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Miscellaneous Providence

S G Collins

A big old DC-10 comes limping across the sky over the back yard, so low you might not need a chute to bail out. Its belly is full of patches and painted-over corrosion, it's been rattling around the sky way too long looking for a place to retire. There's a quick flash of darkness, as if Rodney and his neighbors are getting their picture un-taken.

"Way up on a hill," Jack is saying. "Swimming pool built in. Two car garage with two cars in it. Pool table down the basement. And a full time masseuse, preferably Swedish. And a grand piano."

"Since when do you play the piano, Jack?" says Michael over by the grill.

"Good point. Full time piano teacher, preferably Swedish. Giant satellite TV the size of that wall. Surround sound, two thousand channels."

"You want a lifetime supply of twinkies to go with that?" Eleanor points to Jack's gut, and everybody laughs.

"What about you, Eleanor?" Michael asks.

"Blue Mercedes Coupe," she says, rising out of her chair, which takes a while for Eleanor. "And maybe a house in Coral Gables."

The screen door opens, and Grace is there with a pitcher of her famous lemonade. She smiles, and steps past Rodney, lightly touches his arm.

"What about you, Grace, what you gonna do?"

Grace sets the pitcher down on the table with the condiments. "Me, oh, I got my kids and my grandchildren to provide for."

"Oh come on Gracie," says Eleanor. "You worked hard all your life, you gave everything for your kids. Isn't there something you always dreamed of?"

"I need a new TV," says Grace in her Sunday-school teacher voice, and that seems to close the subject.

Michael uses one of Rodney's garden gloves to lift the grill cover. The smoke swirls around some before going up in the sky. He grabs the flipper and edges it into one of the burgers, squints and purses his lips. "Y'all like em rare?"

Now they're taking up plates in the straw paper-plate-holders, and grabbing hamburger rolls out of the bag. The ketchup and mustard and chopped onions are lined up there on the garden table, with a big yellow bowl full of that good bean salad Grace brought over.

"What about you, Rodney?"

"Oh just set one aside for me, Mike, I'm not quite hungry yet."

"I mean what are you gonna do with your share?"

"Oh." He laughs. "I don't know much about that."

A deep voice by the alley gate. "How all you millionaires doing to day?"

They all turn. It's young Jared in his suit and tie, sauntering in with a big wide smile and a twelve-pack of Michelob under his arm.

"Jared!" Grace is beaming, she always adored that boy.

"Yeah, look who's just in time for the food," says Jack.

Jared shakes Rodney's hand. "Happy birthday old man. Did I miss anything?"

Rodney gestures to his guests. "Everybody just picking out a parcel of paradise. You know, it could get a might lonely around here, once you all move away."

"Don't worry, Rodney," Grace looks right at him. "I don't think I'll be going anywhere. But the way you people talk? You know, two point two million dollars don't buy no emerald city. You wanna invest wisely and let it grow for the future."

Sitting up straight, she brushes away a crumb, and smooths back the lace on the front of her dress.

"The future, huh," says Jack. He just takes his burger on the roll without a plate.

"That's right. Tell em, Jared, you've been good with money."

Jared is reaching down with one long arm, replenishing the beer cooler. That boy's grown up to be quite a tall man, Rodney thinks. Then he remembers Jared just turned forty last month. His daughter's gone off in college now, somewhere down south.

Jared straightens up. "Well I do have one idea. Let's say we was each to take half the money and pool it together. And we build one big beautiful community center. With a

meeting place, a gym, senior programs, after school programs, free health screenings, like for blood pressure and cholesterol and that? Maybe even a neighborhood theater group. Be the envy of the whole state."

Jack is frowning. "Where at?"

"Right here in the hood."

"Here?" Jack nearly shrieks, and turns to face him. "You gonna build something *here*? Jared, you know this place is poison, why you think they payin us off?"

"I'm just sayin —"

"Anybody in their right mind's pulling their kids out anyway, all the young people's evacuatin outa here. Neighborhood? I don't think so, man, this place is done. It's over. We're *all* over."

He takes a bite into his burger, and chews.

Another jet rumbles over. They're coming on steady now, must be near five o'clock.

"Why you mad at me, Jack?" Jared asks.

Jack shakes his head.

"It wasn't me that did it, I ain't the chemical company."

Jack waves his hand to dismiss the whole exchange.

Rodney steps off his back stoop and wanders over to check his tomato plants.

They're growing in five-gallon drums lined up by the fence. It's been two years since he started growing his tomatoes in pots. He used to grow them right in the ground. At least the plants seem to be in good spirits. The leaves are full and wrinkly between his fingertips, still dusty from when he sprinkled them yesterday. No pests that he can feel. He pokes a finger in the soil: not too dry, not too wet.

Jack always was one of those get-mine types, Rodney thinks, ever since he was big enough to grab somebody else's ice cream.

"You talk to that lawyer?" Jack asks.

"This afternoon," Jared says.

"He say when the money's coming?"

"Didn't say when, he said soon."

Eleanor chuckles. "They gonna wait for us to die, then pay us."

Toward sundown, Jared's wife Jean shows up with a cake. It's got yellow and green frosting, and just eight candles instead of eighty, in deference to Rodney's old lungs. They sing him "Happy Birthday," and Rodney smiles, and he's grateful for his neighbors. But inside, he's not quite one hundred percent happy. It all just feels like more goodbye. Rodney doesn't care much for goodbye.

The mantle clock downstairs chimes two o'clock, and Rodney's still looking at the ceiling. The clock was a retirement gift from the printing company. Doris always loved that clock, she thought it was one of the nicest things in the house. He misses her, and isn't ashamed to say so, right there in the quiet. "I miss you, baby," he tells her pillow. There's a nice picture of Doris on top of the dresser, a real studio portrait in a silver frame with little bluebirds on the corners. It was done before they were married, by that photographer who used to be at the corner of Cayuga and Tennessee. The photographer told her she should be a model, and for awhile Doris was pretty near convinced. She did have a nice smile, when she did smile.

There's a picture of their son Duane there too, in his Marines uniform, but it's not so good because the colors are fading. For some reason the old color photos don't hold up as well as the black and white ones.

In the morning, Rodney takes two tablespoonfuls of Worcestershire sauce, then drinks a glass of water, just as he has every morning for a really long time. It's a habit he got from his grandfather, who did the same, and who lived to be a hundred and three.

He's pruning the rosebushes when the front doorbell rings. He takes off his gloves and leaves them with the clippers on the back steps.

The mailman, John, is an older white man who lives in the neighborhood just a few streets northwest of here. He's been a mail carrier here for just about as long as Rodney can remember. It was him that brought the notice about Duane. They were closer back then somehow, but nowadays they're just courteous to each other.

"Morning Mister Manley."

"Morning John, how you doing today?"

"Good, thanks. Can you sign for this one, it's certified."

"Okay," Rodney says, and takes the pen to sign the receipt.

John passes him the pale blue envelope with a little smile. He certainly knows what's going on. Maybe he's part of the settlement too, Rodney never asked.

"Good luck to you," John says.

"Hey, thanks," Rodney says. "Good luck to you too."

Rodney's at the mirror, putting on his good suit for the occasion of his drive downtown. Doris is telling him to brush the dandruff off his shoulder, and that he should wear the red bow tie with white dots, not the yellow one. You never wear a yellow tie into a bank, she insists. Whenever Rodney imagines himself in a conversation with Doris, he tries to keep his mouth clamped shut, lest the people see his lips moving and think he's gone demented. There are times he hears music too, but he won't even tell the doctor about that.

He tucks the envelope into his breast pocket, and turns toward the door.

It comes as no surprise to Rodney that you can't just walk into the bank and cash a check for two point two million. What does surprise him is how nice the bank people are. Something changed while he wasn't looking. Rodney's been cashing his retirement and social security checks at the place next to the liquor store, just because it's closer. His bank has changed names three times since he last visited.

The branch manager's name is Jerry. His office is glassed off in the corner, with pictures of his wife and kids on a smooth wide walnut desk. He wants to know all about Rodney's thirty-seven years as a pressman at Kingsfield Press. He asks about Doris and Duane too, and expresses a measure of condolence. He explains how a line of credit works, then explains it again. He helps Rodney set up some new accounts, and arranges for him to get a credit card. It turns out these people actually offer a very diversified portfolio of financial services. Rodney says he doesn't want to sign up for anything like that just now, as he still needs time to think. The whole affair takes up most of the afternoon, by which time Rodney really has to pee. As they're shaking hands at the door, Jerry asks Rodney where he can get a bow tie like that. "You don't see those around any more," he says.

Walking out the door of the bank, Rodney wonders if he should have asked Jerry about using the bathroom. Banks never have rest rooms for the public, which is why he didn't ask. But he has a feeling they might have let him, just this once. He goes to the Burger King next door instead, and uses the toilet there, and then he orders himself a bacon double cheeseburger to celebrate. One of the few advantages of being a widower is that you can have a bacon double cheeseburger and nobody can stop you, not even Doris.

He takes the long way home, down Kingsfield Road. There's a long straightaway with no trees, then the old playstead on the left, and the chemical plant way off to the right behind all the fences. There are tanks and towers and plumes of smoke, with the sun edging down behind. Just beyond the next bend he sees the big blonde-brick building rearing up on his right, just like it did nine thousand five hundred seventy-one times before. There's no glass at all left in the windows now, and the dark letters across the truss say only GSFIELD RESS.

The squealing under the Escort's hood is getting worse. Timing belt probably needs replacing again. It'll be pouring good money after bad, as they used to say, back when people understood money.

On the same Tuesday his credit card arrives in the mail, Rodney judges some of his tomatoes ripe enough for picking. When the moment feels right, he begins clipping them with the small scissors, leaving a bit of stem on, and treating each one like a newborn kitten as he lowers it into a plastic bag from DeRosa's Save-Rite.

It being a weekday, Jared and Jean are away at work when Rodney comes calling. He leaves one of the sacks of tomatoes hanging on their doorknob. They'll know it's from him. The others seem pleased to see him when he comes round to their doors. Even Jack is in pretty good spirits.

And Grace is nicest of all.

She sits him down with a glass of lemonade and ice and just a little sugar, and they talk for a little while about not much of anything. Something about her granddaughter writing a paper about Spinoza, the famous philosopher, and what an unusual topic that is for a girl like that. It doesn't matter about Spinoza, Rodney's just listening. He just likes

the music of her voice. Grace is a soothing person to be near. Somehow he even gets to feeling comfortable enough to tell Grace what he's really worrying about, deep down. And she listens with the patience of a loving sister.

As he's getting up to leave, Grace says she has plans for these tomatoes. She's going to make a sauce, starting right now. She insists that Rodney come back tomorrow night at six o'clock for dinner.

"Rodney, you always bring me the most delicious tomatoes," she tells him.

Which, as he's walking home, makes him wonder who else has been bringing her tomatoes. That's kind of a funny thought, isn't it. Worried about the competition, Rodney? Well Grace is one heck of a cook, and there's no denying she's still a very beautiful woman. Of course she's way too young for him. He's eighty. She can't be a day over seventy-two.

He turns the corner and sets eyes on his own house, and pauses for a moment to rest with his hand on the telephone pole. It's a modest house, forest green with white trim — cracking now, it needs a new paint job bad. Rodney might give himself a heart attack trying to paint the place. Even climbing ladders isn't too smart any more, his sense of balance isn't what it used to be. It comes to him that he could afford to hire a housepainter, now that he's a millionaire and all. That's not the question. The question is why to bother.

Rodney has no next of kin. Nobody will inherit this little green house. And nobody's ever gonna buy it either, located where it is. The house probably isn't even worth the property tax he owes on it. And that's what he's been so worried about.

A big jet lumbers by overhead.

"Forget the house," was Grace's advice. "Worldly things have a tendency to sort themselves out on their own. Rodney, you've been a very patient man your whole life long. Have yourself some fun. Spend a little money on yourself, and don't be stupid about it — but don't you be shy about it either."

That's some woman, he's thinking as he crosses the street. A lesser woman would say "Spend it on me."

He takes some time Wednesday afternoon mulling over which tie to wear with which shirt this evening. Doris is curiously silent this time, he has to make up his mind all by himself. He's partial to bow ties, the clip-on kind which aren't murder on your fingers. After some hesitation he chooses the bright green one, the one he last wore to the Saint Patrick's parade in 1978. He tries it on, and takes a good look at himself in the mirror, and everything looks as well as could be expected, except for the nose hairs. He finds a pair of tweezers in the bathroom, and spends another half-hour trying to pluck them as best he can. Not a pleasant business, really.

Around four o'clock Rodney hops in the old Escort and drives about half a mile to the florist. The florist has changed hands too, it's a chain store now. Used to be Maddy's place. He orders a dozen roses from the young girl there, who doesn't seem very happy to have a job. It's the first time he uses his new credit card, and the girl gets impatient when she has to explain to him which part of the receipt to keep and which part to give back. He tells her to have a nice day anyway, and drives himself home again.

He leaves to walk over to Grace's place at about twenty before six.

Grace's house is bigger than his, and considerably more pleasant to behold. The mullions of her porch railing are painted a kind of lavender gray, and the rest of the trim is pale yellow, and the walls a sort of dusty rose color. She has potted petunias hanging from the eaves of the porch in the sunlight. Even the curtains in her windows are pretty. He could never ask a woman like this to marry him and move in to his little dump. Rodney's feeling slightly foolish as he steps up to the door, and rings her doorbell.

A few cars pass by, one of them has that awful street-pounding radio inside, the kind that makes the whole neighborhood shudder. Young folks must be going deaf these days. They have the windows rolled up so you can't see who's inside. Most of the new cars have air-conditioning built in.

He rings the doorbell again. Then after a few minutes, he taps his knuckles gently on the glass. Maybe she just can't hear the door from the kitchen. Or maybe she had to run out to the market for some forgotten ingredient. But her car is still in the driveway.

Some time later, he doesn't know how long, Rodney's on the back steps, knocking, leaning to peek in the kitchen window. He can see the faucet is running, that's why she couldn't hear the door. It's running longer than it would take to fill any pot.

His hand is on the little brass doorknob, and now he feels it turning in his hand. Opening the door just a hand's width, he calls out over the noise of water.

"Grace."

As he says the word aloud, it sounds too empty. Something dark descends over his shoulders and creeps down his spine.

He wipes his feet before stepping inside. He turns off the faucet. He lays his dozen roses down on the counter, where the package of rigatoni is lying open. The florist's paper makes a crinkling noise.

Grace is lying on her side on the linoleum, with her head by the dishwasher. Her eyes are open just a little, not looking at anything. Rodney takes out his handkerchief and kneels carefully down by her side. There's a spot of drool there on the floor below her lips. He wouldn't want anyone to see that, it's undignified. He wipes it up. He touches the back of his knuckle to her cheek, and can't feel anything.

Someone has a hand on his shoulder. The sky is dark now, but the rhythmic flashing makes the bunches of lilacs blaze bright against the leaves. Someone is speaking to him. Somebody gives him a drink of water. He's feeling kinda cold now.

"I was a neighbor," he tells a man in a uniform. "I'm feeling a little cold. I was a neighbor."

There is something very wrong about this. Grace was just fine yesterday. Just fine. And Rodney was feeling just fine today. How can a woman like that be just gone, and a fella like him be just fine? It doesn't make any damn sense at all.

It's one thing to take away Duane like that, for no good reason. Another thing to give his Doris some kind of blood disease so rare that by the time they got the diagnosis right she was too far gone. Bad enough to see your only family put in the soil. And then they even took away the soil. They turned his little piece of this earth into poison.

And now this?

"Uh-uh. I don't think so," Rodney says. "No, this is going too far."

It's okay to yell at God. He's the almighty, he can handle a good stern talking to once in awhile. Maybe even a smack in the nose will do.

"Let me talk to him, this ain't right," Rodney is saying into the oncoming headlights. "Let me talk to him."

Somebody has a hand on his arm.

He lurches against the sheet, suffocating, can't unravel himself, somebody's holding him back, and he struggles to slip away. He's flowing with sweat, he realizes, by which time he's cowering on the floor.

"Will you *please*."

She whacks him on the back of the head, but not too hard.

"It was a dream. They ain't no artillery, ain't no Japanese in the bushes, it was only a dream, do you understand? Now some of us have to work in the morning."

The flickering in the sky is just heat lightning.

He climbs back into bed behind her, apologizing. He knows he's been hard to live with lately, having trouble finding gainful employment. He tells her again how much he missed her. "I missed you something awful, babe," he says.

"Go back to sleep," says Doris.

And he wakes up.

It's just before five in the morning. As he stands there by the dresser, the world beyond Rodney's bedroom window is just starting to turn deep blue. The first bird says something, then says something else.

Rodney leans and opens the third drawer down, and takes out a clean, soft towel.

The photograph hasn't moved more than an inch in fifty years. Doris is smiling out at him, as if to say, don't you even *think* about it.

He picks up the frame, brushes the dust off the edges, and very, very gently, wraps it in the towel.

Rodney's no fool. He know's he won't get far in an 82 Escort with a wishy-washy timing belt. First thing Thursday morning, he pays a visit to those car dealers over on Mason Boulevard. It takes him just about an hour to settle on a three-point-five liter, 210 horsepower Mitsubishi Diamante LS. Which is a mouthful to say, but he figures he'll spend more time driving it than pronouncing it.

When Rodney slips out his new checkbook and asks "How much?" the young car dealer Phil's face goes pale for a few seconds. Phil asks if Rodney is trading in the old Escort too. Rodney just hands him the keys, and tells him that worldly things have a way of sorting themselves out.

But by the time Rodney has sorted out other worldly things, like finding the new Department of Motor Vehicles building, and wrapping up all his registration, insurance and inspection business, the day is growing old. He feels like he's criss-crossed this town a dozen times now, and he's frankly sick of looking at the place. He doesn't care much for goodbyes. But he gives it one last wave anyway, zooming up the on-ramp to the turnpike.

On-ramps are no problem for this car. That's what all those liters and horsepower are for. When he first gets out on the highway, Rodney is passing quite a number of folks going slower, and glances down to see he's doing over eighty-five miles an hour, when it felt like he was doing forty. After that, he figures out how to use the cruise controller, as he wouldn't want to run afoul of the law. The car has elaborate climate control too, and soft leather seats with motorized seat adjusters, and leather wrapping on the steering wheel, and windows that roll up and down with one touch of a button, and a hatch in the roof that opens the same way. There's also a fancy radio with eight speakers, it's a shame there's nothing on the air worth listening to. It's a good car. It should be, it cost him about seven times what he paid for his house.

He drives until an hour past sundown, then turns off, and uses his credit card to take a room at a Holiday Inn. Before settling in for the evening, he walks across the grass to the Outback Steak House and treats himself to a T-bone, medium rare, with mashed potatoes and mixed vegetables.

His room at the Holiday has a bright colorful TV set with plenty of channels, too bad there's nothing good on.

In the morning he drives to Denny's and has one of those Grand Slam breakfasts. No complaints there. He tanks up at the Mobil. The day is clear and the sky is tall, and the road is wide and long.

Like anything else, highway driving isn't so scary once you get used to it. It only gets complicated when you're passing a big city. And you have to keep an eye on the signs if you want to know where you are, because from out here on the turnpike one place looks a lot like the next. Although you're moving fast, it feels like you're not especially getting anywhere.

But at least you get plenty of time to think.

He's thinking, this would have been very different if his wife were here. If Doris were alive for the chemical company settlement, that first money certainly would not have gone into a long ride in a fat new car down some highway to who-knows-where. She would have wanted to fly to Rome, Italy, or Paris, France. More likely Paris. Rodney would have taken Doris' picture standing in front of the Eiffel Tower. Maybe she would even be smiling. Doris always dreamed of going to see what she'd never seen in her whole life. And if you think about it, she deserved that. For all she put up with, all those good years taken from her, feeding and clothing her man and her boy. All those years they never would have even wondered how many zeroes go into two point two million dollars. And she ended up with nothing, not even her only son. Just a boring run-down husband and a boring run-down house in the flight path of the jumbo jets. She's the one who deserved to be compensated for a poisoned life. Not him. In a way it makes him feel like a thief. A fugitive on the run with noplac to go.

His picture of Doris is wrapped up and packed in his suitcase in the trunk.

When Jared and Jean come to check on him, they'll probably find his clippers lying on the back steps. And they'll think it's not like Rodney to leave his garden tools out in the weather like that. He would have left a note, but couldn't imagine what to say.

There's a young woman sleeping in the passenger seat beside him.

Maybe she's a storyteller. She says she's Brazilian, but she talks like an American, and besides, he didn't know Brazilians came in blonde.

She found him two or three Roy Rogers ago. He was just sitting down with his chicken cordon bleu sandwich, with a side of cole slaw, when she started talking with him from three tables over. She asked him why he looked so sad, but he didn't want to

get into it so he just said he was tired, a little. She was eating french fries. After a while Rodney said something about how just french fries don't make a very nutritious lunch, and she said she was watching her weight, which Rodney found a little funny because she already looked so thin. So he smiled. That's when she told him she was stranded here, that her boyfriend had ditched her and taken off with her girlfriend. Now a young couple with a three-year-old came to sit at one of the tables between them with their combo meals. So the girl got up and came to sit down right opposite Rodney. She asked him where he was going, and he said he didn't really know, and he asked her where she was headed, and she didn't know either.

"I guess we're a match made in heaven then," Rodney said, which he meant as a wisecrack, but she didn't laugh.

"If you gimme a ride outa here I'll help you pay for the gas," she said.

What clinched the deal, for Rodney, was her spectacular green eyes.

Her name is Lena.

Looks like he's running into some weather. The sky up ahead is turning a kind of dark piss-gray, and the rolling hills all around are cast in a weird light. Rodney is trying to figure out where the switch is for the wipers. Turns out to be on the directional handle, of all places. Meanwhile he's unwittingly slowed down, and the change in the movement and light has brought the young woman beside him to stir with a groan.

"It's cold in here, can I turn this down?"

She adjusts the climate controls like an expert. Then she takes the clip out of her hair, holds it in her teeth while she re-gathers her hair, puts the clip back in.

"So what part of Brazil are you from?"

"Minas Gerais," she says. "It's in the southeast."

He, realizing this means nothing to him, says "What's it like down there?"

"Hot."

Silence.

"I don't remember much about it, I came here when I was four. Where are we?"

"Uh, about three miles away from exit 91."

Having baffled each other with geography, they fall silent again as the big drops splat the windshield.

Someone's knocking on the door. He sits up at the edge of the bed and looks around. Where the hell is he? Knocking again.

Behind her, as he opens his door, is the Econo-Lodge parking lot dappled in early sunlight. The air is cool, the birds are chattering. Lena is wearing the same clothes she had on yesterday. He asks her if she slept well.

"Like a rock. Like a baby. Like a baby rock. You wanna hit the road soon?"

They get egg sandwiches at Dunkin Donuts. The tables in this one are speckled Formica, just like the old days.

"We should be thinking about where you want to go from here," Rodney says.

She nods, chewing. "Any ideas?"

A fly lands on the table, and she scoots it away twice with her hand.

"Well me, I was starting to think about maybe going fishing for awhile, so I was —"

"That sounds okay," she nods again.

"So I was wondering where I might be dropping you off."

She scoots the fly away for a third time, and her tongue is touching her upper lip.

"Well if you wanna get rid of me you can leave me right here, it don't matter," she says, kinda quiet, and Rodney gets the impression he's hurt her feelings.

"That's not what I mean at all," he says. "I was just figuring you must have someplace you gotta be. You don't even have a change of clothes on you."

"Yeah my stuff was in his car when he took off. It's all right, I can get more clothes. I'll be all right."

Rodney finds himself leaning back in his chair, and shaking his head, and laughing.

"What's so funny?"

"Lillies of the field," he says.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean I have to admire your faith in divine providence. I envy it. Really, I don't think you're afraid of any old thing."

"Uhh." She tips her head with a bit of a glare. "Mister, I'm afraid of plenty. That's why I'm riding with you, and not that guy over there."

He thinks about that. She's probably right.

"You can call me Rodney, by the way."

"How bout we just play it by ear for awhile, Rodney."

Before returning to the highway, they ask directions to the nearest mall.

By the time they get back on the road, Lena has a new wardrobe including a lime-green swimsuit, and a new personal stereo with some music to play, while Rodney, having found a sporting goods store, has got himself a fine new rod and reel, a little green tackle kit, two coolers, two flashlights, a water canteen, some outdoor cooking gear, some extra line and a miscellany of hooks.

Two afternoons later, Rodney experiences a scene stranger than anything he could ever imagine. For a moment he thinks he's dreaming.

This twisty road in the foothills takes a turn, and there's a break in the forest, and for a few seconds they're over a gap that looks right out across the lake. The water is wide, choppy and deeply blue, and the evergreen trees are shooting straight up everywhere, like a million church steeples. Far beyond, he sees bare rock cliffs rising faint in the haze. It's one of the most beautiful sights Rodney has seen in a long time, and it literally makes him gasp. A bit further down the hill, they find the entrance to the Fair View Cabins Retreat.

The pimply teenage girl, sitting at a picnic table in front of the office, smiles at them and says hi. She's listening to music on tiny headphones, and appears to be doing homework. "Dad! Customers."

A man in a plaid shirt and bluejeans appears leaning in the doorway of the office with his arms folded. He's in his mid-forties, with a ruddy face more pockmarked on one side than the other, full moustache, dirty blond hair pulled back in a tight ponytail — and the meanest, beadiest little blue eyes on earth, which narrow further now as he sizes up Rodney and Lena.

"Sorry, no vacancy," he says.

The daughter looks up at him.

"Um, well I called ahead," Rodney explains, "I reserved —"

The man's face is set so tight it almost looks like he's smiling. But he's not.

"Sorry. No vacancy."

"Dad, what are you talking about? There's only two couples in the whole place."

"Stay out of it, Lindsay," the man says, without taking his eyes off Rodney.

"That sign there don't say no vacancy," Rodney points.

The man reaches over and flips the sign around.

"Now look here." Rodney is beginning to feel his heart thump. "What do you mean by this, young man? I called ahead to make a reservation on my credit card, and now I stand here, the place is practically deserted, and you tell me —"

Now the man is actually smiling. Something has amused him.

"Listen, I don't know what you two think you're up to, but you sure as hell won't be up to it on my property. You can just turn back and drive away, mister."

Rodney glances back at Lena, who is just standing there with a fishing rod, tackle box, two blankets, and a big new floral-print bag stuffed with her new clothes.

"Well it's one thing to refuse my business, you see, and quite another to lie to my face. Why would you lie to my face, unless you're some sort of coward?"

This is interesting, Rodney's thinking. He has never heard himself speak this way, except maybe to Duane when he was little. Certainly never to a white property owner. He's not feeling much like himself at all. Something has changed.

"Coward? Did I hear you right? Mister, I'm a veteran of the United States Marines."

"Well so am I," Rodney shrugs. "What's that got to do with it?"

The man seems not to have wanted to hear that. Rodney detects a flinch.

He turns and abruptly strides off toward the nearest little cabin, just down the road a stretch.

"Don't you go near that cabin," says the owner.

Rodney tips his eyeglasses to see the little cabin better.

"This cabin here is clearly not occupied," Rodney says. "And neither is that one."

And he turns, and sees a rifle barrel now aimed straight at his chest, and walks right back up the slope directly toward the man wielding it. "And if you're suspecting me of having improper intentions toward my travelling companion? I'm eighty years old. I couldn't

get it up with a forklift. So unless you seriously intend to do me the favor of reuniting me with my late beloved Doris, I suggest you quit making a damn *fool* of yourself in front of these ladies, and do like you promised, and rent me two cabins for a week."

The exertion of getting all those words out while walking up a hill has rendered the rifle superfluous; Rodney is pretty sure he's gonna drop dead right here. But he does manage to gently swing the rifle barrel out of the way with his hand.

The man continues to look Rodney in the left eye for a few seconds more, then abruptly lowers the gun.

"Sir. I completely misunderstood you," he says. "I hope you can forgive me."

The proprietor turns toward the house where the office is, then turns again to invite Rodney inside. And for the next seven days, shows him and his guest nothing but the sincerest hospitality.

It's one of those things that, after it happens, you realize was extremely unlikely.

"Well ain't that the damndest thing in the history of the human race," Rodney says to the young woman when she comes down from her cabin. He's sitting on the dock. The sun is falling so half the lakeshore forest is in shadow, the other side golden.

"Incredible," Lena says. "You were pretty amazing."

"I dunno why he didn't just shoot me."

"It's really beautiful here," she says, as if that were the answer, and passes him the little can of bug repellent.

Rodney doesn't have to rent a rowboat for the occasion, much less buy one. The Fair View has half a dozen of them lying around for the use of its guests. They're dull yellow, made out of some kind of plastic, lightweight enough that it turns out even Rodney can drag one to and from the water without giving himself a heart attack. The oars, on the other hand, are pretty heavy. But he can manage it. Who knows but maybe the fresh air is doing him some good.

The first morning, Lena comes out on the lake with him, just for the ride. She sits there pretty quiet, off and on trailing her hand in the cool water while they drift. She's a

little put off by the sight of the earthworms he's using as bait, and more by watching him push his hook through squirmy worm flesh. She looks away while he does that part.

Rodney realizes the last time he was out fishing was back when all the cars were big, and all the kids had long hair except the ones going to Viet Nam. Still, after only a few tries he regains his old facility for casting the line with not much more than a flick of the wrist. Patiently he reels in the line, then casts again. It's nice here on the lake. The gentle, random flicker of the sun on the water is giving his spirit some repose. Once in awhile a loose V of geese goes honking by overhead, bound for parts unknown. Or there's a line of ducks paddling nonchalantly across the surface, ducking for food. Or he'll just see a little bug that can run around on the water like it was a sidewalk.

And then there's the sound of almost nothing. Depending on which way the breeze is blowing, he can sometimes vaguely hear a truck rolling down State Route 11, the two-lane where that little roadside market is located. But the noise is so far off as to resemble just another kind of wind. Later on he hears the questioning call of a chainsaw, somebody cutting fuel who knows how many miles off. The sound echoes in between all the trees on both sides of the lake, making the world seem even bigger than it is.

"How long before you catch something?" Lena asks.

"Oh, that's a good question."

"If you catch something can we eat it?"

"Uh, depends on what it is, I guess. Or how hungry we get in the meantime."

When the sun gets a bit higher and the world a little warmer, Lena takes off her big denim shirt, under which she's wearing that blinding lime green bathing suit top. She wriggles down to sit on the floor of the boat, with the life vest behind her against the seat.

Rodney eventually gets a bite, and when he reels it in it turns out to be a wall-eyed pike about nine inches long.

"Cool, you got something."

"It's a pike," he says, and he grapples the fish firmly enough so it won't injure itself, and gingerly slips the hook out of its cheek. He looks the fish in the eye and says "Good to meet ya," and tosses it back in.

"Why'd you let him go? Not eatable?"

Nah, I never keep a fish smaller than my willie is what he'd have said to his buddies in the old days. That'd crack em up. He'd never say that to a young lady of course.

"Too puny, anyway pike don't make good eating."

"Rodney, were you really in the Marines, or were you just saying that?"

"Course I was, I wouldn't lie about a thing like that," and glances over at her. She's re-doing her pony-tail again. Her new sunglasses look futuristic, like two little shiny gray bullets over her eyes. He realizes she's taken off her green bra now, so her pale little breasts can enjoy the sunshine too, and neither she nor he says anything about it.

There was a time, he thinks — back in the service — when he actually *had* a woman like that. Briefly, but not just once. Baton Rouge, he remembers. What was her name? Susie maybe? She really was something. Real sweaty girl, but she smelled good anyway. Come to think of it, it was Lucy, not Susie. Looking back now he guesses he was damn lucky, they used to hang men for lesser transgressions. All things considered, Rodney has been pretty lucky all his life. At twenty he survived the taking of Tulagi and Guadalcanal with hardly a scratch, while the boys around him fell like raindrops. And he's never been arrested, never got lynched, his back only hurts once in a while, he hasn't got cancer yet, and he's still got most of his teeth.

He wonders if that Grace is up there looking down at him on this lake right now. And whether she's smiling.

Don't you be shy about it either, was what she told him.

The second day, Lena says she'd rather stay on land. Fishing, in her opinion, is less of a thrill than sitting in the shade reading magazines and listening to the radio. It's just as well they should spend some time apart, because it's a proven fact that familiarity breeds contempt. Anyway her absence brings him some good luck: that afternoon Rodney hooks himself a 20-inch brook trout, and takes out his knife and cleans it right on the spot, then throws it on ice in a Styrofoam cooler he bought just for this eventuality. Late in the afternoon he flattens the slabs of trout between two locking grills with a handle, and cooks it all up over a wood fire in one of the Fair View's fire pits. This part is fun for Lena, who says the fish could use a little salt or something. It's a bit messy too because they forgot to bring forks. They wash it down with a sixpack of Bud.

On the third day, Rodney catches three spotted black bass almost in a row, as if they're lining up waiting for him. Then he meets the lake's fishing warden, who cruises by in a low-slung boat with an Evinrude motor on the back. Seems like a nice enough fella. Because Rodney doesn't have a non-resident's fishing license — and also because it's against the rules to take black bass on this particular lake at this time of year — it turns out Rodney will have to pay a fine of \$240 to the Division of Natural Resources. Rodney says that's fair enough.

"But you know, you oughta tell the bass about that rule of yours," he says, and the warden just looks at him like he doesn't get the joke.

Rodney asks whether he is required to mail in the fine, or can he just pay it in cash to any DNR officer. The latter option would be preferable to him, and it turns out the lake warden is amenable too. Rodney still has a few thousand in cash on him, so he just counts out twelve twenties, and leans very carefully to pass it so his little boat won't capsize. The warden then turns his boat around to putter off toward the east. He warns Rodney that if he catches him fishing without a license again, Rodney will forfeit his right to a fishing license in this state for two years. Rodney waves and tells him to keep up the good work.

As he drags his yellow rowboat up onto shore, Rodney sees Lena hanging around with that kid, Lindsay. Lena's new radio is out on one of the picnic tables. It's not really a radio, it plays music off those little silver disks, with two tiny speakers you can plug in instead of headphones. Lindsay is drinking a can of Budweiser. Lena is dancing barefoot on the grass. The music they're listening to sounds a little like a samba, but without the warmth and roundness — more like a samba played by a locomotive. Rodney doesn't dig what kids listen to these days, but then he's been saying that since 1964, so he's used to it.

Lena doesn't even notice his arrival. She has a faint smile, eyes closed, and there's something deeply graceful about the way she swings, moving in and out of the little shafts of sunlight cast down through the trees. Rodney smiles at Lindsay as he passes by with his fish cooler.

"Your dad know you drink beer?"

"Yup," says Lindsay, and nobody says anything else.

By now he's on a first name basis with Reginald, the moustached owner of the Fair View grounds, from whom he's been purchasing firewood right there at the office. Reginald is still wearing a red plaid shirt, but it's a different plaid from yesterday. At first Rodney thought this guy never changes his clothes, but that's not the case at all. He just likes plaid.

"How's it going, Rodney?"

"Thank you Reginald, I'm doing great," Rodney says with his car keys in hand. "Hey, I'm heading up to the store, you need anything?"

"No, thanks, I'm all set."

They know his face now at the roadside convenient up on Route 11, too. He pulls three bags of ice out of the freezer, they're only a buck apiece. He grabs some tortilla chips and a jar of salsa, a bag of Cheese-Nips, two eight-packs of Duracell double-A batteries for Lena's radio, a copy of the new *Vogue* magazine, and another one called *People*. Then he remembers to grab one of those off-the-shelf pre-filled saltshakers, and some blue plastic forks. Unfortunately he has to buy a whole bag of forks even though he only needs a few. Finally he finds a bottle of Worcestershire sauce, which is good because he's almost out of his daily medicine.

While the cashier is ringing all that up, he goes over to visit the beer fridge. It occurs to him, seeing as he's a millionaire now, to try something besides Budweiser. So he pulls out two sixpacks of Heineken in the bottle and brings them to the counter. But then he goes back for a six of Bud as well, just in case it turns out he doesn't care for Heineken.

"You want a church-key to go with that?" the lady asks. "Those aren't twist-offs."

"Good idea," Rodney says, and picks a bottle-opener from the little bin right there on the counter. He already has one on his knife, but it can't hurt to have a backup.

It takes three trips, and some considerable huffing and puffing, to get all that stuff out to the car. He should have asked Lena to accompany him. When he finally plops into the driver's seat, he's feeling some tightness in the middle of his chest. "Man, you better slow down," he tells himself. "Don't push your luck." So he just rests there for a few minutes with the engine on and the climate-control blowing. He picks up the *Vogue* magazine and starts thumbing through the pages. There are hundreds of full-color photos of slender

young women wearing fancy, if not very attractive, outfits. Maybe it's just him, but they all look kinda stuck-up, like they're better than the rest of us. And in dozens of different ways they all look like they've got one thing on their mind.

In the evening, Reginald and his daughter Lindsay join them for supper. They need help eating all that fish, it's not gonna keep, Rodney says. Lindsay's taken charge of maintaining the fire. The peepers are echoing faintly from all directions. The mosquitoes aren't too bad if you use the spray. While they eat, Reginald is talking about his recipe for preparing trout, but since Rodney's not much of a cook, it goes in one ear and out the other.

"By the way, what do you think of this beer?" Rodney asks him.

"I like it just fine," Reginald says. "Those Germans do know how to make beer, let me tell you. I was stationed in Wiesbaden once, that was a hell of a time."

"I think it's good too," Rodney says. "Takes a little getting used to."

"Uh, Dad, Heineken's not a German beer," Lindsay says.

"Oh, okay Miss Einstein. You're so smart, how come you're failing math?"

A moment of silence and chewing.

"Cuz I smoke too much dope?"

"That's right," her dad nods with satisfaction, and so does Lindsay.

After everyone's gone to bed, Rodney shovels some dirt over what's left of the fire, and makes his way back to his cabin by moonlight.

In his dream, Doris is there, and she's very angry with him, but he can't see or hear her. He just knows she's watching. At first it's just one nubile young sweet thing there with him, wearing a cotton dress so thin it's almost like gauze, and she doesn't even object when he lifts it up, and warms his big old hand on the soft roundness of her bottom. But then there are more of them, seems like a dozen of them, and it seems like they're all sisters. And they're all bathing together in a huge tub of fragrant water out in the middle of the forest. They are all very lovely and slippery and shiny, and the funny thing is, in the dream, he knows he can have them all. That much is understood. It seems like an offer he can't resist, even though Doris will be displeased. He touches one of them, and she giggles. Then Rodney awakens and throws the blanket right off because

it's gotten so hot in here. And notices, very much to his surprise, that he was wrong about that forklift remark.

"What in the —"

He hears giggling again.

He watches them from the doorway of his cabin. The light on the water is so deep blue it's almost indigo. Two feminine silhouettes are swimming, splashing, dunking each other. In this light, at this distance, he can't see which one is which. The birds are just awakening, calling one another discreetly. But it doesn't take but a few minutes for them all to be engaged in a pretty lively conversation. Rodney assumes the birds are talking about the two young women emerging from the lake, who have just turned to embrace each other almost as if they're in love. Birds, being closer to God, have a way of talking about beauty that's unspeakable for mere humans.

Then Lena is standing on the shore with her towel, and the light is rising, and he's not sure, but for a moment she seems to look straight at him. He gets an urge to avert his gaze for decency's sake, but can't bring himself to do it. When the two young women amble off in the direction of Lena's cabin, he finally turns away — and catches a glimpse of red plaid, the figure of a man standing maybe twenty yards off, behind the trunk of a pine.

That fourth day on the lake, Rodney doesn't catch anything. He has \$240 in cash already counted out and folded up in his shirt pocket, but the fishing warden doesn't show.

On the fifth day they decide to go to Paris.

But first, Rodney parks his car in Providence.

In the park across from the Biltmore Hotel, there's a greenish sculpture fountain of an angel woman struggling from the clutches of two small male figures, who seem to be restraining her from her forward stride. A giant birdbath looms above them. Across the way, a fat man with a bible has climbed halfway up the tiers of a Civil War monument, to loudly harrangue the people waiting for buses below. From here, Rodney can't make out what the man is saying. There are five pigeons wandering back and forth in front of

Rodney's feet, never straying too far. They are for now his pets, as they have seen his bag of popcorn. He's been sitting on this bench for awhile now.

He sees no reason why Lena will reappear. She's been reunited with her family now, or at least with a member of her extended family. Victoria Garcia da Silveira, she told the information operator. It's supposed to be just a quick visit, but Rodney has a feeling the auntie will persuade Lena to stay.

"Meet me in the park over there about three o'clock," Lena told him. "I don't want anybody following me back to the hotel." It's almost three forty-five now. The question is in his mind, how long shall I wait here? And then it folds over into a new question — why not forever?

Providence feels like a decent city. It's not too big or too modern or too cosmopolitan or too crowded. Some parts of it look like nothing's changed in sixty years. It's a good old-fashioned American city, with clocks on pedestals right in the street, and sidewalks big enough to walk on without feeling like you're getting in anybody's way. Sure it has a few weirdos, but what city doesn't? He could probably buy himself a little place here and live out his days very comfortably. Maybe he'd even run into young Lena again sometime.

He flings the crumbs of his popcorn for the pigeons to swarm over, and gets up to go buy a newspaper.

"There you are," says Lena. "I've been looking everywhere."

As he promised, Rodney goes to fetch his Diamante LS from the Biltmore parking garage and swings round to pick her up on the far corner of the park. They do a few figure-eights around the blocks of downtown Providence, with Lena keeping an eye out the back window the whole way.

"How'd it go with your auntie?" Rodney asks.

"Fine. She's fine. She was happy to see me. Turn left here."

"Say, I was wondering, are you sure you wanna go to Paris?"

"Sure I'm sure. Why?"

"Well, I don't know," Rodney says slowly, turning the wheel. "I been noticing, Providence is a pretty nice place. I thought you might wanna stay right here."

She doesn't say anything. He glances. She's glaring at him.

"Are you out of your mind?"

"No? Be near your family and all?"

She glances out the back window again, looking more worried than before.

"Rodney, what's gotten into you?"

"Nothing, I was just asking."

"Paris was your idea. You said Doris always wanted to go."

"I know. You still think we're being followed?"

"No."

They seem to have drifted into a more residential area now, with duplex and triplex houses looking like they need a paint job.

"Well you can't leave me here," Lena declares with the authority of a traffic cop. She shakes her head. "They're probly already looking for me here."

"Um. You know, Lena, if you're in some kinda trouble, you best tell me now."

"Just take your next right, we'll go back to the hotel."

One thing Rodney doesn't like is to be ignored.

"Hey. You talk to me, young lady."

When she doesn't say anything, Rodney pulls over and stops in front of a liquor store.

"What are you doing?"

"Talk to me."

He fixes his gaze on her.

"Are you some kinda fugitive from the law or what?"

She looks at him for a while, then turns and looks at the glove compartment. Then she turns again and looks out the back window. Her eyes are troubled and very green indeed.

"If my mother finds me here, she'll make me go home." Her voice is starting to waver.

"Lena, this don't make any sense. How can anybody *make* you do anything you don't wanna do? You're a free woman."

She looks down at the Pepsi cup in the cupholder. The ice inside has melted. She's nodding her head.

"She'll make me go home, and then that man will rape me again. He'll hurt me, and he'll enjoy it. And this time he'll probly kill me too."

Rodney doesn't know what to say at all. Lena is nibbling on the knuckles of her right hand. After a while he lifts his hand and touches her arm. She squeaks. He realizes it's the first time he's ever touched her. Her next words come out an octave higher.

"I *just* wanted *somebody* to know I was ... okay." She turns her eyes to him for a second, then looks away again and wipes her face with the back of her hand. "It was stupid. I shoul'da never called her. I *know* she's gonna call my mother, I made her promise not to, but."

Rodney feels like he's coming down with a chill all of a sudden. He takes his hand away from her arm and puts it back on the steering wheel, and looks straight ahead.

"Do me a favor," he says. "Run inside here and get me a sixpack of Bud."

Lena has her face in her hand. Half a minute goes by.

Then she says, "I can't."

Things begin to swirl a bit, and Rodney finds himself looking up at the sunshade in front of him.

"Oh, God," he says.

"Rodney."

"Oh sweet Jesus."

"Rodney. Please don't leave me here."

"Oh, my good Lord."

"I'll be safe in Paris. And I won't cause you any trouble, you know that."

He looks at her again. In the shop window behind her there's a sign advertising Miller Lite for only \$7.99. From where he's sitting, the Paris option is beginning to seem pretty unlikely. Almost as unlikely as the look in Lena's eyes.

This is bad, he's thinking. This is really very bad.

But as he thinks about it, he guesses he himself hasn't actually done anything bad. Not that he can think of anyway. Maybe there's something about transporting a minor across state lines. Yeah. A runaway no less. But then, from the sound of things, she has a pretty good reason for running. And besides, she's got her own US passport, so he

reckons that means she has every right to take a trip to Paris if she wants to. Even if some shriveled up old man is paying her way. He has every reason in the world to help this kid, after all. It's the Christian thing to do, plain and simple. Anybody in his position oughta do the same.

It's been four days since he went to that federal building, and for the third day in a row now Rodney walks up to the desk in the Biltmore lobby, to ask if any mail has come for him. This time he doesn't get as far as the question. The fella at the desk smiles at him, disappears briefly, then returns to pass him a stiff white envelope marked from the Department of State, United States of America.

"Here you go, Mister Manley."

Rodney smiles and thanks the young man, and goes over to ride the glass elevator up to the fifth floor. Glass elevators are fun once you get used to them, it's almost as good as that ferris wheel at the fair. But he has to hold on to the railing, as it does make him a bit dizzy going up that fast.

He dials room 517.

"I been expedited," he tells her. There's a whoop at the other end.

A few minutes later, Lena walks in with her bags already packed.

"I hate this picture," he says. "I look like I'm dead. Lemme see yours."

She takes her passport out of her purse and gives it to him, and takes a look at his.

"Do I really look like that?" he asks her.

"Yeah. No, no, of course not. It's a horrible picture. In real life you look more, uh, lifelike."

"I like yours better," Rodney says, and hands hers back.

"You have to sign this," she points.

"Read me what that little writing says. I don't like to sign anything I can't read."

She rolls her eyes, and squints at the page opposite the photo. "The secretary of state of the United States of America hereby requests all whom it may concern, to permit this guy here to pass without delay or hindrance. And in case of need, to give him all the lawful aid and protection he can handle."

"Sounds fair enough," Rodney says, and looks for a pen.

He leaves his Diamante LS in the long-term parking at the T F Green airport.

Turns out these new passenger jets are surprisingly quiet when you're inside one, instead of under its flight path. Much quieter than the transports he remembers from his time as a paratrooper in the Pacific.

"Rodney, you ever been on a plane before?" she asks him, and he laughs out loud.

"Been *on* one? I used to jump out of planes all the time," he tells her.

She squints at him from her seat by the window. "Why'd you wanna do that?"

Rodney shrugs. "Quickest way down, I guess."

The plane out of Philly is even bigger than the first, and more crowded too. They're showing a movie on the TV screens. Too bad it's a lousy movie.

On a particular Saturday morning, Rodney's boiling some water for coffee, and he pulls open the twin doors in the front room, and pushes open the heavy wood shutters, and steps out onto the balcony, and realizes it's springtime again. The air has that certain unmistakable fragrance to it. Springtime.

On the streetcorner diagonally across from him below, one young fella's putting out crates of melons and oranges and apples and plums, and the other one's turning the handle to open up the green awning. It makes a squeaking noise. Then a little red wedge-shaped van rumbles up in front of the wine store, and cuts its engine. Rodney checks his watch as he turns to go back inside, it's almost eight. He calls out Lena's name, and goes into the kitchen, trying to remember what happened to fall and winter. Some of it starts to drift back to him while he's pouring the hot water.

When he returns to the front room with his cup of coffee, two pigeons are standing there on the doorstep to the balcony, just looking at him.

"Yes, can I help you?" he says, and steps forward, and there's a whirring of wings and they're gone.

Maybe if he wasn't here they would have moved right in. Squatting, that's called, when you move in someplace and don't pay any rent. They do that over here sometimes. He takes a seat on the sofa and has a sip, and picks up the newspaper lying on the little table. It's nice to sit with your coffee and look at the paper. It's relaxing. *Le Figaro*, it

says. "*Et après l'Irak, la Syrie?*" It's not today's paper of course, but that doesn't matter because Rodney can't read French anyway.

Around the time he finishes his coffee, Rodney's starting to feel restless, and decides to go for another walk. He's been walking a lot these days, the exercise and fresh air do him good. Even the hilly parts don't bother him so much any more. He gets his tan jacket from the chair, looks around for his wallet and keys, and finds them in the dish by the kitchen sink. In the bathroom he finds that pair of sunglasses Lena bought for him. He takes two tablespoonfuls of Worcestershire sauce and drinks a glass of water.

Just as he's approaching the door, somebody knocks on it from the other side. Without thinking, he calls out Lena's name.

But as usual it's just one of the landlord's sons standing there, leaning against the wall at the top of the stair. Sometimes the landlord comes in person to collect the rent, but more often he sends one of these younger fellas. This time it's the one with the bent nose. Rodney just calls him Bent, as they've never been introduced.

"Oh, good morning, Bent, how you doing."

Bent says something in French and makes the usual gesture.

"Already, huh. Seems like you were just here last week," Rodney says.

Bent says something else, flicking his finger at the side of his nose a few times as if there's a scab there, looking away, peering down the staircase. Rodney gets out his wallet and counts out 1000 euros, and passes it to Bent, who disappears noisily down the stairs without so much as a *merci*.

They're probably ripping me off, he thinks, turning, smiling to himself. And just stands there for a moment with the door still open. He's staring into Lena's dim little room, at the narrow unmade bed in there and the pile of magazines on the floor. He wonders when she's coming back. He has, after all, fond memories of her company, even the maddening parts. Absence does make the heart grow fonder, that's a proven fact.

A kid comes clunking down the stairs from above, carrying a greenish plastic box with a cat meowing inside it. Rodney says *bonjour* as she passes, but the kid just ignores him and keeps going down the stairs. He wonders how long he's been standing here. Maybe this would be a good time to go for a walk. He's feeling a little restless.

The Rue Mouffetarde is a narrow little way bending this way and that up the hill, with a gutter running down the middle that's usually wet. Rodney takes his time. Sometimes he looks into the eyes of the young people coming down the hill, and sometimes they meet his eyes. He gets as far as the corner where the falafel stand is, then turns, and the hill gets steeper. Soon enough he comes to a small plaza at the fork of two quiet streets, and here he takes a breather. He finds some shade and sits down on a bench, facing a little fountain, and just listens to the birds for awhile. The cast iron fountain is painted deep green, and supported on six sides by little statues of women in gowns, their hands upturned, with capitals on their heads. He sees a lot of that in Paris: figures of women blending into buildings and street fixtures. Right across over there, there's half of a woman flowing out of the wall, her hands folded discretely over her bosom, just looking down with no expression at all on her face. No look in her eye. Not thinking. And there's several more pairs of her, spaced along the building, each one's head helping hold up a balcony with a fancy iron railing. Almost anywhere you go, you can look up and there's some shape of a woman watching over you. If all the stone and metal women in Paris suddenly got some kind of look in their eye, and broke free from the walls and columns, the city would crash into dust.

Most of Paris is badly in need of a paint job. Rodney decided that pretty quick, as soon as he and Lena moved out of that fancy hotel and into a real neighborhood. It's a beautiful place, huge and overwhelmingly intricate. But with all that attention to detail, still nobody seems concerned about all the worn-away paint layers and the cracked plaster and patches of mold everywhere. Maybe they prefer it this way, who knows.

He moves on. Once he passes that big domed building with the words carved in it about *grande hommes*, it's down hill for awhile. He's doing pretty good. The weather is clear but not too warm. The sidewalk here is wide with cafés spilling out onto it, people having lunch outdoors. Near the foot of the hill he passes a tourist shop with visitors browsing through the racks of postcards outside. Everybody seems to be in pretty good spirits.

Somewhere along the Boulevard St Michel, Rodney finds a big sprawling news stand on the sidewalk, across from a shoe store. He stops to survey the covers of the fashion magazines. There are quite a few, but he looks at every one, scrutinizing the faces. None

of them seems to be Lena. He looks again, he's in no great hurry. Makeup and fancy hairstyles can play tricks on the eye. A couple times his mind is trying to fool him into thinking he sees her face there, maybe because he just wants her modelling career to be going well. But he remembers her face well enough, and finally admits to himself that Lena is not among these cover girls. Not yet. The man at the newsstand asks him something in French, and Rodney just smiles, and turns and moves on down the boulevard.

They should feed the models once in awhile, he's thinking. They'd be more attractive with a bit more flesh on them.

He looks at all these women on the street before him. Some of them are rushing by with a desperate look, some stop to gaze, hypnotized, into the plate glass of the shoestores and fashion boutiques. Many of them seem to be talking to themselves, but that's just because of all the little telephones. Everybody seems to be somewhere else. Nobody's taking time to actually be here. Each of them is carrying some little destiny folded inside her head.

A quick survey of their faces tells him at least two out of every ten could probably be models themselves. It must be a very competitive field. But still, they should stop and eat something. They're getting too thin for their own good.

Maybe Rodney should eat something himself. He's passing another café in the shade to his right, but it's too crowded, and he's not hungry yet. He's coming to another big intersection now, that big fountain is across to his left. He slows to a stop, and looks up, and sees the word *METRO* in curvy, jubilant lettering. And wonders if he still has some of those little purple tickets in his wallet.

The stations flash by outside the scratchy glass, all white tile and barrel-vaulted tunnels and signs with long words he can't pronounce. It's nice to be sitting for awhile, his back was starting to ache. This train is one of the older ones, the seats are yellowish green, and the vent windows above are open so there's a breeze, which diffuses the smell of human sweat. At each station, just before the door closes a klaxon blares for several seconds, just to make sure nobody's sleeping.

He rides for awhile, thinking, and changes trains once, or maybe twice.

As far as he can remember, Lena came back just once since she took up with that photographer. She met the guy at a dance club one night, and came home at about five in the morning, all excited, hastily packing a few things in her little carry-on bag while the guy waited in his car. She kissed Rodney on the cheek, and he saw the smile in her eye as she turned at the door, a look of wild future and big wonder. She could have been a neon sign.

She'd be safe in Paris, that's what she'd said. The word "but" was fixed on his lips the whole time she was packing, but it wouldn't jump off into the conversation. It all happened pretty quick, and he couldn't argue with that look. It felt like she had found her way home, somehow, to the thing she was supposed to be. He felt obliged to be happy for her.

When he saw her again, it was February, dark outside and raining hard. Rodney was fiddling with the handle on the radiator to try and stop it from making such a loud clanking noise. There was a knock at the door and it was Lena, shivering, drenched, and just about skeletal. He found a clean towel for her and turned on the water heater so she could have a shower. While she was showering he made her a cup of tea, and while she drank the tea he fixed her some hot soup and a sandwich with some kind of sliced luncheon meat, and he cut up a tomato for her and put some a sprig of parsley on the edge of the plate. And he sat there with her at the little table with the lamp on. Lena couldn't stop shivering. She was so weak she could barely lift the spoon to her mouth. And she didn't want to talk about it. There was something funereal in her gaze, a kind of blankness, as if she were stunned by the death of her dearest friend. Only a couple times she looked him straight in the eye, and when she did it was like the devil himself looking out at him from inside her. Rodney was terrified. But she slept beside him in his bed that night, just to keep warm, and he felt okay about that.

The second night, he took her out to dinner at one of the good places. It took some persuading to get her outside, for some reason she seemed afraid to go out of doors. He convinced her to order the tournedos, as she was looking pale and clearly needed some protein. She practically dove into the bread, that was a good sign. And now here they were all candlelit and shining together again, just like old times. Just like at the Plaza Athenée. She smiled a couple of times at things he said. "Finish your potatoes," he

instructed her, and by golly she did. They even drank a bottle of wine together. But on the walk back home she began to feel ill, and hid herself in a corner, and lost most of what he had fed her. Rodney wanted to cry because he felt so helpless, and when she put her arms around him, she was crying too.

He contemplated persuading her to go back to the restaurant and have dinner all over again, but she wanted to go home.

"Sometimes you can't just do what you want," she explained to him, as if she was his mother. "Sometimes you just gotta do what you gotta do, that's all. You can try to run, but it comes and finds you, and that's all there is to it."

She wasn't telling him anything he didn't know. But she sounded so apologetic, as if she regretted having taken Rodney out into this disappointing world. As if the world were somehow her own fault.

Her eyes were still so beautiful and green, it made him cry.

That night she slept in her own bed.

The third night she smiled and squeezed his shoulder, and asked to borrow some money for groceries. He was wondering where she was going to buy groceries at that hour. And that was the last he ever saw of her.

Sometimes he forgets that she's gone. When he opens his eyes, he expects to see her sitting right there across from him on the metro.

The station is called Anvers. He gets off, and runs his ticket through the machine on his way out, presses through the gate, and makes his way upstairs. *Bd de Rochechouart*, says the blue sign on the wall at the corner. He starts walking again.

He's thinking about his friends back home in the neighborhood. Jack, and Mike with his beer gut, and Jared and Jean, and Eleanor. Wondering what they'd think of him if they saw him walking along this street in Paris. He would send each of them a postcard if he knew where they'd gone off to. But he left too quick, he never knew where they had gone, or how they'd each spent their two point two million dollars. Rodney figures his share is almost gone now, and for a moment he considers whether he has invested it wisely. What would Doris say, looking down from above? What would Grace say, if she were to look down?

He sees the little signs, *Montmartre*, *Sacre Coeur*, with an arrow directing tourists, and he turns and looks up.

It's the longest staircase he's ever seen in his whole long life.

Don't you even think about it, is what Doris would say if she were here.

But then there's something completely tempting about it, isn't there. It's hard for a man just to pass by a stairway like that and just leave it behind, its mystery forever unexplored.

There's something called a *funiculare* rising diagonally alongside the stairway, a kind of car that's a cross between a train and an elevator. He could take a ride on that, just to see what's up there at the top. But somehow that seems like cheating.

He stands there for a long time.

All things considered, he's feeling pretty good. Some regrets, sure. But he's been pretty lucky all his life. Luckier than some, anyway.

His neck is aching from all that looking up, so he looks down. At the first step.

As he starts to climb, at first it begins to tire him out, he's laughing at himself for his foolishness. But pretty soon Rodney begins to feel a bit lighter on his feet. Younger, even. He passes, climbing even faster than the *funiculare* glides alongside him. He can ascend even faster than these young lovers coming down. He's feeling pretty good.

And by the end, turning, and climbing again where the steps are much wider, he finds he can even run up that last white stone flight.

At the crest of the hill he finds a sprawling, domed building of pale stone set out before him. It's not what he expected, but it looks very familiar. He's seen this place before. Maybe he was expecting to find a church, but this looks more like — yes, that's what it is — the Capitol of the State of Rhode Island. It's quite a beautiful thing to behold. He's feeling warm now. Evening has fallen blue over the whole vista, but the light within is more golden. Somebody's waving to him from the open doorway. It's a familiar smile, he knows that smile. There seems to be a party going on inside, some kind of reception. He can hear the piano player.

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