarter, was his gist)—instead of any of that Mikey was on his Kawasaki, breaknecking to a Metairie doughnut shop next to the bedbug motel on Airline where, earlier, he and the valiant cabbie had parted from the Missouri-tagged ketchup Z71. The backpack of many twenties hidden away in Mikey's expiring apartment, Mikey telling himself there might be some wisdom in learning more about the stakes of this game.

He lapped stale coffee as he gazed across a gouged, moonscape parking lot at the Golden Pheasant Motel. A two-story get-a-room, Woody somewhere inside. Yes, Susannah would have to wait because now, spotting a well-tinted, plain-Jane Ford Econoline that could only be a surveillance van, the Man on a vigil of his own, Mikey was won-

dering if maybe, unwittingly, by taking a fiasco assignment from Lino (not that Mikey had a choice), he'd allowed himself to become both a target for deranged revenge *and* a photograph on some law-enforcement corkboard, thumbtacked lengths of yarn connecting Lino Puglisi to Woody Coyne via Mikey "Monkey" Zak.

Part 3

> Hustlers of the world, there is one Mark you cannot beat:
> The Mark Inside . . .
>
> —William S. Burroughs

"In the first act get your principal character up a tree; in the second act, throw stones at him; in the third, get him down gracefully." A maxim that predates celluloid—and Nabokov, to whom, among others, the quote is often attributed—but, nonetheless, an adage that is still repeated, chanted almost, in film schools and in Hollywood.

So imagine this as a movie, Reader. A *Last Days of Monkey Zak* movie with Mikey "Monkey" Zak as the principal character/star, and all the heretofore (literary, bookish) backstory, exposition, ruminations, and digressions pared down into a tight, 25-percent-of-the-screenplay, up-in-a-tree first act. Go ye to New Madrid, Monkey (the Inciting Incident). Then the eviction-from-his-apartment confabs with Talbot Yarbrough and Lino Puglisi, and that smoldering morning with Susannah Clark. Even, told through a combination of voiceover and (perhaps) flashback, his torturous memories of a drowned English girl and of his own troubled youth—as well as the blur of French Quarter years between age twenty-one and age forty. A coming-to-a-boil gumbo that brings us to the Riverwalk and then the sight of a surveillance van parked near a tawdry Airline Drive motel (and make no mistake, that was definitely a surveillance van).

Our heroic monkey has been pressed up that tree. But in first-act Zak we have a protagonist without, thus far, a conscious and tangible outside goal to drive the action, right? His growing displeasure with his line of work still just an itch at the moment. His ignoble but understandable, suppressed-longing infatuation with Susannah—my divine wife, my Suzkie, my everything—still more leashed than unleashed.

Yet, hopefully, an emotional "heart" story *has* been established: an unconscious *inner* need to change the course of a life.

And then, voilà, on that Friday, as first-act cinematic Zak teeters on the brink of action/agency/ambition, monkey in a tree and the real stones about to begin flying—the First Act Turning Point in the form of: (1) a nighttime call from his mother, a call he in fact answers, for their sole conversation in two years, Joan saying, "So they're telling me I have six months"; and (2) a buzz at the gate, proverbial knock at the door, as he shuts off the citizen smartphone, Susannah come apartment-crashing now, baffled by the tears on Mikey's cheeks he himself cannot believe.

Let me take you to her, my wife says to my Lonely Fool friend (after he explains). You'll hate yourself if you don't go.

Onward to act 2. The 50 percent bulk of *The Last Days of Monkey Zak* until the Second Act Turning Point signals the approach of a third and final act containing the picture's crisis, falling action, and resolution. Act 2, in contrast, an unrelenting dose of rising action and heightened stakes. Much of that act 1 quiet desperation now bottled in a Mercedes emancipated from a Canal Street parking garage. Susannah's Mercedes, my Mercedes, *our* shared, Napoleonic Code community-property Mercedes. My wife and my man Mikey in transit to a Central Florida horse town.

But this is a book, not a movie, of course. A narrative that dwells within the shadowlands between fiction and nonfiction. Mikey, Susannah, Tuyen. All three insist they have told me everything, alpha to omega, chapter and verse, of what they can remember of those 2015 events. Tuyen, for instance, speaking frankly about why she let half a calendar day pass, her conscience pecking at her, before coming to "newly separated Hank Robertson's newly acquired apartment on Chartres Street" to impart her tale of seeing a Palladium Silver Friday-night Mercedes curbed near Jackson Square, Mikey low in the passenger seat as Susannah wheeled a suitcase toward him. Tuyen, her midnight ghost tour under-enlisted and therefore canceled, watching in Goth vampress garb as Clark and Zak roll off for adventures unknown, an elopement if she had ever seen one, something to cheer for rather than interfere with because Tuyen was thinking, then, of the Baroness Micaela Almonester Pontalba. A local ghost who, incarnate, was made to renounce her love for an impecunious French Quarter man and marry a wealthy cousin—departing with him for France that same year, 1811, for several decades of despondent matrimony. A union tarnished most notably by an incident in a chateau near Senlis in which she was shot four times by the maniacal father-in-law. And then the baroness returning, in 1848, to New Orleans, maimed but afar of her husband. New Orleans, where, free at last, the baroness would oversee the construction of the Pontalba Buildings in which, centuries later, a man would eat a posh breakfast whilst eyeballing my wife's smooth, muscled legs.

Eventually, though, albeit twelve hours afterward, Tuyen's conscience won out over ghost thoughts and she told me what she had seen. Against her better instincts because she knew what did happen might happen. The chase, I mean.

Why not simply call Susannah? Well, in addition to our open-separation bar on dating mutual acquaintances, common sense now suggested some even older history between her and Mikey. So I wanted to catch Susannah in flagrante delicto, I'll admit, and then I wanted a volcanic, hurtful confrontation. Not that Tuyen knew *that* to be my plan. Minus a car, and by appealing to Tuyen's broad appetite for shenanigans in general, I was finally able to convince her this was to be spy-ops at most, clandestine information gathering—aware she would never agree to assist me with anything more than that.

But, lies.

Lies because, ultimately, I did indeed intend to come careening up to my wife and my friend, in Tuyen's beater of a Honda Civic, and tell Susannah I was quitting on our marriage too. That this nubile demoiselle was the woman I'd rather be with anyway.

But first, before any such confrontation, any such hurting, I also wanted to see where the hell they were going.

This century we live in! Me on my iPhone in Louisiana, locating a German car through a GPS app lauded for its usefulness in the recovery of stolen vehicles. As of noon Saturday the lovebirds—or at least that (i.e., lovebirds) was how *I* pictured them—were pinned to a Comfort Inn in Marianna, Florida. An interracial couple, fatigued by a night of till-daylight I-10 driving, that had drawn Panhandle stares as they paid extra for an early-morning check-in. Mikey slamming his dying mother for much of the trip but thrilled to be with Susannah. A Comfort Inn where (Susannah swears) our travelers napped in separate beds, woke for lunch, explored a Jackson County state park, had a steak dinner, and, back at the hotel, fucked (Susannah concedes) like wild animals before falling asleep two to a bed. Yours truly and Tuyen by then embarked on a road trip of our own. Me, in due course, having equally torrid and needful sex just a tenth of a mile away at the Day's Inn, Marianna. As if somehow, if Tuyen and I went hard enough and long enough, Susannah would hear us in the wee hours and feel her own soul shatter.

More than eleven years have passed now. Enough time for that which devastated me in the moment to be water under a bridge (I think). Enough time for none of them, not Susannah or Mikey or Tuyen, to begrudge me this short book. Susannah the last to assent, once the children gave their reluctant blessings as well. And I do believe her when she tells me she left nothing out. That only the forgotten has been kept from me and these pages.

But being a writer, an artist, a human being, I know that isn't possible. So when Susannah, at age fifty-six, laughs as she remembers the subterranean silliness of Florida Caverns State Park for me, a small group of tourists plus her and Mikey in a bulb-strung cave, the peanut-popping ranger feigning frightened dismay when the lights snuffed and they were plunged into black, helpless, claustrophobic dark (but the ranger then flipping some stealth switch back on, delivering his bright punch line and hooting at their fear)—yes, Susannah laughs, those eleven years so far downstream from us, but I know, I know, I know, she is also recalling, silently, to herself, how her hand went to Mikey's the instant that limestone darkness came.

Or maybe she *has* forgotten, but her hand had to have done this, no? Them in the dark and together, holding hands. These are the thoughts, Reader, the scraps of missing texture and nuance I am forced to conjure up and then type, that have hurt me the most. Still, after all those eleven years.

From time to time, and at least every five miles, Mikey would glance over at Susannah as the Panhandle pines enveloped them. They had awoken not two hours earlier from a languid night of postcarnal slumber, but—thanks to warm biscuits from the

Comfort Inn feed-yourself and the leathery coziness of that Mercedes crib, a soporific bubble of air conditioning on a hot summer day—Susannah was already dozing again, head against the window, a purloined hotel towel pulled to her chin. Mikey could have driven like that forever, one hand draped over the wheel and the other on nylon yoga pants, moving his Susannah thumb in gradual circles as Steely Dan jazz-rocked from the radio.

Donald Fagen and Walter Becker named Steely Dan after a steam-powered dildo in the William S. Burroughs novel *Naked Lunch*—and so said a risqué deejay between the Sunday tracks on his "Sirius '70s on 7" playlist. Mikey tried not to smile. Tried not to smile because Susannah might rouse and see him there, driving and grinning, feeling excellent, feeling absolutely stellar, and ever since New Orleans he'd been struggling to display the proper degree of gloominess around her. The quotient of woe that would keep her thinking of him as sad and vulnerable but not pathetic and pitiful. Yes, on Friday she had come to his apartment quite late and quite without warning, perfumed and lipsticked. And in the saga of women and men that has generally signified one thing (though a thing that had been delayed until Saturday night and bucolic, country-fried "City of Southern Charm" Marianna). Great, fantastic. The Comfort Inn had been an x-rated nirvana. But compassion and concern? Her *Let me take you to her* surprise? That seemed closer to the zip code of love than lust.

Cancer? Parkinson's? Rabies? He'd hung up on Joan without asking. But Mikey had already watched his father die from an irrepressible disease. The progenitor who had actually been good and meant *good* to him. And yes, that call from Joan had brought tears but only because she had frustrated him like she always frustrated him—this time to a level of weeping fury—saying, as she had, that this might be his last chance to be a son to her.

More like, in Mikey's mind, his last chance to strike a last blow for his childhood self, and by ignoring Joan's decline and demise, narrow the score. He didn't have the slightest intention of running to her bedside (or whatever Joan was expecting from him), but then Susannah walked into his apartment and entered the scene. Mikey abruptly perceiving, as Susannah tried to light a fire under his ass, not a yearning or hankering to become something to Joan (fuck that), but rather a gambit for testing the waters with Susannah. So no, Mikey's larcenous heart was far from breaking. If anything, it was bursting. Bursting with the charged ecstasy of being on an oxygen-rich open road with Susannah Clark. A voyage of discovery that might take them to that Shangri-La zip code of love, all responsibilities and obligations on pause for the moment. Mikey, Susannah—neither yet knowing how the journey would change them. What they'd be bringing back with them upon the return to their known worlds.

A clock on this quest, though—because, of course, there were indeed known-world responsibilities and obligations in New Orleans. For Susannah: our twins (who would be ending their Garden District sojourn with her parents on Thursday afternoon) and her Clark Interiors design firm, mainly. And for Mikey: lots of money that in no way belonged to him. After Susannah picked him up in the Mercedes, then parked at the

square (as he waited for her to pack, email her schedule-clearing assistant Rodney, and come down from our apartment), Mikey had made a burner-to-burner call that woke Lino and let him know, in their heavily coded manner, that they needed to be on the lookout for a vindictive and on-the-loose Woody. And that Woody, and maybe all of them, might have attracted cop and/or fed heat somehow. Mikey wondering aloud, if obliquely, whether he should get out of town and lie low with that fifty thousand for a few days. Skillful musings that, when Lino issued drowsy orders to that effect, left it seeming as if the idea had been his and not Mikey's.

But regarding Cripper Coyne's busted kneecap and Ozarkian crank and so forth—Mikey knew asking would be pointless (and stupid).

And the Saturday-night Marianna sex between Mikey and Susannah *had* been like x-rated erotica. I've pestered her into admitting that much. An uninterrupted flow that began, upon returning from dinner, even before they reached that Comfort Inn double. I can take it from there, and then some. Can imagine Susannah shoving shocked Mikey against the wall of an elevator, her kinked thigh working his crotch, their teeth tinted pink after two bottles of merlot, as if the steaks they had eaten—probably a rich rib eye for him and a tender filet for her, each rare and each bloody—had turned them into predatory carnivores, lycanthropes locked in battle. They spill from the elevator out and down the hallway, Susannah's legs tied around his waist as he carries her toward, and into, their room. Her wrap dress fully parted and his jeans at his knees now. Susannah lying back across a desk, lace pushed aside, a desk on which road-warrior sales reps updated spreadsheets and Skyped with their kids. But not tonight. Tonight a woman is spurring a man with her heels, crimson claws sunk into the cups of her crimson bra, timing his rhythm as he rams away like Steely Dan III from Yokohama.

So later, on Sunday, here Mikey was behind the wheel of the Mercedes—(In the trunk, with Susannah's suitcase: his duffel bag crammed with clothes and a pistol and a $50K yellow backpack. In his jean pockets: the powered-down citizen smartphone and the RadioShack, a wallet holding a couple grand in personal petty cash.)—Susannah beginning to stir as he made the turn onto I-75 to enter dangle Florida, the continent's penis. Smaller pines and sandy-soil scrub. Billboards advertising "near Magic Kingdom" hotels.

Four days for them to spend together before he had to have Susannah back in New Orleans. Enough time, perhaps, to answer that love-or-lust question. And if love, enough time, perhaps, for him to win this neglected queen (and checkmate me in the process). Yes, four days, but for now, with his mother's Ocala home just eighty miles distant, a more pressing problem in that he had hardly an hour to talk Susannah out of any destined-to-be-a-disaster drop-in on Joan. Hardly an hour to persuade her that instead they should breeze by that exit and keep on south to Orlando, Miami, and then, finally, Key West, the end of the road, the end of America, where, as iguanas looked on, they would decide what this was.

"Susannah," he said. "Screw her. I can't do it."

(From *Literary Outlaw: The Life and Times of William S. Burroughs:* "Another pet peeve was 'that bitch mother of Kerouac's,' as Burroughs described her to Helen. She was an evil old woman, domineering, and making Jack feel guilty about everything he owed her. . . . That was Neal, that was Jack, that was Burroughs, all fighting Momism.")

Susannah had her bare feet on the dash, awake but mute as she swirled a foam cup of cool coffee, about to speak, respond, reply, when her phone rang and she quickly axed Steely Dan and the enigmatic first lyrics of "Deacon Blues." An expanding man dawns, that shape is his shade.

"Who's that?" Mikey asked, even though he knew he shouldn't. He'd been here before with her. The sneaking around. The deceits and deceptions.

Susannah put up a finger, commanding him to keep quiet, and had a Sunday-morning chat with Chance and Marcus—but her eyes certainly on Mikey the whole time, giving him a *not a peep* look as she spoke of errands being run at Lakeside Mall . . . Metairie lies for our pure and precious boys. She obviously didn't want them, or anyone, to know about these hijinks.

But what if the iguana verdict *was* "love"? Might he then, Mikey considered, be able to keep him and Susannah together, forever and ever, by coming clean to me and forcing the matter? The wrath with which Susannah would meet such treachery eventually subsiding. Her realizing it had to be done because they were meant for one another. That, since they deserved happiness, Mikey telling all and confessing was for-the-best necessary.

But no. No because Mikey recognized—even if this *was* love, Ziggy Marley—Susannah had scads and scads more to lose than he did. The torching of any ships was her move to make.

"I love you," said Susannah, not to Mikey but the twins. "I love you both so much. Promise to be good?"

She ended the call and Mikey just sat there, driving within the hollowness and holding his breath.

"Don't I feel awesome," she whispered. And then, through clenched teeth: "Man up or you're turning this car around."

"You don't understand what Joan is like. She—"

"Man up," said Susannah, catching his words in a raised palm. "Man up."

So, end of discussion, and at the next rest stop Mikey pulled over and 411'd, on the RadioShack, the number and address for William and Joan Goss. And though he only pretended, then, to try calling his mother—"Sorry, Susannah," he lied, "no answer"—he had nonetheless committed himself, by securing that address (and with the coming assistance of the COMAND navigation system, stock in the 2014 S-Class), to an alternate sort of no-turning-back-now. Mikey standing there in zoysia or St. Augustine or Bahia grass even as a Civic went by at ten miles below the speed limit, Tuyen hopscotching the Mercedes. And me with my own cyber map in hand while I craned my head backward to search for them, then seeing those traitors. Susannah

doing her stretches by a concrete table, Mikey staring at the ground, their head start lost until Tuyen found a gas station where we would fill up and tarry. An Exxon where I sat and monitored my iPhone, waiting until our fractured convoy got rolling again.

Ocala, Florida. The official, planetary "Horse Capital of the World" per the US Patent and Trademark Office. Another early check-in and another hotel. Mikey half watching Tampa Bay pick apart the Saints in the Dome, and during a commercial for Gulfstream Park, a horse track down in Hallandale Beach, reflecting, as a man with no interest in horses himself, on the unlikely role the racing of enslaved Thoroughbreds had played in his life.

(The son of a father who passed twenty years showing up at the Fair Grounds every morning with his lunch pail for what had been envisioned—a perplexed but shrugging Carlos Marcello reminded Reuben Zak whenever they crossed paths—as basically a no-show job. The adult stepson of a jockey-cum-trainer who had once possessed enough wealth and assets to find himself positioned in conniving Joan's greedy sights. And the tenant-then-evictee of the Horse Killer, of course, of course. A man who, as the '95 Louisiana Derby approached, saw better payoff odds in poisoning his prized filly than in cheering her on.)

Mikey and Susannah had driven by his mother's trailer-park address before checking into the hotel. Casing the joint, in Lino Puglisi's antiquated antiquarian parlance, seeing what they could see. Mikey thinking a cursory, impromptu preview of that snake pit might help brace him for Joan. Two years since last contact. Two years since she'd made her first and only (and "fucking final," Joan had promised, with a spittle-flying shriek) trip to New Orleans as Mrs. Bill the Hoof. Her motive for coming as muddy as the Mississippi until she tried to coerce, then badger, then bulldoze Mikey into pulling her and Bill up from beneath an underwater mortgage. A state of affairs she blamed on her husband getting duped by an unspecified "shit Ponzi deal." Mikey's refusal to tide them over for a spell (and save them from drowning) a fucking final reason, he now supposed, Joan and his undiversified stepfather had gone from being upper-middle-class McMansion owners to plebeian trailer owners—their beige single-wide resting almost dead center in the ten rows of sidelong trailers, twenty to a row, that comprised Saddlelands Village.

A Best Western this time, but still a room with two beds, Susannah insisting they keep up appearances even at this second hotel in a Floridian land of strangers. She had a picnic spread out for them on one mattress. Salads and sandwiches and apples from a strip-mall this-ain't-Seattle Starbucks. Susannah being patient with him, for now.

Mikey kicked at the carpet. "All right," he said. "I'm bouncing."

Those yoga pants. A threadbare Fugees T-shirt. Susannah sitting with her spine against the headboard, legs apart, chicken Caesar on her lap. She tossed him an apple. "Bravo," she said between bites. "But eat a little first."

"I can't."

"Sure you can."

"Just leave whatever. I'll eat when I get back."

She chopped through some lettuce and laughed. "When *we* get back."

"What, you don't trust me?"

"Not in this I don't." She pointed a plastic knife at him, dissecting her rhesus macaque from afar, killing him softly. "You've been showing me something, Zak. Something Freudian. Never even heard you mention your mother before yesterday—but now? Now it's like you're the Prince of Denmark over there."

"Yeah," Mikey twisted at the apple until it broke into tidy red halves, "I know."

Susannah placed her salad on the nightstand. She has tried to explain what about him did it for her. The down-to-earth magnetism of a brawny but flat-stomached, off-the-cuff forty-year-old. Five years junior to both her and the spindly (my word), if prettier (her word), father of our children. And those giant and flitting brown eyes. Eyes that seemed to always be on guard, searching for anything that might bring her harm . . . even as each of you devours the other. Mikey lived an unorthodox and somewhat dangerous life. She knew that. Hell, she liked that.

My wife pulled off the Fugees tee and slid lower on the bed, scattering their picnic. A different crimson bra—and all of her guilt gone, deleted in that magical way a hotel room can obliterate any sense of the beyond.

"Or just come here and ravish, boy. Empty that noggin."

And as for me and Tuyen, the GPS-assisted hunters of those rutting naked-lunch fornicators? Well, a bit of deus ex machina in the form of a faulty fuel pump had struck us down thirty miles shy of Ocala. Tuyen's decrepit Civic coming to a drooping, shoulder-of-the-interstate stop while crossing the sinkhole gator-prairie south of Gainesville, temporarily saving hero and heroine from jilted Hank Robertson's "j'accuse." A tow truck then and Larry's Hogtown Auto, Fortuna granting Judas Mikey the better part of another unimpeded day to see the Joan plot line through.

Along with, of course, another unimpeded day for him to work on the story of Mikey and Susannah. That afternoon—ravished, showered, and once again dressed—Susannah guided our Mercedes through the asphalt lanes and tire-biting mongrels of Saddlelands Village, trailer-park children pausing from their rowdy, knee-scraping poor-kid games to think on the twice-in-one-Sunday presence of this luxury sedan. On a chocolate-MILF lady delivering some big white dude to the vinyl rectangle that sheltered the big-tittied Goss Bitch-Witch and her Girly Goss husband.

Mikey stepped out of the car and began lumbering across his mother's burnt ribbon of synthetic lawn, a boulder on his back as he angled to the front of the latitudinal trailer. Take a high road, he kept telling himself, but not the highest. Me and her aren't fixable so no use trying to have some impossible, and unwanted, breakthrough.

That fake lawn, then a wood deck barely the size of a Ping-Pong table. Mikey pounding on the door with the meat of his hand, Susannah observing from the Mercedes. She was parked behind a crap Chrysler that to Mikey looked much like, but could not

have been, the crap Chrysler that had once belonged to his father. The same car that high-school Mikey had watched Reuben drive off in for the Fair Grounds, morning after morning. Mikey wanted to turn around and go back to Susannah and forget this. Pause only long enough to tamp an oily rag into the Chrysler's filler neck. Sparks from a matchbook, then flames. An explosion in the distance as they escaped to a nearby meadow to hump against a horse.

The door opened. Picture a dark room and a figure illumined by the glow of a television. A woman—no, a pygmy man—in a straight-banged, platinum-blond wig that almost, almost, covered his Dumbo ears. He was wearing a fuchsia housecoat, and (once "those giant and flitting brown eyes" adjusted to the half-light) Mikey realized he was seeing the rouged and wrinkled features of Bill the Hoof. Yes, but a sexagenarian Bill dressed housewife-Warhol and chewing at lip. And when Bill frowned at him Mikey decided that, Friday night, on the phone with Joan in New Orleans, he must have misunderstood. That it was Bill, not her, who was the sick one. Slowly becoming loony as a dementia took hold.

"Bill?"

"Sure," said Bill, as sane, steady, and smooth as a horse whisperer, that cigarette croak somehow gone. "Mikey? Been a dog's age."

Mikey just nodded, refusing to be the first to acknowledge anything unusual was taking place—but pondering the likelihood his mother had been hacked to pieces, baked into a Corningware casserole.

And then, finally, further proof he wasn't hallucinating. Bill cupping the back of the wig like a WWII pinup and saying, "You okay with this? I can change."

"No," said Mikey. "I'm okay with it."

"Thank you."

"Joan around?"

"Buddy, not for weeks now." Bill cinched the housecoat tighter. "She's shacked with a cult. Them Bible-beaters at the ass of Half Moon Road."

"I don't know what that means. I thought she was sick. Bad sick."

His stepfather shrugged. "Dunno. You'd have to ask her."

"Where is Half Moon Road?"

"You coming in? Hot as Hades and we got the door wide."

Mikey was back in the Mercedes now, Susannah in the driver's seat and studying him. He stared straight ahead and let the weirdness wash through—until finally she grabbed him by the scruff of the neck, gave him a shake, and Mikey rolled his head toward her.

And as he spoke into the heat of her wrist he was transported, if just for a millisecond, to some fecund place where gardenias were blooming. "Susannah," he said, "strange things are afoot."

Mother Joan stood off by herself in aisle 3 of an Ocala Publix. She was checking and rechecking a grocery list against the items in her cart, waiting for Eva and Inga

to finish with their own shopping and find her. Whole-grain rice. Grits. Extra virgin olive oil. Almond butter. And on and on. Reverend Lucroy's handwriting small and neat—perfect black cursive that ran in dips and twirls down the white of an index card.

Earlier, leaving for the store: "Remember your Isaiah," the reverend had told them. "If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land." In the mornings this churchless preacher led them in Bible talk—or on Sundays, such as today, in a worship service—then, after dinner, on muggy evenings that had grown no cooler with the creeping nearness of autumn, he quizzed them on scripture. And though Joan believed in his Protestant deity as little as she did her Cajun-Catholic or Chitimacha ones, with each passing day at the farmhouse the better her nights had become. Less and less tossing and turning atop stiff sheets, a child of sixty-five in a bedroom of pale-pink wallpaper that on her worst, wallowing nights, in her most anxious and self-pitying hours, she had wanted to paint with her blood.

The reverend's teenage daughter—pretty Inga, adopted from a Latvian infant orphanage when the Lucroys were already in their fifties—was the first to arrive, her cart filled with their perishables for the week. Eggs and milk and cheese. Meat and bread and fish. The requested fruits and vegetables. Their meals were always simple but healthy, planned out by the reverend and prepared by wife Eva (with Inga, and now Joan, working beside her). Sayeth the reverend: "Most have lost the true path but, lo, we aren't most! Won't be infected by this evil world of things any more than can be avoided."

Inga came closer. Dimples and ropy yellow pigtails. Slate-blue eyes. Taller than Joan but only seventeen, her three much-older siblings all toiling on their itinerant lonesomes in various mission fields. Dissidents cut loose by United Pentecostal Church International because of their renegade father, they were, at present, spreading the reverend's unsanctioned eschaton End Times warning in Eastern Europe, Taiwan, the Caribbean: March 20, 2016—Palm Sunday—would bring the final hours of this earth as mankind knows it. But for now Inga the Latvian flamingo was a fervent, homeschooled smile, almost but not quite ready for her turn to fly away too. ("Alas," the reverend kept telling her, "no matter." In six months all of them would be reunited in Paradise.)

"Miss Joan," she said in her mellifluous, Florida cracker lilt, "did you find everything okay?"

"I did," said Joan, and Inga grinned even more widely, pushing their carts together like . . . like . . . like what? Déjà vu, but then a solid memory came to Joan. Barges linking. That city, and that river, seemed from some other lifetime.

"Organic." Inga tapped the jar of almond butter. "Yes, ma'am. That's what Daddy wants."

Joan tugged at the sides of her long cotton dress, smoothing out the ripples collected on her belled hips. "Good," she said.

And Joan was indeed glad to have chosen correctly, to have avoided potential censure, however subtle. She sometimes worried that under all the cheerfulness, Inga

resented her for glomming on to that devout family of excommunicated Pentecostals. But although Joan had probably done much to disappoint and annoy the Lucroys since being taken in by them, they had yet to direct a cross word at her. True Samaritans. And the reverend most of all. Those moments he would spend just with her—counseling her, encouraging her, as much friend and confidant as preacher—felt as if a jewel were being pressed into the palm of her hand. As if the reverend's fingers were covering her own, squeezing them closed, hiding a secret from the others (and from his Holy Spirit, even) that only the two of them would ever know.

Yes, he was Eva's husband. A married man *and* a man of God. But then, three nights past, an upsetting dream. Those same fingers removing one of the plain dresses Eva had given Joan to wear. Exploring the fullness of implanted breasts that had been defying gravity since the American Bicentennial, before moving lower, lower, lower, to the miniature red roses, their two thorned stems intertwined in a braid of jade, stamped above the cleft of her left thigh (punctuating one endpoint of the cesarean scar she thought of as her Mark of the Monkey). The reverend moans when he sees the tattoo, buries his face in graying tresses that had once been as black as the universe before creation. His hot, oniony breath in her ear. You were a harlot, he says. Lord, you are gorgeous.

So an unexpected and embarrassing dream. One with no basis in what Joan actually felt for the reverend. A betrayal of this family—and sure, a betrayal, yet again (not that she could make herself care), of her own spouse. Bill, who in the beginning had adored Joan almost as much as Reuben Zak, the schlemiel, had adored her in the beginning. Husbands (Reuben, then Bill) she had flogged and flailed, beating them into resigned submission for the crime of marrying a cunning and bilious serial philanderer who would never love either back.

If heaven or hell existed, Joan wondered what form her body would take there. Whether those twin roses, or that scar, would be erased. Whether she would even have a body at all.

"Joan?"

At last Eva had joined them with her own cart, in canned-goods-and-dried-pasta aisle 3, and Joan almost—almost—flushed in silent compunction. Tiny Eva. Seventy or so with owlish eyeglasses and a taut mercury-colored bun. Eva, who had spotted her at the I-75 flea market four Fridays previous. Joan glowering at a table of estate-sale bounty, then gasping for air, just then realizing, truly understanding, that she was an impoverished Sunshine State vixen on the wane who would die having nothing, or anyone, of value to her. Eva hugging her as Joan cried, the interstate a Hialeah-to-Canada whirl in the near distance.

And then Eva brought her to the farmhouse, and to him. "Rest for the night," the reverend had insisted. "Morning, we'll see about getting you home."

But at the farmhouse, soothed by the kindness of that peculiar but gentle family, Joan had experienced a massage of calm. One night became two, then, on the third day, a cathartic Saddlelands Village field trip in the leviathan Lucroy Suburban, Eva

as sole chaperone, motor running while Joan suitcased some things and tormented Bill. Bill—again, long ago conquered and subjugated—nodding at her like a well-broken horse as she told him she would be moving to Half Moon Road, for the indeterminate future, because he had failed her as both a provider and a husband. Then she told him she knew he was a she. That everybody in the whole fart-fuck trailer park knew. "So go on and fly your freak flag," she said. "You're worthless." And, just like that, a barn door opened and Bill the Hoof was set free.

Bullshit, maybe—but it makes an impression, hearing day in and day out that the world will be ending. And by and by Joan at least pretended to be coming around. Even complying, despite how much she hated the idea, with the reverend's entreaties that she call her estranged son and warn him about what was in store for March. The reverend listening over her shoulder as Joan, in no rush to be scoffed at, eased into that Mikey warning ("So they're telling me I have six months . . .") but then went on a tirade ("This might be your last chance to be a son to me . . ."), Mikey bailing on her before she could give the full specifics.

So yes, bullshit maybe. But as Joan looked at Eva now—this small, spry, heretical saint, cart piled high with cleaning supplies—she fought back the urge to collapse into Eva's kangaroo arms just as she had beside those flea-market belongings of the already dead. The urge to fall on her and demand some punishment, some penance, for that wicked dream.

"Is she okay, Mama?" Inga asked.

Eva swept the hair from Joan's face, gazing up at her as she waited for their eyes to meet. "Joan," said Eva, "are you ready to check out?"

A white two-story wood-frame. Tin roof, a wraparound porch. The farmhouse—now owned by the Lucroys, but at least a hundred years old—was on the outskirts of Ocala proper, on a mowed acre at the mile end of a dirt road that cut through a monoculture forest of planted loblolly. Chickens and a pigpen. A summer garden and a satsuma tree. Then furrowed pine row after furrowed pine row, no obvious traces of crop fields or pastures anymore.

A dogtrot porch connected the farmhouse to a one-room study where the reverend, when he wasn't seeing to various projects and chores, spent most of his waking hours. Reading from his Bible and preparing thoughts on what God expected from man, and what believers, in eternity, might expect from God.

A plague is here and we live beside that sickness.

But God will take us and heal us if we let Him.

Prior to his ouster the reverend had been head of the Temple of Praise, Ocala, for thirty years—and yet to Joan, when he spoke of the outside world he often sounded more like a CDC bureaucrat than the leader of any church (of any sort).

In the evenings the four of them ate together at a table in the kitchen, and tonight would be fresh food from the Publix run. Steamed zucchini and butternut squash. GreenWise tilapia. Faintly oiled rice. Eva was seasoning the fish for the broiler, and

Joan stood at a cutting board by the sink, slicing vegetables after Inga had washed them.

An intercom on the wall frizzled static, then the reverend's honeyed voice called from the study. "Joan?" he said. "Are you there?"

Inga went to the intercom. "It's me, Daddy."

More static, then: "Sweetie, will you send Miss Joan over?"

Joan put the knife down and saw that Inga was watching her. At lunch Joan had asked the reverend if she could speak with him later—but now the clever girl looked suspicious, as if Joan had been caught hatching some plan to dynamite their home.

Though Eva, for her part, seemed as blind as ever to the treachery of humans. "Shoo shoo," she said. "We have this managed."

Joan stepped out onto the dogtrot, sundown nearing. A month at the farmhouse, and this night would be as warm as any past night had been. From somewhere in the hazy margins came a mournful lowing. There are cows living in those pineys, Inga once told her. Cracker cattle turned feral. See them, you had better run.

Joan hurried across the dogtrot and turned the handle of the thick door that opened into the study.

The stained-glass lamp cornered on the reverend's enormous desk was afire. Stacks of papers, a Bible the size of a phone book. But he appeared through with working for the day. He was in his leather chair, hands folded in front of him.

Joan closed the door, the reverend standing for her as she approached, and she broke him down into parts. A vested, Confederate-gray suit. The neat white beard Eva had clipped that morning, before their Sunday service in the parlor. His gemstone eyes, intense and piercing but also caring, in that same attentiveness.

"Please," he said to her. "Let's sit."

There were two houndstooth wingbacks facing the desk. Joan settled into one, and the reverend returned to the leather chair. He would be seventy in December, according to Eva, but wore his age very well. Still, no more dreams of him since the other night, and Joan was grateful for that. Her knees on the hardwood floor of the study and his thumb on the intercom, letting wife and daughter listen in from the farmhouse. The complete implosion—yes, Inga—of the harmony Joan had come to need this place for.

"What did you wish to bandy, dear?"

Joan tucked a loose cord of her speckled hair. "First off, thanks for being you. I get it ain't so easy having me."

"Wrong. Some have entertained angels unawares." The reverend leaned over the desk, putting out his hands, and she took them. "Been such a miracle seeing you light up. I think we are making a believer of you, praise the Lord. Peace and quiet and ozone. The Good Word. Honest work and structure. Who doesn't need that?"

Joan uncoupled their hands, forcing herself to detach from him. "I'm a nympho," she said. "You should know that about me."

The reverend dropped his head. "Oh my. Okay, lust, okay."

"Means I can't really trust myself. Means I need for you to be sure I can trust *you.* If I can't, boot me out of here."

But before he could answer her, before the reverend could tell her what the thin, frozen smile on his face connoted, before she could deduce whether he was inching around the desk to hug her, kiss her, or throw her away—the gravel crunch of a car on Half Moon Road.

Joan went to the window.

"Who could that be?" said the reverend. And then, going to her, rubbing the small of hypersexual Joan's back, he whispered something about them only needing to make it to March.

Who could that be? Behind a windshield—blurry, doing nothing—a black-shirted black woman and a Hawaiian-shirted white man, their silver Mercedes now parked by the porch. But as the reverend (leery of entertaining *these* prospective, but anonymous, angels just yet) led her from the back door of the study to the back door of the main house, a flabbergasted Joan finally grasped that Mikey had come to her today, tonight, this minute, this second . . . her Jew-boy's timing as horrible as it had always been.

Meanwhile, back at the Golden Pheasant Motel . . .

Constructed in phased segments between 1925 and 1953, and often identified with Huey Long, Airline Highway runs left to right from the Atchafalaya River to the Mississippi to chemical-city Baton Rouge (as US 190), before sloping east-southeast to New Orleans (as US 61). One of the populist governor's many pet projects, this was a large component of his promise to constituents that he would bring a modern highway system to Louisiana. A component that would also substantially reduce the length of his journey from the state capitol to the merrymaking establishments of the rollicking Big Easy.

So a fast track to sin that was assigned the name Airline, as with "air-line" railroads, for being relatively flat and straight, the shortest route winning out over the easiest route; and not, as many believe, for the airports in New Orleans and Baton Rouge eventually built along that same highway.

In 1935 Huey Long, by then a US senator, was shot in the torso by the son of a political opponent. Two days later, his final words: "God, don't let me die. I have so much to do." But God did let Huey die, and the Kingfish didn't get to continue on with his just-announced run for the presidency or live to see the completion of his highway, nor with the postwar rise in car culture, the thoroughfare's emergence, in Jefferson Parish Metairie, as a sort of Gateway to New Orleans—a corridor of brightly painted roadside motels, built mostly in the forties and fifties. Motels such as the one-hundred-unit Town and Country, at 1225 Airline, headquarters of Mafia boss Carlos Marcello and purported command center for the JFK assassination. The sign on the back of the Little Man's office door reminding exiting visitors: THREE CAN KEEP A SECRET IF TWO ARE DEAD. This heyday of Airline lasting only into the sixties

and the inexorable regression that followed the opening of Interstate 10, a new traffic-light free path to French Quarter fun. Airline Highway's Metairie strip then steadily becoming the dodgy "I have sinned" locus where, in 1987, televangelist Jimmy Swaggart would be caught leaving the Travel Inn with a well-traveled prostitute. The Louisiana legislature's 1997 "Airline Drive" rebranding of that Jefferson Parish section of the Airline Highway not doing a great deal, if anything, to change the degenerating tide of things.

Ergo the arrival of Woody Coyne, a sickly tadpole beating on, washed ashore by that tide.

It took a special kind of courage—or at least chutzpah, perhaps—for Mikey to proceed, uninvited, to that sunset Central Florida farmhouse. He parked the Mercedes and thought of something a subdued Edmund Gremillion once told the Lonely Fools. Edmund saying that in his opinion a man doesn't stop being a boy, if ever, until he has walked gamely onto enough stages, and into enough rooms, that he has no actual desire to occupy or enter. Edmund speaking, at the time (the worst of the Great Recession), of informing his aged father that certain clients were now asking to work, exclusively, with the younger of the two Gremillions at Gremillion Investments.

"And simply being present isn't the same as being game," said Edmund. "I assure you this boy still has much walking to do."

That pithy Edmund insight has stuck with me as well. I think of sitting down with the twins to tell them Mommy and Daddy would be taking a break from their marriage but never from their children. Of, in a San Francisco nursing home just last year, holding my own mother's hand as she passed. Of eventually having to answer uncomfortably personal questions from bookworm strangers, and interviewers, about this hydra-headed biography/memoir/novel/novella.

So yes, all of us boys face, or should face, many such walks and rooms and stages in our lives. But as Mikey waited and waited in the car, still rattled by his encounter with Bill the Hoof, a porch light switched on and Susannah saw he couldn't do this alone. Instead they made *that* walk together, across a layer of gravel and onto the porch, *that* stage, the eventide lying over them, crickets and toads and katydids already screaming from the pines.

Mikey positioned Susannah behind him, shielding her, protecting her, as he knocked. Then the door creaked open to reveal an archetypical evil mother. A Southern Gothic, Grand Ole Opry take on Miss Havisham. Susannah says Joan Goss was pretty but in a harsh, hardscrabble way. No makeup and a dress from another century—tight on her buxom figure, but still the dress of a homesteader. Long-sleeved and collared, the white cloth stippled with hundreds of teensy wildflowers. First time in two years seeing her son . . . but Joan was scowling at him as if he'd rolled in atop a wagon of snake oil.

Not that Mikey was doing anything but scowling, himself. And he was counting Mississippis in his head, soon to turn and drive off if she didn't quit with this battle of

wills before he reached ten, when Susannah kicked at his foot and he yielded, letting his mother win yet another round in their infinite brawl.

"Hey," he said.

"You don't call?" said raspy Joan. "You just come find me?"

A man edged in beside her, hip to hip. The bewhiskered mayor for that cracker hamlet. Old but not elderly, if that makes any sense. A manicured and distinguished suit wearer in a town of homespun, his gold watch chain curling from a vest button to a vest pocket.

"Hello there, Mikey," said the man. "Joan has spoken of you. I'm the Reverend T. Raymond Lucroy."

"Heya, cult guy."

"Excuse me?"

"Her husband told me this is a cult, no?"

"Nothing of the sort."

Mikey grabbed the reverend's hand like a chimp seizing a Chiquita, grinning, meeting absurdity with absurdity, being disconcerting for the fuck-all hell of it. "Pleasure's mine!" he said. "Meet Susannah."

Point, Mikey—Joan was disconcerted. Disconcerted and glaring even harder. Joan now the child, Mikey now the parent. A father intent on embarrassing her in front of her newest cool hang.

Joan sniffed. "That a girlfriend?" She shook her head. "Figures."

Susannah hooked Mikey's elbow in her own, and for a moment they were all linked. Her arm fixed to his as he finished pumping away at T. Raymond Lucroy's alabaster hand, the reverend still fused to Joan in the clutch of the doorframe.

"I'm a she," said Susannah. "Not a that."

Joan's glare shifted.

"My manners," said the reverend. "Have you eaten dinner? Please, sup with us." He turned toward the savory, hot-cooking smell wafting at the four of them. Well, the *six* of them—because two other women had appeared behind him. His prim homesteader wife and their twiggy homesteader daughter. "Eva, Inga," he said. "Help me welcome our guests."

And who can guess what that dinner might have been like had I not come bouncing down the road then, in what else but a rented Ford Focus? A Shadow Black cannonball shot from the Hertz across the street from Larry's Hogtown Auto. Me, ready for that confrontation—through with playing cloak-and-dagger Othello to Susannah's Desdemona. And Tuyen, not yet aware that her birth control had misbehaved on us, in her Civic and on her way to Epcot, for all I knew. Having decided and then announced, earlier, in the waiting room of a godless Gainesville mechanic's open-on-Sunday garage, that it was "crazy obvious" I was still in love with my wife. That this was all getting too "real" for her so, goodbye, Hank. My blue dot making for their blue dot—then the aqua circles beginning to collide as I looked up from my iPhone and saw Susannah arm in arm with Mikey Zak on the porch of a farmhouse at dusk, hands above their eyes

and squinting into headlights. And instantly, boom, I was so overwhelmed by those crazy-obvious feelings for Susannah that I didn't care about anything but my wife and my family. All would be forgiven if we could simply hit reset, and that was what leapt into focus as I leapt from the Focus and came staggering and sloshing through the gravel.

"Suzkie," I said. "Let's go hash this out."

What could she say to the man in the cockeyed trilby? What choice did she have but to give me, her crying husband of fifteen years, the begging father of her children, a chance to be alone with her? My chance to tell her that which I'd only then realized I had come there to tell her?

Mikey—a monkey paw caught in the cookie jar and your mother right there, puzzled but smirking—you didn't even say a word. But why? Because you were relieved that at least I wasn't the law? Or, somehow, Woody Coyne? Mikey, how could you just stand there as Susannah uncrooked her arm from your own?

"Go and talk to your mother," she said, on her tiptoes, into your ear. "We'll deal with this when you're done."

And though I'll never admit, or believe, that with or without your surrender right then, your failure to act as a true romantic and fight for her, I wouldn't have won Susannah back in the end anyway, I can dig how difficult my victory must have been for you. Clark and Robertson got a reset, and Tuyen would get a baby. But Mikey?

Woody Coyne was an addict and therefore, pretty much by definition, both rash and relentless. A dangerous combination of traits that probably steered him to persuade his brother Cripper, or to be persuaded *by* his brother Cripper, that the ticket to a better life for the Coyne siblings—the means to their Kentucky-farmland dream—lay in Cripper running a business proposition by a retired 75th Ranger Regiment pal from New Orleans who, Cripper had heard, *knew* people in New Orleans.

So no real surprise Woody had been unable to show restraint. That he must have been audacious enough to skim, say, a thousand dollars in Jacksons from the bag of cash he would later throw at the wise-ass Puglisi courier on a street in New Orleans. Woody convincing Woody that the theft of a paltry one grand would be tolerated or never even discovered. Such is the way with addicts, and with that grand he now had enough money to get himself killed.

A snowballing tumble toward death that began with his decision not to immediately make for the roads that would take him north to Missouri. And a plunge that picked up further momentum when Woody noticed, on his meandering cruise through New Orleans, then Metairie, in search of a swaggering candyman, that the Golden Pheasant Motel was likely a beehive of iniquitous activity. Which is the reason, of course, the prostitutes-and-narcotics look of the place, that he made an Airline Drive U-turn in his red 4x4 and took a room there, tadpole meth head to the madness.

And leave it to an addict, as well, to notice that feeding ground but *not* the white-panel van stationed in the shopping center just across the eight Airline lanes—Jefferson

Parish sheriff's office vice squad detectives scrunched inside, keeping careful records of the comings and goings of hookers and johns, dealers and junkies, as they compiled evidence for the warrant that would authorize them to swoop into the office of Golden Pheasant owner Anish Mehta and take hold of his books. This op inspired by the success of a conjunct JPSO and IRS investigation into the doings of Anil and Maraben Patel, proprietors of two other Airline Drive motels of ill repute (La Village and the Trade Winds) that in 2010 were seized and shut down. The Patels ultimately charged with various state and federal crimes mostly stemming from an alleged underreporting of occupancy for tax purposes, their customers often being of the hourly variety.

So a big-picture operation—those same hookers, johns, dealers, and junkies free to go about their business unhindered for now, albeit observed, in the hope that before too long they would have to find alternate places to play (in *Orleans* Parish, ideally), and that Airline Drive, née Airline Highway, the once-bustling gateway to New Orleans, could move a small step closer to seeing her honor restored.

All told, between Friday afternoon and Saturday afternoon the JPSO vice squad detectives witnessed the Missouri Kid effect narco purchases in the Golden Pheasant parking lot on two separate occasions. Furtive handshakes with Anfernee Stewart (a nineteen-year-old *you good?* with numerous drug convictions already) executed so unremarkably that the detectives were hardly paying attention when, on Saturday night, Woody left room 105 for a third buy. Or maybe more commerce was not the objective this time—because as loitering Anfernee ambled over, Woody seemed to be berating him. An unhinged and blustering haka that compelled Anfernee, disrespected now, to raise a sideways Taurus to Woody's chest and pull the trigger.

Woodrow Kevin Coyne Jr., methamphetamine addict and underclass rural, two of our society's safest comedic punching bags (but why is that?), was expiring and his dreams would expire with him. The exact reason—substandard drugs, perhaps—to forever remain a mystery because Anfernee refused to punk out when hollering, Glocks-drawn detectives came running through the Airline traffic. And as if channeling, then abridging, Huey Long, the death-throe words of those young men, Woody and Anfernee, were one and the same.

"Please," they both begged, chanting at detectives between gurgles of blood. "Please!"

The reverend escorted Mikey and Joan across the dogtrot to his study. "Take as long as you'd like," he said. "Chat."

Chat. As if that farmhouse in the woods were a corporate retreat, and the time had come for breakout sessions. Mother and son to the study. Husband and wife to the Focus. The Lucroys to the kitchen. They would all meet back in an hour to share what they had learned. Three columns—CONTRITION, FORGIVENESS, CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT—built upon an IN THE PURSUIT OF SALVATION foundation . . . and supporting a gable roof simply marked: BETTER FUTURE.

Mikey closed the door in the reverend's Kenny Rogers face, figuring (he reports now) the sooner he could be done with Joan the sooner he could compose himself for his showdown with me. I've done wrong by you and for that I apologize, he planned to tell me. But I might love her.

Joan had already claimed a spot on an oxblood divan centered between bookshelves—so Mikey turned one of the houndstooth wingbacks to her, a full three yards separating them, and tried not to think of what could be happening with Susannah and me in the darkness beyond the porch. Instead he sat and did his best to concentrate on Joan, his mother. His only living kin was scrutinizing him with her lips pursed, hands on her lap. That old familiar comportment. They would always be enemies.

If he could change his mother, how would he change her? Would it help if she told him, even once, she didn't hate him? In the Best Western Susannah had asked Mikey what kind of relationship he wanted with Joan—and don't say none because we both know that can't be true. Give her a chance. Might be the reason she rousted you.

But though Susannah couldn't fathom this, Mikey well understood there are indeed mothers who despise their children from maternity ward to grave. And often the psychology isn't terribly complicated. A venomous woman becomes pregnant, for example, and marries a man for none of the rosy reasons, dooming herself to years of unhappiness. And at every step of the way, there is the son. The living, breathing, and needy memento of paths and possibilities that have been taken from her. A lightning rod for her anger and resentment.

"So here I am," said Mikey. "Ta-da."

"Yep," said Joan.

Mikey waited for more from her—that lye-scrubbed brothel madam stuffed into a sodbuster's dress. Mikey expecting, as he waited, to hear a Mercedes or a Ford, or maybe both, crank up and leave him. But nothing.

"You look ridiculous," he said. "Who are these people?"

Joan's eyes flashed, then narrowed. "Do you care?"

"Not really."

"And that's the Reuben in you. The stupid." She pointed at the window. "Who are *those* people?"

"Is it true? Are you dying?"

"He says that in March we're all dying. There, I warned you." Her hand flopped back to her lap. "Believe him, don't believe him. But if I'm staying here he said I had to tell you that."

Mikey laughed and then stood. "Okay, I get it. You've lost your mind. Die well, Joan."

"Suit yourself. I did what he asked." She smiled at him. "But don't run yet."

Later, though Joan never moved from her seat, in recalling that night Mikey would imagine her crawling across the floor before she began to speak again, a curving puddle

sliding across the hardwood toward him. Mikey backing away until he is against the wall and she is petting his feet like a curse-casting crone.

"I was nineteen," the stroking Goss Bitch-Witch purrs. "Reuben, others, they'd take their turns driving me home from the track—but when you happened I knew it was him. A snapped condom and an abortion were all you ever should have been." Suddenly that speaking puddle of Joan was anger distilled. "But only a kike jackass," she hissed, "would go to Hail Mary wops for advice."

In short order the rumors reached Marcello himself. The Little Man sent for Reuben and Joan. No scraps shops, he told them (just to prove that he could?). Over *your* dead bodies—like it or don't like it, you twos are getting hitched.

"He's your real father," Joan said to Mikey now. "Reuben didn't want you any more than I did."

"You done?" Mikey asked.

The puddle receded. Joan was on the divan and nodding at him. "I am. See to your black girl."

Mikey burrowed his fists into his jeans and sighed. "Everything you just told me you've told me before. Remember our big row when I came back from Israel? But in that version Pop got you drunk and raped you."

"Might as well have."

"Nope, too late—but nice try."

Mikey went out the door and dogtrotted to the wraparound porch, the kitchen windows a cartoon strip, or triptych, of eyes-closed Lucroys giving thanks for zucchini and squash, tilapia and rice. Then he was on the gravel, but Susannah and I were too busy hugging, too busy focus resetting, to notice him. Mikey stopped and observed us for a long while. He had lost Susannah, never had her, and something inside him went from rupturing to ruptured.

To the Mercedes. Mikey opened the trunk and finally we saw him, a revolver in one hand and a yellow backpack in the other. Items kept safe from Best Western maids but not safe from Mikey. Him not even glancing our way again as he disappeared back into the study.

And I wanted to disappear as well, to flee with fingers-to-her-mouth Susannah before Mikey returned and we were hot-blood murdered—but Susannah wouldn't let me. "No," she said. "That isn't who he is. Is it?"

The study, Joan watching as Mikey dropped the backpack on the floor, the .38 now hidden somewhere under the jungled front of his Aloha shirt. "You'll never die," he said to her. "It won't happen. Not in March, not ever."

Joan shrugged.

"Except . . ." Mikey kicked the backpack to her. "Just listen. Please. Really listen." He pulled the Smith from his waistband, pressed the stubby barrel to his heart. "There's a pile of money in there. A pile. And if I let you take that cash you have to promise me that tomorrow, and next year, and the next year, you *are* dead—dead to *me,* at least. No phone calls. No anything."

Reader, you're asking why, right? Even Mikey slaying his mother in a fit of pique would have made greater sense than doing what he did.

I don't know, and neither does Mikey. Perhaps he honestly believed he could shame Joan for once. Shame her into deciding her son meant more to her than marching toward a pretend Armageddon as a financially secure woman.

"Deal," said Joan.

Cut to me. Have I ever been so spooked? I was sitting in that Focus, preparing to hear a gunshot, ready for Mikey to emerge from the study and shoot reconciled and reset Clark and Robertson as well. Susannah still saying, *That isn't who he is*—when he came tromping alongside us and invaded my rental car. I could see his bearded face in the mirror. The man in the back seat, the assassin in a thousand movies.

Mikey spoke first. "Take care of her," he said. And when no one replied he just nodded and told me he was sorry.

You'd think he would have been sad—and maybe he was—but he was acting as if he knew how to skip past all those other stages of loss that precede acceptance. Almost nine years went by before we saw Mikey again.

8:30 p.m. Sunday, and Mikey was sitting with his duffel bag on a warm, moonlit curb in front of the Best Western, beneath some rustling varietal of palm, awaiting the cab a front-desk Wanda had called for him. Apparently the Ocala Greyhound station was in fact a Pilot Travel Center located seven I-75 miles north—and from a B-Dub lobby computer he also knew the next open seat toward New Orleans (with halts in Tallahassee–Panama City–Pensacola–Mobile . . . fuck) wouldn't roll for another six hours. But despite appearances Mikey was in fact in a rush to get to that truck-stop bus station, wanting to be gone from the hotel before Susannah and I came for the Mercedes.

Keys'll be in the room, Mikey had told us at the farmhouse, in parting. I can find my own way to Louisiana.

A monumental, impetuous mistake, giving Joan the money. Mikey Zak was the ass of Half Moon Road, that much he understood. Sure, with Susannah slipping away, and with Mikey seeing he was powerless to prevent that, no big shock he had grabbed the first opportunity that presented itself to boot someone from *his* life. But FIFTY THOUSAND DOLLARS? Fifty thousand dollars and a gun to his heart and, ugh, "you are dead—dead to me"? So dramatic. So idiotic. So embarrassing.

Hell, at that price point he could have paid to have three or four Joans much more than metaphorically killed—but instead he had set her up for retirement (or a humdinger of an Armageddon party). Take that.

So now Mikey was in a bind. What he could have done, and no doubt what Lino would have ordered him to do, was lickety-split back to Joanstown somehow and try to right this foolishness. But Mikey knew his mother better than Lino did. That cash was already squirreled away somewhere, and if she even answered the door it would only be to tell him to leave.

Mikey would rather be in arrears to Lino Puglisi than give her such satisfaction—or roll the dice with a couple of Ocala's finest, 911'd by a cult leader. Which is another way of saying that Joan had as much to do with bringing about the end of Mikey's First Life as anything. He has no clue what became of her after that day, because of course the world did not end. And even now, with his recent resurfacing, the very best he can utter about his mother is that she kept her word, stayed away, has never searched for him that he knows of.

Then a bell dinged, and Mikey's unshot heart jounced, as a text message fell from the atmosphere and was sucked inside the citizen smartphone. Mikey having gone ahead and turned that homing beacon on, at least for the night. In effect both actively running from Susannah and passively remaining open to be found by her. His fear he might miss some on-second-thought-I-choose-you call being greater than concerns about exposing his September 20, 2015, whereabouts to inquiring minds.

But now, instead of a text from my wife—a text from *my* former paramour, the May to my December:

> tuyen here . . . don't know what
> you told trang, but thanks. none
> of my biz but I feel like I should
> warn ya . . . hank is tracking you
> and susannah

Things went from there, Mikey not replying but Tuyen typing and typing, and he came to learn she'd been the sidekick for nine-tenths of my Susannah hunt before finally tiring of my increasing "soup-sandwich" brokenheartedness and despair—which you, Reader, already know—but also that Tuyen was stuck in a hotel in "fugly gainesville" until morning because for some mysterious reason (perhaps as divine punishment for not keeping the Sabbath holy) a simple, shade-tree repair to a 2001 Civic had flummoxed Larry and his Hogtown Auto long enough to make driving all the way back to New Orleans that night, alone and on very little rest, seem less and less "brills" to her.

And while being taxied from that Best Western curb Mikey reflected on his first and only Greyhound adventure. Five hours spent abreast of a sweaty man moaning ceaselessly about methadone, Lafayette to Houston. Mikey eighteen years old and spurned by the Chitimacha not one month after an Egged, the Greyhound of Israel, had spirited him away in ignominy from Ein Gedi Kibbutz.

Dawn broke over Mikey and the Pilot Travel Center. The Monday 2:30 a.m. having arrived and departed Ocala without him on board because, upon further review, a *sixteen*-hour bus voyage would have been suicide.

> I could use a ride. U still in
> Gainesville?

Tuyen drove the thirty miles from Gainesville, snatched Mikey from Ocala, and was soon repeating various renditions of the same basic declaration, eager to talk. Before she even had them on the interstate in her broken-radio, piece-of-shit Civic, Mikey was ready to chloroform her.

She took her eyes off the road yet again. "Getting dumped blows," she said. "I really am sorry."

But Mikey was already moving on from Susannah. Indeed, a peculiar zen had settled over him. He had done the best he could. Left it all on the field, as defeated athletes say. There was comfort in that.

Right . . . for now, zen . . . maybe.

"She might decide she wants you both. Polyamory can be—"

"No more," said Mikey. "Please. Okay?"

And he had metaphorically killed his mother, bought her off, so there was (provisional) zen and comfort in that too. Therefore his primary predicament at the moment, albeit a fat one, was that before long he would have to tell Lino he'd returned from Florida empty-handed. That Mikey had made a gift of fifty thousand dollars that weren't his to give.

But it was only Monday, and Lino wasn't expecting him back at least until Thursday, so Mikey would continue to lie low, as he'd promised, and perhaps commence mending in earnest. But where? The Quarter was no place to avoid Lino, or Traeger—or painful reminders, and possible sightings, of Susannah. Oh, and be on the watch for surveillance vans and red Chevy trucks, as well, because conceivably his apartment was being staked out by badges with yet-to-be-ascertained objectives, and perchance even erratic Woody (and Mikey really didn't want to have to duel Woody Coyne).

I-75 now, and—because riding beside Tuyen had Mikey recalling her "family" in Plaquemines Parish—a destination, a point of refuge, came to him. Edmund Gremillion's houseboat in Venice, P. P. If you're ever keen to use her just say the word, Mr. Mikey.

Edgy Tuyen was wearing ebony hip-zippered jeans and a white T-shirt. She smelled like Gainesville hotel lotion. Her half-head of pink-and-black hair still tangly from a shower; the Mardi Gras shrimp tattoo like some resplendent cave painting on her skull. She was a tailgating, lane-switching bat out of hell, and Mikey nodded at an irate trucker as Tuyen blew by a Peterbilt, the new fuel pump sucking away.

"What," she said, "we're not speaking for eight hours?"

"Not about her or him or them."

"Here's what I think. I think all of us were acting stupid but that we're gonna be fine."

"Groovy. Can we pick up a hitchhiker?" Hang in there, Mikey thought, and come on Louisiana. He sent a please-call-me text to Edmund from the citizen smartphone. With luck, before dusk Mikey would be on a motorcycle and heading downriver.

Tuyen drove with her elbows as she fiddled with a Venus (♀) earring. "I'll tell you about my screenplay. We could talk about that."

"Hank's *Mad Max* in New Orleans?" For the second time in two days Mikey would be forced to contemplate an imagined apocalypse. Maybe he'd been wrong. Maybe the end was indeed near. The signs really were everywhere. "That still happening?"

"No. Thinks he's so with-it and cool, but the guy sleeps in socks."

Or maybe not.

"For now this one's just me," said Tuyen.

And she wasn't kidding, because the movie she began describing could have been entitled *Me.* A self-aggrandizing, virtue-signaling (auto)biopic centered around the initial Teach For America August through December that Tuyen had clocked at South Plaquemines Elementary, displaced and finding herself, touching kid's hearts and being heart-touched while also being, of course, a contentious and controversial figure, until . . . First Act Turning Point . . . a particularly antagonistic PTA meeting in which a weathered, theretofore-silent Cajun spoke up to endorse the spend-time-with-a-different-race project this lib-Yankee newcomer/outsider social-justice warrior had foisted upon their unsuspecting Sportsman's Paradise children . . . the hostile parents unswayed by the coonass, but Tuyen energized by him . . . so energized that she commandeered the annual holiday pageant, secretly revamping the production in multifarious, Benettonian "We Are the World" respects . . . what better way to illustrate to the community, as their white/black/Asian/Latinx offspring would discover during weeks of after-school pageant practice, that our similarities as humans will always be greater than our differences?

Mikey wanted to hammer chopsticks into his ears. But then, thankfully, before Tuyen could get to the inevitable silent-auditorium-erupting-in-applause finish—a reprieve in the form of his chiming phone. Edmund. Mikey took the call and, to keep white-savior Tuyen out of his (other) affairs, employed the Spanish he had learned at eighteen and nineteen among pecan rakers and lettuce cutters, fruit pickers and beet diggers.

"Ciertamente," Edmund replied, sounding each syllable out at a deliberate clip—his own Spanish rudimentary but competent because every July he flew south to wing shoot Argentinian ducks. "Mi casa flotante es su casa flotante, mi amigo. ¿Bueno?"

"Bueno," said Mikey. "Muchas gracias."

Then Edmund gave him the entry code to the houseboat. I'm skedaddling to a meeting, but let me know if you have any problemas.

Mikey powered down, went back off the grid. Uno Mississippi, dos Mississippi, tres Mississippi.

"Who was that?" Tuyen asked. "Who has a houseboat in Venice?"

Mikey sighed—consoled only slightly that he wouldn't have to hear the laudatory finale of *Me,* after all—because an erstwhile inevitable had been replaced by a new, worse, inevitable. That is, Rosetta Stone Tuyen was not about to quit prying.

"Edmund Gremillion."

"The pocket-square in that little club you guys have?"

"You got it." Mikey stared at the dense, zipping pines and saw a hawk perched on a high limb, watching for mice and snakes in the lush grass separating forest from road.

"You'll be there all by yourself?"

"Looks that way."

"Doing what?"

"Nothing."

"Sounds boring."

"I hope."

(Said Mikey—a man whose predominant complaints, at the onset of that strange week, "had to do with feeling bored and lonesome and caged.")

But then Tuyen put her hand on his knee and Mikey thought of Susannah's caressing fingers. Of Clark and Zak jumping from Florida key to key to key. Endless blue waters instead of the brown bathtub of a delta marina. He felt the Civic drifting to the right—Tuyen exiting the interstate at some Waffle House town.

"Wanna stop and do sex?" she asked. "Loosen you up?"

"What?"

Didn't seem like the worst suggestion, but either his silent nod wasn't enthusiastic enough or she'd been kidding all along. Tuyen laughed and removed her hand from his knee, cut off another semi, got them back on I-75 at the last possible jiffy.

"Wow," she said. "You really are a mess."

Much, much later, while clicking through channels in a bar, Mikey, nearing fifty, his curly hair gone ashen at the temples, would linger on two screenwriting, film-producing sisters being interviewed by a press-junket "entertainment correspondent"—and though her inked shrimp was curtained by the layers of an expensive blonde pixie-cut, something about the younger sister gave Tuyen away. But just as (by then) Mikey Zak wasn't calling himself Mikey Zak anymore, that screenwriting Bay Area mother was no longer calling herself Tuyen Phan.

And though he tries, for almost a month, even after watching the Mott sisters' movie, and even after seeing the name H. T. Robertson also in the writing credits, not to get snooping-curious—Mikey can't help himself. He takes a weekend vacation, unaccompanied, to San Francisco. And there, in San Francisco, he waits outside a Parnassus Heights Victorian until Ann Mott appears. That same Tuyen knee-hand, at age thirty-five, now leading a little girl toward Golden Gate Park as Mikey follows along. The most beautiful "high yaller" Zora Neale Hurston *Glossary of Harlem Slang* eight-year-old, and a woman in space-blankety activewear.

Mikey crosses Kezar Drive. The daughter is in the sands of the Koret Children's Quarter playground. The mother is alone on a bench. Mikey kamikazes next to Ann Mott, much too fast and much too close, but though she tenses she doesn't look at him.

"Wanna do sex?" he asks her. "Loosen you up?"

Ann turns on the beardless, sleeve-splitting midlife (or Second Life) stranger in a jovial shirt, a titanium vape pen between her knuckles—her Hayes Valley Krav Maga

self-defense training triggered—until finally comes the moment of dawning *Oh my God* recognition.

"I liked *Down the Bayou,*" says Mikey. "It was uplifting."

She shakes her head. "Holy shit. He has risen."

"But you know we don't boil crawfish in the fall, right?"

"You're here to give me notes?"

"Verisimilitude is important to me."

Ann smiles, remembering, then pokes him with the vape pen.

Yes, Mikey had risen. And of all the things other than just a mere hotshot screenwriter-producer this onetime acquaintance of his could have wound up as, there he was in San Francisco, being hugged by my daughter's mother . . . and about to be talking old times.

The tuckered traveler returns, albeit still certain nothing good could come from installing himself in the Quarter for too many minutes. And though Mikey was grudgingly grateful to Tuyen for saving him from an extra-arduous "Go Greyhound and Leave the Driving to Us!" experience, it also speaks to his state of mind on that Monday afternoon in New Orleans—to his relief to finally be free of her and alone with his sundry thoughts, worries, and dilemmas—that he parted ways without ceremony.

Then he was in and out of his apartment, and the city, in less than an hour.

See a black-and-chartreuse hornet of a road cowboy in motorcycle boots and a scuffed Cordura riding suit, probably the priciest articles of clothing he owns. His duffel bag lashed to the rack of an olive-green KLR 650, the poor man's BMW GS. Sunlight glinting off his enduro helmet as he crosses the CCC over to the Westbank and follows the river into the toe of Louisiana.

Belle Chasse.

Myrtle Grove.

Port Sulphur.

Empire, home to the trawling Phans and their ostracized crabber, Trang/Trey.

And on toward Buras and then Venice and the very end of LA 23, the levee on his left and marshy plains to his right. A cowboy bound for a (much) scrappier stepcousin of Key West. Alligators instead of iguanas, but another end of the road and another end of America. Seventy-seven miles south of New Orleans—and just upriver from the three main passes that form the parasol mouth of the Mississippi.

Venice, Louisiana: where freshwater and saltwater converge. In 2015 maybe two hundred year-round denizens living beneath the leveed river, dead level with the sea. All of them crowded onto a narrow slat between Mississippi and marsh, on the periphery of one of the most fruitful horns of plenty ever known—but Venice a decomposing and unapologetically charmless outpost that smelled of petroleum and shrimp. The chief local industries being commercial fishing and sport fishing, and service and transport for oil platforms and drilling rigs in the Gulf.

Pink nutria-slurries of roadkill. Cavorting buzzards. Asphalt and oyster shells and a fading sky. Yellowy lawns. Battered trucks. LSU, LSU, LSU.

The speed limit dropped and Mikey flipped the gnat-splattered visor of his helmet, feeling the rivulets of sweat under his riding suit as he envisioned the murky, trash-and-debris-strewn whirlpool Katrina must have made of this place. Almost his entire life spent in Louisiana, but he had only been here once before. Five months earlier, actually. An outing to behold Edmund's new houseboat and go chase speckled trout, the spring rains so unyielding that the Lonely Fools never left the marina. Two days of stud poker and Netflix until they were back in New Orleans, promising to try again one weekend but never making that happen.

Then the highway concluded, and Mikey turned onto the first of several cane-lined roads that brought him even farther south, toward Kerouac's "the Night's Great Gulf," before delivering him, at last, to the bleached-mollusk parking lot of Venice Marina . . . a parking lot sprinkled with the waxed V8s of rod-and-reel out-of-towners playing hooky from work . . . and, yes, a "brown bathtub of a delta marina" . . . fifty acres carved from the marsh . . . a dredged, bermed, bulkheaded slick of unctuous water surrounded by a tendrillar knot of bayous and canals.

Mikey crept his bike past the elevated wooden building (picture a barn, hovering) shared by the small marina store and Crawgators Bar and Grill, then stopped near a long apron of warping dock. Houseboat after houseboat. He pegged the kickstand, silenced his horse. Twilight. The gloaming. A salt-methane breeze was blowing and because the shipyards and refineries and whatnot of Venice never rest, Mikey could hear the crashing metal and blaring horns of far-off KEEP OUT! hurricane-fenced infernos. He removed his helmet and slung the duffel bag over his shoulder. A whipped and routed knight spiriting a wounded comrade away from the battlefield—the bad lands and bad memories temporarily behind him as he stepped onto the back porch of Edmund's houseboat.

He punched in the code. He opened the door. That night Mikey Zak slept the dreamless, comatose sleep of the cocooned.

The Bespoke Inn was modest compared to some of the two- and even three-story houseboats moored in Venice Marina, but it did have a certain impeccable and immaculate snugness. Cedar shingles and whitewashed tongue-and-groove siding. A thousand picture-perfect square feet. From the back porch a tile hallway led past a utility room, a bunkroom, a bathroom, and then Edmund's bedroom before giving way to a large living area with an open kitchen and a three-stool breakfast bar. The sliding glass on the far wall unlocking onto a broad, waterway-facing porch Edmund referred to as the front porch—one carpeted with plastic grass not unlike that Saddlelands Village trailer lawn.

Last night Mikey had found a pillow and some blankets in a hall closet, making a little floating nest for himself on the big leather L couch by the kitchen. 8:00 a.m. Tuesday now, and he was finally awake. Awake and mashing various buttons on a

remote, trying (unsuccessfully) to watch satellite on a television the size of a windshield. The fridge was bare except for condiments and a tin can of CDM coffee—but up the road in Buras, three miles north of the bombed-out remains of Venice's Katrina-sluiced market, was modular-building Adams Grocery. And while Mikey waited for coffee to brew he made a mental list of what he wanted to pick up from there later. A pound of ham and a loaf of Bunny Bread. A twelve-pack of beer and a bag of potato chips. Two days and two nights till Thursday morning, but that should do him. For his dinners he would hit the restaurant in the marina. Overdose on fried seafood, as it should be.

He'd last used the citizen smartphone while petitioning Edmund, and he had zero intention of turning it on again anytime soon. To the uninformed, Mikey Zak, protected from potential man hunters by the secure sequestration of a Pelican State Walden, no doubt looked like a man without a care in the world beyond figuring out that fucking television. But such wasn't the case. Susannah and Joan broodings, of course—the stopgap zen he'd been feeling on those fronts steadily ebbing. And yet, at the moment, the most woke gremlins in his head were still more financial, and existential, in nature (Existential as in "related to one's continued well-being and existence," as opposed to a conscious embroilment with the existentialism of Kierkegaard, Sartre, et al.)

Due to his temper tantrum yesterday Mikey had found himself in significant debt to Lino Puglisi. And though he had enough scratch in his savings account to cover that debt, no one hoping to avoid the inquisitive eyes of the feds should simply walk into a bank and leave with such an armful. At best Mikey could withdraw nine grand or so, and empty the twenty K from his safe deposit box. Meaning on Thursday he'd be stuck having to advocate for much-of-it-now-the-rest-later leniency.

And how Lino might react to that proposal was anyone's guess.

Mikey's guess? That with the assistance of considerable falsehoods about a gravely ill Joan and her mounting medical bills, Lino might be slightly sympathetic. That if Mikey put twenty-nine thousand, cash, on Lino's desk, and agreed to work as his uncompensated servant for a stretch, the debt would be forgiven by Armageddon March or maybe April. So, basically, Mikey had sold himself into interim slavery. And while he'd often thought of himself as somewhat enslaved (or at least indentured) before, Mikey was also guessing he was about to discover just how wrong he had been.

He poured his coffee, and giving up on the impenetrable television, went to a shaded and screened half of the front porch. Patio furniture, a gas Weber. There were other houseboats on either side of him, separated from *The Bespoke Inn* by dead-end side docks. Houseboats that here, in this nook of the marina, were the same general size of *The Bespoke Inn* but more aged and worn. And just off the front porch: Edmund's center console—a white Contender 25 with a 200 Yamaha—suspended ten feet above the dark water on a mechanical lift. *Delta Run.* Mikey rapped his knuckles against the hull. A restrained, low-key name for a $100,000 trout boat, but you can't hide money.

So Adams Grocery, there and back, then Mikey spent much of the day lying on a hammock inside that front-porch chicken coop, pausing between naps and jalapeño Zapp's and Chisesi ham sandwiches to dive into and out of an early edition of *Life on*

the Mississippi he'd pulled from a shelf of ornamental books to employ as a sedative. Mikey just studying the pen-and-ink illustrations of explorers, steamboats, and so forth at first—but finally being seduced by the bold, assured simplicity of Twain's opening sentence: "The Mississippi is well worth reading about." Mikey taking that gamble but laboring through two short yet difficult chapters. His mind wandering as he reflected on how what was once the wildest and crookedest of rivers had been corralled into something more akin to a barge canal. A tied python mother snake biding her time, finding occasional moments in which to break free and humble us, drowning and devastating the land while we struggle to once again contain her, that "Ol' Man River" Mikey never could think of as a *him.*

After reading about French explorers—about Marquette naming the river Conception; about Indians warning of a demon "who would engulf them in the abyss"; about LaSalle coming upon a temple, near present-day Vicksburg, adorned with the skulls of sacrificed enemies—Mikey's own skull began to cook and he went inside, returning text to tomb.

There was a heavy bamboo fly rod hanging on the wall above the bookshelf, like those books (and those temple skulls) probably more for decoration than anything else, and because Mikey had never attempted to fly-fish this became an agitation. He stood on a chair and took the rod down. Fixed to a monofilament leader was a googly-eyed feather fly he suspected, upon closer inspection, was meant to imitate a tiny crab.

Dubious of his gentleman-angler abilities, Mikey fetched a frozen tub of bait shrimp he had seen in the freezer, pried loose an icy handful and, then—to the last planks of a side dock . . . where Mikey hooked the dock twice and *Delta Run* once before a sort of flicking roll-cast got his shrimp-tipped crab-fly out into the open water of the marina. A few light-tackle trout and redfish sports were already motoring in from the slaughter grounds, no-waking by Mikey in single file and laughing at him.

"Practicing on dem hardheads?" called a copper-chested Yat in polarized Costas. "Yeah you right."

And because an *Ariopsis felis* hardhead catfish is always famished, Mikey was indeed soon engaged in epic, drag-screeching battle with an unseen foe that had him ignoring any onlookers and instead recollecting the enormous catfish that had collided with Marquette's canoe on the seventeenth of June, 1673—and given the Frenchman, according to Twain, "fair right to think the river's roaring demon was come."

A python Mississippi, sheltering a demon. A killer within a killer. So maybe this was no catfish. Was in fact that immortal river demon gone marina roving. But before Mikey and hardhead or demon could lock eyes and identify what they were each fighting, the mono leader wrapped around an outlying piling and snapped. Mikey cursed as the bent and trembling rod straightened and went still in his hands. He would never know. The blue fly line lay flaccid in the water, stripped almost to the backing, and Mikey began to wind in the slack—hoping he had just condemned a fiend, and not an innocent fish, to a slow death entwined to a piling.

And suddenly Mikey was afraid his mother, and also Susannah, had done a figurative similar to him. That she had doomed *him.* But as the line came spooling in he saw that the leader was intact. And there was that crab-fly as well, dancing across the water. So just a robbed shrimp and a spit hook. Mikey returned the bamboo rod to its peaceful and dignified place of admiration o'er unread books, then went to the marina to be among fishermen uninterested in allegory, their psyches as unburdened as those of God's lesser creations.

The open-air second floor of Crawgators Bar and Grill. Mikey was sitting at a high-top by the railing, listening to streaming Pandora zydeco and looking out over the busy marina. Three o'clock, and the offshore charters were returning. Forty-foot V hulls and catamarans tying up beside the fuel dock to empty capacious fish boxes of blue-water abundance. Wheelbarrow after wheelbarrow of grouper and wahoo and amberjack and, the most treasured species, yellowfin. Fifty- and sixty-pound tuna, on average, plus a few upward of a hundred but still nothing too special or even close to record-breaking. Deep-diving, line-ripping, sapphire-and-gold torpedoes all the same, but just a typical day at

VENICE MARINA

FISHING CAPITOL OF THE WORLD

per a sign (but *capital,* that sign painter meant) . . . the nail-boards awaiting the eye-pegged catch of sun-drained, sore-armed clients doing some picture-taking before their haul was swapped out and replaced by those of still another party . . . electric-knife-wielding captains and shaggy deckhands at toil behind them in a roofed shelter, menthols clamped between teeth as they broke down corpses in a ninja jitterbug . . . periodic placating scraps being tossed to the river otters that lived under the dock.

Tuna, etc., but also the lagniappe. The chain-and-pulley, tail-hoisted behemoths: three swordfish and a two-hundred-pound mako shark that had taken a bullet to the chondrocranium. What a thing, Mikey decided, to have wonders plucked from mysterious places and laid out for you. Dead buffalo on railcars. Indians in reservations. Stumpy Marcello—the petulant, coal-eyed tomato salesman—marched before Congress to spew double negatives. "I am not in no racket," the Little Man testified. "I am not in no organized crime."

Mikey signaled to a bubbly teenage waitress in tennis shorts for another Styrofoam cup of gin, tonic, ice—thinking of the Lonely Fools and the gin-and-tonics we'd drunk together the week prior in my courtyard. Of all the drinks we had shared since Katrina. And Mikey then thinking, as well, and yet again, of Susannah and Joan as fishers of men and of Mikey. Of them smiling as he dangled from a nailed foot, martyred, that family of slinky otters (symbolizing Lino? the law? Woody?) prepared to tear at whatever spare pieces those two might not want of him.

So more sad, isolating, and even grotesque Susannah and Joan, and miscellaneous, thoughts. Perhaps because that Venice Marina Tuesday was September 22, 2015—and thus Mikey was sitting there at Crawgators during the final dog breaths of summer and unknowingly facing, with the coming nightfall, Yom Kippur, the holiest and heaviest of the Days of Awe that follow Rosh Hashanah. Hours passed with Mikey feeling but not realizing their full weight or importance, and after a sunset supper he made his way along the maze of docks that would return him to the houseboat. As the good Jews of Israel and the diaspora began their fasts, Mikey Zak had gorged on a treif combo of fried shrimp and oysters.

He went to Edmund's lamp-lit side dock, each blazing LED bulb spawning a helixing galaxy of insects, and put one fist against the raised hull of *Delta Run,* steadying himself as he pissed into the water.

"Ahoy, big pirate. Hands off me boat."

Wes Locatelli, walking toward him in cutoff khakis and a guayabera. Mikey buttoned his jeans. "What are you doing here?"

But under his boonie hat Guayabera Wes looked as serious as a Gitmo CIA spook, so Mikey sort of knew. Out of concern Edmund had called Wes—because Mikey (gone radio silent now, the citizen smartphone still decommissioned) had been too tired to effectively disguise the fact, even speaking in rusty español, that he had landed himself in some type of pickle. And here was Wes, as usual the most stalwart of us, offering his help.

Wes smacked him on the shoulder. "I took tomorrow off. Hello yourself."

And yet that was a hasty, imperfect assumption. Help, I mean—because Edmund had also rung *me* that morning about Mikey. Susannah asleep in the Pontalba bedroom as I stepped out onto the balcony and, seeking vengeance, told him everything. That Mikey couldn't be trusted. That Mikey was much worse than a criminal. That Mikey was a son of a bitch and, well, if Edmund or Wes had anything to do with him "henceforth" I'd be through with them too.

"We should talk," said Wes.

So now they were on opposite sides of the leather L couch, elbows on their knees. Wes had already popped a couple of Buras Coronas open with his wedding band, warning Mikey this was going to be more of a beer conversation than a coffee conversation.

"She's a piece, Mikey. I'll give you that."

"Ah, you heard about Florida."

"We heard. Yeah. And if it had been me, my Roxanne, I'd be busting out tin snips." Wes threw a bottle cap at him. "Just so we're clear."

Mikey fell back into the black couch. "I'm not looking for forgiveness."

"That's the Yom Kippur spirit."

"What?"

"Never mind. Oy." They gulped at unlimed cervezas—then Wes pulled off his floppy hat, itched his flattop with thick fingers. "We gotta take his side. It's a bro-code thing."

"I understand," said Mikey. "But, bro, I had to try with her, bro."

"Okay, dick. We won't go into that either."

"Good."

"Edmund's coming in the morning." Wes shook his head. "A final hurrah. You get how he is."

And therefore not really a coffee conversation *or* a beer conversation. Instead just a prelude to a goodbye. But because in a room with a dead TV—as at their Johnny White's introduction, so long before—they had to talk about something, Wes waved his Corona and began to reminisce about Mexico 2013. Wes and bilingual Mikey crossing the border at Nuevo Laredo together, exhausted from their drive as they entered the walled zonas de tolerancia compound of Boy's Town. On their way to the police station where runaway Wesley Locatelli, age fifteen (!), was being held quasi-hostage by unscrupulous municipales. A dusty American pickup parking on a crumbling Tamaulipas street. Mikey in his seedy, unsavory element and doing all of the negotiating, all of the palm greasing.

"I'll never not owe you for that," said Wes. "You saved my boy."

Wes looked at him with pained vexation, and Mikey knew what he was thinking. That, yes, maybe Mikey saved a boy once—but now, much more recently, he had almost destroyed a family and a man . . . losing three of his already scarce friends in the process, plus Susannah. (Also somehow finding the time, I should remind, to write off his own mother.)

And all for what?

Part 4

> For my own part I would as soon be descended from that heroic little monkey.
>
> —Charles Darwin

When Mikey, at age forty-nine, next saw Tuyen Phan—blond Ann Mott now—on that San Francisco day in '24, she was soon bombarding him with questions as to what he'd been doing with himself for nearly a decade.

They were sitting on that bench in Golden Gate Park, watching my Lillian Mott ride torn cardboard down a concrete slide again and again on a thermal and fogless morning, Ann smiling once Mikey had finished with his *what became of me?* update.

"The Westbank?" she said. "I'd imagined you living the white-guy run-from-civilization fantasy. A beach village was my bet."

"Nope."

"Right there, all this while? And domesticated too?"

"Yup and yup."

And snooping-curious Mikey had questions for her. Because though he'd indeed seen her movie, the particulars of how Ann Mott ever came into being were still beyond his comprehension. Particulars such as her pregnancy, which he had known nothing of, and that post-Ocala, just as Susannah and I began discussing a starting-over move from New Orleans to San Francisco, we'd been impelled to weather *that* storm. Clark and Robertson ultimately offering, even, to set 2015 Tuyen up out West so we could help with the parenting. San Francisco being, quite fortuitously, a place where such nontraditional arrangements make perfect sense.

Did Mikey feel butterflies, or shock, upon hearing the name Susannah? Only he can say. But to Ann he appeared calm and collected, serenely listening to her recount how pregnant Tuyen Phan had thrown *me* off guard even further by becoming, or at least reverting to, Ann Mott during her second trimester. Ann then declaring, in addition, that she did want me, and Susannah, to be in her child's life ("So okay, San Francisco, let's go, why not?"), but that she didn't need our charity.

Because, it seems, as Ann would explain (forcing Mikey to hold off on all the new questions he wanted to ask, questions that had nothing to do with her or with *Down the Bayou . . .* Susannah questions, that is), even while Phan-ing and piece-of-shit-Civic-ing in Louisiana, Ann had been performing with a net . . . both her and her sister, Jan, a Beverly Hills socialite, the Ohioan offspring of Akron Goodyear Tire & Rubber Company multimillionaires. And yes, Ann dropped out of film school and followed us to San Francisco, but even with Lillian in utero she never stopped writing—coasting down the 5 to LA between OB/GYN visits in order to collaborate with equally (if implausibly) brilliant Pilates, sushi, and Chateau Marmont Jan on a screenplay these two heiress sisters would be rich enough, and crafty enough, to eventually get made.

"But also Hank, though?" Mikey asked. "I saw his name. You know, in the credits."

"Well, yeah. I definitely let him chip in some, but mostly toward the end."

"So he's here?" Mikey pointed at the ground beneath his feet. "And Susannah, too? Edmund and Wes . . . they told me Paris."

And Ann Mott sighed, second fiddle once more.

Before I go on with this history, Reader, let me shoplift a general observation: the test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function.

My Idea One: Mikey not letting himself so much as Google "Susannah Clark" for eight years and nine months (as he claims) is proof positive he was, and is, over her (as he claims).

My Idea Two: Although Mikey had possessed the self-control not to attempt locating or contacting Susannah, each and every night he hoped on a star that serendipity would intervene. That a day, a moment, an opportunity, such as that morning in San Francisco, would come along.

By sunrise Edmund had *Delta Run* stocked with ice and sustenance from the marina, and they were riding Kerouac's "father of waters." A full tank of gas. The dawn sky going blue. A thousand yards from willowed levee to willowed levee and thirty miles to the Gulf. Fast, swirling currents and the occasional four-foot wake of crew boats lugging workers to and from the oil patch. The Contender holding at thirty-five knots. A fiberglass toy dodging barges, tugs, and foreign-flag container ships.

Thirty-five knots. Forty mph. Nothing in a car—or even on the KLR, shielded by his enduro helmet—but to Mikey this was like flying. Hot wind in his face, eyes leaking. Too loud to talk without shouting, so they just raced on wordlessly toward the channel-hemming rock jetties of Southwest Pass. Edmund at the wheel. Mikey and Wes standing beside him on either side of the console, holding on tight. All of them watching for bobbing, telephone-pole Montana logs that could annihilate small vessels and men.

And Mikey was very glad to be on that boat, and not on the houseboat, very glad to be disrupted by this unexpected diversion—but he also felt as if maybe he'd been tricked by conspiring Lonely Fools into attending his own execution. That after reaching the marsh-splintering Head of Passes, *Delta Run* would run far beyond the delta, Edmund and Wes ignoring Mikey's hollered queries as he was taken out into the calm-for-now Gulf and farther still, over and past the continental shelf to the cobalt tuna waters of the Mississippi Canyon that just yesterday, at Crawgators Bar and Grill, had been as unknown to Mikey as the Sea of Tranquility.

Then they are on him like mutineers. Mikey feeling the marine batteries being tied to his ankles before he is rolled over the side into the abyss, sinking football field after football field after football field.

But that's me projecting. At worst their day of fishing together was bittersweet—laughs and backslapping tinged with the sadness of a swan song. Soon Mikey was sighting the end of the Mississippi for the first time, catch-and-releasing bull reds at the jetties before they doubled back to find specks in Breton Sound, wishing he hadn't waited so damn long to see this other world. To once again see anything genuinely new and interesting to him.

Later, they filleted and ziplocked their trout, and then, when the sun was four fingers from the horizon, Wes drove to Buras for fish fry, lemons, coleslaw. Edmund had showered and changed (madras shorts, a linen shirt), and was sitting, sideways-swaying, on the enscreened-porch hammock, palming a YETI tumbler because "only Neanderthals drink beer for an appetizer."

But Mikey had glugged somewhere between eight and a dozen Miller Lite cans since noon. If he took a shower himself, changed out of his rank T-shirt, and put on sweats, he knew he'd be done for. All that was keeping him awake was the promise of food. He opened another glacial, tooth-cracking beer, then sat in a rattan chair facing Edmund and the hammock . . . Mikey's own body still at sway as well after six hours on *Delta Run.*

Mikey was preparing for it. The unsolicited advice or wisdom he was certain was about to be directed at him. Edmund hadn't spoken of me and Susannah since arriving in Venice—but Mikey knew that had to happen, and with Wes gone now would probably be the time.

Edmund straightened his long legs, almost standing against the hammock. A spider in a web, balancing a vodka buck. "This didn't come as a surprise," he said. "Not to me."

"No?"

"I pay attention."

Mikey sighed. "Well, *I* was surprised. We started and we ended three years ago. I thought that was over."

"But it wasn't?"

"Apparently not." Mikey dug his toes into the artificial-turf carpet. "Is now, though."

The magic hour. A billfish Bertram with neon deck lights was pulling into the marina. Music blaring, rich people singing. Salt life.

"In a way—" said Edmund, "your job, this with Susannah—you and I are both cryptic beasts."

"Cryptid beasts?"

"*Cryptic.* As you'd call chameleons. I'm coming out to you, dummy."

Mikey looked up.

"Why am I making this about me?" said Edmund.

"Go on." Mikey shrugged. "Beats talking me."

"No. Shabby. I'm merely proposing that we have commonalities."

"Great. We're beasts."

"Not great." Edmund kicked up his feet and let the hammock fly, legs in the air like a child, the YETI nearly spilling. He chuckled, swinging. "But at least you were being true to yourself."

Said Edmund, as if on this Yom Kippur, this Day of Atonement, Edmund was the "He" in Leviticus 16:30 and Mikey the "you": *For on this day He will forgive you, to purify you, that you be cleansed from all your sins before God.*

But not yet. Unknown scripture to Mikey. And as night presented and Yom Kippur ended, he just kept drinking beer until Wes returned and they feasted. Mikey finally wandering into the bunkroom to fall asleep dirty—but also dreaming of Breton Sound and hectic, *Delta Run* beauty. Of the flocks of feeding gulls they had spotted and sped for. Of frenzied, ravenous trout forcing baitfish to the splashing surface. Of those minnows being harried by gulls above and trout below as Mikey, appearing on the scene, casted into the frothing mix.

I am an American, San Francisco born. But half a century too late—as I felt as a younger man and feel even more strongly now, fifty-six years old and, since 2016, returned to here. San Francisco, that cool, gray city of love where I learned to worship jazz and boisterous literature. And where, in 1989, across the alley from venerable

City Lights Booksellers & Publishers, at a table in the dim, beret-haunted upstairs of Vesuvio Cafe, a watery-eyed and sixty-plus Allen Ginsberg, the horseshoe-bald mad scientist and visiting suzerain, interrupted my insolent denouncements of the casual racism of the Beats to ask if he might kiss the nineteen-year-old me. An act completed outside, in the chill of that alley, Jack Kerouac Alley . . . but not before the illustrious poet impressed on me that as artists everything, *everything,* is free for the taking.

"Good writers borrow," his Jerseyed voice told me. "Great writers steal."

Rheumy Ginsberg quoting, but not accrediting, T. S. Eliot. A fact not lost on Hank Robertson, teen bibliophile, as a sloppy-slippery tongue wormed past my lips. Me then imagining anti-Semitic Eliot had once deigned to do the same to the lips of a youthful freethinking Jew from Newark. Conveying, with that act, *that* aggressive and invading kiss between generations, permission for Ginsberg to one day howl his own depiction of a wasted land.

> Visions! omens! hallucinations! miracles! ecstasies! gone down the American river!

And, oddly, I would be recalling my night with Ginsberg soon after Ann alerted me and Susannah that Mikey Zak had materialized. That he was in San Francisco, and having accidentally (or so he says) found Clark and Robertson, was hoping to meet with us too. I was not eager to see him. To learn of his continued existence even. But perhaps I also suspected, subconsciously, that after my going-on-twenty-year publication drought since *A Boy Never Wept* this might be the sort of jolt to one's being that great art requires. With my trepidatious acquiescence, unflappable Susannah had Ann make the arrangements—then I took a flustered two-mile walk that brought me to North Beach. Arriving, finally, at the very same City Lights, Kerouac Alley, and Vesuvio. And because San Francisco has fully morphed into a town that values the dollar beyond all else, a clogged theme park of what San Francisco once was, just across the street and around the corner . . . the gaudy and galling Beat Museum. Built during my years in New Orleans but avoided by snobbish me until that moment—looking to erase the hours until our bizarre dinner party, looking to be distracted.

But I never did make my way inside. Distracted as I was, in my search for distraction, by the sign for the museum: an eight-by-ten stencil-art representation of a photo taken in the fifties of Kerouac and Cassady, arms around one another and smirking at me. An iconic portrait of friendship but also of a man and his roller-coaster muse.

The subconscious rising, then, and becoming the conscious. I went to a drugstore, bought a notebook and pen—now resolved, suddenly, that this trippy day would be the day I broke the spell and wrote something worthwhile.

Vesuvio. I ordered a glass of red wine that I carried upstairs to, yes, *that* table, my Ginsberg table (or its successor), riffing on friendship and muses but then, stalled, my trilby shucked in frustration, glancing and seeing—with apologies to James Baldwin

and Susannah Clark—William Seward Burroughs, my first true love, caged in picture frame after picture frame above my own horseshoe-bald pate. A celebration of a turbulent human being . . . the favorite author of so many musicians. Burroughs with Mick Jagger and Madonna and Lou Reed and Joe Strummer and Debbie Harry and Frank Zappa and Leonard Cohen and Patti Smith and Kurt Cobain and Tom Waits and David Bowie.

And lastly, Burroughs with an ascotted man-moppet whom a headbanger ancient passing by in a tattered Fillmore East jersey, bothered that I would dare bother him, brusquely informed me was the rock god Jimmy Page.

Hallelujah.

I finished my wine and started for home—for that powwow to come. My unanticipated writing session had been sidetracked, but my point is this: I know every motherfucking thing there is to know about William S. Burroughs. And because my thoughts were also, of course, so much on Mikey Zak that day, as I walked I began to reflect on Burroughs's shortest and strangest book. The book about a Jewish gangster that, in time, will be giving birth to *my* short, strange mosaic of fact and fiction. Of truth, conceived truth, and pure conjecture.

In the autumn of 1935, two Murder Inc. cutthroats entered the men's room of the Palace Chophouse in Newark (howl out, Ginsberg!) and shot the converted-Catholic mobster Dutch Schultz—born Arthur Simon Flegenheimer in 1902, the same year as his contemporary Meyer Lansky (the author and godhead, I eventually discovered from Mikey, of the New Orleans Zaks). A bullet struck Schultz slightly below his heart, ricocheted around his abdomen, then exited through the small of his back. Taken by ambulance to the hospital, Schultz lingered and lingered and rambled, speaking in varying states of lucidity with his wife, his mother, a priest, medical staff, and police.

To cherry-pick a few of those dying utterances:

> Please make it quick, fast and furious. Please. Fast and furious. Please help me get out; I am getting my wind back, thank God. Please, please, oh please.
>
> I don't want harmony. I want harmony. Oh, Mama, Mama!
>
> Please, Mother, don't tear, don't rip; that is something that shouldn't be spoken about.
>
> Please, Mother, you pick me up now. Please, you know me. No. Don't you scare me.
>
> I am sore and I am going up and I am going to give you honey if I can. Mother is the best bet and don't let Satan draw you too fast.

So repeated mentions of *Mother* and *Mama,* but also, I believe, the baffling sentence that decades later roused Burroughs to write *The Last Words of Dutch Schultz: A Fiction in the Form of a Film Script.* (As well as the sentence that, incidentally, supplied me with the title for my underperforming Katrina memoir.) Here is Burroughs haranguing Lou Reed in New York, 1978—in conversation on, quite possibly, the day that photo hanging in Vesuvio was taken:

> No, man, no. You don't know about the last words of Dutch Schultz? You obviously don't know. They had a stenographer at his bedside in the hospital taking down everything he said. These cops are sitting around asking him questions, sending out for sandwiches, it went on for 24 hours. He's saying things like, "A boy has never wept nor dashed a thousand kim," and the cops are saying, "C'mon, don't give us that. Who shot ya?" It's incredible. Gertrude Stein said that he outdid her. Gertrude really liked Dutch Schultz.

The Last Words of Dutch Schultz. Yet another kiss between generations that would, even more decades later, inspire me to guilt my own Dutch Schultz into opening a babbling vein and bleeding for us.

And that—to be honest, the least Mikey could do for me, the fool/friend he stabbed in the back—is just what he has done.

On Thursday morning Mikey rode off on the Kawasaki toward a New Orleans he feared proximity to Susannah would forever ruin for him. Wes, who will always have the work ethic of a farmer, had already left the houseboat for some jobsite or other, whereas Edmund had talked of staying on in Venice through the weekend, the fish biting as they were—the temperature even looking to dip, though only slightly but synchronously, with the arrival yesterday of the first day of fall. Finally, after ten years, the Lonely Fools Club was rending asunder.

So while Edmund slept in a houseboat boudoir, and Wes earned a living, Mikey debated, the whole tire-humming drive to Dauphine Street, what he should tell Lino when he went by Bonsoir Antique in a few hours. And Mikey was still ruminating on the matter as he parked the motorcycle at the apartment (but probably not without remembering, forlornly, inaugural Susannah sex in that same brick passageway . . .) then headed inside to cool down and disinfect, taking a long-overdue shower. And he was no closer to an answer when he exited the gate wet-haired and, figuring he might as well dress comfortably for the walk to his Royal Street sentencing, wearing a T-shirt and scissored sweat-shorts, sockless Sperrys, and a Pelicans hat—wallet, keys, and wheel gun zipped in a knitted French Market fanny pack that had been my gag gift to Edmund for his fortieth birthday (and thereafter regifted to me and then Wes and then Mikey when we made forty ourselves).

"What a look," Lino told him. "Like you're home from fucking camp."

Dieter Traeger was elsewhere, somewhere, so Mikey had just slunk through Bonsoir Antique and knocked on the door to Lino's office. But not before pausing briefly to contemplate the gallery-lit John McCrady painting of field slaves, which art lovers such as myself, on occasion, came into the shop to admire. Mikey thinking then of *Two Negroes and the Devil*—a stolen McCrady that Lino had once hinted at knowing the whodunit of—because, well, sugarplum thoughts of theft and enslavement were still dancing in Mikey's head.

"Deet join a book club?"

Lino stood as Mikey sat, the big desk between them, Lino rubbing at his button-stressing, beach-ball stomach. "E-8 in an hour," he said.

In other words, Shut up, Monkey, and let's go to an elsewhere ourselves. Specifically, to one of the ten elsewheres throughout the city Lino often used as a hedge against wiretaps—a directory Mikey was somehow expected to keep memorized along with an ever-changing letter-plus-number code that, when matched with the day of the week via a system far too complicated to explain here, determined what the hell Lino meant when he barked such bingo-card nonsense.

So an E-8 Thursday. Which either signified, though Mikey wasn't 100 percent certain, the wine cellar of a Mid-City pasta den owned by a Lino second cousin, or Talbot Yarbrough's CBD law firm.

And the uncertainty on Mikey's face must have registered because then Lino sighed, swore, and sighed again. "Shell Square at twelve-thirty, asshole. Don't be late." He opened the door, waved at Mikey to rise. "Traveling a bit light, huh?"

"You're not gonna be happy with me."

Lino stared at him, shook his head. "I'll see ya, Monkey."

A ten-minute walk. Across Canal, where Royal becomes St. Charles, then four blocks to Poydras and One Shell Square, first skyscraper in New Orleans and the tallest building in Louisiana. Only 11:45, so Mikey broke left and went to Mother's, established in 1938 and living off past reputation, Mikey beating the thick of the lunch-crowd queue for a bland debris po'boy and a tepid Barq's he nonetheless savored like a last meal. Under the original, Landry family owners—back when the food was always on point—Mother's Restaurant had held the title of "Tun Tavern New Orleans." Tun Tavern being the Philadelphia watering hole that was the birthplace of the marines during the Revolutionary War. And Mother's, with five of the seven Landry brood having served in the corps, was the unofficial hangout for NOLA leathernecks even into much of Mikey's childhood. Accordingly—that is, because Mikey's father knew a marine and his son would be treated well there—Mother's was a spot Reuben had liked to take him to escape Joan rampages. "Let's get to Mother's to get away from Mama" being a frequent caustic joke between the male Zaks.

But that was a long time ago, in a different New Orleans. Enough debris. Onward—that nostalgic, messy, gravy-drenched intermission has concluded.

Interior: a law-book-lined sepulcher. Still no sign of Traeger, and sartorially challenged Mikey perhaps the only man in shorts, save for the Ochsner Fitness Center

fanatics and a UPS mule, in the fifty-one-story entirety of One Shell Square. Lino had come by cab, no doubt, and was already there, sitting at a richly grained table, when the fashion-forward the Yarbrough Firm goddess-receptionist snootily brought Mikey to him and gave them the room.

"Tell me your tale," said Lino.

"Well—"

"And Woody Woodrow Coyne is done and dusted, by the way. Or so I hear on the tube Sunday night, eating chicken soup. Got himself whacked by a mulignan."

"Yo! There at the motel?"

"È vero. Was a vice stakeout you saw. Drugs are a circus."

Mikey might have thought he was listening to Lino-speak for "I had Traeger kill Woody" were it not for that Airline Drive surveillance van. Impossible, or at least incautious, circumstances to go about bumping someone off in.

And Lino was nothing if not cautious.

So allow me to shift away from Mikey's POV for a paragraph and note that maybe dumb fate rules the world. Maybe Woody Coyne had been marked to die that exact way since the second he was born. A death that may have sent kneecapped Cripper Coyne crawling, frightened, and distraught (yet off base), to the cops—as Lino predicted while inhaling that Sunday chicken soup—and therefore the time had come to muster the lawyers and wait.

"God almighty," said Mikey. "You ever gonna tell me what all that was about?"

"You feel like being a loose end, Monkey? You and Woody never happened. Anybody comes asking otherwise, just hush and let me know. That and call Talbot."

"Of course."

Lino nodded. "Now, the fifty-thousand-dollar question. Where is it?"

"Florida. My mother's sick. Really sick. So that's where I went. Where *it* went."

"Sick how?" said Lino, not without concern. Once, way back, during a boozy, oysters Mosca, Mikey-as-his-designated-driver dinner, Lino had paused his "Ode to an Italian Hostess's Fake Rack" to ask after Joan—the teasing grin on his pumpkin mug suggesting things Mikey didn't want to think about.

"A lousy heart." Mikey put up his hands. "What could I do? She's broke. I had to help her."

"Lino, you mean. Lino Puglisi had to help her."

"I'll pay you back."

"Yes," said Lino, without concern. "And we'll call that your severance package."

"What?"

"A fifty-G loan, payable in two years at two points a month." Lino was grinning his Mosca's grin now, a jack-o'-lantern in a board meeting. "But I'm through with you, me. Deet will be shylock. Carlos had my word you'd be cared for, but here you go stealing. Enough. A water-headed mooncalf could do what you do."

"What?" Mikey repeated.

No, this wasn't the Mafia anymore. But yes, working for Lino had been something of the ilk—Mikey had managed to get himself fired from a job you cannot quit. Semper fi. Another bad-conduct discharge.

(And no, this wasn't Yom Kippur anymore, either. The repentance-and-improvement Days of Awe were over. But now, still, better late than never, Mikey was being thrust off the teat. His opportunity, though one not yet welcomed or even recognized, to truly adapt and evolve. He'd returned to New Orleans expecting slavery but had been tendered the opposite. *Yeshuat Hashem k'heref ayin.* Salvation comes like the blink of an eye.)

A fly landed on Mikey's arm, and he let the fly do whatever flies do when they dance stupidly on your skin—but Mikey also considering the improbability of a fly ever finding its way into, or out of, the mid-level, dead-center core of One Shell Square.

And yet, and yet, and yet . . . here was a monkey, an oblivious monkey, everything lost or taken . . . but soon to be shoved, however ungracefully, from an elevator toward his freedom . . . unable to resume just "going through the motions" any longer.

So at last, the next book. With *A Boy Never Wept* I complied with Mikey's wishes and made no mention of him—but obviously that gag order has been lifted to the nth degree here, albeit on one condition. That is, in exchange for his cooperation, I have agreed *The Last Days of Monkey Zak* will only be the story of Mikey's First Life (my term, not his), and of Mikey's Second Life I am allowed to tell you, Reader, even less than the initial basics he told me, Susannah, and Ann when he gobsmacked us in San Francisco two years ago.

To summarize: By 2016 Mikey had moved away from New Orleans as well, but not far away, just a ferry ride to Algiers, off to become a barkeep—and eventually, also, changing his last name from Zak to Reuben . . . and refusing to abide Monkey over Mikey or (if he had his druthers) Michael.

But let there be no confusion. Westbank settler Michael Reuben isn't living in hiding, either officially or unofficially—his 2016 petition for name change was filed with the Orleans Parish clerk of court for anyone to uncover. No, Mikey took a new last name and fully jettisoned "Monkey" mostly for symbolic reasons. A way to indicate a departure from his past while still honoring his pop.

Other than that, there's not much else I can disclose about Mikey 2.0. His Second Life appears to be a quiet but decent life, a respectable life, and it is for him to decree what he wants to keep private, which questions to field. So take the ferry to Algiers. Buy a drink from him and ask yours yourself.

I have forgiven Mikey. Am grateful to him, in fact. He brought about my reset with Susannah. The luckiness of *my* Second Life. And before Clark and Robertson (and Mott) made our own New Orleans exodus I was okay enough with him, even then, to inform Edmund and Wes that the Lonely Fools Club should carry on without me.

"I just miss San Francisco," I told them—without saying anything whatsoever about Tuyen (or her pregnancy). "So look out for him, boys, and forget about Hank."

"Big of you," said Edmund.

"Humongous," said Wes.

"No," I said, "not quite." Because, before parting, I asked them to lie for me—to tell Mikey that Susannah and I were moving not to San Francisco, but to France . . . reckoning five thousand invented miles, plus an ocean, might better communicate that she would be gone from the Quarter, and from him, forever.

And thereafter, in an email, when Edmund told me Gremillion and Locatelli, LLC, wasn't so sure about simply renovating and flipping its Algiers bar-building? That he and Wes might offer Mikey a sweat-equity partnership in a possible business venture? Well, I gave them my blessing.

Then, nine years later, Mikey Zak arrived at my San Francisco doorstep as the beard-shaved, contrite (and married) Algiers publican Michael Reuben, and for that visit I suppose I am grateful too. Apologies for an abrupt conclusion to what, for many of these pages, must have seemed like a love story about my wife and a criminal, but—though there will always be queasiness and pain when I think of Mikey and Susannah, of how close I came to losing her, of their instant enthusiasm to see each other again—the truth I choose to believe is that all they ever had was lust. In San Francisco, to my profound and immeasurable relief, when Susannah's eyes met his (and she said, "Oh, life!") I sensed nothing in *her* gaze, at least, to be analyzed or deciphered. So I also choose to believe that their moment has passed. That their moment has passed and now Mikey is to her as I am to Mikey, and to Edmund, and to Wes—an old friend who, for nine years, fell out of touch.

But I'm not out of touch anymore. Yes, make that trip to Algiers and the Lonely Fools Pub. Stop by on the final Wednesday in August, if you can. The Yat-fight day we still call our Katrina Anniversary. You'll find us there, promise. Even I fly in for that—the Lonely Fools reunited, catching up. An annual happy hour for whatever years we have left.

L'chaim. To life. To lives both bygone and ongoing, and to the truths I choose to believe.

Mikey left One Shell Square and went for a walk down Poydras toward the river, doing the pertinent math in his head. Best he could figure, Lino's 2-percent-a-month interest rate (generous, actually, for a loan-shark arrangement) would be about the same as having an outstanding $50,000 balance on a 25 percent APR credit card.

Definitely something Mikey needed to get in front of. But yes, he could pull his strongbox $20K from the Whitney on Chartres, and nine from the sixty-five in his savings account, so all would be fine. He would still have more than enough remaining to continue paying Lino, through shylock Traeger, a grand here and a grand there in a prudent, bit-by-bit, IRS-savvy drip. And plenty, also, to keep Mikey on his feet while he sought a new source of income now that he was jobless—and in six days, slated for eviction. Yes, he kept telling himself, all will be fine . . . I can ride this out. He would start packing his things, then scout for budget apartments in humdrummer, and

Susannah-less, neighborhoods. Fine. As for making a living, the possibilium optimus he'd come up with was to buy a used Prius and drive for Uber. Perhaps tomorrow, or the next day, or the next day, would bring better ideas and opportunities, but for now even that would be fine.

Some say righteous change only occurs through losing, unlearning, letting go—but, by God, was Mikey depleted.

Poydras Street to Spanish Plaza, followed by a march with the flowing Mississippi past the ferry terminal and the aquarium. The green grass of Woldenberg Park, then, and a sculpture garden including works such as *Old Man River* and *Monument to the Immigrant* and a kinetic-art Holocaust memorial—as well as a bronze statue of the late Malcolm Woldenberg himself, local businessman and philanthropist, dropping knowledge on the attentive statue boy sitting beside him . . . or kvetching about the vandals who'd had the compulsion, and muscle, to contort his metal spectacles into a cat-eyed upsweep. Humiliated Woldenberg yelling to be heard over the incessant calliope music bubbling from the pipes of the steamboat *Natchez,* moored just ahead in the upward but downstream north.

Mikey watched the ferry leave the dock in Algiers and commence crossing the river. Algiers, the Louisiana city with an African name that coincidentally, in 1911, became the home of a Sicilian couple from Tunisia—Giuseppe and Luigia Minacori. Giuseppe sending for his wife and infant son, Calogero, once he had earned enough money cutting sugarcane on a plantation below New Orleans. The father's employer, who was likewise (again, coincidentally) a Minacori, suggesting the name Marcello because Boss Minacori resented being confused with an underling. And, in addition, Giuseppe becoming Joseph and Luigia becoming Louise and Calogero becoming Carlos. Joseph Marcello then further evolving into sole proprietorship as a ferry-riding farmer of vegetables, selling his produce in French Market stalls.

And that eldest son, Carlos, at eighteen, leaving Algiers for a two-dollar-a-week Conti Street apartment and beginning his life of crime. Yes, Mikey would find some corner of New Orleans where he'd be a two-bit tenant himself, for a time. And Mikey would, for a time, drive that Prius for Uber. But what Mikey could not know, not yet, was that, ultimately, he would accomplish the reverse of Calogero/Carlos Minacori/Marcello by leaving New Orleans for Algiers to begin a life of tame behavior—and becoming Michael Reuben because *he* resented being confused with an underling.

An essential for residing in the congested interiors of a city, any city, is having places where, for sanity's sake, you can break away from the hive. For me, for example, Alta Plaza in Pac Heights, looking down on the Easter-egg jumble of San Francisco. For my wife, long Susannah jogs in the Presidio. And on the same day Mikey at last quit his walking and came to his own separate-peace place (a Woldenberg Park riverbank boulder just before the Governor Nicholls Street Wharf, Mikey tossing pieces of Corp of Engineers rock into the brown slither of the Mississippi and thinking of splashing

Breton Sound minnows), well over two thousand hajj pilgrims were being stampeded and/or crushed and/or suffocated in Mina, Saudi Arabia, during the Eid al-Adha Festival of the Sacrifice. A catastrophic smashup at the intersection of Streets 204 and 223 leading to the Jamarat Bridge, where, as required by Islam and Allah, every Muslim physically and financially capable is obligated to participate, at least once, in the Stoning of the Devil, throwing pebbles at the three pillars, now expanded into walls, that represent Shayṭān and his temptations. The stoning of these jamarāt signifying the repudiation of man's self (*an-nafs al-'amāra;* "the internal despot"), the act of casting aside one's low desires and wishes.

But on this day, apparently, a triumph for the devil. That fateful Saudi intersection not being at all spacious enough to allow for the ingress and egress of those pilgrims coming to stone Shayṭān and those who had already stoned him. A tragedy perhaps better described as a "progressive crowd collapse" than a "stampede" because, in the words of a professor of crowd science at Manchester Metropolitan University: "People don't die because they panic. They panic because they are dying."

In due course an old man (who was nothing like a river) came along and stood at the edge of the short granite avalanche sloping down to the Mississippi—spoiling Mikey's solitude, threatening to ruin this other pilgrimage. Hell is other people.

"You from N'awlins?" the man asked.

Mikey looked over, then let fly another rock. "I am. You?"

(Said Mikey . . . though this Sansabelted codger was clearly a tourist . . . one corrupted by cheap T-shirts and bad television and cinema that insisted, despite all the various ways New Orleanians had of speaking the name of their city—"New *Oar*-linz" and "New Or-*leenz*" and even "New *Or*-lee-uhns"—on perpetuating the grating "N'awlins" myth.)

"No indeed," said the codger.

"Where, then?"

"You never heard of it. And I hate your town so far. No offense."

Mikey nodded. "Not for everyone."

"European, my nuts. Tell me Europe stinks like here, I'll call you a liar. Dangerous too. You can feel it."

"Can you?"

"So why all the fuss? The lickingest split-tail I ever met was in Omaha. Hooch and tits? You can get that anywhere. Admit it."

Mikey turned and threw a rock at this vulgar visitant, not intending to hit him but pegging the shin of his slacks—and the codger limped off in a profanity-laced hurry, as stupefied and as shaken as though, well, as though he'd been stoned in the leg. Mikey's heart was in New Orleans, for better or worse. And even if he lost her he would never disparage her, never not love her.

And Algiers, the Right Bank of the river where Burroughs himself, just thirty-four and yet to be published, moved in August of '48 with his own family: a common-law wife and two young children (the son theirs, the daughter hers), living in a rundown shotgun on Wagner Street that, in January, was visited by New York–to–San Francisco Kerouac (Sal Paradise), Cassady (Dean Moriarty), and assorted hangers-on. A visit fictionalized in the Louisiana chapters of language-as-jazz, quest-for-meaning-and-true-experience *On the Road.* Burroughs (Old Bull Lee) the underachieving elder brother of the Beats since Greenwich Village times. An erudite, heroin-addicted mentor not only to Kerouac but to Ginsberg as well—the poet without whose cajoling and connections Burroughs might never have put a book into print.

Some things within, and poached from, those Louisiana *On the Road* chapters that seem worthy of note:

> • Sal Paradise in Algiers, staring at the Mississippi: "From bushy shores where infinitesimal men fished with sticks, and from delta sleeps that stretched up along the reddening land, the big humpbacked river with its mainstream leaping came coiling around Algiers like a snake, with a nameless rumble."
>
> • Paradise and Bull Lee in a Westbank "bookie joint" stocked with slot machines that in 1949 almost certainly belonged to Marcello's Jefferson Music Company: "Bull and I had a beer, and casually Bull went over to the slot machine and threw a half-dollar piece in. The counters clicked 'Jackpot'—'Jackpot'—'Jackpot'—and the last 'Jackpot' hung for just a moment and slipped back to 'Cherry.' He had lost a hundred dollars or more just by a hair. 'Damn!' yelled Bull. 'They got these things adjusted. You could see it right then. I had the jackpot and the mechanism clicked it back. Well, what you gonna do.' We examined the *Racing Form.* I hadn't played the horses in years and was bemused with all the new names. There was one horse called Big Pop that sent me into a temporary trance thinking of my father, who used to play the horses with me."
>
> • Paradise then mentioning this Big Pop premonition of his but to no avail, Bull Lee instead betting on a favorite only to have Big Pop take the race at fifty-to-one odds: "'Damn!' said Bull. 'I should have known better, I've had experience with this before. Oh, when will we ever learn?'"
>
> • And finally—the day before Paradise et al. rode off in Moriarty's Hudson Commodore for San Francisco via Airline Highway, Baton Rouge, Texas, etc.—the guy-folk are at play in the yard, challenging one another to feats of strength and athleticism: "Then Bull came out with a couple of knives and started showing us how to disarm a would-be shivver in a dark alley. I for my part showed him a very good trick, which is falling on the ground in front of your adversary and gripping him with your ankles and flipping

him over on his hands and grabbing his wrists in full nelson. He said it was pretty good. He demonstrated some jujitsu. Little Dodie called her mother to the porch and said, 'Look at the silly men.' "

In 1951, while drinking at a party in Mexico City, a schnockered Burroughs informs that common-law wife, and mother, "I guess it's about time for our William Tell act"—and because they in fact have no such act, she dies. A glass on her head. A .380 ACP slug *in* her head. Game over.

"Look at the silly men." The females in male-dominated *On the Road* mainly exist as accessories for fosterage, sex, and personal growth (says pot to kettle). But the most insightful line therein? Spoken by a little girl.

Mikey's apartment—a musty, track-lit, and tackily furnished time capsule that suggested the Horse Killer had gone to prison in 1983 instead of 1996—was no bigger than a disappointing hotel suite, plus a kitchenette, and Mikey felt he was seeing it, *truly* seeing it, only now. A weary headshake, then Mikey was busy filling boxes he'd just finished mooching and shuttling from the Esplanade Mini Mart, when someone sounded the buzzer.

He walked across a peach carpet, worn down in places to the backing, and stepped into the brick passageway. Barefoot but still dressed like a summer camper. Clutching the .38 against his hip because, well, for Mikey, the past eleven days had been volatile and unpredictable. A gun! Great! Well, great for me. It would be a sin against drama for him to carry that Smith through so much of *The Last Days of Monkey Zak* only to let it virtually vanish, dormant since that maudlin barrel-to-the-heart moment of momism truth with Joan, from my final act.

The passageway—Dieter Traeger on the other side of the gate and whistling "They All Ask'd for You" by the Meters.

"What do you want?" the monkey asked, his listless voice echoing down the length of the passageway.

Traeger was aglow in his shiny-as-satin tracksuit, red with white piping. "So you got yourself shit-canned."

"Be gone, Deet."

"Season's greetings from Bonsoir Antique." Traeger jingled a ring of keys like a handbell. "Lino wants me and you on the same page."

Mikey was still holding the .38—but Traeger keyed the gate open, bobbing toward him in a peekaboo, shadowboxing crouch. Shadow uppercuts. Shadow hooks. A Cus D'Amato pressure fighter but with a strapping (blond) Ali-in-Manila build. At five paces Traeger twirled, closing the goof performance with a roundhouse kick—his spotless cross-trainer striking a head-high brick.

"You plan on capping me, Monkey?"

"I haven't decided."

"No, you'd need permission." Traeger brushed past like a gliding tower, then mounted the Kawasaki parked at the end of the passageway. "How much you think we could fetch for the scooter?"

Mikey reached into the apartment, setting the .38 atop a tall Lucite curio cabinet filled with the kitschy cocktail shakers of the Horse Killer. "On with it. I got things to do."

"Don't we all." Traeger turned the handlebars so he was aimed at Mikey. "Not less than three G's a month, hear?"

"Ten-four," said Mikey. "We through?"

"You really gave that money to your mother?"

"None of your concern."

"Sure it is. I'm getting points for myself on this."

Traeger hopped off the motorcycle and squeezed by for a second time. And he was inside the apartment, peering into liquor boxes with his cerulean eyes, a burly Argonaut hunting swarthy stowaways, when Mikey—trotting in from behind, his yoked shoulder targeting the *Argo* sailor's back—sent him flying through a stacked pillar of empty Southern Comfort cardboard.

"Zak attack," said Mikey.

Traeger rolled onto his side, flailing at toppled SoCo boxes, a semiauto Beretta already out from under the tight of his thin red jacket and zeroed on Mikey.

"No," Mikey wagged a finger, "you'd need permission."

"Touch me again."

"I've been to every city in Mexico." Mikey circled Traeger and quoted from *Point Break,* an actor on a stage, arms akimbo and full stops between lines. "Came across an unclaimed piece of meat in Baja, turned out to be Rosie. Guess he picked a knife fight with somebody better. Found a passport of yours in Sumatra. Missed you by about a week in Fiji. But I knew you wouldn't miss the fifty-year storm, Bodhi."

"Use your words, sneaky fuck. *Your* words."

"No crying to Lino?"

"I'm listening."

"Save a bullet and let's do this till someone says give. No biting, no eye-gouging, no crotch-shots, no Lino. I'm tired, Deet. I wanna wake up."

Traeger wouldn't, Mikey knew, back down because the two of them were basically children. And though Mikey had always assumed Traeger could maul him in a clash, Traeger was the gung-ho, need-to-find-out-for-sure kind. So a decorated Army Ranger versus a marine court-martialed for kook-surfing Baja Norte breaks from Ensenada to San Quintín.

"And no kicking," said Mikey, remembering that passageway roundhouse.

"You gonna wrestle?"

"I'd best, I think."

"Then I'm gonna kick."

Traeger stood and removed his watch, a monstrosity of a Casio G-Shock, propping watch and Beretta next to Mikey's on-the-curio .38—then they began arranging boxes and furniture, leaving themselves some carpet on which to have at each other, and deciding, at last, that there wouldn't be any kicking *or* wrestling.

"All right," said Traeger.

Mikey raised his fists, bending his knees and getting low before Traeger stalked. Their arena was only about half the size of a Golden Gloves ring. One lined, as well, with tripping hazards. So Mikey understood there wouldn't be much sweet science involved here. That when Traeger finally shrank the distance and crowded him this would become more of a trade-punches affair.

But maybe Traeger didn't think Mikey was serious. Thought this was all a bluff that, once called, would lead to a white flag from Mikey and some smartass yet submissive remark. Because even as they met at the center of the room Traeger seemed to be holding off in milk-the-clock defense, daring Mikey to throw the first punch and make the charade real.

Or maybe, being a half foot taller than Mikey, Traeger simply didn't appreciate how long those monkey arms were. Traeger faked a jab, snorting when Mikey flinched, then Mikey planted his back foot and uncorked a looping right that split Traeger's guard. Traeger stumbled, hands to nose, blood streaming from his busted beak.

"Okay," said Mikey. "I give."

Traeger wiped red blood across the front of the red jacket. "I'm about to fucking murder you, Jew."

"You, Jew, who, zoo." Mikey went to the curio and took a pistol in each paw, a movie-poster hero, both barrels on Traeger. "Rules are rules. Show yourself out."

Yes, the months ahead would be difficult, with Traeger finding way after way to get him back. And once Lino had been paid in full? But none of that would be right now. No job. No home. Seared by Joan, charred by Susannah. Right now—all compounding, pound-of-flesh debts be damned—right now was his to enjoy.

"Vaya con Dios," said Mikey. "Shut the gate good."

Then he pitched the Beretta, and that heinous wristwatch, into the passageway—covering bloodied, infuriated Traeger with the .38, giving him wide berth, on alert for any quick-swiping, disarm-the-gunman Fort Benning hocus-pocus.

"Looks like somebody got his ass beat," said one Dauphine stroller to another, catching sight of Traeger coagulating in the September sun. Soon, very soon, Mikey Zak would be gone. Letting go of New Orleans just as he'd let go of Susannah. And without any more grand gestures this transforming monkey would return to his packing and then begin, relaxed and nearly happy, to scurry away, toward a Second Life. Funny when you think about it. Hilarious and almost noble.

Or do I mean tragic? A tragicomedy. A farce like those lights being switched off in that Florida cave—but also Susannah and Mikey in the dark together, holding hands.

Yes, do look. Look and look close. Oh, Mother, look at your silly man!

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