

*THE KEEPER
OF
THE STONE*

a novel by
J.E. Jardine



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*For my surfer girl and our son,
both of whom occupy a space
close to my heart.*

The Keeper of the Stone

PROLOGUE

It was grey in the city. Painfully grey. Each morning, seemingly for months, had begun with a grey dawn. Even now, in the late weeks of spring, the light of the morning was filtered through clouds of grey.

Clouds sometimes billowed with the lightness of a fog on a summer's day. Sometimes they took the heavy pancake flat shape of clouds in winter. But always grey.

The grey changed little during the day. Little changed until the setting of the sun brought the relief of the black night sky. Even the stars were hidden by clouds. The moon might make an occasional or partial appearance, gently reflecting the light of an invisible sun. But always the grey was master. The light of the day came forward as the sun rose in the morning sky but there was to be no mistake – the light was grey. And it was grey from the rise of the invisible sun, hidden by grey clouds, until it set at the end of day.

Other towns saw the sun. After all, it couldn't be grey everywhere. And in fairness, there were days when the light of the sun burst upon the city as if uncorked from a magic bottle. On those days the highways and city streets filled as those fortunate enough to be able to leave work early did so. Children old enough to skip school took this opportunity to do exactly that. The playgrounds filled with joyful shouts. People wore sunglasses. Women brought out from their closets low-cut blouses and light spring skirts. Flirtations and coquettish looks populated conversations and the more subtle, non-verbal forms of human discourse. Owners of convertible cars put the tops down even if the air was cool enough to require the vehicle's heater to maintain some degree of comfort. The city took on a relaxed, even carefree, air.

But all too soon the grey returned. Those with the finances to do so ventured to other environs for weekends, for vacations. Real light, visible and unhindered by grey, could be found elsewhere. But most of the inhabitants stayed where they were and made the best of matters. After

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all, not everyone had the money to travel. And, most citizens had jobs and families. Children, school, routines. A little grey was worth complaints in the form of general grousing but would not drive them to forsake house and home for the light. Would not drive them to forsake whatever security they might have with jobs and families and routines for the light of a normal town.

The light of grey is confounding. It doesn't help matters that in this city, as in most cities, the color grey is the color theme of primary decoration. Perhaps some elements of the city have color – billboards, cars, and buses have color. But that color derived from an afterthought, a response perhaps, to a city without color. City planners had not considered color as an element of architecture or of the physical structure of the city. The planners for this city, for any city, were not selling a product, were not appealing to the subconscious attractions of the populace. For these city planners there was a need for function, not color. Sidewalks were built of grey cement, streets of black asphalt. Buildings built of grey concrete rose fifty, perhaps a hundred stories in the air, all a testament to the power of grey.

Nowhere is the power of grey more pronounced than in the buildings of government, the buildings where the workings of city and county administration and justice function. They are buildings of heavy grey stone, built of right angles, the intent surely to provide citizens with the sense of rock-solid stability. No frivolity allowed in these structures. Only the common sense and rational workings of public administration and justice. The color grey employed as a suitable affirmation of government working for the common good.

But grey can wear on the soul, deflate the spirit. People feel poorly, or don't feel "as well," often not realizing the deflation of their soul or the cause of their malaise until they have spent some time in a clime with more sun. Beauty surely existed in the city, but the beauty of green foliage which derives from a wet, modestly warm climate fails to compensate for the weight of the grey on the spirit.

Perhaps there would not be a story here if the color grey did not exist. Could this story have occurred in the brightness of sun? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Perhaps the human condition occurs; perhaps it functions, without regard to color or light. Maybe.

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ONE

Alan woke. Early. A sun which was not really a sun had risen. Grey clouds filtered the morning light and a light wet drizzle sent ripples of water through the street and gutters. The air was filled with moisture in a way that only a heavy mist can accomplish. So much water filled the air that it was hard to believe one could breathe without drowning.

Across on the bed, Stella slept. Brunette. Her warm dark-tone skin adding a sense of tropical softness to an otherwise still, quiet, half-light.

Alan swung his legs to the side of the bed. He always rose first. First to bed, first to rise, so it had always fallen to him to make the morning coffee. It was one item of domestic life that he was very good at. He bought only the best quality and freshest beans, fair trade and organic if he could get them. He inspected them for color and aroma, avoiding beans with too much oil or too dark a roast. And though his preference was to buy single-origin coffees only, Tanzanian or Sumatran, he was good at selecting the right blends when they were available. Then it was a matter of brewing, grinding the beans to the right consistency, and the measuring with exactness as he added ground beans to distilled water. When it came to brewing coffee he knew that there were few who could brew a better cup. Still groggy from sleep, he fumbled down the stairs to grind beans and begin the brew.

Coffee brewed with precision – the beans carefully measured and blended with an exact portion of water. He sat in his robe for a few moments, consuming enough coffee to startle his body and brain to alertness. Hearing but not hearing the sound of the morning drizzle, he collected the morning newspaper from the porch and glanced through the headlines. The usual. Robberies. Traffic accidents. Families reunited after years of separation. News that was not really news. Pander to occupy the mind without engaging it.

Stella began to stir while he dressed. He brought her coffee – half milk, half coffee. It was one of the accommodations of their relationship.

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She had never learned to make the stuff, previous attempts having resulted in noxious flat manure-colored brew unworthy of consumption. In a relationship growing tired from its habits and routines, Alan's ability to make and deliver a decent cup of coffee at least partially redeemed his presence. At least partially redeemed their continued habitation.

Stella pulled herself from the bed, her nakedness fully exposed to the cool of the morning air. Even at a glance, unadorned with the stylistic effects of clothing and jewelry, Stella was walking art; adorned with clothing and jewelry, even more so. The trimness of her waist, hips, large but not oversized breasts, high cheek bones, full lips, gave sensuality to her presence. In viewing Stella from behind it would be easy for any designer to frame her hips, waist, and buttocks into to a Brazilian bikini, an article of clothing that she sometimes wore – and wore well – in the seclusion of a private pool with close friends. She was physically fit, and her core body strength was reflected in strikingly flat abdominals, made more attractive by the proportional balance outlined in the bulge of her breasts, the tightness of her waist, and shape of her hips. Stella may not have had the figure of a model. She was too physically fit and healthy for that – she carried more body weight than would suit a model. But her overall proportions and appearance had aroused men from as long back as pre-history.

Stella willed herself to the bedside chair, brunette hair falling in a chaotic cascade over her shoulders and onto her breasts. Crossing in front of the windows she glanced down to glimpse the activity on the street below. It was still too early for more than the occasional runner or perhaps a neighbor walking their dog. All for the better since she was standing naked exposed to the view of the world. No matter how sexually liberated she was, she was not so liberated that she appreciated strangers or her neighbors gazing upon her naked body. Voyeurism did not appeal to her, particularly if she was the object being viewed. She pulled on her robe, settled into the rocker, and woke slowly to the smell and warmth and taste of coffee wafting across her senses. It gave her that warm comforting assurance that she had not risen to see this day alone. That her partner of so many years, now absent from the bed, still remained, and had attended to the first component of their domestic life.

She stretched, jostling the dog who voiced irritation at the disturbance. Rosie the dog had been her addition to domestic tranquility. A wheaten

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terrier. Not a small dog but not large either. Cute. Cuddly, with hair instead of fur, a circumstance that eliminated the shedding of fur common to other breeds, and which eliminated the likelihood of allergies and reduced the chore of cleaning and maintenance. A dog who was social and oriented to people. A dog content to be petted and to sit close to her owner. A woman's dog. A man's dog would have been attracted to games of fetch and Frisbee, oriented to the out of doors. Not so her dog. Her dog was a woman's dog and she, and the dog, and Alan, all knew that fact. Not that Alan didn't take care of the dog or treat it with affection. Walk it when needed. Feed it when hungry. Bathe it when dirty. But the order of things was clear. By temperament and disposition, the dog belonged to a woman. The dog belonged to her.

Stella's bronzed skin gave her presence warmth that belied the cool, cold drizzle of the outside. Her rounded breasts and nipples gave her an aura of sensuality. She rubbed her hands on her breasts and felt the flatness of her stomach. Perhaps a bit of a pouch but, she knew, still giving her the appearance of youth and health despite approaching middle age. If Alan's contribution was coffee, hers was her appearance. Her hair, her breasts, her shape, the warmth and color of her skin stirred him, and other men, in ways she could neither fully understand or accurately describe. Not just the arousal of the libido. Stella knew without knowing that she aroused other and more primitive reactions in a man's soul, the desire to look after, care, and protect her. She knew, but could not understand, how such a chaotic appearance could be arousing but she recognized the power of the attraction. Knew that, should she have been of the right mind, a simple glance or gesture would return Alan to their communal bed, enveloped in the aura and power of her body. But her passion for him had long since abated, at least the passion that occurs in the spontaneous moment, dissipated by routine, and work, and familiarity. What roused her now, what she desired and yearned for, was the more exotic, unfamiliar, and unpredictable.

There is a time in a relationship between a man and a woman when the futility of the relationship can be seen clearly. But the insight belongs to the observer, not the couple. The casual, hurtful phrases. The inconsiderate acts. Irritation at the smallest inconvenience. Disrespect. The rot can be masked. The ability to pretend something is what it isn't is a unique human quality. Both Alan and Stella had mastered the art of such

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appearances. Both had mastered the art of hiding their thoughts and moods. Each had developed the ability to be emotionally opaque, the ability to avoid emotional transparency. Both avoided recognizing the truth standing naked before them.

Even if Alan and Stella had the insight to recognize the lack of vitality in their relationship, the ennui of their emotional and physical connection together, neither would have had the ability to articulate and negotiate a more viable relationship. The sheer lethargy of the affair had settled so solidly that the only way out was total collapse and withdrawal, or total permanence and perpetual dissatisfaction.

Once the pattern of the morning had completed its cycle, Stella and Alan would transition to their separate lives, only returning to their communal existence late in the day. They lived together in the social structure of a society which rewarded and encouraged such togetherness but they were separate in their spiritual connection with life, and had long ago separated from one another in the rhythm of their daily living. Neither could fully articulate or even yet recognize the discordant rhythms of their lives together, much less recognize the challenge their individual yearnings placed on the continued existence of their coupling. They remained together as a couple because their collective world had more cohesion, had a greater power, than the individual worlds in which they lived. But it was inevitable their individual worlds were developing strength and in time would develop enough weight to challenge their continued collective existence.

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TWO

Alan and Stella first met on a warm summer evening at the 507, a neighborhood pub on Capitol Hill. They met late one evening, a time when professionals on their way home from their city jobs had long abandoned the pub for the more respectable environs of home and family. The pub was constructed in the shape of a rectangle taken straight from a third-grade math book, narrow at the front entrance and extending back to a pair of pool tables. Even on the sunniest day, the light from the street barely gained the entry; within the pub the only light came from overhead lamps into which the pub owners, in the interests of economy, had inserted compact fluorescent bulbs, the curly lamps, efficient but with the ability to produce only the weakest of pale white light. The bar, the work station of the bartenders, occupied half the width of the pub, and contained perhaps a dozen stools. Adjacent to the bar was a narrow aisle upon which bordered a few tables, and extending to the back of the pub a few more tables. The very rear of the pub served as a small parlor for billiards and darts. A back door led to a small, unlit parking area, paved with gravel, mud, and ruts.

Alan was employed as a reporter with a local weekly paper. He found in his job a challenge which appealed to him, and he had demonstrated enough skill as a writer and investigative reporter that his editor had given him increasingly challenging assignments. The pay was somewhat greater than miserable but nowhere close to good. With his salary so poor he freelanced as best he could. When the financial dust settled he was comfortable enough that he wouldn't be considered poor but he was a long distance from being financially secure.

With the size of his paychecks unpredictable and his working hours variable, Alan had learned to live the austere life of a single, educated, ambitious urban male with a master's degree and minimal money. He rented and saw no reason to buy both for financial reasons and to avoid the commitment of owning "stuff." His apartment furnishings were sparse. His drinking glasses consisted of Mason jars purchased second-hand at the

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local Goodwill. Some of his furniture came from the same store.

If his taste in some items allowed for an eclectic and pragmatic approach, Alan had distinct quality preferences for other elements of life. He had a preference for good whiskey, micro-brewed beer, and good wine, preferably the reds. He liked good clothes and good food, a necessity for him given the type of women to whom he was attracted.

Alan was attracted to intelligent women and had the usual weakness for women with body proportions that men have found attractive since time eternal – nice complexions, waist and hip proportionality, and attractive breasts. A woman's weight had less importance for him all things considered. In turn, Alan was attractive to women who were intrigued by his Mason jar quirks, charmed by his gentle demeanor, and appreciative of his tastes in wine and food. His relationships with women were primarily casual, a casualness which while not precluding sexual intimacy and a certain level of interpersonal bonding, limited the duration of each affair to no more than a few weeks or months and often much less. Now in his late twenties, Alan had not found a woman who was a "soul mate." He was at an age in which he had not yet developed a fear of growing old alone. He was, as it were, sufficiently content being a friend with benefits.

If being a reporter was Alan's first passion, bicycle racing was his second. Alan aspired to greatness as a reporter, to notoriety, to accomplishment. In racing though, Alan recognized the limitations of his talent and his physical abilities. He trained several days a week and on the weekends. He participated in local races, performing well but not excelling. Alan knew that he would never be more than a competent local racer.

Riding meant more to Alan than placement in races. He loved the feel of the bike. He meditated to the connection of the wheels with the road, the brush of wind over his body, the palpable feel of the air that surrounded and rushed by him as he sped along, and the visceral presence of the weather – the rain, the sun, the fog, the mist settling on his senses so completely that he could more than feel the weather but taste and absorb it into his body. Alan loved the risks, the danger, the competition of racing. The tight groups of riders only inches apart riding at speed, the thrill of the downhill drops, the sharp turns, and the physical agony of climbing hills at a competitive pace.

Racing cyclists tended to be loners and a bit remote in their social

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habits for most tastes, probably because the isolation of training alone for several hours a day drew to the sport a certain personality type, a type drawn to being more isolated from people than the average person. Alan was no “life of the party” but he was gregarious by comparison to most committed racers. He understood the emotional and physical cult of racing, but he knew it was not to be a permanent home for him, knew that racing was an avocation but not an activity for which he should compromise success at his day job. He trained and raced for the joy of doing so but kept the sport in perspective.

The 507 was a convenient stopping-off place after work – quiet and lacking the atmosphere that compelled him to meet and impress women on the one hand, or assume the persona of the up and coming young urban, athletic, intelligent male on the other. It was the perfect place to lose himself in ethereal mindlessness. Not that Alan objected to meeting women, or assuming the role of the successful man in waiting. Just not in the competitive, chaotic, loud factory environment of a bar. And, not when all he wanted to do was put on a pleasant buzz before heading home to sleep. The 507 fit the bill – no one to really talk to, at least not about anything of substance.

Though he could not have verbalized his attraction to the late evening 507 crowd, Alan would have recognized and not denied the appeal of that attraction if it had been brought to his attention. Alan had a comfort with the loose sense of family shared by the late evening regulars. He related to the sense of being connected to others without any of the mutual responsibilities and obligations associated with being “connected.” The superficial warmth and camaraderie of the late evening crowd at the 507 took some of the edge off arriving at an apartment devoid of any habitation by another human, of mutual love and companionship inherent in a “shared hearth.” More prosaically, the 507 was close enough to his apartment that he didn’t lose the alcohol buzz walking home.

Earlier in the evening the 507 was an after-work gathering spot for those women and men who needed a few minutes of fortitude at the conclusion of their work days before heading home to families and commitments and responsibilities. Late evening though, the pub became a tavern, the home of the harder core drinkers, those without families, those with a residence but not a home. For these patrons the bar served as their home,

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and the causal acknowledgements exchanged among them were the closest they could get to the warmth of a family.

For the late-evening regulars of the 507, alcohol had a role in their lives more important than average. For these souls, waking up in the morning with a bit of a hangover was a tolerable way to begin a day. For the late evening regulars alcohol, and the social environment of the 507, served as an essential element of their daily lives and took precedence over more healthful and balanced activities. A few of the men had some history of playing sports and the ability to recall, perhaps with a degree of exaggeration, their high school or college exploits in baseball or football. There may have been some cross country runners or wrestlers in the group but their stories of their pasts did not resonate with the other patrons, more accustomed as they were to the elements of the marquee sporting experiences. For men or women, the existence of a family outside of the 507 had never existed, existed and then disappeared, or was about to disappear, a testament to the power and exploitive effects of alcohol. While many of the late evening patrons had a past, very few had a future.

Perhaps Stella belonged with the earlier patrons but she should not have been at the 507 at the hour that she arrived, and she knew it as soon as she entered. An account executive at a local financial firm, she had worked late and had a need to unwind some before confronting the empty quiet of her apartment. Entering a bar alone, any bar, was not her practice. But, she lived in the neighborhood and had frequented the bar on occasion with friends, though much earlier in the evening – before the theatre, or concert, or film. Her previous visits had been at a time when the bar was a pub, not a tavern.

This night the 507 was not as she remembered from her past visits. It was ten o'clock and the place smelled of stale beer and a hint of unwashed and unclean bodies. The occupants were not lively, but huddled over their tables as if the beer they were drinking were a warm fire. Stella's appearance set her apart. She was pretty and well dressed. And polite. Too polite to simply turn and leave when she realized that this pub was not her kind of place. Sitting alone at a table might have invited, if not company, interactions that she was not prepared to manage so she took a place at the bar close to the door.

Ordering a Chardonnay did nothing to dispel her lack of belonging. A

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rose in a garden of dandelions. A ray of sun on a cloudy day. A vegetarian in a steak house. Sit by the door to facilitate a quick escape if needed. Drink the wine, drink it quick, and slip away home – that was her plan.

Stella's history was not so dissimilar from Alan's. She was bright, very bright. And she was ambitious. Stella's parents had ambitions and attributes which did not distinguish them much from their working-class peers but they had recognized Stella's intelligence at an early age. Stella's parents had always noticed how alert she was, seemingly taking in everything around her. Unlike most young children, Stella had a long attention span and the motor skills to keep patient with a project which would have dissuaded her playmates from continued activity. When Stella began to sight read a few months after her third birthday, Stella's parents knew that she was not a child whose talents and attributes could be developed in the public school system, a child to be lost in the grind of a large classroom, a demoralized teacher, and an archaic management system. Stella had the benefit of a private education, sometimes on full scholarship, sometimes partial. When she had a partial scholarship her parents struggled to provide her with the books and clothes and supplies she needed, but they managed. Stella's parents saw a promise in her and they committed themselves to her future.

Stella did not disappoint them. She graduated from the University with honors and a degree in finance. Perhaps owing to the Spartan finances of her growing years, she pursued an interest in investing with a local financial firm. Her good looks, intelligence, discipline, and attention to detail combined to promise a successful future, provided her a decent living for a relatively recent college graduate, and gave her a comfortable lifestyle within the limits of an entry-level salary.

Sitting at a table at the far end of the pub, Alan had watched Stella as she entered. He had been preparing to leave but had been struck at first glance; he delayed his departure to anonymously take her in. He was attracted in the visceral way that men and women can sometimes find an attraction within the moment of a simple glance, a fraction of a second in which the elements of attraction can sometimes be so simply communicated. Some call it pheromones, but that hardly seems an adequate explanation given the instantaneous attraction. Stella was shapely and proportioned, with distinguished facial features. Though her hair had not altered from

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the “professional” look needed for the day’s employment, its color and texture gave intimations of appeal. Her obvious discomfort in the rough and tumble environment of the pub gave her a jittery and unreceptive appearance, but the attraction for Alan existed regardless. Alan approached her with only the most minimal of hesitations, the attraction to Stella was strong enough that his usual nervousness in approaching a woman had ceased to exist – the anticipation and fear of rejection or being discounted and all the rest of the elements which would have normally complicated a first impression. When he sat next to her at the bar, he simply ordered her another Chardonnay, and commented to her that she was obviously in the wrong pub at the wrong hour.

Stella did not experience an immediate attraction for Alan in the same manner that he had been infatuated with her. But neither was she put off by Alan’s bold approach. In fact, she liked it. Alan had been creative and assertive without being condescendingly presumptuous, a balance which intrigued her. He recognized that she was “too good” for the place, a compliment which assuaged her ego. He seemed pleasant enough, physically fit, and sufficiently attractive to her that she decided to give him time to make a more lasting impression. Stella was curious and put the thought of a discreet escape from the pub on hold. They chatted a bit, about nothing. Their jobs. The characters in the bar. The neighborhood. Alan offered to walk her home, but once outside suggested a detour to the “doughnut” at the park a few blocks away. Stella agreed, on the premise that Alan was of sufficient interest to her to take some more time with him.

The doughnut was a local landmark occupying a vista across from the Art Museum in the park. The twenty acre park housed an art-deco-style Art Museum, an expansive greenhouse, and a water tower with an observation deck at the top of dozens of flights of stairs. In the 1970s the park’s one-kilometer perimeter road served as the opening race course for the local bicycle racing season, a difficult multi-loop race over a rough road, curbs that posed a constant threat to any cyclist who ventured too close, a difficult climb, and a rapid turning downhill drop. The expansive green lawns in the park hosted any number of picnics and gatherings during the warm weather. Lovers walked amongst the trees, gardens, and secluded paths. Relationships formed or ended in quiet conversations. Dog owners strolled with their animals. An outdoor concert stage provided space for

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plays and music performances.

Mounted on a long bench at the highest point of the park, the doughnut looked less like a doughnut than a huge truck tire, its giant empty hole framing a vista of the city and city harbor in the distance. To be accurate, the doughnut was really a respectable piece of outdoor art by a noted landscape architect and sculptor titled “Black Sun,” constructed towards the end of a long and productive career. But among the patrons of the park the artistic roots of the doughnut had long faded into obscurity. And perhaps for the best. The doughnut was now a permanent fixture, an inherent element of the landscape, its origins irrelevant except in passing musings. The doughnut had become a rendezvous point for lovers, family picnics, drug deals, pot parties, and if it was late and quiet and secluded enough, sex. A human hub for the joys, the sorrows, the passions, the intrigues and the debauchery of those who visited.

On either side of the doughnut, on the lawns just a few steps away, were a pair of koi ponds, the koi protected from the predatory hunting of real-life blue herons with a realistic sculpture of a heron in bronze in each of the ponds, art in its own right. Seals had once inhabited these small shallow pools, cramped into a few gallons of water, a testament to a now disappearing heritage in which the value of life forms other than human were held in blatant disregard.

A walk in the park was familiar terrain to Stella. Despite the late hour there were enough walkers and joggers out and about that she was not unduly concerned for her safety. Besides, she was attracted to Alan. They had exchanged the minutely nuanced elements of flirtatious communication, he appeared genuine, and she had enough experience with men that she was confident she could handle any problem that might develop. So she strolled with him the few blocks to the park, sat on the ledge supporting the doughnut and continued their talk from the pub of themselves, their families, their jobs, their sports, their passions. The evening cooled to early morning. Alan lent Stella his jacket and the two walked the few blocks to Stella’s apartment.

When demographers visualize the neighborhood of Stella’s residence they envision an expansive landscape encompassing the land extending east from the city harbor and the downtown core to a large lake. The landscape from downtown business district rises several hundred feet, drops to

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a valley, and rises once again before dropping once more to the lake. The space between contained several neighborhoods developed at different time periods of the city's history but with the most recent and extended development occurring after the Second World War. Stella's apartment sat at the summit of the first hill of this landscape, in an older section of the town that had been developed before the War. The old neighborhood of Stella's residence sprouted few newer buildings. Apartment buildings of various sizes mingled with single family homes and a small business district with grocery stores, restaurants, flower shops, a veterinary, hair salons, small office space – a business district that catered to a neighborhood population willing to support a range of commercial activity but unwilling to be overwhelmed by unmanaged development or business district expansion.

Stella's apartment was located in a building designed by the unschooled but extraordinarily gifted and respected architect, Fred Anhalt, and built to accommodate only a few residential units. Each unit was built in the bungalow style facing to an interior courtyard to minimize the noise and disruption from the city street outside, a practice abandoned with modern construction when construction profits became more important than the livability of a neighborhood. She and Alan strolled to her building, the neighborhood producing an atmosphere of early morning quiet and domestic tranquility. As Stella prepared to enter her building the evening ended simply with an exchange of telephone numbers, a gentle touch, and a general plan to get together on the weekend. With Stella's departure, Alan continued to his own apartment a few blocks away.

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THREE

This sedate, intimate first meeting gave no clue to the raw unrestrained passion which caught them by storm on the next meeting. Alan and Stella had planned a trip to a local farmers market but when Alan arrived Stella was not yet ready. Within a few minutes, somewhere in the process of Stella modeling for Alan the right combination of articles for an outfit suitable to wear to a farmers market, they found themselves sexually charged. Perhaps they were sexually charged from their previous meeting but had, for whatever purpose, sublimated its expression until this moment. In any event, the remainder of the weekend was an orgy of physical sensation – in the shower, the bedroom, the kitchen, interspersed with casual neighborhood strolls and occasional meals. If sex is a means of bonding, a means of cementing a relationship, Alan and Stella bonded that weekend. In the following weeks they bonded in their companionship and by the end of summer they had rented an apartment big enough for the two of them to live comfortably together.

After a time they talked of having a family. Sometime in the third year of their relationship they pooled their money and bought a reasonable home in the neighborhood by Stella's apartment, not too small, not too large. A home which needed some work. Something they could buy, if not on the cheap, then for a price which accommodated the need for and the love of cleaning it up, of repairing and maintaining that which had been neglected over time, and the addition of improvements to meet the needs of the modern tastes and the electronic age – a home which could accommodate the addition of a pet, perhaps a dog, and maybe a child or two.

The dog came, but not the children. Neighbors introduced children to their relationships but Alan and Stella hesitated. Their house became more comfortable and modern, their careers and vocations matured, and for a time their relationship grew closer, fueled by sex, the comfort of companionship, a shared sharpness of intellect, the joint effort of making a home, some common interests. But, like a loaf of bread with insufficient yeast,

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after some years their time together began to show the ennui of a relationship which was beginning to lose its appeal. Somewhat like the flame of a match, the affair that had begun with a burst of heat and light diminished within a few years to a cooling carbon residue.

Stella began spending more time away from the apartment, working late, attending events alone. Over time more and more of her friends became her friends, friends who did not know or had little contact with Alan. While Alan and Stella retained a mutual affection for one another, the infatuation and romantic glow that had given their togetherness poetry had dissipated. What was left was a tender, loving affection but an affection that lacked heat and spark.

The days proceeded as they had proceeded on so many days before. There was little need for conversation. Alan and Stella had settled into that comfortable space in which conversation had become perfunctory and shallow. Not unintelligent, but characterized by a brevity of words, lacking in passion and intimacy. How was your day? Politics. Gossip. Talk of their respective families. Their careers. They were both young enough and sufficiently involved in their professions that the idea of children had not become a compelling issue to them. It was a pleasant and comfortable relationship with occasional periods of too much drink and boisterous partying, the sort of excesses in which young people periodically engage. Sex still held appeal but it was driven by their physical needs and less and less by passion for each other.

Alan and Stella made a physically handsome couple, but they were otherwise undistinguished as a pair, recognized instead by their friends and acquaintances for their individual natures. In the early months of their union either might have described themselves as being part of a tapestry, individual but forming together in an artful whole to make a beautiful and functional quilt. Now they were more akin to separate blankets than a tapestry. They were independent people who lived a comfortable life together. They were not yet middle aged, but their relationship had assumed some of the characteristics of middle age. A lassitude and languor had settled into their union. They were left with the worst of a middle aged relationship, one with quiet bonding developed over time but without the satisfaction that such a life provides. They were too young to be so bonded. Too young to be so satisfied.

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Stella saw her world realistically. Alan was a fine man who loved her within the limits of a traditional relationship. Marriage was their next step, then children, but she was growing restless with the aura of domesticity that she and Alan had developed. Stella recognized the appeal of middle class stability and tranquility. The neighborhood in which she and Alan now resided generated feelings of domestic comfort and the appearance of security but Stella knew that the life she observed here was not necessarily a life she wanted to experience long term.

The superficial comforts of their middle-class neighborhood were appealing to Stella's eye and her psyche. Stella observed a patina of comfort on the surface of the world around her but underneath that patina a boredom, the substitution of habit and routine for the dynamic experience of living. She observed that many of the women who had become mothers in her neighborhood seemed to have lost their sexuality and glamour. They had ceased being women, and had assumed a persona without gender, a manager of children and household. Stella was not sure she desired to be inconvenienced by a child, and her biological clock put no pressure on her to change her mind. Stella was still young, in body and in heart. Though she couldn't define what she wanted from life, Stella still had worlds to conquer and adventures to experience. When Stella was optimistic she saw her relationship with Alan as a temporary journey, one destined to end. When she was pessimistic she saw that relationship as a mistake, an error which would require a painful exit.

Stella had always attracted male admirers but now she began to cultivate a male following with a conscious intent. She called them her quiver, men waiting for the opportunity to bond socially with her. The men in Stella's quiver were attracted to her and made known their attractions with numerous casual intimations. Stella encouraged those attentions even though a date with any of them was not in the making. Stella liked the attention she received from the men in her quiver. She bathed in the emotional glow their unrequited attention gave her. She did what was needed to keep their interest without compromising her relationship or commitments with Alan. She did what was needed to keep their interest in her benign. But, the slope was slippery.

Stella knew in part what she desired, and knew as well that what she desired was likely not attainable. She wanted to be loved. She wanted

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commitment. She wanted the comfort of an intimate relationship with a man that gave her a feeling of connectedness to the world and a holistic sense of herself as a woman. Attractive. Desired. Loved. Stella was not a rebel or a feminist but she did view herself as a whole and independent being. She saw herself in a world which included men, and the relationships of women with men. Profoundly social at heart, she did not want to feel adrift from the mainstream of that world. She wanted, needed, the trappings of a socially accepted relationship with a man that placed her comfortably within the framework of a generally accepted standard of success with other women. Stella needed that security. She wanted, needed comfort. Stella needed a man who gave her independence and freedom but was available when needed in the manner of a piece of jewelry or some other fashionable accessory to be included on those occasions when the accessorizing of a partner was necessary. A man who treated her with respect and consideration. Stella needed a man who wrote her poetry, gave her massages, and remembered her birthday and the anniversary of their first date.

Stella wanted sex and she wanted sex on her terms. Sex that affirmed the intimacy of her relationship with a man. Sex that provided her with the ability to feel attractive, loved, and cared for. Stella wanted candles, the lure of being seduced, pampered, and the arousal of foreplay. But, Stella also desired rougher, more impersonal sex, the experience of sex as experienced by the stereotype of the gigolo male. The rebel, the nonconformist element of her personality, wanted to experience sex in its rawer and more elemental forms. Stella desired to bring a man into her body as if he were a dildo or sex toy. She lusted for penetration and orgasm, to conquer and take possession of a man while simultaneously being possessed. And when it was done, she wanted to get up and leave. To experience a dalliance and to leave it with no expectations or duties or futures. Without consideration of a relationship. With the only consideration that of satisfaction in the present.

Stella was fearful of losing her beauty, of no longer being desirable, of impending middle age. She needed reassurance that she remained beautiful and that she remained a sexual animal desired by men. Stella wanted the comfortable domesticity of what she and Alan had in the present coupled simultaneously with the wild, impetuous and overtly physical experience of what they had in the beginning, before they had a relationship or

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became a couple. Stella recognized that it was likely that the two objectives were mutually exclusive. And each option had its own unique liabilities. The conundrum of advantages and liabilities, the impractical hunger for two experiences seemingly incompatible with one another was confusing and did nothing to help her sort through a healthy relationship with Alan.

To maintain her physique, Stella maintained a gym membership and attended with a disciplined regularity. She did cardio. She did weights. She took classes in spinning and yoga. Contrary to the common stereotype of a gym as an inter-gender meeting place, Stella had never met anyone of the opposite gender in her classes who interested her. None of the men in her classes were members of her quiver. What interested Stella was staying fit, keeping her weight in check. Stella was aware that men paid attention to her. They would sometimes ask her for coffee, or indicate their interest in some way. Stella never went to coffee. She always made herself unavailable.

But over a matter of a few months she developed an attraction to one of the trainers at the gym. In the beginning they simply worked closely together, developing a sense of comfort with one another, a comfort devoid of any suggestion of something other than the common goal of fitness. They touched without a hint of anything more reflective than a mutual feeling of camaraderie. They sometimes hugged at the end of a training session, but not always or even frequently. Yet, as time moved on, as her attachment to Alan cooled, as her subconscious began to redirect her life path, Stella's physical and sexual attraction to her trainer increased. The touching developed elements of intimate meaning in the lightness and lingering of the touch. A hug assumed more and more body to body contact. The non-verbal cues of attraction accumulated.

Stella could not describe with words her developing attraction to the trainer, but over time his mere presence aroused her with an increasing degree of erotic intensity she found increasingly hard to ignore. The trainer had the physique of a conditioned athlete which appealed to her. His skin was bronzed to a color which Stella found tropical and arousing. And, Stella considered him safe, someone she knew reasonably well. With their common interest in fitness, Stella was reassured that the appeal was not all sexual. This gave her some comfort and eased any guilt she felt at betraying Alan on those occasions when the interaction between her and her

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trainer took on characteristics of intimacy. Eventually, Stella reasoned, her trainer was someone with whom she could have an affair that would not engender confusing attachments. Someone with whom she was not likely to experience unpleasant complications, or at least complications she could not attend to. In the distorted manner often characteristic of rationalizations, the sex she eventually consummated with her trainer became healthy for her relationship with Alan. It provided an emotional outlet for her and a means of reducing the interpersonal strain between her and Alan. Or at least, so Stella imagined.

As the markers of intimacy with her trainer increased, Stella began to physically respond to her trainer when he was close, and to physically respond to the idea of his presence when he was not. Thoughts of his body, the warmth of his bronzed skin, his mannerisms, occupied her mind at inconvenient times. Thinking of him involuntarily moistened her vagina. Her heart beat quickened. She fantasized him naked with her, his scent, his strength, his physical manner, the heat of his body enveloping her. Stella did not think in terms of sexual biology – few do when the appeal of attraction has captured their heart. But from a biological perspective Stella desired the stimulation and discharge of the thousands of nerve endings in her clitoris directly to the limbic area of her brain in a cascade of synapse explosions that could extend for minutes, a full blown, totally engaging orgasm that left her breathless and spent at its conclusion. Alone and comfortable, her inhibitions sufficiently relaxed, Stella could nearly fantasize herself to an orgasm simply by conjuring the sensuality of the trainer in her mind.

Her trainer was not oblivious to Stella's attraction. The sex in which they eventually engaged was intense, a release of passion each had built up for one another over a period of time in which they had courted and stimulated, but not acted upon, their mutual attraction. The trainer had found in Stella a compatriot of the opposite gender, a physically attuned opposite with whom the physical experience of orgasm could be equally shared. Their joining was mutually satisfying. Stella was both passionate and physical. And she was beautiful. The trainer was strong, physical and intense. Both knew that their coupling was likely temporary, a recognition which helped to reduce expectations and keep the times they spent together fresh.

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Stella was sure that Alan suspected she was seeing someone. But Stella was discreet, and for a long time Alan avoided making a direct inquiry, an omission on Alan's part which eliminated the need for her to fabricate and incur even more guilt than she was already experiencing.

When it comes to sex, perhaps when it comes to women, men think in simple ways. Stella's trainer could be excused in this situation for thinking that Stella wanted simply to be physically possessed. But such was not the case. Stella was as interested in possessing her trainer as he was in possessing her. If each had thought of their affair in existential terms, they did not engage in just mutually satisfying sex as much as they physically possessed one another in a series of orgasmic events. They were two gods, on equal footing, wreaking carnage above in equal measure. Stroke for stroke. Thrust for thrust. Orgasm for orgasm. Both engaging and frolicking in a cornucopia of desire.

As both Stella and the trainer suspected, their relationship had no legs. It could not last. Both the trainer and Stella knew that the end could appear within the blink of an eye and in the interim, they gorged on the intensity of their attraction. It was, they both recognized, the transitory nature of the affair that helped to make it intense.

Alan was not unaware of Stella's attraction to her trainer. He had paid attention to the subtle clues, noted the extended training sessions, and had sensed Stella's erotic restlessness and the reasons for it. As Stella's attraction became increasingly obvious, Alan eventually confronted her with pointed observations and direct questions. Stella denied the attraction for as long as she could but eventually divulged to Alan her infatuation. She did what she could to minimize the dynamic of the relationship with her trainer. She described the attraction as a friendship, the sex as casual, a last fling before the onset of middle age. As she explained to Alan, she needed this – and if Alan loved her he would let her have this space in her life. She attempted to explain to Alan, with increasingly byzantine logic, that she was sufficiently confident in her relationship with Alan that the sex she experienced with her trainer should not disturb what she and Alan had together. She encouraged Alan to find his own partners while she brought to a conclusion this portion of her life's experience.

Stella's arguments, of course, did little to reconcile matters. Alan saw her explanations as an assault on his manhood, a prelude for separation,

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a knife inserted into a fissure that could only grow wider. Alan and Stella had arguments and discussions, but never resolutions.

Stella was restless, Alan fearful. For a time Stella continued her liaisons with the trainer, but the magic of those moments had been broken, perhaps because it was time to be broken, perhaps because her open conflict with Alan interrupted the thread of passion. Alan spent more time on his bicycle training, more weekends racing. He increased his focus on his job and his free-lance work. The sexual passion Alan and Stella had once had for one another manifested less frequently and became more physical and less intimate when it did occur. They talked less. The intimacy of their time together became less emotionally satisfying. An uncomfortable stasis settled into their life together. They resembled two beachgoers sitting complacently on the sand, waiting for the tsunami not yet visible but clearly on its way.

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FOUR

Stella observed while Alan prepared for work. To women, men are a perplexing breed. Pants. Shirt. Tie. Jacket. Shoes. How to get the groupings to match for color and style? Amused, modestly bored, Stella gave curt instructions. Different shirt for the pants. Wrong color tie for the shirt. Jacket is threadbare, time for the donation pile. How, she thought, could he be this inept? His incompetence when it came to clothing was utterly childlike. After all their years together Stella had developed an impatience with the idiosyncratic behaviors she had once found attractive, appealing, or at least tolerable. The charm of it all was fading. Alan's inability to properly attire himself was one of many irritations that, while once endearing, had become a source of dissonance.

The morning's schedule had Alan attending a hearing at the county courthouse. Alan's assignment from his newspaper was to cover the story of a widow who had been financially exploited by the minister of a religious sect in collusion with her unscrupulous attorney. During her husband's lifetime, the widow had been dependent on her husband for the management of their extensive wealth. When he died she had been reliant on the advice of others to manage the family fortune. She became low hanging fruit for the unscrupulous.

During his lifetime she and her husband had a high profile in the community, having been the benefactors to numerous religious and arts organizations and charities. When her husband died, she was at a loss as to how to manage the family fortune. The vacuum was quickly filled by the minister and the lawyer. Methodically and over a long period of time, the minister and the lawyer had successfully transferred millions of dollars destined for real charities to a sham organization run by the two conspirators. The scheme had been artful in its development and the perpetrators patient over the years in the execution of their plan, delaying the realization of the bulk of their hoped for gains until the widow had passed on.

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The circle of deception became understood when her Will was published – the bulk of the estate, millions of dollars which had not already been diverted to the sham charity during the widow’s lifetime, were now directed to that charity upon her death. The legitimate charitable beneficiaries were to receive nothing.

Alan’s research had exposed the organization as a shell for the personal interests of the minister and the attorney. For weeks Alan had been looking for evidence of other efforts to exploit the wealthy by one or the other, or both. Alan had hopes that the proceeding at the courthouse this morning would generate some leads.

The story of the widow’s exploitation was good fodder for Alan’s newsroom editors. The blend of human interest, expose’ reporting, and the opportunity to reveal the immoral and narcissistic conduct of the rich mixed together in the news cauldron was the perfect recipe to engage readers, sell copy, and bring in advertisers.

Alan’s editors had seen the potential for this story early in its infancy and had given Alan wide latitude in developing it, releasing him from some of the more mundane stories he might otherwise have needed to cover, providing him with financial support to access records, and hiring a private detective to perform background checks on those involved in the scheme. Alan had done his part to meet the hopes of his editor and publisher. In a series of articles he had been able to capture the public interest with well-written stories catering to those elements of human nature which thirst for revenge, shock and titillation. In addition to providing an appealing story, Alan had unearthed elements in the plot damaging to the claims of innocence made by the alleged perpetrators. The stew Alan put into print made for a captivating description of the underbelly of the wealthy, with millions of dollars at stake and involving sex, intrigue, and the nefarious collusion of evil doers. The combination sold newspapers and the sale of the newspapers sold advertising. Alan’s superiors at the newspaper were pleased.

This was not news as Alan might have once understood it. Alan knew that what he wrote was entertainment for the masses, a real-life drama meant to intrigue and delight his readers rather than to inform or enlighten. It was, in the parlance of the trade, a “story” and needed the drama inherent in the presentation of a story. Alan wrote with panache, artfully

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treading the border in his writing between a news style and a style more befitting a novel. The story was important not only for his editor and publisher but for Alan, for his career, for his resume. If he wrote the story well and it gained some local, if not regional or national notoriety, it could enhance his professional reputation no matter what the end result of the court proceedings might be. Already there was talk at Alan's newspaper of a Pulitzer Prize nomination for Alan in investigative reporting.

Alan was a realist. He doubted his articles would pass the Pulitzer review jury. But the talk gave him a sense of being grounded with his employer, an implicit recognition of the financial contribution his articles were delivering to his paper in the form of circulation and advertising revenue. As his union with Stella continued to deteriorate, Alan was more conscious than ever of his need to succeed in other arenas of life, at work, and in racing.

Alan had reported the story line accurately, forming his reports into a passable novella. Rather than adhering to artificial deadlines, his editor allowed the publication schedule for each piece to be a function of the progress of his investigations and the development of the legal case. The irregular publication schedule seemed to heighten the public attention. Each published story resulted in public outrage and eventually inquiries from the national media. Alan had even been interviewed on network television, providing a sixty-second synopsis of the scheme as he knew it and the progress of the trial on a national evening news program.

Alan drove to the local courthouse, a trip he had made so often over the years that he did not just travel the distance but could feel the rhythm of the route, the flow of vehicles, the movement of pedestrians, the traffic bottlenecks which gave rise to the inevitable dance of stop-and-go. The metro was probably faster and certainly cheaper, but the crowded humanity on the metro made him uncomfortable. In his car he was in a cocoon, a part of but separate from all else that flowed. He was a canoe in the river, impacted by all that the river is, but separated from it by a fiberglass and metal shell. Both a part of and apart from the humanity outside the vehicle window. The vehicle's wipers, worn and needing replacement, moved the wet air in an opaque smear across the windshield, complicating visibility in a manner which made dream images of the world observed through the glass, made that world real but unreal, clear but hidden. Pedestrians

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slipped through an ethereal mist, without noise, legs moving otherwise lifeless bodies. Buildings slipped by in a haze.

A world of pictures without substance. Alan maneuvered his vehicle into an available parking stall, relieved to have arrived early enough to avoid a rush to the courthouse some three blocks away.

From the parking lot Alan walked to the courthouse, umbrella in hand, arriving minimally damp from his brief exposure to the elements. Eschewing the elevators, he climbed the stairs to the third floor courtrooms, preferring the physical effort of the climb to the crowd in the elevator.

The courtrooms were located at the end of a long hallway – wide double doors provided an entry to a foyer filled with wooden benches with the dimensions, construction and comfort of church pews. Adjacent to the foyer were four separate courtrooms separated by a waist-high wall and glass which extended from the wall to the ceiling. As Alan examined the docket to identify where his case would be heard, he glanced into each of the courtrooms, empty now until court was called into session. The courtrooms were austere, unexpressive, giving no hint as to the human dramas which were about to unfold within the confines of their spaces. Those waiting for court to begin filled the foyer and spilled into the hallway.

The design of a church gives hint to the spiritual and mystical events one might expect to experience; the curtains, rigging, stage, and seating inside of a theatre speak of the dramas that have and will occur. The courtrooms were of a practical and functional design, giving no such hints as to their purpose – with modest rearranging they could easily have substituted as offices or conference rooms. The courtrooms on the interior of the building and without windows to the outside relied on fluorescent lighting, a lighting which gave those rooms the appearance of a cave filled with artificial light, a womb but a womb without the aura of nurturing. Two courtrooms were adjacent to the exterior wall of the building and had the benefit of day-light. But even though these rooms had the advantage of exposure to natural light, the grey light of the city transpired to create a sense of other worldliness, an appearance of not being a part of the world in which we live and breathe and work and experience life. Alan shuffled his papers and looked about. He was early, the other players in this particular drama not having yet arrived.

Alan took a spot by the windows in the foyer and contemplated the

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view of the city street below. The street was filled with the movement and noise of passing vehicles. The mist had transitioned to become a steady rain. Workers with umbrellas raised made their hurried way to their assigned places of employment, panhandlers did their best to stay dry but still keep a presence in the public eye, drug dealers struck their too obvious deals in plain view of all who might bother to notice and observe. A derelict urinated in the alley. A pair of scantily clad women in short dresses and plunging necklines walked the street, either having finished their morning's work or on their way to entice new clients. The transient hotel across the street from the courthouse gave a stark reminder of poverty. Sheets hung from the windows, shielding from the outside world the squalor of the one room hovels inside. Other windows displayed handwritten signs exposing the injustices of the world in a manner both pathetic in their futility and poignant in their accuracy.

The courthouse hearing rooms required decorum. A quiet whispering was allowed but otherwise the stage belonged to those presenting their cases to the presiding judges. All of the ingredients in the steaming kettle of life were represented here. Divorces. Child custody disputes. Evictions. Foreclosures. Adoptions. Child and adult abuse actions. Wills. Guardianships. The honorable. The dishonest. Those with the heart and intention to do well. The schemers. The abusers. The intelligent. Those so intelligent that they had lost all common sense. Those whose brains had atrophied to a point beyond memory. Yet, whether justice was blind, or benign, or misinformed, all had the opportunity to seek absolution in the courtrooms. All had the same objective – all waited for the wise disposition of justice.

In contrast to the courtrooms, the foyer was a bustle of activity and emotions. The gathered humanity rubbed elbows yet barely acknowledged the presence of one another so intent were they on the dimensions of their own problems. Families in joy over a soon-to-be concluded adoption mixed together among those whose plaintive pleas and empty promises to pay now with the rest by next week were uttered in fruitless efforts to prevent an eviction. The anger and sadness of divorce was recognizable in the tense interactions between former lovers. The faces of children, soon to be permanently and tragically separated from a parent, appeared in and out among the congregated adults. The defeated stares of the bankrupt. The confusion of the abused. The blank uncomprehending gaze of those

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whose minds had left them, victims of diseases of the brain not even the scientist could understand much less fashion a cure. All gathered together for this one fleeting morning, this one fleeting moment.

Gazing into the abysmal grey of the street and the teeming groaning and movement of humanity below and around him, Alan contemplated the reason for his presence, the case of the memory-impaired widow and the charlatans who had preyed upon her. Alan could understand and describe physical illness. Diseases in the nature of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure all have their public education and fund raising organizations. Celebrities serve as spokespersons and appear in advertisements to inform and solicit money for research. But illnesses of the brain are much harder to fathom. There are no celebrities to champion the cause of the mentally ill, no solicitations of money for research, no effort to inform and educate the public. The mentally ill are hidden in institutions or turned loose on the streets to live anonymously in alleys, under freeways and on the top of heating grates.

And those with diseases of the brain? There are so many names. Senile. Doddering. Gaga. Alzheimer's. Cognition loss. As the diseases progress they rob the mind of memory and the ability to reason. These diseases steal our pasts and foreclose our futures. They steal our history. We forget our children. Our spouses of fifty years become our brothers, or our doctors, or simply a formless presence forgotten the moment they are out of sight. We forget our accomplishments. We forget how to eat, lose control of our ability to swallow, return to the bowel habits of a newborn. We need our caregivers to clean us, to lead us to the bathroom, to lift the spoon to our mouths, to wipe the dribble from our chins. We become useless, waiting to die, but requiring the most intimate of care in the process. When the body finally dies, it is only to put finality to a death that had occurred many years before.

While the widow's brain was diseased she had not progressed to utter helplessness. But, the disease had stolen her common sense, her judgment. Her husband had built a small empire but she and he were of a generation and of a mind that failed to include her in the management of the wealth that empire generated. The combination of a diseased brain and lack of experience managing wealth had made her susceptible to charming conspirators who had the intent of stealing from her the beneficial intentions

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she and her husband had envisioned.

Neither the widow nor her husband had wanted children. Children, or grandchildren, might have been her recourse for help after her husband's death. But she had no one there for her. Alone, widowed, her brain a declining crumb of its former self, she had been manipulated by this charlatan of a minister, a discredit to the profession of ministry, this newly discovered friend of the family – the man who claimed to have been her husband's best friend before his death, though in reality they had never met. A bold man this charlatan, with the audacity to appear at this time and place to argue for his right to stolen wealth. And, helped in his scheme by the very person who should have protected her, her own attorney.

FIVE

Alan waited in the foyer for the case to be called in the assigned courtroom, chatting briefly with associates and acquaintances that had the usual courtroom beats. Around him beat a cacophony of sound and movement, a murmur of human emotion indistinguishable in its parts as if the noise itself were an ocean wave, the rumble of distant thunder, or the om of the earth as it spun on its axis through the Milky Way for all of time past, present, and future.

Noise indistinguishable except for that made by a man in an oversized shirt, jeans, and running shoes, his clothing out of place in the formal setting of the courtroom. If the clothing wasn't enough to distinguish this man, his distress caught Alan's eye and drew his attention. Alan had seen the man earlier, in a barely constrained angry exchange with a woman who Alan surmised must have been an estranged spouse or girlfriend. In her arms she had a small child, perhaps two or three years of age, and it soon became clear that the child was the focus of the man's distress. As the morning had worn on the man had become increasingly agitated. Pacing. Loud. Talking to himself. The man's behavior had warranted one of the courtroom clerks to venture into the foyer to ask for quiet.

The clerk's admonition had quieted the man for some moments, but the he became increasingly agitated as the waiting for his hearing continued. His voice and words, his agitation, stood in sharp contrast to the murmuring of those assembled in the foyer. His face became red. The veins stood out in his neck and forehead. His jaw and fists clenched. The movements of his body were rapid, lacking in flow and symmetry. He made no eye contact with any individual but took in the entirety of the room with his gaze, seeing but not seeing. Everything in his manner spoke of anger, agitation, fear, hatred. Injustice is universal. We have all experienced our share. But for this man, at this moment, at this time, injustice lost its universal nature and existed only for him.

What happened in the next moments happened in a blur, a blur which

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streamed so quickly that the memory of that moment was difficult for those present to recall accurately. Alan could not be sure himself what transpired, or how many moments passed from beginning to end. In the blink of an eye, this man full of outrage altered the manner in which time is perceived and events observed.

As Alan watched, the man ripped the shirt from his torso to reveal what appeared to be a life vest, but in this instance a life vest with a deadly purpose. A closer look at the vest revealed wires emanating from and encircling the vest. Round canisters were attached to the front and back of the vest. In the center of the vest was a switch. The man's thumb rested on the switch. So much to digest and so little time to do so – the man ripping off his shirt, the deadly contraption, the man's shouting, his screaming. The scene was for Alan to observe but impossible to understand or to comprehend.

Panic. Within the crowded foyer a general panic took root and increased as those closest to the bomber recognized the dimensions of the threat. Their panic infected those close to them. The increasing panic, the noise and frantic movements of those in the foyer, confused Alan even further. He could neither think rationally or process what he was observing emotionally. But, the confusion did not last for long and soon gave way to a frightening understanding. The man's shouts made absolutely clear his intentions. In a world where injustice existed only for the bomber, the bomber's shouted commentary that "there is no justice here!" could make reasonable sense only for the few who were sure that they would be on the losing end of the court's decision in reference to their specific case. But the bomber's next expletive that "The moment I release this button you will all die!" made clear his intention that only death or profound injury, not justice, awaited everyone in the foyer.

Other than Alan's earlier observation that the bomber was distressed from a domestic matter, the bomber gave no clue as to the motivation for his threats. But then again, no reason or announced motivation would have had any impact on the ensuing panic. The bomber could have announced that he was "depressed," or having a "bad day," or that "the milk was sour this morning." Nothing the bomber could have said, or shouted, would have mattered to any of those congregating in the foyer or courtrooms.

People ran for the single exit, the double entry doors to the foyer,

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crowding or attempting to crowd through doors not designed to handle a panicked mass exodus. They jostled about, were knocked off their feet and crushed to the floor, as the mass of humanity pushed for a point of exit from doorways not adequate to accommodate the rush. Confusion reigned as the exit became bottled up by a writhing tangle of escaping human flesh.

Where his calm came from, and what force motivated it, Alan could not describe at the time or later recall. But for a brief moment he experienced the utter clarity that to do nothing meant death, and to do something suggested the possibility of living. Alan saw the hand, the thumb, of the bomber pressed against the detonator of the bomb, a bomb poised to obliterate all life within a hundred yards or more once its destructive force was released by the piston that controlled the electrical impulse to the explosive canisters. A bomb that would disintegrate the walls and windows to rain debris, injury, and death on everyone in the foyer, in the courtrooms, and on the unsuspecting walking the street below.

In the clarity of this moment Alan saw that neither he nor the bomber nor anyone else in the courthouse had value or mattered in any manner. The moment belonged to the bomb. The bomb waited for the release of pressure, to live and complete its life as a bomb. A second, a fraction of a second, was all that was needed to fulfill and complete the bomb's life and end the lives of all humans close enough to experience the impact of the explosion. In the blink of an eye families would be fractured and torn asunder either through the death of someone they cared about or through the agonizing reality of attending to the physical injuries of a bomb blast. But death, torn and missing limbs, brain injuries, emotional scars were of no concern to the bomb. All that mattered was that the bomb existed, and that its sole purpose for existence was to explode. The effect of the explosion was irrelevant to the bomb. It mattered not at all to the bomb whether the explosion would occur for some constructive purpose or rain down death and injury on the innocent.

Alan saw that the lives of those around him mattered little. The bomb lived for itself. The bomb would make no distinction between good and evil, the just or the unjust, the caring or the unfeeling. Those living with hatred would be impacted in the same manner as those who lived with love. Human values meant nothing to the bomb. Those with loving homes

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would die or be maimed in the same manner as those without homes. Those with a promising future would be destroyed as would those without any future at all. Destruction had no value other than the value of destruction itself. To destroy was the ultimate value, and to destroy without regard to petty human considerations, values, or moral ethics. Death. Destruction. Chaos. The bomb had its own destiny separate and distinct from any petty human considerations.

Freeze, fight, or flight. From the dawn of history and before, humans have confronted danger with one of those three responses. Depending upon the danger those responses have been validated by the test of time. Survival for Alan required the selection of the correct response for the danger presented in that courtroom. And given the general panic which surrounded Alan, the survival of everyone was dependent upon Alan's choice of response.

If the bomb had a means of communication other than destruction it could have warned the bomber of the impending catastrophe. So warned, the bomber might have been able to protect the bomb and secure its purpose. But the bomb was not genetically predisposed to communication other than through the singular act of destruction. The bomb took no heed of its surroundings and Alan's rush was not noticed by the bomber until it was too late. Alan hurtled through the air, wrapping his arms around the distraught man, and pinning the bomber's hand and thumb on the trigger of the bomb in an iron body grip. The bomber fell back, straight back like a tree falling in the forest after having been cut through by the metal of the saw. Straight back to the waiting floor, the bomber's hand, his thumb, pinched inseparably between Alan's body and the detonator.