

ROBBING THE PILLARS

Glen Weldon

The miners murmur to each other as they work, their words baffled by topsoil and floorboards before they can reach me here, lying awake, in the darkened bedroom. I go down to the basement, I squat behind the new boiler, and the timbre of their voices vibrates in the well-pipe against my back. I can make out little else, though—nothing but sounds of industry, nothing but hammer clangs and crumbling earth and the throaty scrape of coalcart wheels.

I have, only lately, heard them singing. This is a guess, as I don't recognize a tune, but on certain nights their voices hang in the metal for long seconds in a way I can't help but think is musical.

There are no mines below our house, of course, nor abandoned subway tunnels, nor sewers, nor anything, in fact, but airless, compacted earth. I've been down to the county office; I've seen the survey maps. A dollop of blue roughly the size of my thumb denotes the slab of sedimentary rock upon which we all have built our houses.

The miners, then, have lost their way; that much seems clear. I have decided they belong to my grandmother—that they are ghosts from her coaltown childhood—and they have found me in this distant non-bituminous city because I am her last living relative.

This, at least, is the working theory.

I remember the miners from the stories she used to tell every summer, over Yahtzee and Dominoes in the house on the lake.

In Old Forge, Pennsylvania, “when the century and I were young,” my grandmother would come home from school, change into her playdress, and sit quietly in the grime and coaldust of her basement's northwest corner, listening to the men below. Her mother (who emerges from these stories an unnervingly taciturn woman, much different than the garrulous, elfin creature I remember) made sure to call her up to the kitchen and wash the telltale black silt from her ears before my great-grandfather came home.

Thatcher McKutcheon taught at the local university, and hated the mines. His daughter's poorly concealed fascination he regarded dourly, certain it would lead to no good. He wrote blistering letters to the editor lamenting the rise of the coal barons in a flurry of rhetorical questions ("Whither academe?") and foreign phrases (*nostalgie de la boue*). Family history is murky on Thatcher, and we may never know for certain if, as my grandmother asserted, his father was killed in the Scranton mine collapse of '87, sparking a lifelong antipathy—a notion that strikes me as too romantic not to be suspect.

Hearing the stories, though, I always felt my kinship with Thatcher more closely. I too would have hated the mines, and the somber, blood-colored buildings of iron and brick which made the town look rusted out, dying, even when it was new. I would have hated the soot in every crease and pore, the low black clouds portending rain that never came, the train engines screaming through the back yard which rattled the cupboards and hutches every quarter hour. Like him, I would have been a bookish, indoorsy child, made overanxious by yawning mine shafts the town could not yet afford to cap, which exhaled hot rippling air in the summertime even as they threatened to swallow you up.

"Oh, it wasn't that bad," my grandmother would admonish me, as the moon rose over her shoulder, outlining the sad, tiny dock my grandfather built into the lake. At night, during our Yahtzee tournaments, breezes off the water came up through the pine trees. When it was my grandmother's roll, I'd watch the screen door's loose netting luff quietly in and out as the kitchen filled with cool, scented air. "All that coal, and coaldust, we used to play with it," she'd say. "You could use it for warpaint, you would have liked that, Charles, now wouldn't you? We had a game called Pickaninny—"

But I was my mother's son. Even at seven I knew to roll my eyes at this.

"Well, we *did*," she'd say then, more softly, frowning into the felt-lined dice cup.

Lee never met my grandparents, though he did come with me to my grandfather's funeral, last year. They laid him next to my grandmother—three years hadn't dulled her stone's black marble at all, its edges still seemed sharp enough to cut you—and once, only once, I broke down. Distant great-aunts and members of my grandparent's bible group turned, threw worried glances into the small space between Lee's body and mine. Pale children in bow ties blinked up at us, frowning.

Lee, audience-conscious and resenting it, patted my shoulder brusquely, as if I'd just missed the extra point. "Fucking *Mayberry*," he whispered, and when my crying had subsided, he turned to glower back at them, the whole motley assemblage of dowagers, tots, and rheumy-eyed councilmen, one by one by one.

The adults, of course, looked away at once, but a few seconds passed before dainty hands in black beaded gloves steered the children's faces back to the wreaths, the hole, the lowering casket.

Afterwards everyone was ferociously polite. The pastor even came over to me; we talked about my grandfather, my grandmother, and about my job. He had an

interest in the market, he said, and asked me informed questions about bean futures. Lee was cornered by a loud woman who introduced herself as the town liberal, who laughed too hard at the polite jokes he made and asked him how many times he'd seen *Les Miz*.

I haven't yet mentioned the miners to Lee. He's a heavy sleeper; I haven't needed to. I admit I have been growing concerned. The sounds are no louder than they've ever been—they remain muted, just below the level of polite conversation—but each night it's easier to distinguish individual noises, to separate the tumult into grunts and shouts, pick-strokes and mallet-blows, and I don't know what to make of this.

I probably wouldn't have thought of a dog; that was Lee's idea. Even before the siding was up, he was pointing into what was becoming, at a maddeningly slow pace, a back yard, and having me imagine some loping Black Lab or scuttling wienerdog.

We ended up with a Jack Russell terrier, the trendiest of choices, perhaps, but when the woman at the shelter mentioned that the entire staff had fallen in love with the animal, Lee was sold. I suspect everyone who comes through the shelter's door hears some version of that story, no matter which animal they end up eyeing tenderly through the wire mesh, but I didn't say anything, and abandoned my hopes for something bigger and more surly-looking. The way Lee stared at the dog in his arms told me he was constructing some elaborate Dickensian puppyhood for it, and that he and I were there to deliver the poor furry waif into the warmth of our newly-purchased townhouse. Lee apologized to the woman for spiriting the dog away, for breaking the hearts of the shelter's personnel. She smiled ruefully, in a practiced way, and made cartoon noises at the dog as we signed the papers, paid our money, and took our leave.

"This dog is all neck," Lee said on the way home. "Feel."

I took a hand from the wheel and patted the dog, who sat up in Lee's lap, staring out at the flow of traffic like a concerned commuter.

"Tree trunk," I said.

"And what isn't neck is waist." He showed me, making an O with both hands, hockey-puck sized.

"They're bred to hunt, to chase things down into their tunnels," I said. "Like Rikki-Tikki-Tavi."

"*Who issss Naaag?*" Lee whispered into the dog's ear. "*I am Naaag!*"

"That's why they're built that way," I said. "Bullet-shaped."

Our development came into view. Lee pointed to our house and the dog actually followed his finger, which I have to say impressed me.

"Names," Lee said suddenly. "Go."

I frowned. "Dog," I said.

"Cerberus!" he said.

"Pooch," I said.

Lee considered the dog's profile. "Fenris Ulf," he said, slowly.

I winced. “Here Boy.”

Suddenly Lee picked up the dog, cradled it in his arms. “Toto!” he said—sang, really—in a voice like Charles Nelson Reilly’s.

“*Not* funny,” I said, turning into the entrance. They had tied balloons and an Open House sign to the silhouette of the grazing deer out front, so the name of our development, Deer Pointe, bopped in and out of sight on the low brick wall.

“*Deer Pwant*,” Lee read.

I looked out at the frames of houses, some of which had grown new skins of burnished insulation since the morning. Around us lay a panorama of mud and seed, the flat promise of lawns. A thin line of scrub pine, the remains of a thirty-acre forest, peeked over the horizon. “*Dead Deer Pwant*, maybe.” I said.

Lee nodded. “*Venison View*.”

Thomas, the guy who had showed Lee and me the model home months before, was now leading a dazed-looking couple up to its imposing, wrought-iron screen door. I honked as we passed; he waved.

Thomas was one of the reasons we’d settled on Deer Pointe, despite its nearness to the highway, its twee name, its bleak landscape dotted with over-precious gazebos. When we met Thomas, he knew. Sometimes it’s that simple. No long minutes tediously wondering if he understood our state of affairs, if we had to find a way to work some obvious reference into the conversation. (In the past I’ve caught Lee adopting a ridiculously sibilant *s*, only for a few sentences, and only if faced with someone who is helplessly slow on the uptake. [He denies this.]) Thomas, however, knew, and, much more importantly, he made it tacitly clear that he knew. We went right to business.

Before finding Deer Pointe, we had actually been asked if we were brothers in several real estate offices across the tri-county area. Just as often, we’d met alternate-universe versions of the woman at my grandfather’s funeral, and found ourselves waist-deep in one-sided conversations about Cirque du Soleil, Sandra Bernhard, or the films of Montgomery Clift. There seemed to be no middle ground; nobody before Thomas had gotten it right.

Chiefly for this reason, Lee has convinced himself that Thomas is gay.

When I first met Lee, I trusted his judgment in this area, because he seemed so off-hand, so casually certain, about this waiter, that co-worker, this famous actor, that father of three. He particularly likes to point out gay men who don’t know it yet, who walk over-proudly down city streets cuddling well-fed young women, or who, more poignantly, sit off by themselves on park benches, worrying their wedding bands.

We see these park-bench men mostly in the late afternoons, just before dinnertime—thoughtful, handsome, they sit in silence, gazing down past their knees, as if dumbstruck by the quality of their shoe leather. If any of them glance in our direction, however briefly, Lee nudges me.

“*The eyes*,” he says cryptically, as we walk past.

He’s a patient teacher, but I’m not a particularly quick study. It’s been years now, and the elaborate, codified world of overlong looks and imperceptible nods

he talks about still mystifies me. (I used to joke that the Fairy Fairies had skipped me, that I'd been crushed when, after first having sex with a man, I awoke the next morning hoping to see the full complement waiting there at the foot of my bed—gaydar, fashion sense, membership card and blazer—finding instead only two sets of sneakers, and a strange pair of jeans slung over my chair.)

Today I am more prone to challenge Lee's dubious assertions, if only on principle. It's an old argument—I don't like what all the subtle cues and cabalistic signals say about us, still skulking around like first-century Christians. Lee says the furtiveness is part of the deal, always has been, always will be.

In fact, he likes it that way.

"People's Exhibit A," he said, just after our first meeting with Thomas, as we sat mulling over the townhouse in a nearby diner, "the man clocked us the second we walked in his door."

"Mm." I stared out the window, down the highway toward the city, thinking, *An hour commute, an hour commute, an hour commute every day.*

"Exhibit B," Lee said. "Hair."

I turned to him. "What about his hair?" I said, frowning. "It was messy hair."

"Exactly," he said. "It takes an awful lot of product to look that natural. Exhibit C, his name."

I smiled down at my coffee. "See, you're stretching now."

"Thomas," he said, pronouncing the name with a fey English accent. "'Please, call me *Thomas*.'" He sniffed like a peer of the realm, adjusted a phantom monocle. "'I say,'" he continued, "'I'm quite famous for my English muffins, don't you know. For all my little *nooks* and *crannies*.'"

I chewed my sandwich slowly. "I hate this," I said, "when you do this."

"Exhibit D . . ." By now he was gesticulating with his soup spoon.

"Look, whenever you do this," I said, "you sound—*desperate*, more than anything else."

He put down the spoon and grinned, sighing the long wet sigh of the world-weary. "This again," he said.

"Lee," I said, leaning over the table. I cupped a hand to my mouth, and stage-whispered, "Everyone. Is not. Gay."

"Not everyone," he said, shrugging, raising his eyebrows. "Just some. *Him*, definitely."

I sat back, adopted a lecture stance. "I just don't like what it says about . . ."

"The man laughed at your Beautiful Launderette joke, for God's sake."

"He knows movies," I said, crossly. "So he sleeps with men."

"It was the *way* he laughed," Lee said. He tilted his head, searching for the word in the chrome of the napkin holder. "*Knowing*," he said, finally. "In that knowing way."

"We've had this conversation," I said, reaching for the check. "We've *only* had this conversation."

The dog, sensing deceleration, danced in Lee's lap. We pulled up to the spot in front of the townhouse and stared out, the three of us, across the side yard at the

highway, a blacktop gash across our line of sight, in all of its unsettling nearness.

“Hold onto the leash,” I said.

The dog bounded out of the car, Lee following. Immediately it went to work scanning the perimeter, exploring. I watched it closely as it nuzzled the earth under the privet bushes and electric Jack the Ripper lampposts that line our streets. Lee chased the dog into our yard, where the cracked mud was just beginning to dust over with a low fuzz, and tackled the animal. He stared into its wet brown eyes and picked up a conversation, aping its every sound, growl for growl.

The dog leapt out from under Lee and ran over to me, leash oscillating over the dirt and flagstone, tail a fan-shaped blur. It stuttered over the ground at my feet, forward, back, forward, back.

“What is it, Lassie?” I said. “Is Timmy in trouble?”

“The well?” Lee called. “An avalanche? Cattle rustlers on the ridge?”

The dog ran over to Lee then, but kept looking back over what would have been, on any other breed, its shoulder, inviting me to join in.

“His *leash*,” I said, shifting my weight, feeling fretful and hating it. “Grab his leash.”

It has occurred to me that I’m dreaming the miners, dreaming each nightly visit to that snug dark space between the boiler and the wall, dreaming the cool concrete under my toes and the muffled clamor in my head while the more reasonable parts of me sleep safely on, two flights above. And I’ll admit that the experience has much in common with dreaming—each morning I’m left with only the vaguest impressions of the night before—but I think this has more to do with the off-putting newness of the house itself, the cold, movie-set atmosphere it breathes as I pad over just-laid carpet, down scuffless wooden stairs, across freshly-set cement. Finally I come to the too-shiny boiler, waiting silently, like a prop, for the approach of winter.

I don’t turn on lights as I go, and I know I’m not dreaming the barked shins. Lately, to make doubly sure, I’ve been repositioning some of the knickknacks above the fireplace before I go back upstairs. Just quarter-turns, nothing noticeable. Sometimes when I come down in the morning, I see Lee staring blankly into the den over the rim of his coffee mug. His eyes scan the fireplace—still untouched, its bricks so new and cherry-red they startle—and I wonder if he knows.

The only thing that’s really changed is that the dog comes with me now. Sometimes it snuffles its way along with me, dangerously underfoot, and sometimes a few minutes pass before I hear tiny dog-nails clicking slowly, sleepily, down the stairs. More and more often, though, it leads the way. Last night it was waiting there for me, and didn’t even look up from where it crouched, nosing at a tiny crack in the floor, until I took my place.

Those first few times it came with me, I caught myself staring at the dog, watching its ears, its tail, the hair along its back, for some reaction. The noises began—the low thrum of heavy equipment, the quick, urgent shouts—and I kept waiting for the dog to stop whatever aimless activity it was doing, to bark a warning at this subterranean invasion of its territory. A bark, a growl, that low-to-the-

ground, taut-muscled stance I've seen it take with the spaniel that just moved in across the street. Something.

Instead it rolled over on its back, and whined until I started to rub its stomach.

The key to what's happening, I think, lies in this: my grandmother met my grandfather at the cost of many lives. The ground under her high school caved in, and 38 miners, students and teachers slid with the building into the earth's crust, and from there, on, into the afterlife.

My grandmother, however, had been kept out of school with catarrh—an unpleasant condition of mucousy lungs and bedsores and mentholated vaporizers with a name that gives it the lie, that seems more fitting an exotic middle-eastern spice.

On the day of the cave-in, she lay safe in the dim light of her rear-facing bedroom. She had tossed in bed all night long, kept awake by her chest's persistent gurgle, and slept fitfully through the day. At four o'clock in the afternoon, my great-grandfather roused her with the news that she had become, in her sleep, the small town's only teenager.

For the rest of the school-year she was loaded into the back of a haytruck and driven across the county, shivering through the sad, dun-colored coaltown mornings despite her still-weakened condition, to a high school in Taylor. Here, at a spring social, my grandfather, M. Truman "Bud" Cooper, ever the gentleman, acted as watchman while my grandmother stole into the boy's lavatory to avoid the line for the ladies'. Her kidneys, she used to say, loved him before her heart caught up. (My grandfather would look away, when she told that story; at the mention of any bodily function he would shamble to the window, and blush into the drapes. For this, and other reasons, he was an easy man to love.)

The cause of the tragedy was well-known, and supplied Thatcher McKutcheon with fodder for two solid months of vitriolic rage. My great-grandfather never missed a day, and the *Standard* published every one of his "Schoolhouse Letters," as they came to be known.

Beneath the town of Old Forge lay a great man-made warren of shafts and tunnels and ill-dug sewers. The coal companies, loath to spend extra time and money buttressing each and every mine with iron or steel, soon discovered that they could trust the valley's rugged geology to do the job for them; they simply hewed great coal pillars out of the earth as they dug. It wasn't long before these immense columns lined every tunnel and gallery like fat caryatids, gleaming into a kind of life when grazed by a miner's lamp.

When a mine eventually ran dry, however, the companies would turn their attention back to the architecture they'd left so casually in their wake, and send in miners to "rob" the pillars—to chip, from every support, as much wealth as possible.

"Each pillar" the company explained afterward, to the *Standard*'s special "COLLAPSE!" edition, "contains enough coal to keep 30 families warm over even the harshest of winters. It would be wise to bear that in mind." There follows a lengthy and damning interview with one of the more infamous coal barons,

which stands as stark testimony to the days before public relations consultants. For three pages of tiny type the man attempts to place the tragedy in context (generally speaking, a bad move) and offers a valiant, if harrowing, defense of his companies' policies.

Thatcher McKutcheon, in the next edition to hit the streets, calls the man "a jowly Mephistopheles, whose gaudy diamond stickpin of greed and corruption has pierced the sleepy dream of our community forever. Shame, I say! Shame!"

My great-grandfather's prolix letters on the tragedy ended abruptly. My grandmother once demurred that, though much appreciated and well-received by the grieving wives of the dead miners, parents of the high-schoolers grew to resent his conspicuous outrage at an injustice that had, after all, left his family untouched.

But of course it hadn't; my grandparents found each other because of the tragedy, they fell in love and married in the clouds of grit and dust kicked up by the construction of the new high-school, where they sent their only child, my mother, when it was time.

Their life together began with death, grandiose and pointless, the kind that throws a long shadow into history. Growing up, I knew this, I felt this. It has always made sense to me that such a tragedy would have to leave some imprint of itself, that it would be coded like color-blindness into our DNA.

And I've always found it strange that my grandmother—a woman whose deep spiritual yearnings could not be met by the Methodist church alone, and whose fervent superstitions gave her such complete and lasting comfort—strange that she should be blind and deaf to the ghosts that haunt us, that have cursed our line into extinction. Here was a woman who never failed to emit a low moan at the sight of the neighbor's cat, an animal which was only largely black. She had, it seemed to me, over 100 tiny salt rituals alone; pinching it, throwing it, scattering it before her to read its constellations.

I think, though, that she may have had some idea of what had been set in motion—she named her only child Grace, after all, in what seems to me now a sad supplication to our doomed future, an offering, a plea. She never mentioned anything concrete to me, though, even when the time was right.

I had come to my grandparents' Old Forge house for an early Thanksgiving dinner, arriving directly from my first three months of college, fat and flushed and full of secrets. As we held dinner for my parents, who were driving up from Delaware, and our stomachs began to squeak and rumble, I excused myself and stepped out into the freezing rain. From a payphone down the street I telephoned one of my secrets in particular—a suitemate named Stephen, with whom I had fallen in quick and clumsy love. When I returned, my grandparents were in the kitchen, getting out the Tupperware. My grandmother spooned stuffing quickly and efficiently into nested plastic bowls while my grandfather held a series of plastic lids up to the light, squinting at the raised numbers.

As she crammed olives and yams into separate containers, my grandmother told me that we were going to the hospital in Allentown, that my parent's car had spun off the Northeast Extension, and they didn't know any more than that. I re-

member going to the refrigerator then, and carefully moving everything on the top shelf back and to the side, making room.

All her life, my mother had planned her funeral. (She *knew*, you see.) Her voice would go soft, she would touch my hand, a sly, theatrical smile would cross her face, and she would tell me the name of her favorite hymn, which was to be played as the mourners drove up to the plot.

Her mistake was trusting me with this information; when the time came, I couldn't remember it. I remembered the flowers (Stargazer lillies), the reading (Keats), and the state of the caskets (closed, though the impact had taken this decision out of my hands). I hummed as much of the tune as I could remember for the funeral director, who shook her head, and for the organist at my mother's church, who stayed there with me all morning, playing the first grandly lethargic bars of over a hundred hymns. There were bells in it, I kept saying. She would nod, and play something else, something wrong.

So what we heard as my mother and father were lowered into the ground was the standard set-list of keep-your-chin-up Methodist hymns, all of which sounded to me like graduation music.

A pattern emerges:

My grandmother died in childbirth, briefly. There was a tunnel, she said, there was a light, there was The Lord, dressed in the white and blue robes of bright Bible storybooks, who told her it wasn't yet time, and then there was the tunnel again, leading back down into the heaviness, the weight and pain and blood of the world, and the warm tiny child that wriggled like a moribund trout on her chest.

"Never again," she croaked to my grandfather, as she opened her eyes. He looked up from the stove, where the doctor had stationed him, ordering him to boil gallon after useless gallon of water to keep him busy and out of the way. He had been so absorbed in his task that he hadn't noticed my grandmother slip out of the world, and when he finally met her gaze, she saw in his face the annoyance of a man whose concentration had been broken. "Never again," she repeated, hefting the red, egg-headed baby aloft. "This one's the lot, understand?"

My mother suffered complications at my birth. I never found out much more than this—my parents died before I was mature enough to care about such things, much less ask about them. I suppose, at some point in my childhood, I must have demanded a little brother or sister, but I don't remember doing so, so I don't remember the polite lie they must have told me. My grandparents were uncharacteristically tight-lipped on this topic, and grew restless at my questioning. It was difficult to get anything of substance out of them, as it would be of any two people who refer to the female reproductive system as "The Waterworks."

Their line, then, will end with me. Here, in this unit at the end of a townhouse row. Here, with Lee and me, and the dog Lee has decided to name after Alexander the Great's faithful hound, as soon as he can look up what it was.

On my father's side there is, has always been, a staggering fecundity; there are aunts and uncles and cousins with two children each, three children, four. At family picnics—loud, sprawling affairs under State Park pavilions—a new genera-

tion is forever darting through the legs, hiding behind the beer cooler, squealing blue murder.

The cursed blood of my maternal grandparents, however, will move no further into history.

I was named executor of my grandfather's will, so last year, when Lee and I went up to Old Forge for his funeral, I spent a great deal of my time at the bank, reviewing account statements and sifting through safety deposit boxes full of outdated deeds and car titles and the mysterious, dried-out husks of cheap cigars.

Lee spent most of his time attacking the foliage around their house—he cut away the climbing bittersweet and pruned the forsythia, he went out to rent a John Deere because the lawn was too high and thick for my grandfather's tiny red pushmower.

He was pulling ivy down from the shutters when I drove up. He tossed a few brittle vines into a pile, and walked over to where I stood leaning against the car, surveying his handiwork. He gave my tie a couple light tugs, brushed at something on my lapel, and then leaned in to kiss me, quick and dry, on the cheek. I glanced across the street, watching for signs of movement behind the Steiglitz's enormous picture window, which stared out at us like a milky eye. Seeing none, I kissed him back.

"Looking good," I said, though the lawn was only half cut, and branches lay over the ground as if strewn by a storm.

"Be done tomorrow," he said, "around noon." He stuck his hands in his pockets. "But it doesn't look like—I don't think I'll be able to stick around and help you with the lake house, after all." He squinted, as if it pained him to say it. "I called Anthony"—our supervisor—"just to check in, and he went off on how he's having to scramble with both of us gone. One of us he could handle, but—"

"It's okay," I said.

"—and anyway it'll be easier for you to get your shit done, you'll be less conspicuous, up here alone—"

"It's okay," I said, getting the wheelbarrow from the garage, "they sold it."

Lee blinked.

"The lake house," I said. "They sold it."

"When?"

"Years ago," I said. Still in my suit, I pushed the wheelbarrow into the front yard, and began tossing clods of dirt and strands of ivy into its rusted-out belly. "They never mentioned it, or maybe they did, and I forgot—no," I shook my head. "No. They never mentioned it."

Lee picked up a branch, slowly, sheepishly. "Look, I'll *do* this," he said. "Tomorrow."

I straightened. "No," I said, too heartily, "come on, I'll help you. We can get this done, and then we can leave in the morning. First thing."

I continued loading up the wheelbarrow. Lee stood there a while, just watching me work. Then he went back to the shutters, muttering something.

That night we ate at my grandfather's favorite restaurant, a mom-and-pop Italian place in the front of a tiny white house. Brown stains mottled the drop ceiling; moth husks littered the fluorescent lights, which still managed to throw a glare so brilliant that our food glistened disconcertingly on the Farberware. The spaghetti sauce was sweet as ketchup—Lee and I sat grimacing at each other across the checkered tablecloth.

"Be glad to leave this one-horse town?" Lee drawled, reaching for another slice of the garlic bread, then thinking better of it.

"I spent a lot of summers here," I said, poking gingerly at my pasta. I shrugged.

Soft music played, happy blond harmonies. The Association. The Manhattan Transfer. Behind us, a door marked "EMPLOYEES ONLY" hung open, through which we could see a living room of bald-eagle lamps, convertible furniture, and plastic runners crossing and branching over blue shag.

"Yeah," he said, "but at least you didn't grow *up* here." He shuddered. "Jesus, can you imagine? Even the *bank tellers* are closeted in this town."

"Well now," I began, mock-serious. "Not closeted, necessarily. Be fair. There *are* straight bank tellers in the world, you know." I paused. "I mean, theoretically. There have to be."

The owner, a Mrs. Vagnoni, came over then, asked how everything was, swiping her hands nervously against her apron. We lied with aplomb.

"Actually," I said, after she left, "I met most of the tellers at the bank today, while I was going through all the—" I waved my hand. "You know, everything. And I'll say this—never have I heard pro wrestling discussed with such *gravity*."

Lee smiled.

"No, really," I said, "it was a hotbed of heterosexuality."

"Aha," Lee said, lifting a finger, "now, you'd *think* so, wouldn't you." He smiled again. "And the Achy-breaky hairstyles and the skinny leather ties would certainly *seem* to bear you out. But one of 'em clocked me today, believe it or not."

"Clocked you." I went back, half-heartedly, to the salad of iceberg lettuce and cherry tomatoes. "Clocked you how?"

"When I went in to cash a check," he said, "so I could rent the mower. I looked for you, but you must have been in the back. Guy gives me a two-dollar bill in my change." He twirled his fork. "He was cute, in a Bowser-from-Sha-Na-Na sort of way."

"Wait," I said, "I don't—I never knew about this one." I blinked. "A two-dollar bill."

"See, now," he said, shifting in his seat. "Don't get all—don't make too much out of it, I mean it wasn't like a come-on." He shrugged. "It's just a thing. A recognition thing. Kind of like, you know, 'Hey.'" He gave me a quick salute. "Hey, there."

Even the cherry tomatoes were mealy. "So," I said, frowning, "so how do you know it wasn't just that his drawer was low, or something?"

Lee grinned. Incredulous, amused, he said, "The man works in a *bank*." He lowered his eyebrows. "And anyway, it wasn't just the bill—the kid looked at

me. You know, up and down. He was nervous, so it wasn't particularly subtle." He put a hand to his forehead. "I just—I felt so *cheap*, like a piece of meat." He fanned himself like a vaporish extra from *Inherit the Wind*.

I put my fork down. "Where do you get all this, anyway?" I asked, too loudly. "All these little code things? I mean, what, is there a newsletter?"

"Take it down a couple notches, okay? You're upsetting Ma Kettle." He inclined his head toward the kitchen, where Mrs. Vagnoni's round, pressed-in face peeked through a window in the door.

"Doesn't mean anything," Lee said, tearing a breadstick. "I'm just pushing your buttons. Just wanted to see you take the green-eyed monster out for a walk." He looked away. "It's been a while."

When Mrs. Vagnoni came over again, offering dessert and coffee, we surprised ourselves: we said yes.

It was the best damn zabaglione either of us have ever had, and as we wolfed it down I felt I had come to understand something small but important about my grandfather.

Back when the noises began, I'd go down, and crouch there, and spend all night just listening, just trying to pick out voices. Lately, though, after so many long and regular nights of it, my mind drifts.

Lee is losing his hair. I know how it sounds, but that's something I think about. He's been losing it for a long time, in drain-clogging clusters, and I don't say anything—he's self-conscious about it, which is kind of cute.

Lately, though, I don't say more things than I do. I don't say he's gaining weight, though he seems not to notice. I don't say he's watching too much television. I don't say he treats the dog like it's our slaving, witless child. I don't say a million other petty, shallow, hurtful things. For now, I only think them.

Here is another thing I don't say: Every night, just as the rumbling of the workmen begins to subside, just as the light starts to change in the high, tiny window on the opposite wall, my mind projects five, ten, twenty years into the future. Sometimes Lee is there.

But only sometimes.

Yesterday morning, minutes after Lee left to go shopping, the dog began to growl. It was a long, low, harrowing sound, a sound like shifting earth, I thought, like the rasp of stone against stone, and I thought: *Now*.

The dog took off from where it lay, went skidding and scudding across the linoleum toward the front door. When I looked up from the Saturday paper, I saw Thomas.

He stood there on the porch, frozen, blinking at the dog through the storm door glass. He had been startled in pre-knock—his fist hung in the air before him like a Black Power salute. He wore a dark suit, which was perhaps a bit too heavy for the August weather. He looked uncomfortable—pink-faced and sweaty—but his black hair was slicked down, as if he had recently showered.

I waved him in, and he nodded. He started to ease the door open, gazing cau-

tiously down at the dog, which began to pace the front hall in anticipation.

“Don’t let the dog out!” I shouted, and Thomas braced himself in the doorway, slammed his knees together, and leaned his shoulder against the jamb. He hung there like that, trying to make himself a human wall, his legs and arms ridiculously splayed, staring fearfully down at a tiny, barking dog, and I couldn’t help it: I thought of Ray Bolger.

The dog went silent, then, pondering him.

“What’s his name?” Thomas asked, sliding the rest of his lean body through, still caught in the animal’s dark, doggy stare. When I didn’t answer, he looked up at me. “The dog,” he said, dropping to one knee, proffering a hand for sniffing. “What do you call it?”

“Long story,” I said. The dog approached him diffidently, almost haughtily. “You, ah, want anything?” I asked. I looked at his chin, the shape of his face. Not Ray Bolger. “I mean, do you have time? Lemonade?”

He sat in the den, gulping lemonade—my stomach hurt, just watching—as he brushed his long fingers over the dog’s belly. He was just popping by, he said, he had some time before his next appointment, and he was tired of staring at the fake plants and over-the-couch-seascape-art of the model home. It was depressing, he said, like living in a furniture store. He hoped I didn’t mind.

I didn’t, I said.

We talked about the things Lee and I had done with our unit, and the things we were planning to do. I used the plural pronoun. *We’re still looking for stuff for the walls*, I said. And, *We haven’t decided what to do with the extra bedroom*. And, *Over here, we’re thinking bookshelves*.

Talking like this conjured Lee—a kind of abstracted, idealized version of Lee, anyway—so I felt compelled to acknowledge it. “Lee just left,” I said. “Couple minutes ago.”

Thomas didn’t take his eyes from the dog. He stroked its chest and chucked its chin. “I know,” he said, quietly.

Then, for a long time, there was just the sound of the dog, the steady jingling of its tags, as it flailed and twisted on the cushions.

And then I said, “Listen.”

They blinked at me, the two of them. The dog’s tail began to thump against Thomas’ leg.

“Listen,” I said. “I want to tell you a story.”

And I was going to tell him about the miners, then; in fact, that’s what I began to do. I started talking about Old Forge, and about my grandmother, and her basement play. But then I was telling another story altogether, an older one. Thomas sucked on his ice, and then sank back into the couch, silent, listening, ready.

The most important story my grandmother ever told me was the one she didn’t have to, the one that I saw winking at me from behind the plain, honest tale of Miss Eugenie Marvel and Miss Felicity McGrath. This is the one I told Thomas, as he sat in our living room, drinking our lemonade, petting our dog:

Miss Eugenie Marvel was an acquaintance of my great-grandmother, a neigh-

bor who lived in a semi-detached house on Gravers Street, where a Wellness Center stands today. (A *semi-detached house*, I used to think, as I stared out at the lake. In my mind one of those grim Old Forge Victorians, with its weathered gingerbread and witchy roof-angles, came unmoored from the earth and hovered over the cobbled street, shifting slightly against its tethers. I told Thomas about that.) She lived the life of a wealthy spinster, according to my grandmother, having inherited a considerable fortune on the passing of her father, a gruff, austere career army man she referred to only as “the Colonel.”

“The Colonel used to say,” Miss Marvel would intone, at church socials, potlucks, and trustee meetings. She would close her eyes, and proceed to quote the sour old coot on temperance, charity, and the life of the spirit.

Miss Marvel, my grandmother would remind me, was richer than rich, she was *wealthy*. She had a woman come in to do her cleaning, and another to do her mending. She had her groceries delivered. She went to New York City several times a year to buy shoes.

And every night, Miss Felicity McGrath would amble by after closing up the library, and together she and Miss Marvel would go for dinner at the Lamplighter Inn on Front Street. Dressed like twin sisters, they would, in one sing-songy voice, order the wine, the special, the soup of the day. Later they’d be seen walking home, whispering to each other, giggling, pointing at the stars. All along the route they followed back to Miss Marvel’s, faces peered out of picture windows, tongues clucked. Second childhood, people murmured.

Every night this would happen, my grandmother said. *Thick as thieves, she said, the poor dears. Two lonely ladies, two—well, to be honest, Charles, slightly mannish old maids. Nobody but each other.*

For years afterward, I’d see them at the strangest times, turning corners just ahead of me, entering doorways. I told Thomas about that, as well, how it kept happening—the quick glimpses, always just a few feet ahead, like they had something to tell me: Eugenie and Felicity, arm in arm, walking down the city streets with prim, tiny steps, hems brushing the pavement, faces turned to the night sky.

The dog whined. Thomas smiled, and started scratching it behind the ear again, then checked his watch. He stood slowly. Had to get ready for his 11:30, he said. An osteopath, he said, from the city. Seemed nice enough, she’s looking at the end unit—he pointed—over there.

I turned to see where he was pointing—another unit, another lawn, like its neighbors, just alike—and when I turned back to Thomas he was looking at me, and for just a second more he went on looking at me. A second, maybe two. But long enough.

He thanked me for the lemonade, and as he reached the door, I said that if he had any other gaps, any other times between appointments, he should feel welcome. That’s how I said it: *you should feel welcome*.

He nodded, and smiled another close-mouthed smile, quick and shy, and I watched him leave, watched him start down the sidewalk, over the blacktop, to-

ward the nice osteopath. I stood there looking after him like that for a long time, blocking the doorway with my body, which is something Lee and I do now, instinctively, because the dog would make a break for it, given half a chance—would bolt, leashless, ecstatic, out into the world, and we are fearful of the highway.