

## FIRST THEY'RE FEVERISH AND HARD TO CONTROL

On the flight from California, Michael had imagined this moment as pure drama: him rushing into the hospital like a man burning to cinders, barking questions to a confused staff, then pushing into the room to embrace his daughter Sharon, who lay limply in a shallow hospital bed. He could not tell if she was comatose or simply asleep, but he lifted her to himself, her cool body light in his arms, and brushed damp hair from her face.

Yet after galloping steps two at a time to reach the fluorescent third floor, his forty-six years swelled and filled his weak lungs and doubled him over, hands on knees, gasping. A few white-coated staff slowed when they passed, and Michael could feel their stares.

At the nurse's station he used the counter for support. "Sharon Heller," he managed. "Where's her room?"

The large woman with a phone to her ear looked up at him, set the receiver down, and shifted a stack of folders until one caught her eye. "You are the . . . ?"

"Father, yes. I just flew in from—"

"Missus Heller is down the hall," she said, and nodded to the left. "Outside your daughter's room." She wedged the phone between her shoulder and head and resumed her conversation.

For an instant, Michael thought she was referring to Linda Heller—no—that wife was back in San Francisco, probably in their kitchen, scrubbing at the sink to soothe her nerves. But

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he was in Boston again, and in Boston *Missus Heller* meant Ruth Heller, his first wife, Sharon’s mother. He’d almost forgotten about her.

She was squatting just beyond an empty, raised stretcher, her chin in her upturned palm, gray-webbed hair confused about her shoulders. From the way her hand held her head at an awkward angle, covering one eye, she looked ready to drop from fatigue. Or humility, he thought, and when she noticed him she uncovered the eye, exposing the pink, clammy skin around it. She shook her head, half smiling, and stumbled to her feet.

“Hi Ruth.”

“You got fat,” she said. “Really pretty obese.”

He leaned close and pecked her on the cheek. They hugged briefly.

“I’m glad you’re here,” she said, and pushed him back to get a look. Then she grabbed her purse from the floor. “You wait here. Okay? And if a Doctor Leonardi shows up, you do the talking.”

“Leonardi?”

“Yes,” she said. “Black woman, about yay tall.” She marked a spot a little above her head.

“Right,” he said. “And Sharon? How’s she?”

Ruth hooked the purse over her shoulder and shrugged. “Ask the doctor. All I know is I’ve been waiting forever to piss.” She turned and rushed down the hall.

He folded his coat over his arm, then gazed down the bright, glistening corridor. A few weak-looking women in blue gowns moved with the aid of walkers, and a staff member wheeled a cart of small boxes and plastic tubes past him. Michael smelled cleaning fluids.

The flight had been an uncomfortable, cramped six-and-a-half hours, broken only by a plastic cup of watery beer, then Boston itself had been twenty degrees colder than the city he’d left. The taxi ride was lined with landmarks from his uncomfortable past: the green T subway signs, the neon Citgo billboard that grew as you watched, then shrank and disappeared. And the brownstones, one after the other. Now he was faced with the woman he had spent a

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decade with, his entire twenties. And *here*—the hospital where he had once squeezed her hand as she squeezed out their daughter.

Michael checked the name on the door: HELLER, SHARON D. He placed his hand on the cold lever and held it. He released it and waited.

When Ruth called him yesterday, he had been sitting in his living room with a novel he’d read twice before. From beside the large, open windows, he could see Linda in the hallway, wiping potting soil on her sweatshirt, the receiver held still by her shoulder. She frowned deeply, drew a tongue across her teeth, and her expression relaxed into a practiced composure when she turned to look at him through the doorway. He knew then who it was.

“Jesus Michael, Sharon’s done it this time.”

“What are you talking about.”

“Christ, I don’t know. I talk to her, you know that. I’m a talker. We communicate, and sometimes it’s like there’s nothing wrong. But now, I swear, I don’t know what to do.”

“You’re not making any sense. You know that, right?”

“Don’t tell *me* about making sense! Our daughter’s in the hospital and you want me to make *sense*?”

He moved down the hallway a step and heard Linda in the kitchen, the water on full blast. “What’s wrong with Sharon?”

“What *isn’t* wrong with her? Can you tell me that? Can you tell me one thing I’ve done right raising her? It’s not a breeze being a single mother, Michael, don’t think it is.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” He spoke slowly, trying to make his patience apparent. “Nobody’s saying that. Please tell me what’s happened to my daughter.”

“Oh! *Your* daughter?”

“Cut it out!” he shouted, then glanced behind. The kitchen was empty. “Just tell me what’s going on. Can you do me a favor and tell me that one thing?”

There was a moment of soft static. “How was I supposed to know she was shooting heroin?”

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Michael thought that was the worst of the news, but then she talked about Sharon’s boyfriend, Anthony or something, who had called in her overdose. He was wanted for armed robbery. It was all recorded on a convenience store’s hazy black-and-white videotape, one hundred thirty-four dollars shoved into a plastic bag. The clerk identified Sharon as the driver who waited in the parking lot for her boyfriend and his .38. Michael learned this slowly, over the course of that long Saturday afternoon, as fragmented phone calls came in, at times defensive, sometimes strangely lucid, often incomprehensible. During the last call, Michael asked to speak with the police, and he heard Ruth shout down the hospital corridor: “Hey cop! My husband has something to say to you!” When the stony male voice said, *Yeah?* Michael explained that, first of all, he was definitely no longer married to that woman, and he only had a question or two. Would his daughter be allowed home when she was able? *No.* Should he call a lawyer? *You’ve got that right. A good one.*

At the sound of heels against the floor, he looked up.

“That’s a relief,” said Ruth, peering into her purse as she approached.

“Did James Samuel come by yet?”

“The lawyer? He left with the cops. Asked a lot of questions and said he’d be back later.” She frowned. “Tonight, maybe.”

He felt in his pocket for the old envelope he’d used to make notes. “I better give him a call.”

“You’re not calling now, are you?”

“Shouldn’t I?”

Ruth rubbed her hair. “Well you know.” She blew a loud sigh. “I only thought that after flying across the country you’d like to see your daughter.”

“Of course. Right. I’m just wound up.”

“Go on,” she said, and pushed open the door. “I’ve been in there a thousand times already. Back and forth all the time. Christ, what a constitution I’ve got.”

. . .

Sharon in the hospital bed, surrounded by bags of heavy fluid that flowed into her through clear tubes, did not look asleep as he imagined she would. She looked dead. Beside the messy threads of her dark hair, her face was gray. Plastic, he thought, brushing the hair back with his hand. She was thinner than the last time he’d seen her, and her eyelids were two large bruises. He listened to the buzz of the lights and the steady *bleep bleep* of a machine beside the bed. He wondered what Linda was doing right now, if she was washing the dishes from their early morning breakfast, or if she had disassembled the Sunday paper and was searching for articles on the ebola virus, her dark hobby. Or was she taking a bath in a house now empty of all distractions, phone off the hook, reveling in his absence?

Sharon’s hand was warm and dry. And heavy. At fifteen, she had been sent to juvenile court for spray-painting obscenities on an abortion clinic in Brookline. When he had flown in for the arraignment and tried to puzzle an answer out of her—why, of all things, an abortion clinic?—she looked at him as though he had spoken in a foreign language. “No reason,” she said finally. Then she stopped talking to him completely. Two years later, she returned to another clinic for her own abortion, and he learned of it afterward, over the phone, from Ruth. Now she was twenty and he was surprised he could recognize her face at all.

. . .

Outside, Ruth was speaking with a white-coated woman who had an oblong mole on her cheek. “Doctor Leonardi?” he said, reaching out a hand and trying not to stare. “I’m Sharon’s father.”

She shook his hand and released, and her abrupt, cordial smile appeared and vanished. “I was just telling your wife that we’re keeping up Sharon’s fluids, and barring anything unforeseen, I expect her up by morning.”

He wanted to clarify that Ruth was not his wife, but said, “Tomorrow morning?”

“No promises, you understand.”

Michael noticed the soft hair on the doctor’s mole. He wondered how it felt.

“And the other thing,” she said.

“The other thing?”

The doctor looked at her feet an instant. “The boy who called in your daughter’s overdose?”

“Tony Romano?” Ruth came forward.

“He was just admitted downstairs,” she said. “Same symptoms. But his condition is significantly worse.” The smile flashed again, involuntarily. “We don’t know if—” she began, then looked over to the nurse’s station, backing up. “I’ve really got to run.”

“Sure,” said Michael.

Then she was gone.

Ruth rummaged through her purse as he watched. She dropped it. She cursed beneath her breath and squatted to pick it up. Louder, she said, “I hope that fucker dies.”

He hadn’t expected that. “But he called the ambulance, Ruth. She’d be dead otherwise.”

Her face went hard. “That boy *gave* her the drugs. He almost *killed* her.”

He said nothing. Sharon had collected drugs well enough without Tony Romano for years now—cocaine, amphetamines, even crack. Michael smoked pot now and then, but Sharon was doing drugs he’d never heard of, synthetic highs mixed in graduate chemistry labs. He’d heard about each one over the years the way he heard about everything in Sharon’s life: over the phone, breathless, in Ruth’s voice.

She produced a pack of cigarettes. “You coming?”

He followed her down the stairwell he had entered through and recalled his gasps from earlier and felt a buzz of humiliation around his face. The double glass doors opened onto the covered walkway outside, and ahead he saw lines of cars, and beyond, the elevated tracks of the subway which crossed the Charles River, moving north to Cambridge. He wished he had brought out his coat. Ruth snapped quickly at the lighter.

“Can I have one of those?”

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Her face collapsed into a suspicious squint. “I thought you quit.”

“My daughter’s in a coma,” he said. “I think I have a right.”

It was good to breathe the heavy, warm atmosphere of a cigarette again—a decade of abstinence had almost convinced him they weren’t enjoyable—and in the cold, with the smoke lingering in the fog of his breaths, the old ritual comforted him.

“How’s Linda?”

He blinked. “Good. She misses her kids. Carl’s graduating Berkeley this spring.”

“Mmm,” she said unconvincingly. “Is she still expecting the world to end? Or did I miss the big day?”

“She’s still interested in the ebola, if that’s what you mean.”

“I thought she was ready to sell the house.”

He closed his eyes and waited for the flushed feeling to pass. Linda’s long-lasting fascination with the ebola virus had only grown over the years, developing into a full-fledged obsession, and Ruth never lost a chance to remind him.

He opened his eyes. “Tell me about Sharon.”

“What’s there to tell?” She spoke toward Cambridge. “From the time she turned fourteen she’s been going all to hell. She shacks up with one worthless son of a bitch after another, and now Tony Romano—Jesus, a *Mob* name.” She wiped an eye with the inside of her wrist. “She’s got her mother’s taste in men.”

She gave him a quick smile, pulled a loose strand behind her ear, and shook her head.

“I don’t know dick about her life. She’s been on everything under the sun. Now it’s heroin. I swear she’d done it all by the time she was sixteen, but not that robbery. She wasn’t involved in that.”

“You sure?”

“Yes I am.”

“But the clerk,” he said slowly. “What about—”

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“Look, Michael. I know because I’m her mother. I live in the same state as her. I *raised* her.”

“Right.” He took another drag.

“Shut up.” She shook her head and raised a finger. “I’ve been taking care of her by myself for half her entire life.”

“Don’t give me that single mother crap. Linda raised three children on her own and not one ended up in a drug coma, charged with robbery.”

Ruth took a half-step back. He heard that brief intake of breath. “What are you saying?” He could read the gathering cry in her twitching features. “You move to the other side of the country and *I’m* the one who can’t raise my child?”

“*Our* child.”

“Fuck *you*.” She flicked her cigarette at him, but it fell to the side and sparked against concrete. “I didn’t ask you here to listen to this.” She covered her pink face with both hands and rubbed furiously, then turned back to the entrance again, her heels knocking against the walkway.

He wished he had gotten drunk on the plane. That single lite beer had done nothing for his disposition, and when he looked at Ruth hurrying through the inner doors and into the hospital he wanted to chase her down and scream at her, and punch her in the kidney.

. . .

Inside, at a row of five payphones, Michael dialed home. After four rings, the answering machine picked up and he listened to his own, too-effeminate voice drone on that they were not there, but would return, and would the caller leave a message?

“Honey, it’s me,” he said. “I made it safe enough, not that—”

The whine of feedback.

“Michael?”

“Hey. Just letting you know I made it. Everything okay?”

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“Oh, yes. Of course,” she said. “I mean, yes.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I’m just preoccupied,” she said. “The usual.”

“Ah.”

“It’s back in Zaire, you know. Forty-seven infected.”

He sighed just loud enough for her to hear.

“And they think it’s a new strain, Michael. A new strain they’ve never seen before.”

“Which would make it new,” he said. “But there’s nothing you can do about it. So go work on your garden and let them take care of it.”

When the silence lasted long enough, he knew she was angry. That was how she expressed her anger, through silences. But it passed. “How’s Sharon?”

“Not good. She’s still not awake, but they seem to think she’ll come out of it by morning.”

“And Ruth?” she added without enthusiasm.

“Older. And pretty goddam unstable.”

“Really?”

“No,” he said. “She’s just the eternal victim. We’ve talked about this. And it makes me the eternal criminal.”

“Oh,” she breathed into the phone, a soft laugh.

“Look, I should go. I need to track down that lawyer. Just wanted to touch base.”

“Well thank you for that. I guess you’ll be staying tonight?”

“Think so. Give Bill a call, will you? Tell him . . . tell him my daughter’s sick and I’ll be in Tuesday.”

“Not too long now,” she said. “I can’t be reading these articles all by myself.”

Well then don’t, he thought, but said, “Right. Talk to you tomorrow.”

He called James Samuel at his home number, and spoke to his machine. Then he found a large bathroom on the first floor and used the cold handicap rail to sit down. It was only five-

thirty and the day had wrung him out. Sharon’s condition, then Ruth’s, then being reminded of Linda’s paranoia: these things were a heavy fist inside his gut, and he wanted nothing more than this bathroom’s momentary peace.

Ten years before, when they were married, Linda’s interest in the ebola was charming, like a weakness for kittens. She came across articles chronicling its spread through southern Africa with an easy curiosity that even Michael, at times, shared. But at some point during the last decade she had chosen the virus as her nemesis, as if its twists and turns followed a complicated path to get to her, Linda Heller, in San Francisco. As each child left for college she went deeper into her studies, and by the time he noticed what was going on, it was too late. She cut out pieces with grainy photos of mass funerals, entire South African villages put to rest, and filled shoe boxes. At the library she excised microfilmed *New York Times* pages from the late seventies which made reference to some vague, unnamed disease in Zaire and the Sudan that slaughtered hundreds at a time.

“Filoviridae,” she said once while rubbing a lime-colored sponge into the kitchen countertop.

Michael looked up from the calculator and loose piles of receipts and tax forms he had been trying to organize. “What?”

“Filoviridae,” she repeated, her shoulders heaving into the wet sponge. “The family it belongs to.” She looked up, and Michael felt suddenly naked. She turned back to her work. “The ebola. Four strains: Tai, Reston, Sudan and Zaire. This is a plague, Michael, and all you can think of is taxes.”

It was clear to him then that the ebola had taken his wife.

. . .

In front of Sharon’s open door, Ruth stood facing a short, darkly hairy man and a thin, taller woman. The man was pointing at Ruth, shaking his hand accusingly. Michael caught fragments

of his low voice—something about a whore with no goddam discipline, a bad girl who needed to be curbed. Michael came up behind Ruth. “What’s going on here?”

The man’s bare scalp reflected the lights. “And who the hell are *you*?”

“He’s my husband,” said Ruth. “Sharon’s father.”

The thin woman cried mutedly, as though through a blanket, and looked at her knotted fingers.

“Just calm down.” Michael raised his hands. “Are you Tony’s parents?”

“We were,” said the man. “We were!”

The woman’s crying grew louder.

Ruth whispered, “The kid just died.”

“Jesus.” Michael rubbed his forehead. “I’m really sorry.”

The father pushed Michael’s chest with an open, hard hand—back, against the wall.

“You don’t know the first thing about it!” His breath was thick and sweet. “I’ll tell you something you goddam father of a whore, I’ll tell you what it’s like to lose your only boy—” He blinked a moment. “Brought down by your slut, when all he was—” He was right in Michael’s face, his red features twisting painfully, sweating, searching for words. He pressed his finger into Michael’s chest until it hurt. “You want to die it feels so goddam bad!” The mother was shaking farther back, holding herself.

Michael said, “I—”

“You don’t know the first thing about it!”

“Hey!” said someone. “This is a hospital!” It was the nurse Michael had spoken with earlier, jogging up to them. “Take it outside and kill each other. *Then* we’ll bring you inside,” she said, her jaws tight, but she seemed to be appreciating her own irony.

The father let go of Michael, palms exposed. “All right.” He stepped back. He grabbed his wife by the arm and pulled her away. Michael, the nurse and Ruth watched them go. They stopped at the elevator. The man pressed the down button and crossed his arms, leaning forward, then back. He pressed the button again. He put his arm around his wife, who was

settling down. A tone sounded and the doors opened slowly. They stepped in. Then his head appeared. “Curb your goddam whore!” he yelled as the doors closed.

The nurse turned back to them. “No more fights, okay?”

He followed Ruth back into the room, where she sat in the metal chair and cradled her stomach in her arms, as if she were going to vomit. She rocked back and forth beside Sharon’s bed, gazing into space and chewing the inside of her mouth. He recognized this movement. At first, it was a vague recognition, then it came to him from over a decade ago, from after their fights. She would run into the bedroom and sit there, rocking, chewing, until the tension left her. He squatted and placed a hand on her knee. She would rock back and forth on the bed, waiting for him to follow and put his arms around her. And he usually did. Instead of making up, they would have sex, and Michael wondered if they had ever reconciled anything.

Ruth looked down at his hand blankly, then looked into his face. “Are you hungry?”

“A little.”

“I’ll be out in a sec,” she said, and nodded past him.

He followed her gaze to the bright, open doorway before comprehending. “Oh.” He stood and went to the door and looked back. She arched her brows—again, the delay in comprehension—and he closed the door.

Michael stretched and rolled his head, to eat up the adrenaline Tony Romano’s grieving father had released in him. He bent and tried to touch his toes, but only made it halfway down his shin. He bobbed, breathing steadily, and remembered when Ruth first told him she thought she was pregnant. She had been a week late, but he had pointed out that this was evidence of nothing: Michael had never known a woman with a regular menstrual cycle. Each of his few lovers had had long and short months in unpredictable sequences, and after three years of marriage he knew better than to be concerned. “How late were you last month?”

“Five days.”

“So there.”

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But then her nipples showed signs, becoming tender; certain blouses pressed and scraped too brutally and she winced and expressed her fear again. Then the sharp back pains. At the end of the second week he allowed himself some worry. He’d just received his MBA and at his new job, between meetings, the possibility of a child collapsed upon him and he understood in a way he could not express even to Ruth, that everything was going to change. He came home to find her reading want ads, still in her waitress outfit, and when he told her everything was going to be different—their futures, their moment-to-moment lives—she stared at him sympathetically, but uncomprehendingly. This frightened and thrilled him. And when the pregnancy test, and the follow-up at the clinic, proved their child to them, the ground disappeared and he felt, every day, as if he were falling.

“You look stupid.”

He straightened, blinking, dizzy, and Ruth patted him on the back. He could see that she’d been crying.

“Hold on,” she said, and went to talk with the nurse at the desk, who gave her a small black box. She held it up for him to see.

“A beeper?”

“In case anything happens.”

“Did you take one home with you last night?”

She slipped it into her jeans. “I didn’t go home last night.”

“Oh,” he said.

She pulled on his arm, and he followed.

. . . .

The cafeteria was in the basement, four floors down, and Michael watched all the injured and debilitated patients in smocks as he and Linda collected their trays of food and found seats.

“This place smells like beef bullion,” he said.

“Remember the last time we were here?”

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He saw she was smiling. “Was it with you?”

“No,” she said, and took a spoonful of peas. “Her. Remember?”

“The bicycle.”

Her eyebrows rose and fell quickly.

When Sharon was nine, she was side-swiped by an old man in a Cadillac. There was one more year left in the marriage, and this was their final lengthy group activity, huddled together in Sharon’s hospital room, reading her bedtime stories, sharing cubes of institutional jello, piling up the teen magazines.

“You know,” she said, “I feel like I’ve spent my whole life in mourning. Do you know that feeling?” When he shook his head, she shrugged. “I don’t know. But first you leave, then Sharon falls apart. Not to mention my own life, my career.” She poked at brown gravy with a fork. “It’s worse having her around all the time, knowing all the hopes I had for her.

“She’s only twenty years old.”

“Give me a break.” She delivered a slice of hamburger to her mouth, and chewed.

“She’ll get jail time for this. For criminals, success means getting through community college and finding a job in data entry. That’s as high as you can aim. But that’s not what we had planned for Sharon, or what she had planned. Do you remember?”

He remembered writer, actor, cellist, astronaut, painter, president and more—but couldn’t remember which they had wanted and which Sharon had chosen on her own.

“But I’m in this every day. I can’t forget about it. She shows up only when she needs something, looking like hell, like she’s not getting any sleep, like she doesn’t eat a thing, and do you think she hears a word I say? When she’s around it’s like being a ghost in your own house. Do you know what I mean?”

He did.

“It’s not like I won’t be happy if she gets all this behind her and goes to some trade school and finds some nice young man—or turns gay. Jesus, maybe that would do the trick.” She smiled, her gaze sliding down their long table. “I can’t help but be proud of her when she

shows the slightest aptitude for something. No matter how insignificant. I’ll always blow it out of proportion.” She motioned with her head to the end of the table, where a nurse fed a small boy in yellow pajamas, the child’s sloping forehead and wide-set eyes marking him forever. Ruth lowered her voice. “It’s like finding out your child is retarded, after you’ve enrolled her in Montessori.”

Michael set down his coffee and watched Ruth look at her hands, gathering her words. She seemed violated to him, somehow, overworked and crushed, but the way her hands opened up like two small flowers, tapered white fingers spreading to reveal her palms, was striking. He stared at those fingers. He wanted to ask what she wanted of him, but was afraid of what she might answer.

She closed her hands. “You don’t know what it’s like to live this way. You really don’t. It’s bad enough I have to deal with my own failures. But watching someone I love destroy herself and not be able to do anything about it . . . ” Her voice dimmed. “You’re far away enough you can forget about it. God knows I’d do the same thing if I could. And each day I expect the big phone call telling me my daughter’s dead, or she’s been picked up doing prostitution—*really*, I don’t know what. She’s been shooting up; what if she’s got AIDS? She might already be gone, and there’s nothing I can do about it.”

She deflated with a long sigh.

“I’m babbling.”

He passed the ketchup bottle, and as she poured a red mound beside her fries, he said, “How come you never married again?”

She forced a quiet, mocking laugh. “Come on, Michael. I was going to be a publisher, remember that? I was going to publish books—good books. But I wait tables for a living. Nobody wants a depressive waitress with a twenty-year-old delinquent.”

“You’re still very attractive.”

“Which is what you become when you’re no longer pretty.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“I know.” She pushed a french fry into her ketchup, stirring it. “Just don’t bullshit me. I think we’re beyond that.”

She went back to her food; Michael went back to his.

. . .

When James Samuel arrived a couple hours later, the first thing Michael noticed was his limp, and that his shoulders sloped slightly to the left, as if scoliosis had taken hold. But his quick walk was even and firm. A friend from the office had suggested this lawyer, said he was the kind of man you wanted on *your* side in a fight, and that had sounded good to Michael. His handshake was intense.

“I’ve been talking to the DA’s office,” he said, “and it looks like they want to play hardball.”

Michael nodded, and wondered what exactly that meant.

James Samuel gave a satisfied smile, then glanced up the corridor secretively. “But they don’t have shit. Trust me on this. A sad thing when anyone dies, but that Tony Romano boy, he was their whole case against your Sharon.” He reached out an arm and motioned them closer; they leaned in. “It’s an issue of *blame*, see? Who’s to blame for your daughter being in that hoodlum’s car when he robbed that store? Only two people know for sure, and one of them’s dead. It’s all up to Sharon.” He squeezed Michael’s shoulder and winked. “What she says, goes.”

He spent another hour with them, explaining the details of what he’d already said, repeating issues of formality and covering the more complicated issues with an all-encompassing *I’ll take care of that*. Michael asked sporadic questions, but once it was clear that her daughter would not go to jail, Ruth stepped back, nodded, and disappeared into Sharon’s room.

Michael followed when James Samuel was gone, and squinted in the semi-darkness. “How are you?”

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She looked up at him from the other side of Sharon’s bed, and stifled a yawn. “I don’t know. A little stomach ache.”

“Where’s the waiting room? Go lay down.”

“Will you stay here?”

“If you want.”

Ruth nodded dreamily and reached for her purse as she stood up. She put an arm around Michael’s shoulder and kissed him on the cheek. “I’m glad you came.”

From the doorway, he watched her move slowly down the vacant, dim hall. Her low heels clicked and her ankles trembled. She pushed against the door to the waiting room, was slowed momentarily by the door’s resistance, then disappeared. He returned to the chair beside the bed.

He felt an unsettling happiness that Sharon was going free. For all he knew, she had instigated the robbery, had talked Tony into buying a gun to steal her some cash. Anything was possible. She had been in and out of the juvenile courts, through drug rehabs, and had spent the last five years giving him silence. He didn’t even know if she liked movies or books. Did she even know how to read? He had spent a decade in California with three children who were appalling in their achievements and good humor. He wasn’t close to any of them, but they had been enough to distract him from this troubled girl in Massachusetts. James Samuel had talked about blame—who was to blame for Sharon being in that car?

He wanted to be anywhere else.

On the plane ride to Boston he had had a window seat, and for a while he leaned his forehead against the trembling, egg-shaped glass and looked past the wing to the gray and white cloud-tops below. He sipped at his beer, set it aside, and was overcome by a desire for freefall, wanted it strongly, irrationally, could feel the cold of it envelop him. It reminded him of a steak restaurant where he and Ruth and Sharon used to eat—an over-decorated place, constructed of kitchy southwestern signs and cigar store Indians and circus paraphernalia, and a mix of do-wop and country blared from the speakers. They used to sit at the edge of the

balcony, beside a low, waist-high wall that gave them a panorama of the whole chaotic place. Sitting there, Michael always felt a twinge of fear that he would accidentally throw himself over the edge. He imagined a muscle spasm in his thigh, one that would make him lose his balance and stumble over, and down. He could clearly see his body draped over a cracked tabletop, customers running, his back snapped like a brittle cracker.

On the airplane he recalled that fear, but remembered it as desire, and he pressed his knuckles against the window, and rapped.

. . .

“Fucker!”

Michael fell to the left, sliding off the couch. Ruth punched him in the arm and he grunted.

“Disloyal son of a bitch!”

He was awake now, on the floor of the waiting room. He couldn’t remember how he’d gotten there, though it was no mystery: that metal chair had been extremely uncomfortable.

Ruth buttoned her shirt above him, pacing, her frown deep and bleak. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Waiting,” he said. “It’s a waiting room.”

“No.” She looked down at the black beeper, then slipped it into her pocket. “You were supposed to wake me. You said you would stay with her.”

Michael held down his yawn and swallowed it. “Christ, Ruth. Be reasonable.”

“Someone has to be there when she wakes up!”

“We’re less than fifty feet away.”

“You’re a motherfucker.”

“Come on,” he managed, but she was already out the door. The words dried and stuck to the inside of his mouth. He didn’t know why he was here. Ruth didn’t need him, and Sharon probably wouldn’t even speak to him when she woke. He was only in the way. He rubbed his

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face and wiped his eyes clear. Linda was strange, and her children were distant, but they spoke to him clearly in a language he understood. He stretched out his neck—first one side, then the next. He didn’t need any of this.

But when he stood in Sharon’s doorway, watching Ruth in her chair, examining herself in a compact mirror, lining her lips carefully, he felt the urgency of his decision drain slowly from him, through a hole in his foot.

“Any change?”

Ruth shook her head. Her arms were stretched around her stomach and she avoided him with her eyes. He watched until he saw the rocking—slow and incremental, but clearly there—then he made his way down the hall, taking his time, past old women with walkers, and the morning cleaners with carts of brushes and fluids.

“Your daughter hadn’t even been born in 1976, but in Zaire and the western Sudan three hundred forty Africans were dying.”

He blinked against the lights and remembered.

“All they knew was entire families were dying fast. They lined up outside tiny clinics and churches but nothing helped. Their friends were gasping for breaths, they were bleeding from their mouths and noses and genitals. First, they’re feverish and hard to control. Then they’re dead.”

“Jesus,” he had said to Linda, staring at their bedroom ceiling. He had closed his book and marked it with a finger. “You’re like a broken record.”

“I’ll keep telling you until you listen. This is a plague. It’s fucking Armageddon and you don’t even care.”

“Armageddon my ass.”

At the far end of the corridor he turned around. He watched the floor as he walked, the perfectly reflected lights of the ceiling, then he counted white floor tiles. At fifty-six, he went back in and squatted beside Ruth’s chair. He put a hand on her knee, lightly, and considered apologizing. There was no telling how long this would last. But silence was better. Nothing to

provoke. He unfolded another chair that was stored behind the door. He sat on the opposite side of the bed and took a long look at his daughter. Ruth gathered her purse straps and left the room.

“We’re in a lull now,” she had said. “Like in seventy-six. Five years it left us alone, five years, then took another thirty-four in the Sudan. It keeps coming back, just to remind us what it can do. Last year over two hundred more died.”

“Hardly a plague,” he had told her, rolling over to face the wall.

“It’s not the numbers—don’t you see? It’s that we know nothing about it. And there’s so much commerce that if it shows up in one port city, then it’s all over the world in weeks. Then no one’s safe. Least of all you.”

He looked up at a sound. Ruth was leaning against the closed door, watching him. The anger was gone; she was only watching. He rubbed his face, stood, and went to stand with her. “Can you spare a smoke?”

As if the question were expected, as if their whole meeting had been written beforehand, she opened the door and they went out.

. . .

The gray sky glowed orange in the east. Long shadows crossed over them as they smoked and talked, and Michael buttoned his jacket. She lit another cigarette and brushed ash off her jeans. “Remember those first months we were married? That rent-controlled trap up in Cambridge? God, what a nightmare.”

“Yellow water,” he said, smiling.

She leaned against a dewy column and drew her arms tightly around herself. “It was all right for a while. You were in school and I had my degree and was looking for a job. We could distract ourselves from the rusty pipes.” She looked into the bright end of her cigarette. “But after a few months I started getting a little paranoid. I never told you about it, though I almost did. I’m glad I didn’t. I was sure you were having an affair.”

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He scratched his unshaven cheek.

“Yeah, I know,” she said. “But you weren’t there, not during the daytime. I was stuck in that miserable hole calling publishers and getting nothing. I had no experience and they didn’t even answer my letters. Then you’d come home from school full of all those clever students in your classes, all those quick-witted women who impressed you so much. And I was being insulted each day by that empty mailbox and that silent phone. I was sure you were fucking those smart little girls. I even followed you once.”

“You followed me?”

She held up a hand and he noticed the cigarette stub trembling between two fingers. “Don’t look shocked. It’s not that crazy. I just decided to take a cab to your school one afternoon. I set up in a coffee shop across the street and waited. And when you came out, you were with some gorgeous girl. Really beautiful. And I could tell by the way she was laughing at what you’d said that she wanted to sleep with you. Even if you didn’t, I could see she had you marked. I almost got sick right there.”

“No,” he said. “This doesn’t make sense. It never would’ve occurred to me to cheat on you. Not then.”

“It’s all relative. I just kept thinking: If I were him, *I’d* cheat on me.” She chewed the inside of her mouth, then her lower lip.

He nodded, though he knew he didn’t understand. His memory of those early years was charmed, and all he recalled was a sort of happy poverty, a lot of alcohol and wonderful sex.

“Look at me now,” said Ruth. Her hands were beginning to flutter. “I was right. Even if I wasn’t, I’ve become the woman any man would cheat on.”

“Jesus,” he said. “That’s not true at all.”

She took a long drag, then gazed out over the parking lot. Her lips opened slightly, skin clinging to skin and separating, then formed a sad, half-smile.

Michael flushed at the sight of her misery and his eyes watered. She looked as though her whole life had been a joke she only now got. He dropped his cigarette and wiped at his

eyes; his irregular breaths were loud and raspy. Ruth placed a hand on his arm. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. The ground buckled beneath him, disintegrating, and he realized then that he was speaking, loudly and quickly, telling her everything. His life was cold and repulsive and, God, he and Linda were hardly even man and wife. Did she understand? He was living with a stranger. There was nothing. He never should have left Boston. "Why did I leave you and Sharon?"

"Come on," Ruth whispered, rubbing his shoulder. "Don't talk like that. You're upset."

"Damn right I'm upset," he said. "I've thrown everything away. That woman in California, she's crazy. I really mean it." He held onto her shoulders so she would not go away, then touched her cheek. He brushed a loose piece of hair from her forehead. "You're so beautiful, Ruth."

"No," she said firmly. "Not that." She pushed away, but he held her shoulders tighter, thumbs disappearing into the fabric of her coat. He jerked her closer so that her tight, squinting face was almost touching his. He shook all over as he cried. She said, "No."

He kissed her on the mouth, and for a moment she gave in and gave it back to him, her mouth open, and they stumbled against a damp column. Her tongue tasted of old cigarettes, and he opened his mouth to accept it, but then she pushed away again. Her wiping hand smeared mascara. She looked almost frightened. "No," she said, and jogged back into the hospital.

He followed, his knees cold, and saw her disappear into the bathroom he had used earlier, just past the payphones. The door's hydraulic hinge slowed it down, and Michael was just able to wedge a shoe into the space between the door and the frame.

"Michael," she said, her voice wavering on the other side. "Go upstairs and I'll meet you later." She was leaning against the door.

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He shouldered his side, and it gave a little. “Open up, come on now.” He checked the corridor, saw that no one was looking, then threw himself into it. The door surged open, and he heard Ruth stumble back and fall. He bolted the door and helped her up.

“Get out of here, Michael, I’m telling you. I’ll scream.” She held onto his shirt with fists, keeping his body inches away. She spoke through gritted teeth. “I’ll scream rape, I swear to God.”

It was quiet, but the crying was still in him, pulsing as he twisted off his coat. When she pushed, he found her wrists and held them. “Please,” he whispered. He was having trouble seeing through the tears, and all of this—Ruth’s blurred face, the echo of his voice in the bathroom—was a ghost of the reality he knew. When he held her against the wall and unbuttoned her jeans, her smeared face seemed to say yes. His fingers groped over the buttons of her shirt; threads snapped. He felt her hands on his own shirt, unbuttoning. He threw her jeans over the back of the toilet.

She used the cold porcelain sink, half-sitting on it. It was difficult at first, and he could see her wince, then it was easier, and the motion of it began taking him over. His limbs worked of their own accord. Then the falling came, and it was like throwing himself from a high place, knowing the impact is coming, but not caring when, only knowing it is later than now. He was sweating in the cold bathroom, and Ruth was so far away he couldn’t remember what she looked like, could not make out what she was saying, then it was louder and more demanding; then it was right in his ear:

“The beeper! Goddam the beeper get the hell *off* me!”

He stumbled back and the fluorescents flooded his blinking eyes. There was banging from somewhere, and it was the door, someone trying to get in. “I’ll be right out,” he said weakly. Ruth’s bare back was hunched over the toilet, the steps of her backbone pronounced, and her hand was in the water, swimming after the small black box with the red blinking light. She held it up for him to see, dripping, then its light went out.

“Do you see? Do you get this?”

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Behind, the banging continued.

He felt his nudity all at once. He felt his exposure as he felt hers, and the bathroom was a frigid hole. She threw his pants at him.

“We’ve got to get out of here. Jesus. We’re so worthless.”

The knocking grew louder.

Ruth raised her voice: “We’ll be right out.”

It did not cease. They rushed through it, pulled up pants and buttoned shirts, and Ruth squatted to find the buttons that had fallen. Banging on the door. Michael pulled on his shoes, the sound of the door filling the space in him where his desire had been. “Hold on! We’ll be right out!” Ruth was tying up her hair. He buckled his belt and jerked the door open—“*I said,*” he began. Then stopped. The boy standing there in his yellow pajamas smiled, his fist still pounding air where the door had been. It was the child they had seen in the cafeteria, whose sloping head was a badge of ineptitude and innocence. He laughed softly at Michael, then at Ruth, who wiped the last of the water from her hand. The beeper was in her other hand. The boy’s laugh was like someone trying to catch his breath, over and over.

Michael could smell the odor of their sex hanging dead in the air, and again when Ruth rushed past him to find their daughter.

The boy wiped his face with a flat hand and looked up at him. He caught his breath, and did it again.

. . .

Sharon was propped up against the headboard, looking ravaged and drained, twisted beneath the skin. So that’s what it looks like, he thought: someone who’s come back from the dead. He could not get over how false her skin looked, so lifeless. But her face moved, the features sorely animated, and he watched from the door as she whispered through a crackling throat to her mother. Sharon smiled, then Ruth smiled, and they held hands. Someone had opened the

curtains and filled the room with sunlight. These were his two girls—his wife and his daughter. He stepped forward and cleared his throat.

Ruth looked up first, smiled slightly, then Sharon turned to him. For a second, Sharon’s smile remained, until her eyes accommodated the distance and she recognized him. She looked at Ruth. “What’s he doing here?”

“To see you,” he said, stepping farther into the room. “I’ve been—”

“Mom, make him go.”

“Hey,” said Michael. “Hey.”

“Mom.”

Ruth looked at him, then at Sharon. And when, after a few long seconds, she turned back to him, there was no recognition in her face. She stared through him, and into the hall. It took him a moment to understand. He was a stranger who had entered the wrong room, and in that way he backed up slowly and apologized, confused, and left.

The corridor swam in his vision, white and noisy. He could feel the sickness beginning in his belly, but it didn’t take, and by the time he had settled into the cab and was well on his way to the airport, his vision had cleared as well. On the flight he tried to understand what had happened, came at it from a hundred different angles, but it always eluded him. Linda was in the kitchen with a newspaper when he arrived, and put her arms around his neck and told him she had missed him, and asked about Sharon, and gave serious looks when he explained what little he knew. “Poor Ruth,” she said finally. “I’ve got to admit I feel sorry for her.”

After he showered and washed off the old sex, Linda followed him into the bedroom and handed him a beer. She sat on the bed, watching him dress, giving him an update on the virus.

“Some of the doctors following this outbreak have been working on it for the past decade. They’re so loyal to their patients.”

He browsed through the closet for some jeans, and grunted.

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“You think I’m off my rocker,” she said. “I know this. But Michael, it’s serious. You’ve got to be aware. It may move slowly, but there’s nothing more serious than this disease. It can kill anyone. Anywhere.”

Michael paused with one leg in, and one leg out. He looked at her.

“Do you see? Do you see what I’m saying?”

“Uh,” he began, and blinked.

“Honey?” She leaned forward. “What’s wrong? It’s bad, but we need to keep a grip on ourselves.”

He wiped his face with his palm and pushed his other leg into the jeans. The cold sweat of that hospital bathroom overcame him, it tingled on his back, and he felt Sharon’s hatred again, all of it, in his gut—no. He leaned against the closet door. No one was going to die. Linda reached forward and smiled sympathetically, standing, but he couldn’t even look at her. They would live forever, he knew, and this would never end.