

High Windows

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Nelida points to the sun.

She is late. Already the morning colors squeeze between surfaces like clay in a clenching fist.

“Longer days don’t have to mean shorter nights,” her lover says.

Nelida does not make mistakes. Once, last summer, when Carmen lay bedridden, her arms crossed and her hands fisted against her gutted chest, too weak to stalk the kitchen yelping for her sister’s warmwarm and her herbal poultice, Nelida stole an extra ten minutes on a Sunday morning and outsmarted the early risers. She strode briskly out of the alleyway, past the silver fire hydrant and across the street as though she were en route to early mass. Nelida scowls: Carmen grows worse.

“Wednesday,” she says.

Her lover laces up his high heel shoes. Nelida walks slowly from their spot between the rows of dead azaleas—it is winter thaw and the ground yields. Her lover follows, hurrying to delay their parting. He draws even with her shadow as they step into the sunlight. They go their separate ways.

Nelida glides expertly on the slick concrete, but her lover skates uneasily, lurches on a dry spot, trips over his high heels and topples. He scrambles to his feet, flapping his stinging hands, and bending and rubbing his left knee. There is no blood, no rip in his pants, only a complimentary bruise. Relieved, he takes a mincing step and glances suspiciously over his left shoulder. But Nelida has rounded the corner, and as she juggles her dates in her scrupulous memory, she inspects her reflection in the Porter Artificial Limb Co. west display window, and the Negro arms and legs reclining inside.

Nelida moves out of Matthew’s line of sight. Matthew yawns and stretches, peers down on Nelida’s lover crossing the street.

“Fucking football,” Matthew mutters, kneading the stiffness in his shoulder, satisfied with the morning’s spectacular parting and how

tough he was in high school—second string all the way through.

A gust of warm moist air forces open his yellowed terry cloth, rides up his crotch. It's a good thing it got warm last night, he thinks, otherwise I'd be stiff as—her lover's knee tomorrow morning. He fell asleep against the refrigerator before he came, after a half-bottle of Vaseline Intensive Care—some nights he just can't make it—and missed the kids' second go-around. Luckily, he woke in time to catch their dramatic parting.

Matthew leans on the windowsill, rubs the scar on his forehead. He checks the alleyway—the busted up alley lamp (he tore out the wiring once Nelida and her lovers proved to be chronic and agreeable visitors; the light itself had been taken out by a stray BB), the azaleas, the color-blasting hydrant, the quiet—and his street.

To his left, to the alley's right, is Panagakis and Sons ADULT CLASSICS BOOKSTORE. Set on a pedestal in the front window is Alexander Panagakis's pride and joy: his three-dimensional Pegasus. Its neon wire body burns a townstrip red.

He follows the horse's glow out to the curb, to a bag in the slush. How downhill neighborhood can you get? he laughs. The real clue is the oversupply of garbage on collection day—figure one pail or plastic garbage bag for every two persons.

To his right, the alley's left, stands a black walnut twisted up in the green light of Moy's Chinese Laundry. In the summer the kids hang a rope swing from the tree's thickest branch and throw walnuts at police cars. Tad's Grocery is on the corner. Tad's always in the doorway picking his nose and finger fox-trotting to his cheek when he guesses that someone's about to catch him in the act—like it does him any good.

Matthew swings his eyes back over the alleyway, past Panagakis's, and over to Porter Artificial Limb Co. on the other corner. During the riots three years ago a bunch of Vietnam amputees trashed the place, trying on and trading in arms and legs, and rummaging for spare parts.

His eyes track the street light across to his side of the street. Ned's Bar on the corner. He's never been inside. All he's ever seen from the street—the entrance is a sawed-off fifth face angling out into the intersection—is half of a bare cream wall behind rows of bottles, a round-screen 19" black and white, and the rounded shoulders of middle-aged men. And the bartender's face. Maybe he's Ned? Matthew doesn't know the face, but he's got the substance of it—the indulgent grin, the sour regretful eyes, and the arms and hands busy and detached. Sometimes, drifting by Ned's, as he stepped up onto the curb, he would try to catch both the bartender's arms and hands

and the arranged arms and hands in the Artificial Limb Co. window at the same pose. Next to Ned's—And next to Ned's. And it hits him. I can't remember my own goddamn side of the street. Except for Savatini's downstairs—of course. And my weed!

Matthew smiles, relaxes, rests his cheek on the cool window, and watches the giant weed's palmy leaves fan the old sooted brick above the Savatini's Delicatessen EAT HERE OR TAKE OUT sign. The weed is as tall as his window now, growing out of the concrete: a mini-forest framed in gun metal, winter brown, and the deli lights. He worries that someone—Batterman the landlord, the city—will cut it down. It bleeds the same milky white as his midnight mush when he scrapes it with a fingernail or when the kids carve their numbers in the smooth thick stem with their switchblades.

"Hungry?" he asks.

Ice cubes. Cornflakes. Condensed milk. Sugar. Water. Mash. The midnight mush transported.

Matthew backs away from the window and turns to stare at the refrigerator. More warm air wafts in—indistinct, not cold, soggy, unfamiliar, like half-processed sewage, like burnt milk.

"Yuuck!"

Nelida messes up the times. Nelida and her lover parted too late for him to catch the sunrise across the bay—the cobwebbed frozen haze, the starch propulsion of winter ducks, the stevedores with their wool caps and rolled up brown sleeves dwarfed by the piers, the construction booms, the unloading. Matthew breathes deeply against the tightening in his bowels. Most mornings, winter thaw or no winter thaw, good news bad news or no news, are just mornings, and he's solid for an hour or two at least, sphincter silent and brain Dranoed. He learned the trick during his Deep Sleep. And the midnight mush mix.

Sugar and cornflakes on the kitchen table. Coors pitcher in the drainboard. Condensed milk up top. Ice. He breaks open the ice and the kitchen table wobbles. It came from the Salvation Army. Two rickety men rattled and banged the oak six-seater, and the extra leaf to make it an eight-seater, up the narrow stairway to his rooms above Savatini's.

Matthew pours the steeped mush into his Tony the Tiger cereal bowl and dips his spoon in. A little of the mush flows over one side of the bowl, ebbs, flows over the opposite side. He reaches to steady the table but only excites the waves.

"Damn." Matthew pushes away from the table. Nelida's thrown his body rhythm out of kilter. Matthew circles the kitchen table. He stops, fingers the spillage, a sleeve end dragging in the murk, and lowers his

lips to the cool liquid. Toast crumbs from last night glide in the mixture and stick to his tongue. He spits, looks up at the window, at a perfect thumbprint, at the blue air. Last night, killing time at the window, half-conscious and half-standing like a sleepy child falling upstairs, he noticed that the night air was blue, not black, not gray, a deep endless peaceful blue as peaceful as the early days of the Deep Sleep, before the pitched battle between sleep and not sleep when the known something demanded either wakefulness or death. He shakes his head.

Matthew breathes on the window and pokes a squiggle in the frost. March is a bitch of a month, he thinks; it can fool you with a half-dozen thaws. He can't be sure it isn't just another souther rolling in—mid-thirties temperature, a pile of packable snow and no ceiling to the sky, and then the midnight freezeover. Matthew turns back to the kitchen table ready to woof it down. He slurps. Today's my day. Might as well gird the loins before the assault on downtown: Government Center, the Department of Public Welfare and Human Resources, Mrs. Mulray the food stamp lady. "The bitch." She knows. She's got to know. At their first meeting she led him around by the nose like some cerebral palsy kid slobbering through a telethon, and then she sent him home to get the facts and figures of his family's need. He'd asked for food stamps for four, and Mulray hauled out ADC, her ripe as eggplant skin spotting maroon, the tips of her long nails glinting in the fluorescence, and he flashed on gray, inconsolable Mr. Monroe in his khakis tenderly wiping down his flowering lilacs after the famous Fairview mud storm. This is senseless, he thought, watching Mrs. Mulray's mouth move and hearing nothing. Mulray had confused him. Who ever heard of welfare workers offering benefits? he wanted to know. At Tad's he'd learned that anything more than food stamps trotted out the caseworkers and a perfunctory investigation. That's what you get for going on hearsay, he told himself.

He wandered around the welfare complex gathering the layman's literature from every office. He stole a Caseworker Guidelines Manual from the coffee room on the second floor, scooted out of the building, and made one more stop in his mandated trip home to wheedle out of skinflint, thickskinned Panagakis the overnight loan of the "world's finest pocket calculator."

Back home, he threw a Man-Eater's Chicken Supreme with cottage fried potatoes and gravy, early peas, and a circle of cranberry in the oven, and consulted Pascal under *Knavery* (he found nothing) and *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* he purchased for \$17.95 from the Book of the Month Club promising to buy four more books at their regular

price under *Conscience* (he found the “universality of moral prescriptions”), and went to work. Energetically, neurotically, happily, he toiled. The insurance money from David’s death was gone and now he was fending for himself.

The food stamp formula was so simple he abandoned the calculator. The literature was plain and clear on one point: there was no way Mulray could deny him the \$184 in stamps, but there was no way he could stop the ensuing investigation—they’d been right at Tad’s. He’d plunged into the food stamp business because he had to, because everyone at Tad’s used food stamps, and they all had at least as much money as he did. They’d lied and gotten away with it. But they’d lied about income, he realized, not family. For ADC or SSI, the State checked. And Mulray wasn’t going to give the kids food stamps without putting them in clothes too. From City Hall records alone they’d see he had nobody. Not to mention census reports, social security, police files, insurance companies, the FBI, the CIA, junk mail rosters.

He surveyed the papers spread out on the mattress and closed his eyes. He scraped the cotton mouth off his lips and wiped it on the blanket. He’d told Mulray they (Peggy, the kids, himself) were still living off the money they’d made in California selling T-shirts. “When Peggy got sick we had to sell the heat transfer press to pay the medical bills. Peggy wanted to come back home, though there is nothing here for us.”

What the fuck can I do? he asked himself.

When he got to Tad’s he couldn’t go in. He slid past the entrance and around the corner and rested against the brick. The street smelled like wet stale dog and he was breathing hard. For over two years he had Deep Sleep’d it in his rooms, and when it was over he relearned how to buy a pack of cigarettes and jabber; he made friends with old man Savatini and wrote to Walter Stevens in California. Walter wrote back a short, hyperactive letter. “It’s good to hear from you . . . California’s a fat earthworm in too rich soil . . . It chews you up—shits you out . . . See you soon? Love, Walter.” And he had let himself care about a woman without it killing him—or her. They had been together only five or six times when he told her he loved her. She rolled over and grabbed his cock and kissed it and whispered to it that he was very sweet. She spun herself around and set his head in the crook of her arm, bracing his cheek on the run of muscle curling from her thumb across the top of her wrist to her elbow. She pushed his hair away from his forehead with her free hand and told him that she didn’t love him, and that he didn’t love her, and that he shouldn’t say things he didn’t mean.

"I understand," he said, and kissed her. He didn't understand and didn't want to.

The world was spiraling into view again, the center flattening like an accelerated electron, and this time he was not going to let anyone set him back.

He gritted his teeth: diarrhea. He rolled his hot forehead on the brick and stomped his feet. He beat the flat undersides of his fists against his stomach and his bowels firmed.

Tad quit picking his nose while they talked, substituting a brisk knuckle-cracking session and a few nasal hmmmpps.

"Food stamps are my business," Tad said. "I don't know a thing about ADC or nothing like that."

"What am I asking you for?"

Tad smiled. "Asking what?"

"Never mind."

Dejected, wrapped up in thwarting diarrhea—his double-crotch underwear wedged in his buttocks crack—the answer came to him. He would tell Mrs. Mulray that he and Peggy had decided to send the kids to their grandparents rather than stigmatize them forever as welfare kids. If necessary, he'd get someone to pose as Peggy—who he didn't know. But if he had the confidence to plunge into this eyes closed, surely he could recruit someone, and find the money to rent a wheelchair, and steal doctor's stationery to authenticate her paralysis, and there was I.D., and—The list was endless, and he didn't care. It was put your meat on the table time, and his life was at stake, and he could do it if he had to. I won't have to, he thought, Mulray likes me. He sensed her complicity. Or was it fascination? An interest in his pathology?

Matthew punches the kitchen table. "It worked!"

The spilled mush splatters on his face, on his lips, on his neck. With his robe he wipes his face and neck. The sweetness. He wants more. Coffee and Danish downstairs at Savatini's. He looks down at the table, at the scattered little puddles, at the one big lappable puddle, and laughs. Laughing, he bends and mops up the last of the breakfast mush with his elbow.

Savatini leads Matthew to the table farthest from the door, nearest the kitchen.

"Nobody should see the likes of you in here," Savatini says.

Willie, a distant, tall, twice-removed cousin of Savatini, swings through the kitchen door. Tucked beneath Willie's right arm is the red-and-white check dinner tablecloth.

"Fancy this morning," Matthew says.

Savatini nods in agreement and holds out a chair for Matthew while

Willie spreads the cloth.

"The sauce," the old man says, and nudges Willie toward the kitchen.

Willie wraps his arms around the old man and lifts him off the ground. "Let's go," Willie says.

"You guys are crazy!"

"Cherry Danish, cup of coffee, aisle seat on 8," Savatini shouts, though there are no other customers, and no one behind the lunch counter. Savatini kicks his feet as Willie carries him off.

Matthew wishes Willie had left the old man. It doesn't take two to stir a sauce; nor does it do any good to worry about Mulray. He stares at the unframed portraits of the great men—Dante, daVinci, Verdi, Garibaldi, Sacco and Vanzetti—slapped onto the back wall seemingly with spit and pasta. Matthew smiles. "The old man's crazy." The year before Nelida arrived (he was still hovering over his Deep Sleep, waiting for anything), he would stop in around 3:30 in the afternoon, when the deli is the quietest, and he and Savatini would sit at the lunch counter and swap stories. The old man reeled off tales about the city and ward politics thirty years ago, when Carmine Vitiello had more classy whores in the typing pool than anyone guessed, were in the whole damn state, about what happened to people brave enough and stupid enough to try to reform things, about Sacco and Vanzetti and their families and the rich uppercrust people who took up the cause—"We ask ourselves over and over, 'Why?'"—and about riding the underground—"Everyone looks at me: ITALIAN"—and how he backed off from what he thought he should believe in because he was scared and being scared made him see he didn't understand—"The communists use us; they wrong us. I am lucky, dumb lucky." They talked about baseball and Matthew told Savatini about the trouble with his father, how he summoned up the courage to leave home after he'd gotten sick, almost died, and how outrageous his hopes were when he moved in.

The apartment was cheap. It needed work, he didn't care. He wanted a place, something to do until he was ready for a job, and Batterman said he could make any improvements he wanted—they'd go 50-50 on the expenses.

"I wish I could go all the way on it," Batterman said, "but I can't sink too much into a building in this neighborhood."

"It's a bad neighborhood?"

"If we get lucky and the university comes south, or if the young and the beautiful decide to move their potted plants and sconces over here, then we'll make it. Otherwise, the sons of bitches from the west side will eat this place alive."

"50-50 is the best you'll do?"

"I've got to be crazy to go that far."

"So do I. But it's all right."

Everything was all right. He had the insurance money and he was happy for the first time in a year, calm and patient for the first time in his life—the failures of the past were the mishaps of another person.

Within a few days he had overhauled the plumbing. Working from his own crude sketches, he reconditioned the water heater threading pipe and refitting couplings and gauges. He bled the radiators. He replaced washers and rusted spigots. He caulked the bathtub. He spackled the screw holes in the kitchen walls. Sweaty, greasy, proud, he played *Abbey Road*, the "Here Comes the Sun" side, and cleaned out the fireplace and an old wasps' nest in the foyer closet.

Phase 1 (repair and clean) completed, he walked into the bedroom to hang the bizarre concentration camp etching he chose from Aunt Martha's basement art gallery on his 14th birthday.

"A fine selection," Aunt Martha said. "You must care about people."

"The people look angry and sad," he said.

"Yes. They are prisoners of the Nazis. They see an avenue of escape, a chance to rise up and be free, but they are transfixed, made motionless by their anger and sadness, the evil cruelty of freedom in such a world. The artist understands this confusion in all of us. Not everyone who has gone through what she has would be so understanding, so sympathetic. The artist and her mother fled Russia before the Revolution. The artist's mother had been a close friend of Kropotkin the anarchist. They rolled bombs under the carriages of noblemen just like the communists, but they were of the opposite political persuasion. Ironically, the artist's mother died of old age in a Nazi concentration camp."

Everything shifted. Aunt Martha's face darkened, and he looked up at his father positioned squarely on the second to bottom step. His father seemed intent on actively not coming down any further.

"Look," he said. "Do you like it? I like it."

"It's morbid," his father said.

"I told Matthew he could pick out whatever he wanted," Aunt Martha said.

"That doesn't make it any less morbid."

Across from the bedroom door, between the bathroom and closet doors, he hung the etching and threw his mattress on the floor beneath it. He added an outlet for the stereo in the near right corner, catty-corner to the radiator, a corner and a half from the west-facing window. He built the desk. Nailed slats of Douglas fir across two saw

horses. Clamped on an architect's high intensity extension lamp. Centered it neatly beneath the Venetianed windows for the hour or two of good light that slipped between the buildings. He stacked puce cinder block H's and pine board bookshelves on both sides and unboxed his few books: Hesse, Marx, a biology textbook, Salinger, *El Camino Real*, Kesey, Kerouac, Eldridge Cleaver. He laughed knowingly at the absurd collection and collapsed on the mattress, resting the palms of his hands on the cold hardwood. He'd think things through, he promised himself, study his pain and love and learn which was which, and become the person he thought he could be. He felt the clearest, truest, best of his life, and he wondered how the hell he had survived to get here. He saw himself engulfing the whole neighborhood in his good fortune; he let the kids play and smoke dope in the open stairway leading to his rooms and introduced himself to Savatini, Mr. Moy, Mr. Panagakis, Tad, and Mrs. Santo at the liquor store on the next block (he decided not to shake hands with the owner of Porter Artificial Limb). After he'd been in the neighborhood a few months and knew what was needed here, he'd work with the block association—if one existed, organize one if necessary—to buttonhole the local politicians and get things done. All it takes is energy, he told himself.

But on the Thursday before the weekend he set aside for the paint job, a boy was stabbed in the stairway, and he came home that day from playing ball at the schoolyard to blood on the walls and steps and a surly policeman's questions.

Yes, I know the boy.

No, I know nothing about him.

Yes.

So I know the boy's name. So what?

No, I don't use or sell drugs.

I know all the kids' names.

I thought I could help them.

No, you can't look around my rooms.

I thought I could help them.

Yeah. I was an idiot.

He cried.

The phone rang. It was Batterman.

"The police called. Don't worry, they won't bother you anymore. Be careful from now on. It's nice to have a big heart, but don't overdo it."

"I'm sorry."

"I'll send someone over to clean up."

The next morning three identical placards were posted:

NO LOITERING

by order of

P.P.D.

The stairway reeked of disinfectant and his Deep Sleep. He stumbled, backedpedaled to his rooms.

Savatini heard the clumping terror and carried a hero up to him.

“I’m Antonio Savatini from downstairs. Remember?”

He picked his head up from the pillow—his eyes were red and wild.

“I have a veal and pepper for you,” Savatini said, “and a Dr. Brown’s cream soda.”

He stared at the diagonal of light on the desk.

“You do nothing wrong,” Savatini said. “When Marianna died I hear her voice in the walls and I know I am safe, but it saddens me. You’re o.k. here.”

Matthew shakes his head and grimaces. How absurd the deli looks in the morning sun! The tessellated floor like the tiled bathroom in a famous public building. Rows of light bulbs dangling in rice paper balls from the 20-foot ceiling Savatini says he would have dropped if his brother had lived. The EAT HERE OR TAKE OUT sign in the window. The shriveled hung salami. The lunch counter, the clothless tables, the Chianti bottles with the candle drip down the sides. The clouded, plastic-covered menus, the prices inked over twice and still not high enough. The plumbing farting.

But Savatini’s belongs to the lunch hour rush.

Bursts of cold air rip through the front tables, shouts of “Hi, how ya doin?” and “Business good?” and the puddle of mud soup at the door. Someone whispers, “If it weren’t for the old man and Willie, I’d never see this part of town.”

“Yessiree,” a friend says, “Savatini should get the hell out.”

Willie shoulders open the kitchen door and they shut up.

Willie’s long arms sling meatball, sausage, veal and pepper, mortadella and provolone heros big as a thigh down the dulled formica countertop. Old man Savatini hacks at a peppered ham, slices the heros, wiping the blade of his butcher’s knife on his white smock. Moy does the cloths and smocks. Get them clean, and God bless him, white! And the red checks never fade. The Deli’s towels and the old man’s personal stuff go to Bruno and Rosie’s Laundry. Bruno and Rosie fold the old man’s stuff at no extra charge. A college kid comes in and asks Savatini for a slice of pizza. The old man raises his foot long knife and waves it under the kid’s nose. “Who send you here? I no sell no pizza. I no sell no shit!” The boy jumps back. Turns and runs. Drops a book opening the door. Stops. Stoops, the door half open, customers shouting, “It’s cold!” and “You asshole!” and “Hey moron!” and laughing. The boy picks his book out of the puddle. Grins sheepishly.

Empty, the deli is all wrong.

Matthew pushes away from the table. The chair rattles on the tile.

Savatini comes whirling through the kitchen door with the coffee and Danish and spots Matthew squirming in his seat.

"Relax, Willie has to clean the bathroom. It is all yours in one minute."

The old man puts down the coffee, then the cream and sugar, and the hot cherry Danish.

"What, no espresso?" Matthew bites into the cherry Danish.

"I call City Hall about the hydrants and the alley lamp."

"You didn't?"

"I do. I figure I kill the two birds with the one stone."

"Did you?"

"Punks. All of them. Punks."

Matthew smiles. The old man's been trying to get the city to fix the alley light for over a year. A new alley light might scare away Nelida—if it lasted long enough.

"I tell them," Savatini says, "'Every spring the men come to paint the hydrant in the alley, but the hydrant never get used. The kids can't open her because the paint jobs seal her up. And the firemen take care of only the hydrants under the street lamps. But you never paint those hydrants. It make no sense. Paint all of them or none of them. That one painted hydrant stick out worse than a Republican at a Sons of Italy meeting.' You see I want the guy to right away know we're important.

"They say for me to hold on a minute and I guess he go to find out who Antonio Savatini is. I figure the guy can't be too smart if he don't know about Savatini's Italian Delicatessen.

"He come back to the phone and he say to me there's nothing he can do. 'The Parks Department,' he say, 'paints the hydrant in the alley, but the Fire Department is responsible for the rest of the hydrants on the block. If you people down there didn't turn in so many damn false alarms maybe the Fire Department people could find time to paint a hydrant once in a while.'

"So I say to him, 'We paint the hydrants whatever damn color we please and send you *minchioni* the bill!'

"So he say to me, 'I must tell you, Mr. Savatini, that if you paint even one fire hydrant you'll be subject to a heavy fine and/or criminal prosecution.' The little fascist!

"So I say to him, 'What for? No law say not to take care of the neighborhood.'

"'Defacing public property,' he say.

"Then I drop the big one. 'Wait till Carmine Vitiello hear about this,' I warn him. Carmine's nephew is on the City Council now.

"And then he hang up on me."

Matthew smiles. "Some fucking nerve."

Savatini frowns, "Don't interrupt."

"Sorry."

"I call Carmine's and they tell me Carmine in Florida with his nephew. So I ask if anyone else can help. They say no. I say, 'Then things is worse than I think.'

"And he say, 'That's not the half of it.'"

"You tried," Matthew says.

"I am mad."

"You wrote letters. You called. You could always ask Lester Batterman."

"I never ask Lester. He should ask me. Marianna pray for him like a godson." Savatini folds his arms across his chest.

"What about the alley lamp?"

"I never get to tell the City Hall punk about the lamp. Antonio Savatini paint those hydrants and fix that lamp all by himself if he have to. Let them try and send Antonio Savatini to jail. They be sorry!"

"How much do I owe you, Mr. Savatini?"