SCOUTING FOR THE REAPER

STORIES

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Bio: Jacob M. Appel is a physician, attorney and bioethicist based in New York City. He is the author of more than two hundred published short stories and is a past winner of the Boston Review Short Fiction Competition, the William Faulkner-William Wisdom Award for the Short Story, the Dana Award, the Arts & Letters Prize for Fiction, the North American Review's Kurt Vonnegut Prize, the Missouri Review's Editor's Prize, the Sycamore Review's Wabash Prize, the Briar Cliff Review's Short Fiction Prize, the H. E. Francis Prize, the New Millennium Writings Fiction Award on four separate occasions, an Elizabeth George Fellowship and a Sherwood Anderson Foundation Writers Grant. His stories have been short-listed for the O. Henry Award, Best American Short Stories, Best American Nonrequired Reading and the Pushcart Prize anthology on numerous occasions. His first novel, The Man Who Wouldn't Stand Up, was published in October 2012. Jacob holds graduate degrees from Brown University, Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons, Harvard Law School, New York University's MFA program in fiction and Albany Medical College's Alden March Institute of Bioethics. He taught for many years at Brown University and currently teaches at the Gotham Writers' Workshop and the Mount Sinai School of Medicine.

CREVE COEUR

The woman who was not my mother was named Sheila Stanton and at the age of nineteen she was held captive for ninety-one days by the Red Ribbon Strangler. That was during 1967, the Summer of Love. After she was freed by a SWAT team, Stanton found herself the nation's celebrity *du jour*. She performed a duet of "Rescue Me" with Aretha Franklin on the Ed Sullivan Show and went on to win a pair of back-to-back Grammy nominations for her folk-rock ballads "Don't Hold Me Hostage" and "Stockholm Syndrome." Growing up in Creve Coeur, Rhode Island—whose other claim on history was a late-life visit by Lizzie Borden—my male classmates all passed through a phase where they begged their parents to let them trick-or-treat disguised as the kidnapper.

By the time I was conscious enough to be interested—at the height of the first Reagan recession—the Red Ribbon Strangler, Wayne Zane Minsky, was long dead. Natural causes: an antibiotic-resistant skin infection. The serial killer had been five months into a three-hundred- plus year sentence, and he'd never explained what motivated him to spare his final victim—why he hadn't abandoned Stanton's naked body on a front lawn or porch swing with a crimson bow festooning her waist. But what interested us most in grade school wasn't the psychology, it was the house. Every weekday, my bus climbed Banker's Hill, past the three story Victorian mansion from whose flagstone path Stanton had been abducted. Towering hollyhocks dominated the steep street-front garden, punctuated by stands of sinewy tiger lilies. An American flag hung backwards on the door-face; the brass knocker was an owl wearing spectacles. One Thanksgiving, the LaRue brothers and I made a closer investigation of the crime scene, which had been constructed, according to the plaque on the portico, by a retired whaling magnate. We were examining the walkway for bloodstains when a plump, small-eyed matron

came to the door and asked courteously what we wanted in her hedges. We ran off. For many years afterward, I mistakenly believed this to be Sheila Stanton's mother.

As for my father: If he ever wondered about his ex-fiancée, he didn't let on. His concerns were those of an ambitious but thoroughly small-time lighting retailer: Christmas displays in December, fireworks shows in July, staving off discount merchandisers during the slow months in between. Also getting me a university education, transforming his only son into a diplomat or a law professor—in short, anything far removed from the grind of Spring Clearance Sales and voltage conversion. So when my parents argued, it was over whether it was safe for me to go target shooting with Eddie LaRue and his uncle. Or how much they could afford to spent on a sailboat. Or if Gary Hart's affair with Donna Rice made him, in my father's words, "un-Presidential." But *never* about old flames or new temptations. Those possibilities were miles off either of their radar screens. On the rare occasions that a Sheila Stanton ballad played over the car radio, my mother didn't even care enough to switch the station.

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One August—the summer I turned fifteen—my father decided to expand and remodel his showroom. He quadrupled the floor space to nearly sixty thousand feet, buying out the blind Judaica dealer and the two Portuguese bait vendors who had hemmed in the enterprise since Grandpa Abe founded it in 1958. The highlight of the renovation was a store-length panorama of the Providence, Rhode Island, skyline, looking north from Narragansett Bay—every office window illuminated with a twinkle bulb. Another section of wall, beyond the alcove for ceiling fans, had been fashioned into the façade of an Tudor-style house. Hurricane lamps dangled from the porch beams; starlight stakes lined the "walkway"; topiary grizzly bears frolicked in the "yard." Dad even invested in a SnoBlaster for generating paper blizzards—bought at auction

from a local company that had recently filmed a mouthwash commercial—to bestow on the sham dwelling-front a convincing pre-Christmas air. But true to his nature, my father built all of this on the location of the old shop, at the base of Banker's Hill, while the rest of the Creve Coeur business establishment was shifting piecemeal toward the commercial strips opposite the Washington County mall and along Route One. So only a handful of customers were on hand for the debut of the snow machine.

The contraption's maiden-run took place at mid-morning. Dad spoke from the Victorian "porch" like a political candidate addressing a rally, promising the sales staff a summer of ice storms and igloos. He wore the same uniform as the most junior clerk: a gray sports jacket, red suspenders and a tie depicting Thomas Edison holding up his first light bulb. All that set my father apart was his bushy salt-and-pepper mustache. The store's employees—and that included me, in my first summer job—were required to be clean-shaven. A legacy of Grandpa Abe. Next to Dad on the podium stood Carl Pachinsky, his chief electrician, fussing with the dials of the SnoBlaster. Pachinsky was a pear-shaped man who wore dark-blue coveralls like a second skin and who'd reached the age where he serenaded himself while working. *Un*self-consciously. During breaks in my father's oration, we heard snippets of *Sweet Caroline* and *Leaving on a Jet Plane*. Then, without much buildup, Dad ordered Pachinsky to yank the starter, and "the skies" opened. The sales staff clapped tepidly and returned to their posts. At that moment, the girl— the most alluring creature I've ever seen—stepped angelically into our artificial winter. She wore a low-cut white sundress and tiny white sneakers.

"I'm looking for Mr. Dortmund," she said. Her voice held just a hint of drama, a dash of New England royalty, as though she'd learned English watching Rosalind Russell movies. She

also had a desperate force about her, like a talented actress holding together a very bad play. "Ma*ma* sent me to find Mr. Dortmund."

"Did she now?" asked my father.

Carl Pachinsky slapped my father on the back and said, "Fifteen will get you twenty, pal," far too loud, before shuffling off. I longed to choke the bloated ape from behind with electrical cord. The girl blushed. My father stretched his shoulders, squeezing the blades together like turkey wings; folds of skin rippled like lava waves at the base of his scalp.

"Ma*ma* wants you to help her put in a chandelier," said the girl.

"I see," said Dad. I sensed he was offended, but he held it in. "Well, what your mother needs is an electrician. Lots of those in the Yellow Pages. But this is a lighting distributorship. A *store*. We *install* only what we *sell*." He spoke so politely, so intimately, I feared he might wrap his arm around the girl's shoulders. He didn't. "You tell your mother, look in the telephone book."

"Ma*ma* said you might not want to come," said the girl. Her expression was graciously indifferent, almost indulgent. "She said to tell you it was *Sheila Stanton* who wanted you, and you'd find a few minutes."

"Oh, Jesus," said my father. At first, he didn't show much emotion—his look was almost one of mild displeasure—and flakes of paper snow began to build up on his hair. But then he grinned as though this were a punch-line to a joke told many years before. "So you're Sheila's daughter," he said.

"Step-daughter, strictly-speaking. Pamella. With two L's."

"Step-daughter," agreed my father. "Of course."

"But my father is dead," Pamella said, matter-of-fact. "He burned himself freebasing. My birthmother belongs to a religious order in Utah. They're like nuns, only not Catholic. She's *unfit,* so I don't see her." The girl sighed. She sounded more amused than pained. "I've been quite unlucky in that way."

"Well, Pamella with two L's," said my father. "I suppose I could spare of few minutes for an old friend." He retrieved his toolbox. "Hey, Wade," he said. "Introduce yourself to Pamella with two L's."

"Hi," I said. Then, after too long a pause, I added, "I'm Wade."

"I'm Pamella." She shook my hand crisply as though confirming a business transaction. She did not mention the two L's.

"She's pretty, Wade, isn't she?" asked my father. He had a knack for expressing sober what most men only dared say drunk. From a great distance came the shrill voice of a junior salesman pitching ceramic wall-sconces. "A very pretty girl," Dad repeated. "I bet you'll make someone a great girlfriend."

"Thank you," said Pamella.

"Your mother was a great girlfriend," he said. He was speaking about Pamella's mother, not mine. "You two could have been brother and sister, you know that?"

That was the sort of thing my father used to say often. Soft on logic, but as potentially lethal as a live current.

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We followed Pamella up the hill, over jagged sidewalks. Many of the once-fashionable homes had fallen into severe disrepair. Here and there, a tidy patch of marigolds or cherry tomatoes separated yards overgrown with crabgrass and pachysandra. College fraternities,

exiled from the main campus, had unfurled their banners from several dormer windows. To my amazement, the girl led us directly to the crime scene. Inside, the house was dark and hot and smelled richly of aged wood. We crossed an unfurnished anterior room where cardboard boxes labeled “FRONT PARLOR” lay haphazardly around a pair of escritoires and a sofa, like boulders strewn about by a glacier. In the next room, Sheila Stanton was on her knees beside a long mahogany dining table. She’d been unwrapping crystal crockery, piece by piece, and stacking it on a rosewood sideboard. A chandelier socket gaped in the ceiling. When we arrived, Sheila, who was beak-nosed, with a chest as flat as an ironing board, rummaged through an oversized leather handbag and retrieved a pack of Virginia Slims. Mentholated. “I’m done with singing,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “Now I can kill myself.”

My father set his toolbox on the tabletop. Light from the high, curtain-less windows accentuated the ruts in his face. “Well, Sheila,” he said. “I didn’t know if I’d see you again.”

“It’s me,” she said. “You’re seeing me again.”

My father’s fingers toyed with the clasps on the toolbox, but he didn’t take his eyes off her. I stood behind him. It struck me that despite her lack of cleavage, and a nose to rival Julius Caesar’s, Sheila Stanton was somehow extremely alluring. “Yes,” said my father. “I’m seeing you again.”

She answered with a short, high-pitched laugh. “Do you like what you see?”

That shook Dad from his spell. “You’re looking to put in a chandelier?”

“Oh, that,” said Sheila. Seemingly annoyed. “In there.”

My father had me remove the chandelier from a dust-coated garbage bag. The fixture was a four-armed hanging lamp with thirty-two small-watt bulbs. Not a model anyone had

stocked in years. “This is my son, Wade,” said my father. “He’s going to be a diplomat or a law professor.”

Sheila nodded at me. Totally indifferent. “I do appreciate this. I don’t know what I’d have done without you.” She tamped out the cigarette in a dainty porcelain candy dish. “I bet you’re surprised I bought the house back.”

“Somewhat,” Dad agreed. “Do you know what the old chandelier looked like?”

Sheila shrugged. “Is that important? Why get hung up on the past?”

“The junction box has to be the right size,” said my father.

“Does it?” Sheila sounded playful.

“It does,” my father said firmly. “Otherwise, it’ll come down on you and take half the ceiling with it. I’m going to have to put in a new box, just to be safe.”

“Whatever. As long as you don’t electrocute yourself.” Sheila lit a second cigarette off the first, and addressed Pamella: “Why don’t you give Wade a tour? Show him the roof. Charlie and I have catching up to do.”

I looked to my dad. I was on the job, after all. “Go ahead,” he said.

So, with overwhelming ambivalence, I followed Pamella through the partially furnished living room, and up a narrow wooden staircase, onto the open-air catwalk that connected two rear balconies. Outside, the breeze rustled the branches of the hundred-year-old oaks. Through a break in the leaves, you could see all of Creve Coeur: the spires of the various churches, the new six-story parking garage at the ferry dock, the glimmer of sunlight reflecting off the ocean. The wind was blowing toward the shore, so a faint stench of muck tinged the air. Directly beneath us was the Stantons’ backyard, where an ancient garden swing creaked beneath a basswood tree.

"The beer cans are from the college students," said Pamella with indignation. "They throw them over the fence at night."

We stood side by side, arms resting on the wooden railing. The windblown hem of Pamella's sundress occasionally grazed my leg. "This is an amazing view," I said.

"You know what I really want?" she asked.

Here was the moment where I was supposed to say something suave, something simultaneously seductive and devil-may-care. "What?" I asked.

"One of those mega Christmas displays. Like in your father's store. That's what I want," she said. "When we lived on Long Island, there was this family, the Carranos, who owned a huge candy company—they were Italian *and* Jewish—and they always had these amazing displays. People drove all the way from Manhattan to see them. But you probably think that's stupid, don't you?" She was standing too close to me for my brain to function properly. Fortunately, the bells saved me: Episcopalians' and Congregationalists' and First Presbyterians' all peeling a simultaneous noon—albeit slightly out of sync.

"I could make you a display like that," I boasted.

"That would be *so* awesome," said Pamella. She squeezed the inside of my bare forearm—a fleeting warmth. "Let's go inside," she said.

She led me along the catwalk into the master bedroom, where her step-grandparents had once slept, then along a dimly-lit corridor to her own room. She'd already plastered the walls with posters for classic movies. *The Philadelphia Story*. *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The ceiling fixture consisted of four alabaster bowls, but two of the bulbs were burnt out. Or maybe there was a defect in the wiring. While I looked around, flicking the switches, Pamella told me about home-schooling, and accompanying her mom on tour, and about how nervous she was to start at

Nathaniel Greene High School in September. I'd never heard anybody call it by its full name before. It was just "the high school." A crummy, third-tier high school at that. My dad had hoped to send me off to Andover or Choate or Billings Hall, but I hadn't wanted that, and neither had my mother, so we'd fought the "deportation order" until all of the deadlines had passed.

I mustered my courage. "It will be fine. I'll look after you," I said.

Pamella laughed. "Let's go downstairs," she said.

We found my father standing on the tabletop in the dining room. Dad had torn apart the garbage bag to cover the mahogany. He was brandishing a cordless drill in one hand and pressing the medallion into place with the other. "There," he said. He climbed down slowly, rubbed his bad knee, and packed up his toolbox.

"You were always so good at these things," said Sheila. "Like that time you fixed the trunk light in Papa's Cadillac….It's so hard to believe that…." She didn't finish her sentence. She merely let her thoughts trail off, like a dying breeze, and escorted us to the door. Her step- daughter waved at me, grinning, from the edge of the dining room, but didn't follow us any farther. In seconds, we were trudging back down Banker's Hill. Alone. Already, I missed Pamella intensely.

I kicked a small stone along the pavement, hoping for an avalanche. It came to rest anemically beside a sewer grate. Dad asked, "Did I embarrass you by saying Sheila's daughter was pretty?"

"Can we talk about something else?"

"You should never feel ashamed of being attracted to a woman," he said. "You don't owe that to *anyone*."

We'd caught up with the small stone. I kicked it again. This time, it built momentum down that hillside. "Should I tell Mom that we were here?" I asked.

"Why shouldn't you?" Dad answered.

He didn't say anything else, after that, until we were back at the store. My mother's Plymouth Caravelle stood parked out front. She volunteered Mondays and Thursdays at the municipal library, but she'd taken off early to witness the SnoBlaster in action. Dad put his arm on the back of my neck, something he hadn't done since I was a little kid. "You know what?" he said. "Why don't you let me tell her?" And then he went inside and showed my mother how to make summer snow.

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Three days went by, a week. My father said nothing more of our visit to Sheila Stanton, and I didn't know whether he'd told my mother. I wasn't even sure what there was, really, to tell. Meanwhile, I inventoried our surplus from the previous Christmas season—everything from artificial aspen trees to the tiny "rice lights" designed for braiding into wreaths and kissing balls. Most had minute imperfections, but not the sort that Pamella would ever notice. I put off seeing her again, maybe because I feared she'd change her mind about the lights. About me. Instead, I stockpiled materials and drafted displays, some as elaborate as Rube Goldberg devices. I went to work each morning. I came home and fantasized about Pamella. I was totally self-absorbed. Soon enough, my father's secret—if it was that—drifted into the background.

"How are my two hard-working men?" my mother asked—on the second Tuesday after our hike up Banker's Hill. She had her face toward the gas range, where she was dropping batter-soaked vegetables into a frying pan. The kitchen smelled of grease and garlic. Each falling eggplant and zucchini produced a savory sizzle. I was struck by how heavy my mother

looked bent over the oven—especially compared to bone-thin Sheila. “I’m trying something knew,” Mom said. “Patty-pan squash.”

Dad rinsed and soaked his hands. An evening ritual. “Guess who I ran into the other day?” he said—a bit too nonchalant. “Sheila Stanton.”

“Here in Creve Coeur?”

“She bought her parent’s old place,” said my father. “She had me install a chandelier for her.”

Mom carried the plate of fried vegetables to the kitchen table. I piled twenty slices onto a paper napkin and gorged myself—not that I needed the calories. “It’s funny,” she said. “I hardly remember what she looks like.”

“Terrific,” said my father. “Honestly. Real good.”

“Should I be worried?” teased my mother.

My father bristled abruptly. “Why should you be worried?”

“I was joking, Charlie. Heavens.” My mother began scrubbing down the frying pan with Palmolive. “*Joking*.”

“I know. Sorry. It’s just, she’s had such a hard time of it,” said my father. “Wade’s offered to put up a Christmas display for her stepdaughter. It might be a good experience for him.”

“Because a future diplomat has to know about Christmas lights,” said Mom—but her tone had turned mischievous again. Her own parents had operated a bowling alley in New London, Connecticut, and she was pleased with our quiet, middle-class existence, so *she* didn’t mind me going into the lighting business. Why not?

"A future diplomat can always use a girlfriend," said my father. He tasted one of the fried vegetables and gave my mother a thumbs-up. She smiled. "I trust you won't worry too much," he said, "if I check up on him now and then."

"I'm done worrying," said my mother. "It makes me nervous."

Dad parted her bangs and kissed her on the forehead. "You've got *me*," he said. "All Sheila's got are holiday lights."

I'd never mentioned the Christmas display to my father, of course. He'd obviously paid the Stantons a second visit.

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The following afternoon, my father sent me back to the crime scene. "Go take some measurements. And forget about that surplus. We'll order everything custom fit," he commanded. But I didn't feel ready to see Pamella again—yet. Or maybe I wanted to, but at heart I was a coward. When I protested that August was way too early to plan a Christmas display, and besides, I was still 'on the clock,' Dad chuckled. "Sooner you start something," he said, "more time you have to undo your mistakes." So I hiked up Banker's Hill again, this time through an unseasonable fog. Sheila's stepdaughter opened the door. She appeared mildly surprised, but not unpleased, to see me.

Pamella wore a T-shirt with a torn shoulder and form-fitting pink sweatpants that must have doubled as sleepwear. She held a coffee mug in one hand. The entire entryway smelled of hot cocoa, and a thin residue of the beverage filmed her upper lip. I stood with one hand in my pocket, the other clenching the toolbox handle like a life buoy.

"I thought I'd drop by," I said, "to start on the Christmas lights."

"Oh. You really are going to do it," she said.

"I said I would, didn't I?" I said defensively. In my world, people did what they said they were going to do. Whether they wanted to or not. Here, needless to say, setting up this display was what I wanted most in the world. Or almost most.

All afternoon, I showed Pamella how to measure the heights of trees with an Abney clinometer and a leveling rod. We also jotted down the circumferences and the crown spreads, though these weren't essential. At first, I'd hoped Pamella might help me by calling out the readings on the measuring marker, signaling me in which direction to adjust the clinometer, as though hanging a painting. Eventually, I gave up on getting any meaningful assistance out of her. What she wanted to do was sit in the cool grass, sipping Hawaiian Fruit Drink from a miniature cardboard carton while watching me labor. When she got tired of doing nothing, she lugged out *The Complete Poetry of William Blake*, and read aloud. Tyger, tyger burning bright. "Like Deborah Kerr recites in *The End of the Affair*—after she breaks up with Van Johnson." I'd never heard of either of them. Or Blake. But this was Pamella's film obsession for the week, so I was more than willing to indulge her. By the time I actually got around to renting the movie— about an extramarital affair set in World War II London—Pamella had already moved on to a Katherine Hepburn film about a pet leopard.

My father showed up around four o'clock that first day, as he would many times over the subsequent months. He wore the same gray jacket, the same red suspenders, the same eight- hours growth of stubble. Sometimes, if he'd eaten a bagel and lox for lunch, tiny black poppy seeds remained wedged between his incisors. Yet there was no mistaking the newfound radiance in my father's eyes, the vigor in his step. Once, while simultaneously reviewing my calculations and explaining to Pamella the difference between A/C and D/C current, he'd started talking about opening a *second* showroom near the mall. In any case, he rarely spent much time

inspecting my handiwork. Mostly, he stayed ten minutes with us, another twenty inside the house with Sheila Stanton, then he came back outside, glanced at his watch and announced it was time for us to depart. He was also prone to bursts of irritability, particularly on the ride home. In one instance, after Pamella told me her step-mom was directly descended from suffragette Elizabeth Cady Stanton, I asked my father where Grandpa Abe had come from in Europe. "How the hell should I know?" he snapped. "Who keeps track of these things, anyway?"

We kept up these afternoon visits all through August and then through September, long after the start of the school year. But we weren't the Stantons' only guests. In fact, for a woman who claimed she'd returned to Creve Coeur for "the peace and calm," Sheila kept a whirlwind of a social calendar. Some of her callers were from her life in the music industry: her agent; her accountant; an emaciated, one-eyed woman who sported a peacock-plumed hat and had apparently performed at Woodstock. But many of the men who spent time with Sheila—and most of the visitors *were* men—had a decidedly local flavor. There were a couple of fathers I recognized from Little League games; Old Mr. Decormier's son from the drugstore; the husband of one of my mother's bridge partners; a big, broad-shouldered guy with a limp. Some did household tasks for Sheila, like my Dad had done. Hoisting a piano. Painting shutters. Others just sat on the porch with her for half an hour, sipping iced tea. Several returned more than once. By the time my father arrived, around four o'clock, they were always long gone. I asked Pamella what this was about and she told me: Her stepmother was looking up all the friends she'd had in high school. "I hope *we're* still friends in twenty years," added Pamella, laughing. "Don't you think that would be awesome?" But Pamella had already proved herself far more popular at school than I would ever be—there was nothing particularly wrong with me, other

than my weight, but also nothing particularly right—and often she went out with her new clique of friends while I labored alone on the lighting display.

Then, one afternoon in early October, my father pulled his van to the curbside an hour earlier than usual. It was snowing that day, an aftereffect of a Javanese volcanic eruption, the earliest recorded snowfall in Creve Coeur, in fact, since the Colonial Era—unless you counted Carl Pachinsky's feats with the SnoBlaster. The precipitation mixed with the dried leaves, and caked on paved surfaces as icy sludge. Pamella attempted to build a snowman, while I balanced on the slick gambrel roof, nailing quarter-inch hooks into the eaves at four-inch intervals. My father climbed the front steps just as Sheila Stanton and one of her guests stepped out onto the porch.

"Oh, Charlie," said Sheila. Surprised, I think.

"Hi," said my father. "I closed up early. The power went out."

"You remember Manny Standish," said Sheila. "From school."

"Manny the Pansy. Sure. The class behind me." The snow glistened off the top of my father's bald pate and the bridge of the other man's nose. "But I'll bet you're not Manny the Pansy anymore, are you?"

Manny sneezed twice. Then a third time. "No, Charles," he said. "I'm the headmaster at Billings Hall."

I feared the men might exchange punches. Instead, they shook hands.

"I should really get going," said my father. "I just wanted to give my boy a lift. Good to run into you, Manny. Dr. Standish, that is," he added. "Billings Hall is a damn fine school. Wade almost went there. Didn't you, Wade?"

"I missed the deadline," I called down.

"He's going to be a law professor," said my father.

Standish sneezed again and blew his nose into a cotton handkerchief.

In the van, I realized that my father was trembling. His entire body shook, all on account of this one brief encounter with the stiff, short, perpetually-allergic principal of a second-rate private school. Dad was still out-of-sorts, distracted and hostile, when we pulled into the driveway. In the kitchen, he scrubbed his hands. Then he dunked his entire head under the faucet. Tap water matted down his shirt.

"What's wrong?" pleaded my mother. "Charlie?"

"Nothing," said my father. "Or maybe everything. I ran into a guy I went to school with today and it upset me." He turned off the tap and dried his scalp with a dish towel. "Do you ever feel life is slipping through your fingers?" he asked—apropos of nothing. "That it's like snow. And every time you squeeze, it melts on you."

"I don't understand," said my mother. "Please, tell me. I *want* to understand."

"Like snow," said my father. "Like fucking snow." And that was all. It was the only time I can ever remember him speaking metaphorically.

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I continued to make progress on the Christmas display. My father let me spend as much money as I wanted, on whatever materials I wanted, so I ordered nine topiary reindeer and a four foot long Bethlehem sleigh. For the lead reindeer, I arranged a vermillion nose that lit up as one approached it. By mid-autumn, the lindens and sycamores in the Stanton yard had more mini-bulbs than leaves on them. Every crook in every branch was tightly wound with camouflaged electrical tape. I even designed a special series of grape and bell-pepper cluster lights that illuminated, sequentially, as visitors climbed the stairs, crossed the front porch, and then rang the

doorbell. As they passed over the threshold, on the way out, a phalanx of incandescent lawn angels "played" *White Christmas* on twinkling harps. I did all of this myself, even hooking an auxiliary line into the main power cable—everything, except signing the official filings with the town. Either Dad or Carl Pachinsky had to do that, because I couldn't get my own electrician's license until I turned eighteen.

When the local media marked the twentieth anniversary of Sheila Stanton's rescue, bringing a rivulet of regional journalists back to the crime scene, one freelance reporter from Public Radio decided the lighting display was newsworthy. She asked for a short interview and a guided tour—although in the end, the piece never actually aired. But I remember how nervous she was, a girl just out of college, always gnawing at her bangs when the recorder was off. She asked me: "What made you take on this project?" And I answered, cryptically, "It's a labor of love." But already I sensed that while I labored for love, the object of my love was losing interest in the display. Any given afternoon, the odds of me finding Pamella at home were less than 50-50. Wherever she went those evenings, and I guess I actively chose not to know, she never invited me along. When Halloween came, I was there alone on the porch to scare off the junior high school kids sporting plastic knives and red ribbons.

Meanwhile, my father was doing to the inside of the Stanton residence what I'd been doing to the outside: swamping it with expensive lighting. Every few days, he appeared with yet another complimentary sample. A lamp filled with exotic seashells, or a dragonfly desk- light from Tiffany's, or a fluorescent music box that unfolded into a beveled mirror. First these were "housewarming gifts"; later, they were "to spruce the place up for the fall." He bought my mother more expensive gifts, too. Ruby earrings. An ermine wrap. "If we're not going to buy a sailboat," he said, "there's no point in socking all that cash away." But Mom never wore the

jewelry, kept the stole in a box above her shoe shelf until it rotted. She made my father promise not to buy her anything else, and he didn't. But he kept digging up gifts for Sheila.

At the Stantons' house, Dad still glowed. Away from it, he grew less irritable, more morose. I'd wake up to use the bathroom at two in the morning, and he'd be sitting at the kitchen table, mindlessly stirring milk into a bowl of cornflakes. He went for long, aimless walks during the middle of the workday. He drove me out to the state fairgrounds on a whim to show me where he'd once eaten sixty jelly donuts in one sitting to impress a date. Presumably Sheila. He also drove me to Gates of Heaven Cemetery, north of Bristol, to show me where Grandpa Abe and Grandma Edith were buried.

Late one night, I heard my parents arguing in the kitchen. Or rather, my mother's voice, enraged, fraught, carrying up the stairs: "You're going to say she's had a hard time of it! Has it never crossed your mind that I'm having a hard time of it?" Then: "I don't care if it's nothing. I believe you, it's nothing. But it still *feels* like something." And then: "Why do I care if he hears me? He spends every waking moment over there anyway. Why don't you both just go live with the bitch and let me die in peace?"

~

The next morning. In the van. My father turned on the news—Baby Jessica had just been rescued from the bottom of a well—then flipped to his Oldies Station. Dad's breath stank of coffee. He'd long ago Scotch-taped a family photograph to the dashboard, the three of us visiting the Vanderbilt Mansion at Newport, but I was suddenly struck by how much younger the man in the picture looked than the man at my side. His mustache had been entirely black then, his shoulders strapping. Far thinner and more handsome than I would ever be. It was hard to imagine the middle-aged retailer at my side, droning along to "Build Me Up, Buttercup," as the

star southpaw pitcher who'd struck out seventeen straight Pawtucket Pirates for the Creve Coeur Heartbreakers. I rolled down the window, relishing the crisp autumn dawn.

"So how's your girlfriend?" Dad asked—without warning.

"I don't have a girlfriend."

"You know who I mean," he said. "Pamella with all those L's."

I stared out the window. "*I said*: I don't have a girlfriend."

"Well, what are you waiting for? When I was your age, I went out with a different girl every Saturday."

This was too much. "You can't do that anymore," I snapped. "Hell. What fucking planet do you live on?"

I knew he'd lay into me for cursing. I just didn't care. But then a Sheila Stanton song came on the radio, like a call to prayer, and he didn't say a thing.

~

Something about this conversation with my father brought the anger inside me to a swift boil. All morning, while setting up a display of gooseneck and fleur-de-lis torchieres—modeled upon engravings of the Flavian Palace in Rome—I catalogued the ways in which Pamella Stanton had wronged me: the invitations to hang out with her clique that never arrived, the promises that we'd be friends forever. Every low-cut blouse she wore became an intentional effort to bait me, a calculated element in an elaborate plan of deception. Even her laughter was at fault. Like the music of the Sirens. My thoughts were so addled that I dropped a halogen bulb on the showroom floor. Less than two feet away from a customer wearing open-toed sandals. Then, clearing the shattered glass, I toppled an entire case of lava lamps. Five hundred dollars

worth of merchandise. "Slippery fingers," said Carl Pachinsky. "Comes from jacking off too much." When he charged the broken fixtures against my paycheck, he included the sales tax.

On a different workday, I'd have had it out with Pachinsky. I hated him because he was fat and funny-looking, and crass, and he didn't care that he was fat and funny-looking and crass. I'd met his social-worker wife at a Memorial Day picnic, on the only occasion she'd ever come to a store event, and she was also fat and funny-looking—yet they'd seemed so damn happy together. Unreasonably happy. Nobody who looked like that had a right to happiness, as far as I was concerned. Not if I couldn't have Pamella. But I let the electrician dock my pay without complaining. Even he looked surprised. *It's not worth it*, I warned myself. *He'll be dead someday, and you'll have the last laugh*. I realized that my anger was like a land mine, capable of exploding only once. And I was determined to hoard my blast for my encounter with Pamella.

Dad kept me late at the store that afternoon. We'd received a shipment of pool-table lights one day too early—a wide assortment of French Quarter hanging counters, and Olympia billiard chandeliers, and Medici-style island lamps—and every last one of these needed to be inventoried before my father would sign the bill of lading. It was nearly dusk when I finally arrived at the crest of Banker's Hill.

I rang the doorbell. Nobody answered.

I figured Pamella was out with "friends"—whatever that really meant. But I intended to wait. I wandered around the side of the house, through the azalea hedge, looking for signs of activity in the windows. Nothing. Most of the curtains were drawn. The only illuminated light was an outdoor post lamp beside a drainpipe.

First I heard the creak of the garden swing and then I caught sight of her. A light gray shadow in a dark gray twilight. She called out my name.

"I didn't think you were home," I said.

As I approached, her body took shape. She sat wrapped in a men's raincoat—like Humphrey Bogart in the movies she'd urged me to watch. But the size of the coat made her appear small and vulnerable. Pamella was holding something in her hand. A can of soda. No— it was a can of beer. The remains of a six pack—only three cans left—rested beside her on the swing. "I came out here to think," she said.

"I've been thinking too…." I muttered.

She cut me off. "Sit down here next to me, Wade," she said. "Have a beer if you want to. It's Old Milwaukee, but that's all I could find."

I slid my index finger over the damp, peeling skin of the garden swing, but I didn't sit down. She handed me a beer—and I took it. Even though I'd never tasted one before. When I opened the tab, the sound punctured the darkness like a gunshot. I held the can in front of me, but didn't drink.

"M*ama*'s sick," said Pamella. Her voice was worn, joyless. "Really sick," she said. "She might die."

I felt a shiver cascade down my spine. All around us hung the electrical vines I'd laced into the foliage, dark and silent, yet capable of such brilliance. A raccoon lumbered in the yard—and I feared that it might claw out some of my wiring.

"I love you," I said.

Pamella's breath caught in her throat. The raccoon kept walking.

"You really do love me, don't you," she said. "Oh, Wade. You always know exactly the right thing to say." She reached forward and squeezed by forearm, just as she'd done the day we

first met. Her grasp was warm, but also clinical, almost like a nurse taking a pulse. And that—to quote the movie title—was the end of the affair.

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Two days later, Sheila Stanton checked into Narragansett Bay Hospital for aggressive chemotherapy. Cancer of the lymph nodes. A particularly malignant variety. When I saw her next, propped on a pillow, surrounded by IV drips and gift baskets and the detritus of leftover hospital meals, she no longer looked female. She hardly appeared human. Her arms and legs were all bone. Skin draped off her clavicles like rumpled shirts off a hanger. But her face was broad and nearly jolly, swollen round by her medication. The fluorescent ceiling lights—two rectangular cloud panels—tinted her jaundiced skin a sickly yellow-violet. Every day, after work, my father sat with Sheila Stanton until the nurse shift changed at the end of visiting hours. Now, he made no effort to conceal these visits from my mother.

My parents argued every evening, every morning over breakfast. Even my presence no longer tamed their hostility. But the worst of it was late at night, after I was in bed, when my father tried to watch television, and my mother yanked out the cord.

"You don't owe that to her," Mom insisted. "She's the one who ran off and abandoned you. Not the opposite."

"Under particularly extenuating circumstances," answered my father. "I don't owe it to her. I owe it to *me*."

"Because you're in love with her," my mother shouted. "Because you're having an affair with her."

I could hear Dad plugging the television back into the wall. Sometimes Ted Koppel or Johnny Carson blared out at top volume. “Jesus, Gwen. She’s terminally ill,” said my father— in a way that sounded more like a confession than a denial.

Several times, my father brought me with him to visit Sheila. First at the hospital in Cranston, later at a special facility for cancer patients. She had many other visitors too—even Manny Standish and his plain, gray-haired wife—but Dad didn’t seem to care anymore. He’d step out of the room until they left and then return to sit at Sheila’s bedside. Sometimes, he read to her from the *Providence Journal* or *People Magazine* or a popular history of the Soviet Union by a man named Lev Byokov. All about Stalin’s 5-Year Plans and the purging of Lavrentiy Beria. I doubt he understood a word. Usually, he just sat. Or sat and held her limp hand. Pamella was always there too. Mostly alone. But once she brought along a tall, lanky high school senior named Nicholas whom she introduced as her boyfriend. Without a hint of shame. Or even hesitation. As though it were perfectly natural for her boyfriend and me to get along socially. But the worst part was that he was actually a pretty decent guy. When he and Pamella were ready to leave—he was tutoring her in trigonometry—he even offered me a lift across town.

After that, I stayed away. I concentrated all of my energy on the Christmas display, somehow clinging to those electrical cords as my only remaining hope with Pamella. Sheila called me her “personal electrician” and let me have her front door key. That gave me easy access to the circuit-breakers and the switching cables in the cellar.

My father picked me up in the van each night on the way back from the hospital.

“Is she really going to die?” I asked him.

“I hope not,” he said. “She has very good doctors.”

I sensed that was my father's way of saying her check was cashed. Sooner, rather than later. But Thanksgiving arrived, and my father brought Sheila cutlets and dark meat from our turkey, and she didn't give up. By the second week of December, she was promenading through the hospice corridors with the help of a walker. Her hair started growing back in random patches. One day, according to my Dad, she put on lipstick. Her recently terminal disease entered a state of spontaneous remission. Not a cure, certainly. But also not imminent death. Sheila grew restless away from home and made plans to leave the hospice on Christmas Eve. Up to then, she'd taken little interest in my lighting project, or in me, for that matter, but now she suddenly wanted to see the first demonstration of the lighting display. Sheila went so far as to summon me to her hospice room and to make me promise not to start the show without her. She wanted to "flick the switch"—in her words—like she'd once done with the New Year's Ball in Times Square. I tried to explain to her that this wasn't like that, that lighting her yard required numerous switches adjusted over a matter of hours, but she wouldn't hear anything of it. "You're a professional electrician," she said. "Make it all into one switch." So I did.

That Christmas Eve brought one of the worst ice storms in recent memory, a fitting conclusion to a year of wacky weather. Frost several inches thick built up on exposed surfaces, petrifying the tree branches to rock. (The water weight would eventually take down most of my elaborate wiring.) But Christmas lights or no Christmas lights, Sheila Stanton insisted upon returning home. She phoned our house—something she'd never done before—and point blank asked my father for a lift. He told her that he'd come for her after supper. Mom threw a tantrum. She'd worked all afternoon preparing a pre-Christmas feast of goose and poached salmon. "Go spend Christmas with Sheila Stanton," she shouted. And she tossed my father's meal—glass plate and all—onto the glazed lawn.

So my father picked up Sheila Stanton at the hospital. They made it as far as the turnoff for Route One, just north of the 3-Mile Bridge. The Kissing bridge, they used to call it back then. Because a politician named Kissing had once jumped off it. The telephone poles were down across the roadway, and my father set about removing them with the greatest of care. Avoiding the power lines. Rolling the wood posts to the embankment. He did the job in under twenty minutes.

On the way back to his delivery truck, he stepped into a puddle—the residue of ice melted by the exhaust from the vehicle. The live wire at the other end instantly drove thirty- three thousand volts of electricity up his legs and into his body.

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It was Sheila Stanton who phoned my mother to tell her that my father was dead. And four hours later, it was Sheila who, while Mom and I waited at an emergency roadblock after an embankment gave way on the interstate, identified his corpse for the deputy coroner. When we finally did arrive at the hospital, bone-tired, iced-through, broken, there was nothing to do but wait for the storm to pass. Sheila was also waiting—for an ambulance to take her back to Banker's Hill. She offered my mother her sympathy. Mom nodded—that was the most civility she could muster—and looked away.

My father's funeral was far larger than he ever could have imagined. Lighting wholesalers came from up and down the Eastern seaboard. Also his associates from Little League, from the P.T.A, from the Friends of the Creve Coeur Public Library. Dying young has a way of drawing a crowd. My old nemesis, Carl Pachinsky, wore a dark three piece suit and sunglasses—looking something like a beached cartoon sea mammal without his trademark coveralls. Pachinsky's wife brought a get well card my father had written her after her disc

surgery, and passed it around. It was a cold, windy day, with dark clouds streaked across the horizon.

After the service, mourners circled around my mother and me to offer their condolences. Others, particularly those who had known my father many years earlier, formed a similar, if smaller, conclave around Sheila and her stepdaughter. What exactly they said to her, I don't know. But her expression remained hard and distant through the morning, not the face of a woman who'd lost a lover. Nor did Pamella look like she'd lost a surrogate father. They were like a pair of stones that morning, hand in hand, inseparable, watching us with the uneasy relief of near-strangers passing perilously close to another family's calamity.