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Museum of Unforeseen Circumstances

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MUSEUM OF UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES

by

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B.A. February 2014, Spring Arbor University

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ABSTRACT

MUSEUM OF UNFORESEEN CIRCUMSTANCES

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Old Dominion University, 2018
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On the day of his mother's death, Charlie Agate abandons his current life and returns to his childhood home in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. For months, this new residency enables his thirst for isolation and comfort, but at last Charlie ventures back into the public world where he forms an unlikely bond with an elderly woman, Virginia Day. Virginia is strange and impoverished, broken and yet hopeful as she maintains an assertion so outlandish Charlie can't help but pursue the truth of this mystery alongside her. This novella is about faith and mystery, guilt that leads to opportunity, and the persistence of charity unquenched by reward.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter	Page
I.....	1
II.....	9
III.....	18
IV.....	34
V.....	45
VI.....	58
VII.....	73
VIII.....	81
IX.....	93
THESIS READING LIST.....	98
VITA.....	100

CHAPTER I

The first Sunday he took Virginia to church with him she wore a pink blouse with a long matching jacket, and Charlie thought she looked like any of his mother's old friends, like she belonged with the rest of the aging congregation. But as the Sundays went on, her clothes became more and more outlandish: a turquoise vest, a poof skirt that could have been made from Hawaiian shirts, even pendants in the shape of animal paws. So long as she lived with him, Charlie never learned how she acquired these items.

They were in the center pew of the sanctuary, that first Sunday, having arrived early before the sermon. In front of them, they watched the members of a modern band tuning their guitars and drums, the wires running into black sleeves or taped down the steps of the stage. There was Pastor Phan now, come out the door of the left hall, clutching his hands against his chest in his special way. He was small, proportionately thin with the shape of a full-grown male. He had a spryness about him. A constant, energetic sway.

The sanctuary was as white as an empty house with nothing more than a polished, wooden cross on the wall above the mahogany stage and eight hanging lights in two rows along the length of the ceiling. But then, Charlie had been coming here all his life. It was too old and constant a memory to feel anything more than what he'd always experienced. How far back did the memories reach into the atmosphere of childhood? He'd been sitting under those same hanging lights when he was five, two and a half decades prior, when both his mother and father, alive, stood on either side of him.

Charlie came to his feet with the others as they began to sing. Virginia, too, slowly gathering herself up from her limp posture. At first he didn't realize that the sound he heard was from Virginia. It didn't sound like a normal human voice, but an obnoxious sugary drawl, such

an interruption from the universal tone—“All creatures of our God and king...” He was relieved when no one turned their heads.

As they began the sermon, Charlie flipped through his Bible, Matthew 25, “The Sheep and the Goats,” and started taking notes in his little book. Not that he would ever read them, but to set his mind in some general region of relevance.

“And who *are* the least of these?” asked Pastor Phan. “The pedophiles? The dog beaters? Surely, in this century, we would say that *they* are among the least...” Charlie wanted to find it reassuring and relevant that today's sermon was on the “The Sheep and the Goats.” Plenty of topics before where the message cut deep into whatever guilt or doubt he was currently experiencing. For once this seemed like a positive affirmation, the Lord's message sent to comfort him with the whole situation regarding Virginia, who now lived in a spare room of his deceased parents' house. But despite his present preoccupation, his mind suffered its usual difficulty with the passage. Believers gave and that was good. Others failed and it was a wretched mistake. But what of the charitable atheist? The generous Jew? Were they sheep or goat? those who gave and yet believed wrong or in nothing at all beyond the visible world and science.

He knew the answer, of course. “The Sheep and the Goats” was not a story explaining the requirements of salvation, much as it seemed to be, but one that illuminated the nature of true followers, when belief was validated by act. Yet he couldn't help but picture the future Judgment Day, and there'd be an atheist woman who spent her life serving the destitute, a Jewish man who inherited millions and gave all it away. They fed the hungry and the thirsty, the stranger needing clothes. So it all applied. It all should have applied—the sheeply things that were done “for the least of these.” But the woman didn't believe, and the man believed wrongly, and so they

couldn't have done it for Christ, even though those who did believe and did do it for Christ, as the passage indicated, even they would not know what they had done.

He wanted to stop those thoughts. Stop the near blaspheming line of reason. But he had to take it, the Word, as literal. If not, then what did that leave? A God who could have sent a big fish, but didn't? A virgin birth He might have willed, but didn't? If He created the world, He did it all. Charlie believed that. No room for an in-between. So in life he believed hard and he gave what he could, striving to be a Good Samaritan, sometimes having to suffer for it. Life was so different now that Virginia lived with him, but at least he was giving. Those old ladies, his mother's friends, perhaps they thought he was selfish, come home to live in the house only after she had passed. But now he had taken someone in. He'd done a charitable thing for a friend. He was good. He was kind. Maybe he'd messed it up with his mother, unable to stand her in those final years, but now he was making up for it. In time, the ladies would have to accept that, overcoming the judgments they bore.

Not long into the sermon, Charlie felt the cushion shift and heard what sounded like a kick from Virginia's heel striking the underside of the pew as she stood and crept sideways down the aisle, dragging her oversized purse. He had little reason to be concerned by this, only that she must have needed to use the restroom. He wouldn't have remembered it, if not for what happened after.

Virginia was gone a long time, almost the duration of the remaining service. Charlie tried not to worry or care although it bothered him, constantly. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes, twenty—what was she doing? Had she left the church? He wanted to get up and search for her, but what would he say if he found her? Tell her he'd been worried?

They had started the final song—the one always sung after the sermon and the closing

prayer—when Virginia returned, her hands neatly folded against the flat of her stomach. “This is the day... this is the day that the Lord... has... made.” This time, not a sound came from her lips.

Shortly after he’d moved back home to Milwaukee and started re-attending Tippecanoe Presbyterian, an organic tradition had arisen in which one of his mother’s church friends would approach him after the Sunday service to inquire about his wellbeing. This had started, now over six months before, as an extension of the funeral sentiments following his mother’s death: a sad, weekly inquiry as to how he was “holding up.” Charlie knew the gesture was cathartic on their own part, for it was clear that his mother’s sudden demise had been harder on those who were close to her than for him. In time, the ritualistic condolence became a more cheerful “how-you-doing-these-days” sort of inquiry. Among these women there was one, his mother’s closest and most interesting friend, Jo-Ellen Roots, who approached him the day he first attended church with Virginia.

“Hi, there,” said Jo-Ellen, who spotted them as they stepped out of the pew into the left aisle. Beaded strands ran from her glasses to the back of her head. She wore a dress with a pattern like the spills of an abstract painting. “Anything new these days, Charlie?”

“Actually, quite a bit,” he said. “I have a job finally and a new housemate as of a few days ago.” Virginia was a few feet behind him, picking at a mark on her jacket. “Have you met Virginia before? She’s been coming here on her own for a few months.”

“Oh, no, I haven't,” said Jo-Ellen Roots.

“Well, this is Virginia,” he said.

“Hello,” said Virginia.

“Hi, Dear. Charlie, did you also say that you have a roommate now?”

“Yes, it’s her. Virginia.”

“Oh.” Jo-Ellen frowned at that. “Nice of you to bring her here.” Something had troubled the woman as she made the connection that this older lady, yes, was the “roommate” of whom he spoke. “Actually Charlie,” she said, “I wanted to show you something in the office. Can you spare a minute before you head off?”

Not wanting to leave her behind, he gave Virginia his keys to let herself into the car and went off down the hall after Jo-Ellen.

The office, which was referred to as the “Women’s Ministry Office,” had formerly belonged to his mother. Over the years, she’d done little to personalize it: a potted spider plant had once hung from a hook in the window, and an ancient picture of him dressed as a cowboy had been stapled to the cork board behind her desk. Not that he was surprised, but Jo-Ellen Roots had transformed the office dramatically: new purple drapes, woven tapestries flowing down the walls, three different rugs, and a collection of porcelain cats lounging on the windowsill. It would have looked nice, he thought, if it wasn’t so busy. Shockingly, he spotted the picture of him as a cowboy, but not on the wall. It was propped up on the edge of the desk inside a wooden frame.

“You’ve really enhanced things,” said Charlie.

“Oh, it’s great to have an office again,” said Jo-Ellen. “Every time I get one, I want to make it my own.”

“Did you have something to give me?” he said, assuming it must be the picture.

“I wanted to tell you something in private. I know you don’t have a lot of time. I thought I’d better let you know. It has to do with your friend, that older lady.”

“Virginia?” He felt warm, loathing the feeling of anticipation for something negative about to be said though he had no idea what it could be. How he despised those anticipatory prompts.

“Don’t take this the wrong way,” someone would say, and wasn’t that always a brace for an insult? New reasons to doubt yourself in areas you had no doubt before?

“Yes, dear, Virginia, what a lovely name that is,” said Jo-Ellen. “I wanted to let you know there was a report of an older woman, who I think might have been her, loitering about in the hall all during the service.”

Well, that made sense, and he didn’t like it; did not want any part in it, but here he was, guilty by association. The last thing he’d expected was that bringing Virginia into his home and taking her along with him to church, of all noble places, would lead to such complications in which others would get themselves involved. If anything, he’d have thought Jo-Ellen and the others would have been impressed by what he’d done. Giving Virginia a place to live and all that. If he’d seen any risk in it, it was a risk solely of his own.

“She did get up,” said Charlie. “In the middle of the sermon. Maybe she was uncomfortable? I don’t know. I take it people were concerned by this?”

“There was some concern,” said Jo-Ellen. She had appeared serious, but now she relaxed, opening a blind to reveal the beginning of a pleasant Sunday afternoon. “Just concern. I don’t think anyone would accuse. I only wanted to say it after I found out it was you she’d come along with. Seemed only right that someone should say something. Who is she, by the way? You’re not related, I know that much. Your mother didn’t have any sisters or surviving aunts.”

“She’s a pleasant old lady,” he said, “who’s found herself at a point of desperation. I met her at Seventh Roast, the coffee shop, and now she’s staying in one of my open rooms till we figure something out.”

“That’s generous of you.”

He’d been wrong. No one was impressed. It was weird and unnatural that she was living

with him—gutsy, dangerous. But it still felt unfair that the church leadership should make an issue out of it. “So was she just in the lobby?” Charlie asked, his curiosity triggered as much as it was troubled. “Just standing out there and somebody complained?”

Jo-Ellen shook her head. “Now, this may sound bad—and it did come from Patrick so take it for what it’s worth—but apparently it appeared that she was rifling through people’s coats. He said that he asked if she’d lost something, and she floated off, back into the sanctuary.”

This was hard for Charlie. He felt hot. Felt involved and forced to face things he had not imagined. The thought that this simple act of charity could put him in such a position—almost like an accomplice to the woman’s mysterious, possibly delusional activity—made him sick with unease.

Jo-Ellen was speaking again: “Charlie, I’m telling you this only because is it possible that you’re in over your head with helping her? I know I don’t have all the details, but, it makes me wonder what type of help she truly needs? More help than maybe you’re equipped to give her right now, does that make sense?”

This invasion felt like it had come from nowhere; still, he was aware of its wisdom. “I hadn’t realized she came off this way to people,” said Charlie. “She’s attended here before.”

“I wouldn’t say she was...” Jo-Ellen’s voice tapered off, switching from declaration to inquiry. “What do *you* think she was doing during the service?”

“I thought she’d just gone to the restroom.”

“Could you ask her about it?”

“Sure,” he said, knowing he would not. He couldn’t even bring up the prospect of her moving out, let alone such an invasive topic as to what she was doing during the service.

“Well, do call me if you need anything at all,” said Jo-Ellen. “You have my cell number.

Please take care of yourself.”

“I have to help her,” he said. “I must see this through.”

“Be smart. Don’t let yourself... you know. It’s easy for things to happen to people who are trying to do good.”

Charlie was hot. Wanted to stick his head in a refrigerator. Stepping out of the church—now paranoid and embarrassed as if everyone was looking at him—he was possessed by the notion that giving Virginia his car keys had been a mistake. The suggestion of her untrustworthiness led him to this fear as he trotted through the parking lot to find her sitting in the passenger seat, the windows still up. She held her phone in one hand and tapped it slowly with the finger of her other. Calm down, he told himself. She’s fine. Just a good friend with some problems of her own. And he believed it was strength, at the time, not to exercise those negative thoughts.

“Sorry to keep you waiting,” said Charlie, buckling his seatbelt. “Let’s go home.”

CHAPTER II

The day his mother died he had packed up everything he owned and drove four hundred miles east to the house in Milwaukee where he grew up and had lived all but those last three years. Two days after, he emailed his boss at the museum of the changed circumstances, to which she was immediately understanding and sorry to see him go and more than happy to assist if ever he needed anything. He also sent a note to his landlord at the studio in Des Moines telling her to do what she must with breaking the lease. He was now a homeowner.

The funeral and the burial were prearranged and paid for, as they had been for his father fifteen years before when he died the day after Charlie started high school. In his mother's case, he had only to go along with it, playing the part of the sole survivor, showing appropriate somberness and deliberation at the funeral director's questions about flower placement and whatever minor details had not yet been formalized. The service was held at the church. Graciously, he served as an object of pity for his mother's many friends, accepting their cards, their memories, their casseroles stuffed high in the basement freezer. The women had lost a good friend, several years earlier than should have been expected, who apparently had become a spiritual mentor for many of them in her final years. Charlie tried his best to understand what they were going through.

Living with his mother those first twenty-five years in all her worries and mannerisms, and having tried to escape for the last three, Charlie could do little to make himself upset about her death. The call informing him of the incident had come from a police woman. He was cooking an omelet, and like anyone, he was shocked by the news which sent him into moments of disbelief. Meanwhile, even in this dumbfounded state, his mind carried on with the yellow of the eggs still runny along the side of the pan, how in a few minutes he would lay the peppered

cheese on top. Yet, here was Mom now dead in the same thought, probably still warm on the brick path through her garden as the officers crouched to take their photographs.

That day he put down the phone and looked around the crumbling studio and snickered nasally in the way he had suppressed for years before accepting the habit. His mother was dead, and it was as if someone stood in the doorway declaring it: *Your mother just died, Charlie; everything has changed.* With perfect consciousness, he turned off the stove and sat on the bed, entwining his fingers in the holes of an afghan. He took up his knees in his arms and leaned against the headboard, feeling inquisitive, seeing himself as someone else. *His mother died. Look at him!*

Before he moved out, he wanted everything to be civil, polite, as he played the part of the adult son, but there was always some irreconcilable barrier, some irritation, like a burning grain of sand in their eyes. What he hated most was that she never learned to trust him, never came to understand him as the adult he had become. Every day, he cleaned, put away the dishes after dinner. He made dinner, if she would trust him not to ruin pans or scrape up the new glass stove. But being twenty-five and still living like that, what a shame it was. Waking up day after day to walk to his corner store job, to get out sometime in the late afternoon and walk back home to his room and his computer, his books and his mother.

If she would have given him her trust, he could have dealt with her personality. How she would question him, constantly. “Are the doors locked?” Ask him six times in one night, “You go around and lock all those doors, Charlie?” The same repetitious patterns of her speech, day after day. “You go around,” “you getting tired,” “you getting all snappy at me.” Neutral words turned sour. And the fact, too, that technically he was her dependent, that all this was still hers. He had no valid work experience. He had no degree. He couldn't just live somewhere else with

his meager income, a fact that always seemed to be unspoken ammunition for his mother's narrative of his inability. One night it might be, "If you'd just make something of yourself." But so often he got the sense that this was exactly what she wished to prevent him from doing. "You going out, what for? What's out there we don't have in here?"

The out-of-body strangeness Charlie experienced on the day of her death wasn't at all how it was when his father died. With Dad, it had been gradual, tedious, even clichéd at the end, with Mom standing at his bedside feeding him soup and the extended family coming in and out. Every day of the summer they waited for "that cancer," until their conflicted anticipation turned to fatigue and then some form of tender impatience. The situation was much different than it might seem for a young boy with his dying father. Dad was thirty-one years Mom's senior and never in Charlie's lifetime was he the sort to run around the backyard or crawl about on his hands and knees. As an adult, Charlie supposed his relationship with his father had been more like that of a live-in grandfather. Mom, in contrast, was the director of their lives—piercingly sweet at the time and the only presence that carried real significance.

Now, sitting on his bed in the studio, a half hour after his mother had died, reality hit him. He had not eaten, had done apparently nothing but sit in this trance-like reflection. His mother had died. Was he supposed to be productive? Something foreign had begun to rise beneath the surface of his steady emotions, and he wanted to be comfortable. He craved; what did he crave? So he got in the shower, and it was then under the steaming warmth, gripping his hair in his hands, that he bawled like a toddler.

He cried loud, a pathetic mess of half-man. He saw and wept over memories he'd forgotten, as if a lost tank in the brain had been punctured, exploding the past into the conscious present: A pair of overalls she'd sewn for his favorite stuffed bear, Christopher. How she would

wait till the last possible moment to wake him up for preschool. Special words she had for him, nicknames he'd long ago demanded that she never say, with an indignant assertion that his name was "Charlie." And then the cooking. It was mother, after all, who—despite her latter mistrust—had started him on that down to his earliest experiences with scrambled eggs and sautéed onion. He even recalled a time he was nine and had seen her fully naked from across the hall, her dearest bosom from which he had been nourished in his earliest days. This was all like a washing of mental waves, liquid mind photos reeking of sorrow and loss. He flowed outside of era as if he weren't American or in the modern present but a peasant of an unspecified land. *Your mother is dead. The good woman. Gone, may the Lord bless her...*

And then it was over. The water from the building's old boiler had waned to an unsatisfying lukewarm. He turned it off, dried, and finished making the omelet. With an empty plate and his squat legs splayed beneath the bar counter extending from the wall, he found himself thoughtful and relieved. Charlie had imagined moving back to Milwaukee, but the thought had been distant and indeterminate so long as his mother remained there. Now there were many possibilities, and he would live in the house again. It would be foolish not to. For a while, he could live off savings, no longer bogged down with rent to survive a life he had grown to reject. The grief was canceled out by relief and opportunity, a sensation of rescue wiping every tear from his eyes. Still for several months, he would tell himself he was sorry for her, that he missed her dearly. But he wasn't and he didn't. He was free.

The week after the funeral, he spent hours each day sorting through the house. He enjoyed the process of organization and found it addicting. Filling up boxes of photo albums and spare mugs, clearing out cluttered shelves. His mother was not a chronic packrat, but it was as much as you might expect for anyone living in a house nearly forty years. Among the generic articles, he

found old, familiar objects every now and then, providing impressions of the past: a bronze vase holding thirty-year-old peacock feathers, a black, iron toaster which had lasted his entire life and upon once his aunt Sarah had split open her nose. The best stuff he kept out or repurposed: a wicker laundry basket replaced the disgusting white tub which had long served as the kitchen trash can, and from the ceiling he suspended the detached wheel of a bicycle as a device for hanging pots.

He became a perfectionist about the project, spending most of each day in the mess and becoming more and more meticulous. Every single box and drawer had to be gone through and wiped off, every can of screws from Dad's "workshop" days had to be sorted and bagged and labeled and put away. He had never been so organized. Later he would wonder how he'd tapped into that potential, where on earth it had gone since. Most of what was worth keeping went to the basement in boxes stacked high on shiny, new shelves. At last he could see the red floor tiles which, as a boy, he had pretended were lava.

In all, Charlie was proud of the house, excited about the further changes he had in mind for fresh coats of paint, artwork and theme rooms, a huge vegetable garden the next summer, and eventually an old-fashioned iron fence. But two or three weeks into the process, as the overhaul came to a close, Charlie fell into a routine of living which was not traditional or consistent. Life became a single day fretted with naps. He'd wake up late and stay up. If he was tired, he'd sleep till he was tired no more. Because he had no conception of any day to the next, everything became a monotonous blend, easily forgotten. Inversely, he could remember those three years in Iowa with great specificity, able to pull up lost hours and trace them one to the next, not unlike the way he'd always imagined judgment day and the replaying of all human life which seemed it would take longer than the history leading up to it.

There were a few fantasy novels he'd been meaning to read and a season of *Monk* which he had started watching, plus minor repair projects or ingenuities with the house which kept his creativity afloat. And there was cooking. A great deal of that. Big, complicated, four-or-five course meals he spent hours preparing before sitting down to dine in the near dark, while slowly working through his mother's five boxes of tea lights. He stopped driving. He stayed home, except for the walks which might have taken anywhere from an hour to most of the day as he grazed through the various Milwaukee neighborhoods before eventually looping back home. Food was so often on his mind then, and the walks were enabling because he believed he was making adequate compensation for the extra consumption. Tired and full, he slept long each night on his parents' ancient mattress. Or—just as well—it might have been three-thirty in the morning when he needed more tartar for his catfish, and so he'd walk the ten blocks to the 24-hour Pick 'n Safe to buy eggs so he could blend his own mayonnaise.

Yet in some ways, he was on top of things those seven months more than at any other time. He had an immaculate house and a clean kitchen counter, he showered or bathed twice a day, he paid every bill the moment the envelope sailed through the door slot. Charlie was never bored or wanting in his knowledge of the next thing, and still it was as if he'd taken a vow of silence and become an urban hermit. Milwaukee was his home town, the place he'd always lived except for those final three years prior to his return, but he knew almost no one.

The one exception to this timeless, dateless lifestyle was that he managed to attend Tippecanoe Presbyterian every Sunday morning, the single tie to his life as an adolescent and those who populated it. He spoke to no one, besides his mother's friends. He supposed it was a fair surprise to them that he was still there in Milwaukee. What kind of son moves away, and, upon his mother's death, drops everything to move back? They knew her side of the story well,

he figured. But that was just the thing. It was always her side—in her house, in her mind, in every situation. If only there was a way he could make her friends see.

Regardless of their true opinions, these women and a few others in the church were quick to offer assistance. He received cards in the mail, calls and invites to various groups. Tippecanoe Presbyterian was his church, after all, and the congregation was not shy in expressing its welcome, though the tone was consistently like an invitation offered to a new Christian rather than someone who had attended the place his whole life. They were good folks—almost all of them—but his reasons for steady attendance were different. More to do with peace of mind, spiritual comfort, his intense wish for God to be real and the sanctity of belief which he found he could not achieve outside of ritual.

There was one other aspect, however, that would affect him greatly in the following months, and that was his observation of a certain elderly woman who had also begun to attend the church. Unlike just about everyone else, she was not one of his mother's friends, and it wasn't until later that he would learn her name, Virginia Day.

Virginia had to be at least seventy he'd thought the first time he noticed her from his seat in the balcony. Though her skin hung loosely off her face, she had painted it bright with doll-like rosy cheeks and potent eyeshadow. Her thin, orange hair was frizzed up behind her, but there was a faint outline of skin on the top of her head. She wore a billowy blouse and a colored skirt which came nearly to the floor. Nothing provocative, but the whole presentation was uncanny and striking. His first thought was that she epitomized human decay, but also nostalgia for youth. If his mother's friends prided themselves on dressing their age, on not wearing things that were "too young," this lady embraced the outlandishness, which had the opposite effect—her age being only heightened by these attempts. It wasn't that she was ugly, but she did herself no

flattery in the ensemble.

For a long time, Charlie would remember those early months as a specific era, a season. How different had life been back in Iowa? Over the three years, he spent a lot of time in the studio room. Still, he had work four or five days a week, and there was the storefront church he walked to, just three blocks, every Sunday. In Iowa, he had a few friends, but they were not close. Carlos, who cleaned the museum after hours, was one, and there was also Jasper across the street who was fifty and newly disabled and would sit out on his porch sipping Natty Boh all summer. These were friends by default, people who talked to him and who he talked back to. They were blessings, but this was the furthest thing from his acknowledgement. When he left Iowa, he told none of them; never even thought about it.

In a sense, the house and the life it allotted drew out a disposition which was already inside Charlie, but to a new less-compromised intensity. Clean, uncluttered, a feeling of freshness but always within the perspective of having transcended the worldly need to accomplish. Even the thought of that vegetable garden the coming spring was somehow to the level of his one day having made a name for himself. He'd have to earn new money eventually, but with the few thousand that had finally come through from his mother's accounts and every weather report prophesying another cruel Midwest winter, this life felt more than appropriate.

Yet somehow, in a bizarre paradox, he was still dreaming all the time of people, friends, and the culmination of this fantasy was the great thought of his hosting a party at the house one night in which these hypothetical persons would attend. He was content. He was sealed in his solitude, a warm little man wrapped in his quilt, and still he was standing in the kitchen glazing his first Peking Duck, imagining if only *they* existed, if they came to the house, and here he was serving them Peking Duck: a tall spry salesman, a tired professor, a marine biologist with her

asymmetric hair. Every time it was Peking Duck, the specific oriental-feeling dish shelved in his mind as a conception of extravagance and specialty which had been with him since childhood and bearing a similar role as Hasenpfeffer (his father's old joke whenever he saw a rabbit in the yard). One scene he would always recall was lifting the first bird out of the oven on a late September night. Its fatty aroma, its caramel shine looking like a basted pig, like something that belonged in a medieval banquet. What would they think about that, these intelligent friends whose faces materialized as crude images and a sense of inward glee? It is good, they would think. As if for once he could impress people other than himself, show them a sort of person they had not already known.

In time, this life began to wear him out. He needed something—needed to be in the midst of people he could watch, speak to. People who were not his betters. People like the peculiar woman at church. The more he thought about it, the more he wondered how he could have been okay with this gut, fleshy existence of eating and sleeping, of such menial life? How long had he thought it could go on? One day in November, Charlie finally went online and spent the next six hours searching for jobs and applying to whatever he could find: barista, dishwasher, maybe a janitor. He had no connections, hardly any experience outside the museum, but there was a calming sensation just in clicking the submit button, uploading the resume, in knowing that he was trying for once in his life. He wasn't hungry that night, and the next morning he woke up at seven and headed out to be in the community, where he could do research and apply for more jobs. He decided to go to a coffee shop he had walked past many times without ever stepping inside. Seventh Roast, it was named. But for the first day in months, he drove, pleased to find that his mother's Corolla started without any trouble.

CHAPTER III

Stocked with unmatched chairs and sofas and a few communal tables, Seventh Roast was a modern but relaxed place which had grown in popularity over the past few years since the time Charlie had moved to Iowa. He found a large circular table in the rear, his back to the outer wall and no one behind him as he settled in with his worn Dell laptop. Even something as simple as waking up at a normal hour and driving to a coffee shop like a normal person was a step. This was good. He needed to be somewhere that wasn't at home sitting half asleep on top of crumpled blankets till the middle of the day.

By nine o'clock, Seventh Roast was already a busy place. People on their phones and computers, reading from their tablets and many faint conversations going on. He liked the style, the mix of ages and careers. Already, he felt a sense of connection as if they were all the representative archetypes of an era gathered quietly into a single place: technological website builders, students with biology textbooks, a man hand-sketching images of birds. And he, a twenty or thirty something, middle-class, white, who didn't have a job. He wondered why he hadn't come here months before.

Of course, he wasn't so productive as at home with good light and the absolute quiet. He'd skim through a page of job ads, click on one or two which, in turn, appeared to be scams, but then there'd be this lanky guy, his limbs stretched across a wooden chair three tables over with the longest human neck Charlie had ever seen. The man leaned back to sip the last from a bottle of iced tea, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down the length of the neck, almost cartoonish. And Charlie would marvel in that land of distraction: how different the human body could be one to another, not to mention the illusion of frailty. For the man would have the neck and the Adam's apple some fifty more years barring accident or disease, and yet all it would take was,

imagine, a sharpened melon scooper and almost no pressure and there'd be the bloody apple plucked like a Hershey's kiss off a snickerdoodle.

He could make himself sick with these illusions. It was that way often as a child. Phases of his own self-mutiliative fantasy with the seeming weak parts of the body. Hard, addictive thoughts he didn't want: a serrated knife to the arm, cut all around it in two places to form a cylinder, and there'd be the loose skin, twistable, like a sleeve. Far be it that this should be impossible, that the skin ought to be attached throughout. Still, he spent hours thinking about those parts of the body which ought to be barely more durable than cardboard, wondering how God could build people weak, yet keep them going so long.

Charlie didn't remember whether the lanky man with the long neck got up and left, but he soon became captivated by a surprising yet familiar sight. The woman, Virginia, in slacks and a flowered sort-of Kimono. The same older woman he'd noticed at church every Sunday. Today she sat alone sipping a glass of red wine, and he was struck by the coincidence of finding her there, out of all random places, after weeks of wondering who she was and what she did.

On his way out of Seventh Roast he scanned the room for Virginia. She sat alone in the opposite corner with a glaze over her eyes. This was the first time he got this sense about her: that she was only partially conscious of herself and her surroundings. As if some invisible or mental distraction had pulled her away, out of the present. Thoughts of her past, plans for her remaining future. Maybe a slight intoxication from the alcohol. This made him view her as a body, a soulless body, as if she wasn't quite present like the rest of the people. Mechanical, a little off. He figured some other elderly folks were like that. It seemed usual and yet uniquely specific to her at the same time.

Did people have so much a choice regarding the things that fascinated them? The obscure

or grotesque observations that were so easily captivating it felt inconceivable when no one shared the same intrigue. Was it different with faith? Charlie would wonder. Was assertion ever really a choice? Could you will yourself into caring or loving or belief? Or perhaps the desire, the true desire for such, meant that you already had.

It was not yet two in the afternoon when he arrived back home to the easy and now meaningless life of food and solitude. Already, in the last twenty or so hours his passion for the sudden necessity of finding work had reached its summit, and he was more accepting of the fact that his longing would not be appeased immediately, and there was nothing he could do but wait. He had submitted over two dozen applications and had begun running into the same listings over and over. Still, it felt unfair. He was so ready and would do such a good job. He could have driven back to Seventh Roast and stepped through the kitchen door and begun fixing sandwiches.

The biggest reason for his sudden discontent was that, with the exception of the last several months, his life had never been like this. After high school, he'd tried community college for a semester. Fresh out of that experience, he'd gone to work, full time, at a corner store owned by a family friend. He worked there nearly five years before it closed, and then he took the big, though necessary, step of moving out against his mother's wishes. That was when he went to Iowa to begin work at the museum thanks to yet another family friend, an old coworker of his father's whose cousin served on the board and who was convinced that Charlie was just perfect for that sort of thing because, apparently, he had a great inclination towards history and a personality that was good for presenting facts and details.

"You'll be back," his mother had said. "Won't be able to handle all that alone time. I know you."

Oh, how she hated his leaving, tried to convince him that it wasn't the right fit for someone

of his sensibility, that he needed “action” in the workplace, such as working a cash register or becoming a barista. To this day, he found it incredible how little she had always understood of his ways.

Sure enough, the Portrait Museum was a boring joke of a job, but it was also a fantastic opportunity. It was a small, converted mansion of a rich business owner who used to collect art, mainly portraits, with his wife and also boasted extensive gardens surrounding the premises. The museum was kept afloat by elderly supporters on a dying board of directors and the money brought in from weekend weddings, which he never had to deal with any more than collecting envelopes and putting them in the right person’s mailbox. He was desk assistant from Tuesday through Friday when they were open, and occasional tour guide with a script he came to memorize inadvertently when visitors would show up, which was not every day. Charlie didn’t know why they were open so much. Maybe it was the abiding notion of the board’s that this was supposed to be a “space” for people to come and celebrate art. Sometimes he would clean the floors, and then there'd be assignments from Alice, his direct boss, but these never took more than an hour and a half, and so most of the time it was just him enjoying the “space,” sitting, reading, drawing, looking up recipes to serve guests he could never fit into his tiny apartment.

He was disillusioned in thinking it would be as easy this time around—finding a job, a new livelihood—having failed to realize to what extent everything had been handed to him in the past. For one, he could not deny his mother’s obvious support, nor her ambition in all things. She had provided for him to the point of gross anxiety. Although he had fled her once, he couldn’t escape the fact that it was her livelihood he was still living, even after her death. This was her house, cleaned and tidied but steeped nonetheless in her perpetual influence. Indeed, he was her offspring—for when he sighed it was his mother's sigh, the strains of her voice blown out

through his breath. When he spoke, so often it was her own words creeping out of him. Her verbal patterns. He couldn't raise his voice without it being her, inside him, trying to raise it.

Within a week he fell into a routine of applying to any job that seemed remotely feasible—banquet server, mail handler, appointment scheduler—and receiving no response. When he went out, he always drove his mother's Toyota, leaving the archaic van, which he'd taken to Iowa, in the garage. Three or four days in a row, he returned to Seventh Roast first thing in the morning and remained till early afternoon. He began to notice the old woman every time. She had a smart phone which she used consistently, holding it in one hand, finger pointing the screen with the others. Much of the day, however, she would flutter from table to table with her glass, sometimes joining conversations, sometimes just there, a face at the table. Even across the room, he began to notice her distinct, cat-like voice as it drifted through the rays of conversation and the sound of frothing milk. He supposed it was a voice to match the image she presented: not atypically young or weirdly masculine nor ruined by cigarettes.

Although Virginia appeared to converse with a variety of people in the familiar air, there was a polite, accommodating, sometimes patronizing falseness to the way they regarded her. Always, it was she who started conversations or placed herself inside them. Their heads nodding at her words, "mm hm, mm hm, fascinating," their soft, annoyed smiles of faked intrigue. Plenty of folks ignored her outright, turning to their laptops and tablets as she approached. Didn't want to give her eye contact, didn't want to get the old lady started.

Most days she ordered food. Usually a burger, and twice he watched her snap her fingers at the boy waiter to raise an apparent issue with her meal and demand something new be brought in its place. How could Charlie's perception of her remain undefiled? He wanted her to be the kindest, most misunderstood, least judgmental creature a person could know. An old dearie, a

sweet human syrup. But were her shortcomings any surprise? Virginia was her own artist of her own crazy display entitled *What This Woman Became*. Yet Charlie had to deal with the reality that the way she snapped her fingers at the poor kid probably had much to do with the fact that he was the only person in the room less in power than she was, that elderly ladies were not exempt from the vices of those who abuse.

One day it happened that Virginia sat down at the communal table, where he had by then made a habit of working, to chat with another woman who sat across from him. Here she is, *here she is*, he thought, like some miserable love-crush of his junior-high years. She used a potent perfume, and he got the occasional waft of feta and radish. He would grow used to the odor. It was not unpleasant, although it must have been stale and deteriorated from what the manufacturer had intended.

For the next two hours, he tried not to study her face, fearing she would sense it, that their eyes would meet in the eerie, half-knowing stance of stranger awareness. Yet there was already an implied dialogue between their shared glances, their eyes cast in the direction of clanking dishes or bursts of laughter from some corner of the room.

Perhaps these seemingly shared transmissions were nothing more than the guesswork of a poor memory. Years later, when he'd think of Virginia on this day, he'd think of her name—although he couldn't have known it—and of the many odd things she said to him over the next few months, how these contributed, each, to the exact nature of the person he conceived her to be: the gullibility, the commitment, the either beautiful or mawkish passion for life which just wouldn't fade. He supposed that was the biggest aspect separating her from so many of her generation.

There was another man at the table with short silver hair and a camouflage vest along with

the middle aged woman Virginia had spoken to, scribbling away at handwritten letters—blue cursive on a yellow pad. If it wasn't for them, it might have been easier for Charlie to speak to Virginia, for he feared they would wonder what his deal was, that he had some motive.

At last, he and Virginia sat alone at the table while she finished her burger with nibbling bites. Charlie wondered, was it so uncommon among the momentary drudgery of life to experience a sensation of something old? All this time you couldn't remember, not even that you had forgotten, what it was, is like; the rush of dark comprehension which follows a friend's confiding of a secret, the familiar newness of the year's first warm day. "Ah ha," you say, rolling up your sleeves as the skin grows clammy with sweat. What Charlie experienced sitting at the table with Virginia was a sensation of motherhood. Not that she looked or sounded anything like his own mother, but that Virginia was mother-like, and might have been his in some other world. A world where he would have been bred and empowered to care for his elderly mother, where his mother would have grown old like she was supposed to, and he would have become an independent adult—like he was supposed to—that was how it might have been. Imagine, an old woman, and that's his mother. His old, silly, beautiful mother. He wanted to run home right then, to be his mother's adult son, to have her be proud of him. The moment led him to thinking of Virginia differently, differently than he did with his true mother or his mother's friends. He felt a genuine need to speak to the strange woman, to know her.

Silently, Charlie prayed while staring into the pixels of his computer screen. Prayed the Lord would make it happen that he could speak to her, as if it was right that they should talk, and surely *He* agreed. Unfolding his hands, he tipped over the remains of the tea latte, causing a thin wave of liquid to wash across the table to the other side, dripping off the end. Charlie did not think it ideal or appropriate to consider every ironic happenstance a direct answer to prayer. Who

was he to say, “This is God, this is not.” But it occurred to him as a sudden and unwanted rush that now, like a wish granted, he had a reason for speaking to Virginia.

“Oh dear,” she exclaimed. “Oh dear,” throwing up her hands although the spill had avoided her region of the table, and, to his relief, the liquid hadn't touched her.

“So sorry,” he said. Forget the answered prayer, this upset him greatly. Why had he taken the stupid lid off the latte? He went to get napkins, but Virginia had already popped out of her seat.

“We need a mop over here,” she declared loudly in the direction of the kid waiter she liked to heckle.

One thing Charlie had noticed—maybe it was generational, maybe demographic—some folks had to address every minor incident in the most official way. In his perspective, if you have a spill under a table you wipe it up the best you can with a napkin and maybe the spot will just be a little sticky till someone wipes the whole place down as part of the nightly cleaning or whatnot. Be discreet, that was his way. Don't over present. But no, the other mindset was that an inevitable incident must be handled properly, right then, with mops, with getting as many people involved to make the biggest spectacle possible. He didn't like it. The sudden attention and the stares and here was the boy coming over with the mop bucket and an arrogant face, like everyone and everything was stupid, as Charlie pulled the chairs out of his way and Virginia leered.

“Well, I guess that ordeal is over,” said Charlie, sitting back down and feeling goofy now that his low profile had been shattered and everyone in the place had taken a glance in their direction. “I'm Charlie.” Would she be cold towards him now, because of the spill? He hardly cared anymore. He had not been the object of a spectacle since years before with his mother, who had no problem initiating public arguments with him or with strangers.

Virginia leaned in with her makeup plastered face. “What?” she said, her hand behind her ear.

“I’m Charlie,” he repeated, feeling foolish and surreal with every word. “I think I’ve seen you around before today. You must come here often?”

“Oh yes, often,” she said, looking past him. “All the time.”

“You live around here, then?” It occurred to him, as he said it, that this was an intrusive question to ask a stranger.

“Now, I do. Just a few streets over.” If he had thought she was going to turn a cold shoulder and wouldn’t be interested in conversation like she was with everyone else, Charlie was relieved to find his fears disproved. She took a big sip of her wine, half the glass. “I live with this woman whose home I used to own,” she said. “It’s a strange situation. I think, most people would find it very strange.” She smiled, her cheeks dipping at places, revealing wrinkles where the makeup cracked. “You can imagine it’s not pleasant at all, and it isn’t. Me living on a friend’s couch like some high-school dropout girl who does drugs. No,” she shook her head, “not ideal at all, and her being that way, being hostile. It’s as if every one of her problems has got to be a problem for me. That’s how it goes.”

“People tend to baffle us,” said Charlie, not knowing how to take any of this.

“Oh they do,” said Virginia, clapping her hands and laughing with a high-pitched gasp as if he’d said something profound.

Charlie smiled. “I think I might have seen you at my church, is that possible? Do you go to Tippecanoe Presbyterian?”

He started visiting Seventh Roast three or more times a week to continue his job search,

and it did not take long for Virginia to adopt him as one of her regular outlets for conversation. He'd come in around noon and order his tea latte and just as he got settled with the laptop she would be there, slipping into an empty chair, her wine in hand.

Virginia spoke like an audiobook. She talked about her ex-husband, the accountant, whom she had divorced twenty-five years before, how she'd never understand that a man could go from hardly drinking once in a six-month period to "thinking he needed it" every single night. Then she'd take a big, showy gulp from her glass, as if this were an intended irony, the best part of the joke: she needed it too.

"You have no idea what someone will become," she said. "You have no idea. He's dead to me now, Ron is. I said to myself the moment these papers were signed, 'The man that you married no longer exists.' I've been a widow ever since."

Charlie would nod, frown, smile when something was supposed to be funny. She didn't need him to say anything, just to sit in the listening space. His presence validated the use of her breath, and somehow he was always intrigued.

Over the next few weeks she told him about her four grown children who lived out of state. Two who had doctorates and one who had headed up the national charity division of Noah's Craft and Fabrics since the age of twenty-six. She told him that when she was married, they had at one time owned thirty houses, she and Ron, all over the county, and she had served as landlord for many years. Whenever repairs or renovations were required, she'd insisted they do it right, with modern windows and garbage disposals as they would if they themselves had lived there.

"I lost nearly everything, after the divorce," said Virginia. "All that was supposed to be mine." Up until last year, she'd limped along in her house, surviving on a pathetic retirement pension and renting out rooms to college students and poor, single adults on SSI. "I didn't mind.

It wasn't so bad after you get used to people living in your space. The only times it didn't work was when the guys ended up being alcoholics, and I'd come home to find one of them lying beneath the kitchen table."

And she'd take a sip of her wine.

But last year things had finally gone "sour" with the bank. Charlie wasn't sure what Virginia meant by that, but apparently there was a lot of lying and illegal activity going on from the side of the bank and its lawyers, according to her.

"They're all crooks," she kept saying in unoriginal language which Charlie would have wanted to think was beneath her. Nonetheless, she was convinced that the "bank people" and those who worked at DHS were all out to get her, that it was their criminal actions which had driven her to the state she was in. The year before, she'd been forced to leave her home and sell her car for next to nothing and resort to an absolute last option, which was to reduce nearly all of her belongings to a four-by-six foot storage unit and begin sleeping on a couch in the apartment of a Sudanese woman, who had once been her own tenant, and who was also bitter and violent because CPS had taken her children away, many years ago.

It wasn't so much that anything Virginia ever said was unbelievable or that he had reason to consider her false, but still he had some sense that these stories were all to be viewed in the context of her perspective. After all, what would the "bank people" have to say about it? Here was this woman who seemed so peculiar, who he had noticed a few times as one takes to recalling specific strangers who pass regularly through daily life, and like the flick of a light switch, here was her world laid out thin before him in the extreme publicness of a coffee shop, as if he were some worthy confidant, to whom gossip and scandal must to be shared. Charlie didn't know, however, about one large aspect of her current life which she had yet to disclose. It must

have been all she thought about, the one big hope for putting everything right, and still she found it in her every day to go on about her past, reliving the whole dramatic narrative of people who had wronged her.

“Sounds like you’re being smart about it.” He would always say something like that in response to her ruminations, a weightless reassurance over situations which continued to bewilder him, making him feel as though his eyes had been partially shut most of his life. Growing up, he didn’t know people like that. He never had. “Doing what you can to keep a roof over your head. I imagine it’s not easy.”

“Oh no,” Virginia said, “you have no idea how hard it’s been.”

And she was exactly right. There was nothing in her history common to his experience, and though she was repetitive and rambling, the more he learned from her the more he could only regard her with pity and a desire to legitimize her, that is, to believe in the sincerity of her perspective, where others—judging by their occasional glances towards their table—clearly did not.

Virginia was Charlie’s only friend at that point, and he was conscious of this with feelings split between his undeniable eagerness towards having someone to talk to yet all too aware of how pathetic it was that the woman was his only outlet for conversation and the only person he felt comfortable with. Pathetic, not because she was elderly or because of her digressive speech, but because she was the only person—the only one—and it was the highlight of his week. He would wake in the mornings, drive around town in search of job advertisements, and on many days he would end up back at Sacred Roast, speaking to Virginia Day for what could easily turn into three-hour sessions. Even the nights were better as he sat alone and ate his dinner, because there’d be tomorrow, and he’d be getting out there again and seeing what sense he could make of

the world and his need for it. Life's not so bad, he would think. Praise the Lord, it was not. If he could only find a way to start making money again, that was all he needed for the present.

In time, Virginia revealed to Charlie what became a puzzling thread in their discussions. They had just sat down, one morning, and she was waiting for the burger she had ordered.

"I haven't told this to many people," she said.

"What might that be?" Charlie asked.

"I haven't told you, even, because of how I know it will sound." And there was something about that "even" that was so affirming of their friendship, so crystalizing if he had ever doubted it. *Even* you. It was good to be that way with someone.

She went on: "I haven't told a lot of people, because I don't ever know how they're going to take it, telling me I'm wrong, or I ought to be careful, that gets discouraging, you know."

"What is it?" he said.

"And here my own kids are on the phone saying, Mom, you've gone crazy. Mom, that's not how things work these days. So I just figure I'll have to let them see for themselves after he comes."

"I'm not following you," he said. "I believe you, whatever it is, but I don't understand."

She smiled widely. "The thing is, Charlie, I'm engaged!"

She couldn't have surprised him more. "Like, to a man, you mean?"

"That's right," she said. "To a real, live man."

They both laughed. She more than him. "The most remarkable thing has happened to me over these past few months. I know how it sounds, but it's true. I've finally met someone, and it's like we were made for each other. All this time, and at last I've found him."

"And this guy is, who?" he said, feeling skeptical.

“Brett is in the Army. In Iraq.” Charlie nodded. “He’s older,” she said, and he wondered if that meant he was older than she or older in general, as one would naturally assume given her own age. But, then, how much *older* could he be and still serve in the military?

“When did you meet him?” he asked.

“Two months ago. Two months exactly from this past Friday.”

“He’s currently serving then?”

“I should say he is, currently serving.” She laughed, almost splashing him with a drop of her wine as she plopped the glass on the table. Sitting low in her chair, Virginia looked sunken. Not that she was small, he thought, so much as she had deteriorated. Her skeleton was large enough that her stature did not appear shrunken with age. She was not fat, though. She had not acquired mass in those later years. “All right,” she said, “I’ll tell you what he is.” She glanced around cautiously, not wanting others to hear. “The first time he started messaging me, I asked him, ‘So what do you do?’ And he says to me, ‘Well, you’re not going to believe this but I’m the first-star general of the United States Army!’” She clapped her hands in a gesture that was young and old-lady-like at the same time. “Do you know what this means?” she said.

He did not.

“It means Brett is the one in charge of all those guys over there. He’s the man on top of the United States Army.”

Charlie had many thoughts, and one of them was that there were also generals of two, three, even four or five stars, and therefore this general, if he was a general, was likely not the highest, being star number one. “So how did you meet this man?” he asked.

“On my phone.” She held it up as a piece of evidence. “With the people I connect with on the Internet.”

Virginia was near giddy. Charlie felt a strong aversion to her story, despite his desire to affirm what she was saying. “Wonderful. Excellent news,” he wanted to say as if the news was that one of those four, successful children was finally going to pay their old mother a visit or she had just crossed paths with some long lost classmate from fifty or sixty years ago. Or, say the man, this general, had been living in the city, say she had met him last week and now she was introducing him. Charlie would have been happy for her, would have been overjoyed. But how could any real friend suspend disbelief without batting a wary eye? He imagined, or had read, that elderly folks were particularly susceptible to these kinds of scams. How could he bear to tell her that this “Brett” person was almost certainly one of those, and she had better be careful? Nevertheless, Virginia, one half-step from living on the streets, was an odd target as opposed to some rich and lonely retiree. Who would bother to try and steal her monthly pension or whatever they were after?

For a moment they were quiet, listening to the clanking dishes, the shake of change at the counter. He didn't want anyone to overhear, didn't want anyone judging her hope and vulnerability.

“So you and this man, the general, you chat back and forth online and things?” he said.

“We do. Every day.”

“But he hasn't come here to Wisconsin yet?”

“He's trying to,” she said, growing serious. “You can't just leave when you're the general of the United States Army.”

“I guess not.”

“He said he'll be returning in the next few months though.”

“And he proposed to you?”

“He said, ‘When I get back to the states, *I will make you mine.*’ That’s how he said it.”

CHAPTER IV

One day, as Charlie was about to leave the coffee shop, Virginia asked for his phone number. An ordinary enough request, but Charlie was taken aback. One of the first things he'd done when he'd moved back to the house was to get rid of his mother's landline, which was constantly going off throughout the day. His rationale was that anyone who didn't know she'd passed probably wasn't that important to her and, therefore, to him. He still had a TracFone, which he'd been using for job applications—not that it mattered—but he didn't know the last time he'd actually received a call. He gave Virginia the number, and she wrote it down on a flier for some city street concert and stuffed it into her orange purse, which was large with gaping seams that rose from end to end like Viking horns.

“I wanted to make sure I had a way to get a hold of you,” she said. “In case I ever get into a situation. You seem like the kind of guy who'd be of great help in an emergency.”

Charlie was flattered that she thought this way of him. Later, he would guess that Virginia had expected there would be an emergency. Calling on him, she had lined up her resources in anticipation of it.

Sure enough, three days later she called him in the late morning. He was at home, washing his mother's Toyota.

“Hello, this is Charlie,” he said, with the sudden hope that finally this was a return call regarding a job.

“It's over. It's all over,” said a frazzled voice, as he started to recognize who he was speaking to.

“What's over?” he asked, stepping out on the back porch, an old habit, he supposed, to avoid his mother on the rare occasion that he needed to use the phone. “Where are you?”

“She’s been evicted.”

“Who?”

“Tuma. That African lady I’ve been living with. They came while she was getting her nails done and made me leave too. All her stuff and mine, they threw it all outside.”

Oh dear, Charlie thought. Virginia made it sound like the woman had not told her this was going to happen, but perhaps she had known, or had a pretty good idea, and that was why she’d asked for his number at such a convenient time. “Where are you right now?” he said.

“I’m standing out in the front yard. I don’t mean to cause trouble if you’re busy, I just need to find a way to get this stuff to my storage unit and didn’t know who else to call.”

He was taken aback by this. To think, someone pulling him out of the place he was in by a simple phone call, right as he stood in his driveway performing his life. Nothing happened to him spontaneously any more. There were no interruptions. He always had a rolling plan, a sense of exactly what was to happen next: that day he would finish washing the car then cook a late lunch of rice and beans to eat with the rest of the avocado then send an email to a staffing agency he’d seen a flier for then it would be cooler outside and, with his food now digested, he would go jogging, which he hadn’t done in years, but had decided he ought to try in attempt to measure his fitness before he ended up lifting boxes in a factory or whatnot.

“I can head there now,” he said. “What’s the address?”

“You don’t have to,” she said. “It was just if you had any ideas about what I should do is all.”

“Let me help,” he said. “I have the time.” More of it, those days, than he knew what to do with.

Charlie drove through a tight neighborhood of small houses, yards the size of an average

bedroom. Mostly, these were rentals with broken handrails and unkempt lawns. Down at the dead-end of the drive, he came to a gray building, house sized, dating to the sixties or seventies, with four apartments in its quadrants. It was about five blocks from the coffee shop, which made sense, as Virginia no longer had a car. Already, the entire length of the building was taken up by mounds of discarded junk.

Off to the side, into the shade, Charlie spotted Virginia peering over the pile as if trying to see through a swamp. She didn't hear him pull up, or didn't turn his way if she did. None of her makeup was done, and her hair was crazy, as if it had been through a wave of static. She wore a black dress, low cut and sleeveless, out of place. Her legs were thin and white and from this angle it was as if she was standing in a sea of domestic wreckage.

He parked in the street and walked towards the mess. So this was an eviction. He knew the concept, had never seen one. Evictions didn't occur in Tippecanoe from what Charlie could recall, and neither where he had lived in Iowa. Even his mother's basement, before he'd gone to work on it, was nothing like this. Full boxes were overturned, a bed-frame wedged upright between a mound of white trash bags, drawers from a dresser sat askew on top of more bags and boxes and plastic totes thrown sideways with their contents spilled, paper cards and fabric squares.

He joined her where she stood beneath the only tree in the yard. For a few minutes, he too just studied the junk. It was daunting, hard to believe such volume could fit into a one-bedroom. Must have been cramped. If he'd thought this project would take like thirty minutes, he was deceived. It had been a while since the weight of a task had been set before him, a chore in which he was bound to serve someone other than himself, and he knew with some anxiety and irritation that now he just needed to get the ordeal over with. Wasn't like he could drive away and leave

the poor woman. Of course, he'd conquered much bigger projects than the eviction. For example, the endeavor to clean and update his mother's entire house. But that was all personal, self-motivated, a task he could stop whenever he liked which was likely the reason it became so engrossing and seemingly effortless as the hours passed.

"Is a lot of this stuff yours?" he finally asked.

"It's mostly her stuff."

"Oh good." He was glad to hear it. This would be a task of gathering maybe no more than a carload. "So what things are yours?" he said.

"I don't know," said Virginia.

"You don't know?"

"My stuff is," she waved her finger over the pile. "It's all there, somewhere. Those Mexican guys, when they came, they just started grabbing. I wasn't allowed to go back inside."

Charlie could see he was going to have to take the leading role. But then he remembered the woman whose apartment it was and all that Virginia had told him about her a few weeks before, how she was angry and violent sometimes and, most of all, didn't like men, didn't like them anywhere near her house.

"What about a handyman?" Charlie had asked.

"Doesn't matter," Virginia had said.

What would happen, he now wondered, if she drove up and found him digging through her stuff?

"So that woman is gone, then?" he asked her as they stood before the mound. "The woman you've been living here with?"

"Tuma? I have no idea where she is. She should be back any minute now."

He did not find this comforting. “You think it’ll be a problem if I’m here when she shows up?”

Virginia gave him only an empty frown, as if she remembered nothing she had told him the other day.

“I mean, what would you say if that happens?” he asked. “If she comes by when I’m here.”

“I wouldn’t say anything. Her and me, we’re finished.”

This seemed like an inadequate plan, but he turned to the task before them and suggested they go through the pile systematically, segregating the things that were hers.

After that, it went along easily. He’d grab tarps and bags and soggy boxes and drag them to an empty section of the lawn for Virginia to pick through. As he’d hoped and imagined, most of her items were manageable in size: file papers, bottles of perfume, many articles of clothing. Some jewelry, lots of jewelry in fact, which she scooped into a brown paper bag.

“I guess I don’t need everything,” she said to his surprise and relief.

“We’ll get as much as we can though,” he assured her, though he was deeply satisfied to know she wasn’t going to be stubborn about every little earring. His mother would have been like that. But then, his mother would have never found herself in this situation. She’d have died before that happened.

“It’s mainly just an orange box,” Virginia said, “that I’m still looking for and a green bottle of pills.”

“A large box?” he said, indicating with his arms.

“No, teeny-tiny.” She held up her thumb and forefinger.

He began combing through the greater pile now, which was still mostly unchanged, but with this specific pursuit. Scraping through drawers, scrounging into the deep well of a couch

cushion to pull out white sacks containing cereal box tops. There were spoiled grocery items and crusty towels and bundle after bundle of unused fabric and colored sand spilled everywhere in one general region like the desert of this eviction, but no orange box and no green bottle of pills. Still, he would come across some special article of clothing or a bag of hair products and Virginia would grab for these frantically, exclaiming that she had forgotten about that skirt or that velveteen vest, how there was no reason to keep the brown slacks without it.

Walking back to Virginia's pile in the lawn, he observed that she was not organizing as much as she was studying and reminiscing upon what they had found. Christmas cards. Legal documents. A Boy Scout uniform from one of her sons. "Oh, and look what I almost lost," she said, flipping open a blue folder where he caught the quick glimpse of a photo, which must have been of her from many years ago. She even had a commemorative license plate stolen off a local politician's car in a parade, she told him. Why did she have these things? Why here, considering that she had a storage unit with the rest of her possessions? All these discoveries, although she had only lived there for the past six months. He would come to expect these distractions out of Virginia. Likewise, they never found the little box, nor the jar of pills.

"Should I go over it one more time," he said, "in case we missed something."

"No," she said, taking a light green stocking out of a bag and holding it up to the sun. "I think that's good enough."

They consolidated her things, mostly by Charlie's direction, folding and stuffing the clothing into brown grocery bags, the papers into a beat-up, strapless attaché case that served as her filing cabinet. All of it fit in the car, though not without difficulty in getting the trunk to close.

Charlie opened the driver's door to get in, and all at once the smell of her things in the tight

smallness of the car hit him. A noxious blend of perfumes, so strong and distinct you'd recognize it years later. In the following months, he would always sense a hint of that odor radiating from Virginia's clothes, though never the initial intensity.

He was fiddling in the car, adjusting the front seat to accommodate the load, and Virginia was about to get in, when they heard another car pull up behind them, and he turned to see a gray station wagon from the late nineties. It squeaked to a stop as an elegant, professional looking woman with a white shirt and a blazer climbed out and started cussing at them, spit flying from her mouth.

"You steal from me?" the woman shouted with an iron voice. It was Tuma. It had to be.

"I didn't take anything that wasn't already mine to take," declared Virginia—an unnecessarily complicated statement, he thought, in place of a simple "no."

Tuma approached, slowly but with deep steps. "I will call the police on you. This mess, it was you who brought it about."

"We're finished," said Virginia. "I have nothing more to do with you."

"And who is this?" said Tuma, pointing at him. "The culprit in this crime you have committed against me in my home."

One significant effort of Charlie's life was to avoid such confrontations. He would sooner cross the street, start taking a different route altogether, find a new dry cleaner. But he found it incredible, the foolish, crude mentality of someone being like that. A stranger screeching at you over a speck of mud flown off your shoe. So unexpected, so unwarranted, and then, afterwards, to let said stranger live on in your mind breaking you up into pieces the rest of the day. As if an accusation, just because it was loud, just because it was boisterous, was somehow indicative of

the real issue. How could Charlie help but reduce those actions to primal terms? Sports-like stuff. The big dumb notions of old world manliness, or in the African woman's case—well, it became racist if he took it there: the fearful outbursts, the raw aggression... But this day was not like other days. There was something different about his placement in it, his role as Virginia's cab driver, connected now to the wellbeing of someone else, which was not to say that he didn't want to run, only that for once he knew he could not.

“Let's get in,” he said to Virginia who didn't hear him. “We've got everything we need, let's leave.”

He ran around to the other side of the car and opened her door. Virginia began to slip inside, but slowly, still facing the woman.

“I hope you see now that you can't go on living forever as you have,” declared Virginia. “You've treated me very poorly, and I will not forget!”

Charlie stooped to pick up Virginia's right leg and shoved it in the car and slammed the door and sprang halfway over the hood to get back to his side. They pulled away as the woman kicked the bumper with a loud thud. It sounded like rocks against a window. She screamed some more garbled profanities which were stifled through the rolled up windows and the sound of the car scraping gravel. Spit came out of her mouth from the rear-view mirror, although it seemed he should have been too far away to see it.

Maybe his real issue with confrontations was the accusation itself. The raw gall of someone. As if he had stolen anything. As if his motive for being there could be anything more than his own goodwill to help a friend. He had been right to come to Virginia's aid. No matter what that woman said, he had done no wrong.

Charlie pulled out of the dead end onto Appleton and sped up. Neither he nor Virginia

spoke until they were a mile or two down the road.

“So where are we headed?” he said. “The storage unit?”

“I just don’t know how somebody could treat another person like that,” said Virginia, shaking her head.

“At least she didn’t show up while we were still separating your stuff.”

He turned down a quieter street and off to the side, in front of a red house where they could get their bearings. Virginia had gone into one of her vacant moments, sitting straight in her seat and gazing out the windshield.

“What part of town is the storage unit in?” he asked.

“There’s just one more thing I was thinking about with all this?” said Virginia.

“That box and the pills?”

“No, I was thinking about the bed we left at the house.”

“Oh,” he said, relieved by the obvious excuse that there was no way he could accommodate such a thing with his car. Besides, hadn’t Virginia told him that she slept on a couch? He had assumed the frame and the mattress belonged to Tuma. “That bed is yours?” he asked.

“No, it’s hers,” said Virginia. “It’s just.”

“Just what?” He felt mild unease at this conversation because it reminded him of the immediate question which he had not yet approached, which he had mentally avoided as they gathered her things out of the rubble: where would Virginia stay that night and from now on?

“She was not nice to me, you see. I mean, she became violent and hostile. It’s difficult to live with a person like that. I don’t know about her hardship with her kids and them taking them away, but just... and then I think about the bed going to waste out there. It really is a fantastic

bed, a good frame, just sitting out there when it starts to rain. She's got nowhere to go. I know she doesn't, not where she can take the bed."

"I don't think there's any way we could get it," he said. "With the car."

She sighed and smiled, and he thought she seemed relieved, like she was in a way glad. An opportunity you almost wanted but are nonetheless grateful when something irrefutably prevents you. That's how he preferred to see it.

"It's okay," said Virginia. "You've done a lot. I mentioned it just in case, you know, in case something could be done."

"And it is her bed, right?" he asked. "So we couldn't take it without it technically being stealing."

"Most definitely." She sighed again, speaking more quietly as they faced a row of plastic trash cans in front of them. "But it sure would serve her. That would be fair, at least, after all she's put me through, and the bed's going to waste sitting out there, I know it is..."

Never would he think it was as simple as her having a mind to steal, as if some professional could assess and declare that her apparent disregard for the belongings of others earmarked a tangible flaw in Virginia's behavior, causing the circumstances which led to the situations she often found herself in. Her irrational request that they go back for the bed merely revealed to Charlie the other side of her behavior—of her possible behavior—which was so separate from his own gut instincts he couldn't understand how another person could think this way. Did he consider Virginia a thief, then? He knew she stole, but never did he think it was her default mentality, nor her desire. Oh, and what doctrine was this? As if the sense of right and wrong and possible vengeance toward a troubled immigrant woman who had, after all, let his friend live in her home all those months, was just another way of seeing things. How was that for

absolute truth? How could it be anything but paradoxical: *thou shalt not steal; vengeance is Mine, saith...* But it wasn't his way, merely his interpretation of Virginia's way which Charlie sought to comprehend in all possible factors of life and conditioning, making it understandable yet still unjustified.

CHAPTER V

The day after this great altruistic endeavor of helping his friend gather her things and take them to her storage unit across town, Charlie became convinced that he had done something awful. For weeks he would cringe about it, despite their later reconciliation and no indication from Virginia, ever, that she saw this mistake for the unchristian betrayal he believed it to be. By four in the afternoon, that day, they had stuffed everything into her storage unit: a simple, wooden cupboard with a particle board door, as if it had been built with a circular saw in someone's garage.

"They gave it to me for a deal," Virginia said.

It had taken nearly a half hour to get there and even longer with the traffic on the way back. Somewhere along the drive, it occurred to him that he had no idea where he was taking her afterwards or where she would end up staying that night. It was an uncommon experience for him, not to know exactly what was to happen next, not to have any idea where he was headed except the basic, general direction towards their end of town. This was foolish, like one of those impossible childhood fears that used to take control of him late at night, but he couldn't bring himself to ask her if she had plans or what was going to happen next. Ever since he had showed up in the afternoon, he felt like he was carrying the continual responsibility with him, a clutch on his life which he was not used to. Even for a day, a few hours, this was what it meant to have obligations, and he didn't know what to say or think, how to progress, without locking himself down into something he didn't intend. He was relieved when, after a drive of near silence, she asked him outright if they were going to Seventh Roast.

"Of course," he said.

He pulled up outside the entrance right next to the bushes as if to drop her off before he

parked and went in except, after she got out, he didn't park. As soon as the door to the coffee shop had swung shut behind her, he drove away, turned onto Michigan, and went home with the thought that maybe he would turn off his phone that night, maybe he would conveniently find another coffee shop to attend for the next few weeks, a new church.

Before he was home, he was already battling the conviction that he shouldn't have left her like that, should have asked where she planned to stay for the night. The lingering odor of her belongings pervaded the car, and her obvious predicament sat heavy in its atmosphere. It was the end of October. Where in all of Milwaukee was she going to stay? He drove on and pulled into his driveway.

Oh, he ought to know better about preventing a giant mistake; dangerous, idiotic, inherently foolish to think that way—the obvious solution to her housing problem. He couldn't have her stay with him, could he? Was that even an option? Virginia in his house—surely, that was above and beyond. And what of her wanting to take the other woman's bed? Well, that was certainly a red flag if he wasn't too dumb to see it. This was exactly how good people got taken advantage of in their homes. Good people. Not the adult child who moves back home only after his mother passes away. He thought of his mother's old friends, so obvious their judgments beneath their sympathy. He could sense it. But it would hard to consider him a lowlife after they came to appreciate the extent to which he'd cared for Virginia, after they saw him attending church with the old woman.

By the time he'd taken a shower and was fixing a long-delayed meal of oven shawarma on top of homemade hummus—despite his evaporated appetite—he was almost ready to drive back and see if she was still at the coffee shop. But he didn't, wouldn't. She must have worked something out, he told himself. Another friend possibly. Brett, the general? He had left his phone

on after all. She had his number, and if she needed something she would call like she had before. Wouldn't she? Or would she feel that she shouldn't bother him, stick it out in less than ideal conditions the entire night or longer, until he did something to help her. Charlie picked at his meal, hearing keenly the clinks of the fork and knife against the plate.

He reclined in the sunroom as the sky faded into an early dark, trying to read his new book on home vegetable gardening, unable to focus. There were two bedrooms upstairs. His parents' and the one his mother had claimed after his father's death. His childhood bedroom was on the first floor. Thanks to his own efficiency with the basement storage, these rooms were empty, except for the beds, which sat like untouched lawns. The next time he saw Virginia, which would be tomorrow, he would ask where she was staying and, if needed, he would do something about it. Yes, he regretted leaving her, but it was already dark. It was not possible to do anything now. Oh, but those two beds, those empty rooms, how could they be anything but an extra coat, a "tunic," as some versions say?

Charlie was never one to cough up passages out of thin air, stating their wisdom at inopportune moments of self righteousness or condemnation. That was his mother's way, with her pseudo King James expressions, though he knew she had used an NIV most of her life. No, his biblical haunts were just a smattering of partial verses in his mind, some with a certain mental hold as if they were out to get him.

The wind blew around the back deck, causing the windows of the sunroom to creak, and he shivered at his relocation of those words that wanted to stand there, unquestionable, like an inscription on his face. Say you had two coats, say there was someone out there who didn't have a single one... If that didn't speak to the situation with Virginia, then what other situation in this world possibly would? He sipped his tea. He felt weak. Two extra beds, rooms. Open spaces in a

cluttered city. There was no overlooking the evil in that.

Late that night, he found Virginia's number in his phone from when she called earlier that day, but he received no answer. Only a recording of her name, "Vir-gin-ia." It rained that night. Hard and obnoxious on the roof, nothing like the peaceful, soft pattering that induces sleep. He sat in bed and surfed the Internet and read some more and tried to sleep. There was nothing so unique about this, he told himself. But he imagined where his friend might be as it continued to pour—an open garage, under a tree, another friend's house maybe—and still he would not do what he knew he should, which was to get up and go out in the wet discomfort to see if he could find her. He lay there about an hour while the storm continued, tired but not really, and then he'd had enough. He threw on his clothes and went to the car.

Charlie had never liked driving in the rain at night and would avoid it whenever possible. There were times he'd stayed home because of it, like an old lady fearful of the ice. This had something to do with his eyesight and his depth perception, although he wasn't night blind that he could tell. He actually preferred the nighttime when he wasn't behind the wheel. Preferred it to the day. Day was for work; night for rest. But driving through the dark wetness was like soaring in a mesh-veiled world that lacked all regular description. The shine of artificial light blurred everything with circles of illumination which he imagined as a cloud of particles like a diagram in a science textbook, and he couldn't make out discretely the road or grass or the walls of dark brick.

There were no lights right near the coffee shop, so it was in fact easier to see around the dark premises. He circled the parking lot, as if she would have somehow stayed on the property after the place had closed. Then he began driving up and down the side streets with the mission of finding her old apartment, meanwhile scanning the lawns and the dark regions between.

Everything was drenched, a stream of water, several inches deep, ran fast down the edge of the street before it lurked into the drains. He drove slowly. There were not many cars, but the two or so that came passed before crossing back in front. Though the apartment was close by, he managed to get confused. At last, he recognized the side street with the four-plex at the end. She might actually be there, he was thinking. He had left the house mainly to appease his feelings of self contempt, to know he had done all he could to correct his mistake. But now that he was out there, he hoped it would be worth it. He could just see her waiting around until after the coffee shop had closed and then with the idea on her mind that she would sleep outside, that it wouldn't be so bad. Almost that she had started to look forward to it, and then it had started to rain.

The remains of the eviction pile were still there. A sopping mess of wet couches and deteriorating cardboard boxes. Tuma had not taken anything. He imagined that upon seeing it all uprooted in the most undesirable way, she decided to start completely fresh, wiping her life clean of her current belongings which no doubt appeared inaccessible in such exposure and disarray.

He parked on the side of the road as he had earlier and found his umbrella in the backseat. The area was lit by the moon, and once he was outside it wasn't hard to see. Remarkably, it had become almost like a normal night, drier and peaceful, the raindrops suddenly tame above his head. He approached the dark mass, its nondescript hues, wanting to make certain there wasn't any space in all this where a person like Virginia could be asleep. Not on the broken down sofa nor somewhere between the upturned mattress and its box of springs. "Virginia," he said, not so loudly as it was now the middle of the night. "Virginia."

He said her name a dozen times in different places and walked around the building until he noticed the tint of lamplight behind the blinds in one of the second floor apartments. He wasn't supposed to be there. He was a trespasser, albeit good intending, and what would someone do if

they looked out and he was standing in their backyard? He returned to the car.

Early the next morning, Charlie woke with a strong feeling that he needed to get to Seventh Roast and see if she was there. He'd made a promise and had to carry through or else this was another example of his once again fleeting assertions about some pressing issue, only for them to be forgotten by a new day of apathy. How many times had it been like that? Painful caring one night; hardly a care the next. It was a familiar agony to be so convicted all while knowing, too well, how soon the conviction would be lost. He could say there was a spiritual side to it. A sense that his going back for her was out of obedience. Or was it mostly in selfishness that he sought relief by knowing he had done all he could, rather than abandoning the woman in her time of need—thoughts that the Lord would bless him with a job if he kept on the path of righteousness and, also, his mother's friends—they too would know of his charity. He had the superstition, hated that it was always there at some level: the punishment reward complex reducing faith to that primitive place.

She wasn't at the coffee shop, although he supposed it was still early. He waited, guilty, unable to achieve anything much with the computer. What if she was gone? *Gone*. What did he mean by that? Of course she existed, somewhere, but gone in the sense that he would never see her? Which made the unusual endeavor once again narcissistic. Or was he thinking gone as in dead? No, that was ridiculous. She was fine. Wherever she ended up, it might not be comfortable, but she was fine. It was rain. No one died because of rain. Next time he saw her, he would ask where she was staying, and if it seemed necessary, he would offer her the room for a few days or even weeks while she figured something out. That was his only solace, the promise of his future generosity.

He stuck around Seventh Roast for several hours, and then he went home and tried to carry

on. Cooking. Bathing. Jogging long enough to decide it wasn't for him. He went back to the coffee shop the next day and the day after that and tried calling her several times over this period. Then it was another three or four days, and that was the weekend he received the call for an interview at a local bookstore. So he was preoccupied and at last this concern for his friend, like all his concerns, began to wane. The following Tuesday, he made it back to the coffee shop with the intention of typing out the answers to sample interview questions he found online as if the part-time retail job was the opportunity of his life, and there she was, sitting across the room, dressed as always with her makeup and her frizzled hair and, today, a clean white blouse.

"Virginia," he said, walking over to her.

"Hello," she said, and he was surprised when she said nothing more. Was she mad at him? Her hands were folded timidly on the table. Wrinkled hands with inflamed knuckles more fit to clasp a mug of tea or a church pew Bible, he thought, than the base of the wine glass. She didn't seem particularly well, but she wasn't bad off either. She looked as though nothing at all had happened.

"How are you?" he said. "I've been meaning to find you and ask about where you're staying."

"Where I am staying?" she said, confusedly. "Over on Fourth Street."

Oh dear, he thought. Outside as he'd expected. "You're living in what?"

"I'm at the women's shelter."

Ah. The shelter. Hadn't thought of the shelters. Surely, there were such places for people in these situations, but what did he know about that?

"I was afraid you wouldn't have anywhere," he said. "I really should have asked you about this the other day."

“No, I figured all along I would stay at the women’s shelter. I’ve stayed there before, you see.”

That, too, hadn’t occurred to him—that she could have dealt with this in the past, that the loss of her living situation and the risk of homelessness, might not be a crisis to her so much as it was to him.

“I didn’t know that,” he said.

“A few times I have. Whenever I get into a pickle with where I’m gonna live, I go see my old friends.”

It was always interesting to him how the worst ideas—often the least desirable—could sometimes evolve into good ideas, or at least not so undesirable ones, after a period of acceptance. A week before the thought of Virginia in his house was something he didn’t want to consider. Then a few more days of that shifting around in his mind, cooking rice and thinking how just as easily he could cook two servings, and then a random trip upstairs to the towel closet to check if he’d kept an extra change of sheets and his mother’s flowered comforter, before he decided to make the bed on the off chance that she or someone did actually end up staying there. So there he was, somehow eager at the prospect he had only recently dreaded. A change of pace. Something different from what life in the house had been.

“It’s lucky you came by today,” said Virginia. “I was hoping to see if you had any ideas for me. I can’t stay where I am any longer.”

“Oh,” he said, pondering the coincidence that the very day she needed a place to stay was the day he had at last found her. Was he the reason she had returned to the coffee shop? “They must have it limited how many days at a time you can stay,” he said, “at the shelter.”

She thought that was funny, and he didn’t understand. “If you saw the place, Charlie. You

have no idea. It's a crazy place.”

“I'm sure I believe you,” he said. “As far as tonight goes, it sounds like you're kind of in a position.” This made it easier. He could make the offer out of a genuine response to the news she had provided him, instead of coming out with it on his own.

“I think so,” she said. “I mean, I've had things like this happen before, and I'm still here after all. They'll let more people back into the shelter as soon as it starts snowing, but for now I have blankets, and I traded this lady for a soft coat, so I was thinking I'd probably just find an area. There's a stairwell not so far from here that leads down into a flat space, used to be a Mexican restaurant.”

How many old ladies did he know who were like that? Charlie thought of his mother's friends. They had stability, careers, family support, but what would they do in Virginia's situation? A lot of people, older people, would end up in the hospital or worse. It took someone like Virginia to get by in such unstable conditions. Confused, distractible with her various fixations on her housemate and the alleged fiancé, yet also strong and persevering in her own right. Even the defiance of her age, which he saw as her great weakness and her biggest breach from reality, was a strength. It allowed her to go on believing she could still do the things she used to and, perhaps for that reason, she still did.

“I won't have it,” said Charlie, feeling noble, then immediately foolish for speaking like this. “What I mean is what if for a few days, until you find another person to be roommates with or something, you stayed at my house. I have two extra rooms just sitting there. They even have beds in them.”

In part, he assumed she would reject the idea, but now that he'd made the offer outright, his remaining hesitation disappeared, and he really hoped she would take him up.

“How much would you charge me to stay there?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he said, surprised and chagrined that she couldn’t take this for the act of charity it was. “It would just be for a while, a few weeks maybe, until you find something more permanent.” The veins in her eyes were like maps. “I figure this way, ‘cause you said you’re getting that pension every month, you could save up to pay rent in a more permanent arrangement somewhere.”

“This is really nice of you,” she said.

He relaxed. “Well, if I have rooms just sitting there it’s a total waste for you to end up having to sleep outside or somewhere.” Then he had a terrible thought. “The rooms are on the second floor, up a flight of stairs. Is that going to be okay?”

She frowned. “It isn’t a problem at all. I can use the stairs. I’m doing fine for my health.”

“Sorry,” he said. “Just wanted to be sure.”

“I know you’re a nice guy, but I’m still healthy. My doctor says I’m doing great. Says there’s no reason I shouldn’t live another thirty years.”

“I understand,” he said. “So you’ll stay with me?”

“Can’t see any better option.”

In the afternoon they drove back to the storage unit to pick up more of her clothing. He figured she had purchased the blouse over the past week so she would have something else to wear. Her storage unit was stuffed to the ceiling from their last excursion, and they had to unpack almost all of it to access the trash bags in the back containing her shirts and the other articles. They were at the place almost two hours, and then he drove them in the direction of his house.

“So I guess they only let people stay at the shelter for a week?” he said. “I hadn’t realized it was so short term like that. Were they full?”

She sighed. “They’re supposed to let you stay three months. You have to understand, there are some fine people at the shelter, but some of the women, the ones they keep having there, they have a lot of problems.”

“Did something happen?” He thought of Tuma who Virginia had lived with before all this, of the unkindly greeting they experienced on her moving day. Put a regular old lady in such a mess, and of course she’d be prone to the mistreatment from others who were more or less in a similar circumstance except younger and better equipped. Someone like Virginia would serve as an outlet for their anger, an easy target. It was sad, because she was vulnerable, after all, and her trustingness would have to play a factor in the way people perceived her. It seemed inherently obscene for someone to curse at her, but perhaps he would have felt this way about all older people.

“It goes back to poor management,” she said. “One of the ladies who had some real issues said I stole her scarf, and the people running the place believed her instead of conducting a proper investigation.”

“Oh,” he said, thinking back to what she said last week regarding Tuma’s bed.

“I wasn’t stealing, though,” she said, as if to assure him of any unease. “I would never steal from those women, especially with everybody so close together at night. That was just what this lady said, and she had friends there. She’s been in the system for a while I guess, so they all stand up for each other. It was a plot to get me out from the beginning.”

“Why would someone do that?” Charlie asked.

“They’re black ladies,” she said, as if that answered the question. “I know they’re not bad

people, they're just very unified with one another."

With this heavy message sitting in the air, they turned down his street, pulling into the driveway of the house.

"They stick together better than we do, the blacks. And then the way they talk. I don't mean to sound, you know... I just think, is it really necessary to be like that all the time?"

"We're here," Charlie said, wishing to end this. He might have expected, but it was a bit of a shock to learn the extent of Virginia's prejudice, that it didn't end with the occasional badgering of a kid waiter in a coffee shop.

"This is where you live?" she said.

"Yes. It was my parents' house before it was mine."

"Looks fancy, from the outside."

"It's nice inside, too. I've tried to update it some since I started living here again."

They stood in the living room, setting down the plastic bags on the hardwood floor. The walls were stark white, which he hoped to change, but Virginia was colorful in front of them as the first foreign creature who had come into his sacred world. Her hair was a frizzy mess which always seemed amiss given the effort she put into her makeup and her clothes. Awkwardly, she glanced around as he questioned what he had gotten himself into while believing, at the same time, that he had no other choice; had felt no peace until he'd made the offer which he, for his own sake, needed her to accept. The room upstairs would not be left empty, and that was worth everything.

"Well," he said. "Let me show you the room so you can get settled in."

This was not the same room his mother had once shared with his father. That was where

Charlie now slept, along with the bed his parents had used. For years, this other room was his father's home office—a medium sized space he spent the majority of his time. About six months after his father died, Charlie's mother moved out of their grand bedroom and into the old office where she slept until she died. When Charlie was a child, he had his own downstairs room, a room he now intended to turn into a library if he didn't end up with some other hopeless derelict and the Lord clamping down on his shoulder.

It didn't strike him how bare Virginia's new room was until they were both standing in it with just the bed covered by his mother's comforter. Months before, he had cleared the place out, scattering the knick-knacks and wall art to all corners of the house or straight to the trash, depending.

“Will this work?” he said. “I'm afraid the main restroom is all the way on the first floor.”

“This is wonderful,” she said, gasping as she often did and glancing all around at the bare walls and the window without curtains as if there was something there to see. They set her bags on the floor, there was nowhere else, and she sat on the bed and gave it a youthful bounce.

“Yes, this is more than perfect,” she said.

CHAPTER VI

All those months with the house to himself and—even in the middle of the day, even in the big city—it was so nearly silent but for a passing car or the muffled roar of an airplane. Living alone, he'd gotten used to an adult kind of privateness, the adult version of a child's blanket fort, built out of wood and drywall and brick. Now, from the solitude of his room Charlie could hear the soft movements beyond the wall they shared—an intermittent pacing sound, a creak of a floorboard under carpet. Then nothing. Then another creak enough to remind him that he was not alone as he had been before. Already, he could feel a change in his personal atmosphere—an old way of being having crept back into the house with a new publicness about it. He supposed this was a little like it was before, when he still lived with his mother.

Not that he saw Virginia as a mother type figure, nor some ironic, anti-mother figure acting out that role in his house. But he had forgotten what it felt like: another presence in his space. He had to will himself not to immediately run from this as he had in the past. His mother had always represented the usualness of his life with her constant and absolute proximity. His eating, his sleeping, his coming and going about—she had her hands in all of it. But Virginia was his guest, someone whose wellbeing he couldn't help but care about. How could he be anything but polite and accommodating to her? That was the difference between friend and family. The newness of a bizarre acquaintance versus the tiredness of a familial system, a gift he wouldn't have chosen.

Charlie lay in his bed beneath the white ceiling and the fan that needed dusting. If he had a lock, he thought. The memory of his mother and her regular intrusions into his room, at all hours, had led to this. No matter what, he'd always been a single turn of the doorknob away from her. Often, in the years before, he'd had the thought that if he'd installed a chain lock on his bedroom, it would have helped him mentally—just the feeling that physical security brings; one

of those psychological things. He probably wouldn't have even used it.

The growling of his stomach interrupted Charlie from these ideas. Rarely did he wait to eat until he was fully hungry, but now he felt rejuvenated with the realization that he had a guest to feed, a wounded Levite in need of the Samaritan's ration, before he settled down at the day's end to study his questions for tomorrow's interview. With all this distraction, he had nearly forgotten.

He decided on Italian—everybody liked Italian—and went to fixing a quick dish of cavatelli with cherry tomatoes and pea pods in light cream sauce.

“You made food?” Virginia said, when he found her sitting on her bed, her luggage bags unopened and lying in the same pile where they had set them a few hours before. “Well, I don't mean to eat up your food.”

“No, come and have some,” he told her. “It's all just cheap ingredients anyway.”

He gave her what he thought was a reasonable portion in the center of a large dinner plate—not overwhelming though not stingy—and she ate less than half of it, saying it was very good. “Delicious,” she said and something about how it reminded her of a place she used to go with her husband, a family-owned Italian restaurant near Brady Street. “We used to know a lot of Italians. Most of the houses we rented out, we bought from the Italians when they all lived in the same area.”

Charlie turned to his food, observing that the nutmeg in the sauce was a bit overpowering, but could not release his conscious mind from Virginia's presence, could not stop seeing her crooked posture in the corners of his eye.

He asked her about the church, when she'd started attending. “Not so long ago,” she said. “This summer.”

Over the last few days, he'd wondered if he'd ever seen Virginia before his stint in Iowa

some three and a half years ago. He thought of the faces he remembered from years of growing up. Every Sunday and special occasions. There were many common faces he'd recognized but never spoken to: a short-haired boyish woman with a hand crippled enough to make a child uncomfortable for a whole service, a loud overweight man who liked to sit up front with his gaping gut and his belt loops pulled up into contortions. Charlie hadn't thought any more of that Bill or Al or whoever he was since before he'd moved, but the memory pricked his mind that night sitting across the table from Virginia. All those "amens" and "hallelujahs," inappropriate words the man had spat out jovially to their placid congregation. Must have been going through a phase of spiritual fervor, Charlie thought, and maybe now it was over, now it was back to the bar or the taco stand, to being fat and lusting and who knew whether he prayed, whether it was anything but the occasional, "God is good."

Charlie hated that he thought that way, that this was exactly true sometimes: a boorish person's spiritual phase. Somebody stumbles into church, puts themselves out there in the sheer innocent joy of hands raised, and all he could do was make it ironic. Funny and fake—the fat man with his big arms raised, hands like a stupid air-cup. "Does it make you holy, the way you hold your hands while the sweat darkens your sleeves?" "Amen" this month and what will it be the next? A bar and a taco stand, but today it's all glory hallelujah. He knew it was the devil telling him. He was entrapped, flawed in his thoughts, lacking kindness, the innocence of the child. At least he didn't see *her* this way as he so easily might have. With Virginia, at least he was freed by the mercy of his judgments.

"How did you get connected with Tippecanoe?" Charlie asked her.

"It was a group I went to for women. A lunch party they did all last summer, and there was one woman who would drive around in her van if somebody needed a ride."

The Women's Summer Luncheon and Bible Study. He remembered such a thing because—he shook his head at the coincidence—because his mother had not only been in charge of the biweekly event for the last two summers, but she had started it. Which meant that his mother was the reason he had seen Virginia in the first place. Now true, if he hadn't spotted her at church he might still have ended up meeting her at the coffee shop. Might have. But this wasn't something that could be known, exactly. All he could affirm was that he'd recognized Virginia at Seventh Roast because he had first noticed her at church, and his mother was one of the influences that led her there.

Virginia insisted that rather than throw away the remains of her portion of food, he save it for her to eat the next day. "No need to fix a whole other meal," she said. "I don't eat very much, ever."

She sat for a while as he finished eating. The pasta had gone cold. This was the first time in a long time that he hadn't devoured his food. A tired gaze had come over Virginia, her dark socketed eyes sunken and her forehead as red as her cheeks. She looked so nearly drugged. As before, he had noticed that she sometimes bore this intoxicated undertone, the not quite present not quite conscious countenance, and he thought that was one of the reasons people at Seventh Roast had such reservations about her.

"Are you all right?" Charlie finally asked. "Did you need anything else?"

She nodded. "The money I get, it'll be in my account next week, and then I can pay you for the rent," she said.

"Not for something like this," he said. "You'll need that for the next place. This is just a pit stop."

He didn't want to sound ungenerous, but she couldn't honestly assume she would be

staying here indefinitely. The Samaritan had paid for the Levite's care for the duration of his recovery, promising more if needed upon his return, but not forever. "It's my goal for you that you can find somewhere better," he said. "More fitting for the long term."

Although his house was nicer than anywhere she had probably lived in a while, he felt it was an immense strain for Virginia to be there, much, he supposed, as it was for him to have her there, although he was glad it had worked out. Was he inflicted with any special anxiety? The indeterminate nature of her stay, the hints she had made, now twice, at her own thievery? He may have been nervous, but he had a much stronger conviction that this was right, that things were occurring exactly as they were supposed to, whether that had anything to do with the Lord's prodding or some extra-religious morality he just couldn't resist.

That night after dinner Charlie found a screwdriver and removed the extra chain lock from the back entrance of the house and installed it on the door of his bedroom. The next morning, he spoke again at breakfast before heading out early for his interview.

"Here's a key," he said. He'd found several during the overhaul when he first moved back and kept them in a drawer upstairs.

"Oh," thank you. She took it from him and set it down on the table.

"Would a keyring be helpful?" he asked.

"I have something," she said, reaching into her purse which she carried around the house wherever she went. He wondered if she hadn't yet accepted the safety of the place, that here you could leave your things wherever you wanted or carelessly set them down with no thought at all, and they would be there when you came for them. She took out a wire bracelet and fit the key around it and slipped it over her wrist.

"So, I'll be out today," he said. "I have an interview to go to. Trying to get a job, finally."

“Well, you look prim and proper for it,” she said.

He was wearing a green dress shirt and a pair of khakis. The only new clothes he had purchased in the last four years. He had considered and decided against wearing a tie.

“Thank you,” Charlie said. “And I was wondering if you wanted a ride anywhere? Heading to Seventh Roast?”

“No,” she said.

“Heading somewhere else?”

“No, I think I’m fine right here for today.”

“All right, then,” he said. “Should be back by tonight.”

Heading out that first morning, he was troubled by the idea of Virginia alone in the house. Not that he feared she would do something, just the absurdity of her being there by herself, like a stray he’d carried home from the animal shelter. What would she do all day? Sit at the table? Bounce on the bed? If she had plans, he had no idea what they were besides “Brett,” the general. But this story was exactly the kind of fixation an ignorant person might latch onto. It sounded vacuous and improbable, like a teenager deciding to start a band. Naively, he’d supposed that now that she had a place to sleep, she’d be going out in the daytime to determine the rational next step for her life. And besides, she went to the coffee shop every day, so why not now? He was on the verge of fearing this would turn into something he did not intend or desire, though he couldn’t say precisely what that undesirable condition was.

With those thoughts heavy on his mind, Charlie attended his interview at the bookstore. As soon as he stepped through the door, however, his concerns evaporated. The store was larger than it had seemed from the picture on the website, a narrow brick building that went back eighty or more feet. It would have looked cluttered had any more bookshelves been added. A middle

aged woman, Mary, who owned the store with her husband, greeted him and led him to a room in the back which served as an office and also storage. Fifty or sixty boxes were piled in a corner and reached nearly to the ceiling. Mary had a librarian's demeanor with her golden glasses and a gray cardigan.

"We're seeking someone who's the organizer type," she said. "Someone who's naturally inclined to that sort of work without, really, doing much of anything else."

"I find it invigorating and empowering," said Charlie. "It'd be a joy for me to get this place where you want it to be."

He thought the interview went surprisingly well and only hoped he didn't come off as pretentious. He had aimed for a knowledgeable tone with a tint of creative fanaticism, which he thought spoke to his longevity on the job and the zeal he would put into the reorganization of books on the shelves once he learned the system. It was also funny that during the interview, as he glanced at the mountain of books piled behind them and one tall stack that had spilled and slid over the floor with paperbacks in upturned states of disarray, it occurred to him that this was exactly the sort of job somebody of a certain type would desperately desire. It would be the perfect store-job setting for the reader, writer type person, but here he was faking it and thinking, yes, this does relate in a way, the underused museum clerk and the keeper of books—how these jobs were connected by the same basic impetus.

Afterwards, he took himself out to lunch. Why not? He hadn't eaten out in a while. He ordered the special, Beef Wellington—which he'd never been able to cook right on his own—and thought about how he needed to approach the question to Virginia very soon before she became settled. The question of the plan. Where she intended to go for a permanent home? How he might assist her in achieving it?

But the weeks went on, and they didn't speak about it. He either forgot or avoided the topic whenever he remembered. Charlie would be up in his room, and he would hear her movements, the soft squeak of the boards enough to remind him, once again, that he was not alone, enough to bring him back to that constant thought: he still needed to talk to her about where she was to end up next—a place to live comfortably for the long term that was not his house. He needed to say it. No more of this, “Hi, doing well? Got everything you need?” Rather, “What’s the plan? How can I help? Where might we go from here?” He would think about it at night sometimes as he lay in bed. It was worse at night as hard thoughts often were. Virginia in his house and what was he doing with his life? Swallow another melatonin and twist his body on the hot sheets. But then with the next day, with his teeth clean and spicy from the toothpaste, his hair combed and the cool wetness of the morning breeze as he drove to work, windows cracked, he would think, well, I’ll get to it one day, bring it up when the time is right, no hurry. She was hardly a bother.

Working at the bookstore was the only job he'd ever had where the tasks were continuous for days on end. Always another dusty shelf, another box of '90s paperbacks, a loose book cover to be set aside for later matching when its faceless body finally turned up in some other box. He worked thirty-two hours a week which more than covered any basic expenses, given that he didn't have to pay rent or mortgage, and at the time he was relieved by the feeling of sustainability, which was not to say it wasn't difficult, going back to work and following a schedule again after so many months.

But everything felt immediately different—like Christmas break followed by the first day's return to the pungent presence of classmates and the expectations of school. Charlie went from living alone to living with Virginia to having a job in about two days, and the transition was vast.

Still, he imagined this to be a feeling most people experienced. A season, a life era of drifting along a certain apathetic course just long enough to forget that life had ever been otherwise.

Once he was fresh, active, buzzing with an energy that felt like grace. Now to wonder, did any of that ever really occur? High school, the corner store, mother? And then one day, like nothing, he was back—to work, to commitments, to an old woman pacing through his home; the guilt of his daily laziness gone to the newfound business of life.

Because he worked early mornings and partial afternoons, he didn't see Virginia before he left each day. He bought boxes of cereal, something he had not done since he lived with his mother, and told her she could help herself. By three or four most days, he was back home and sometimes she would be there, sitting in the living room on her phone or upstairs with the door closed, but oftentimes she was gone. Quickly, it became apparent to him that Virginia was not one to do regular meals, which, he supposed made sense, given the recent patterns of her life. Also, he didn't think she had much of an appetite. She was not a small person, but she was thin.

On these days when Virginia would go out to Seventh Roast or wherever else he didn't know, she was usually back by seven. It was getting dark around that time in the late fall, and if he was sitting on the first floor he'd hear the key in the lock—a long, drawn-out fidgeting like breath held underwater—until he'd go and turn the knob and slowly open the door.

“Oh,” she would say, every time as if surprised but pleased. She'd step in, slide off her heels. Sometimes a bag over her head if it had rained. Often when she got home she'd sit silently on the couch in the living room, depleted, her limbs languishing over the armrest. She looked like a teenager in this position. Arms in disarray, a careless posture as she stared bored or dumbstruck at the swirls of the ceiling plaster.

And then at some point in the evening if he hadn't gone upstairs to take his shower or

settled in bed with a *Saveur Magazine*, they would end up speaking to one another, often for no more than fifteen minutes, sometimes for much longer.

One thing Charlie was curious about: “Did you ever hear of a woman named Linda Agate?”

“Linda Agate,” she said, mulling over the words. “I don’t know that I have.”

“She was my mother. I was just curious, because of church. She was a big figure, involved I mean, for a long time. It was mostly in the women’s ministry department where she worked.”

In time, Virginia got to telling him all about the different churches she had been a part of. As a child her family had been Presbyterian. She had taken the kids to a Methodist church down the road when they were little, but her husband was not a steady attender. He had tried to be “steady” for the first five years, but couldn’t make himself care. Didn’t want to become bitter towards something that was obviously important to her, or so he said when he decided never to return. She went through various congregations after the divorce and after her kids had moved out, a big nondenominational church across town and later an Eastern Orthodox.

“I’ve always attended somewhere,” said Virginia.

Recently, she had settled again at the Presbyterian Church, taking rides on a outreach bus. It was a straight shot down the street from her old home with Tuma, and she said she liked Pastor Phan and his style, the way he put it all out there in such an honest manner.

“Don’t you think he’s brilliant?” said Charlie. “I do.”

“He’s surprisingly... well, Chinese men are very studious men in general.”

So it went with their conversations. Every topic from her children, to her husband, to her life growing up, her churches, except for that one topic—how long she would be staying in his house—which always felt forbidden, like a contract breached were he ever to bring it up. He

listened, unable to interrupt her some nights as she went on. They were civil with each other, almost to a fault; perhaps their friendship was stunted by this constant cloak of politeness.

Around that time, he started taking her with him to church. No reason not to when he was going there already. They would ride in the car, sit together at the service. She dressed outlandishly, sang cringingly, but after that first Sunday she always stayed in her seat, and there were no further incidents such as the one involving the coats. Never had they spoken of it, as Jo- Ellen Roots had advised him, but he wondered if Virginia was consciously or subliminally aware of the reservations the church leadership had about her. Still, he felt as if their very presences came with an aura of ugliness and possible treachery when they stepped into that church. What he had done as charity, they saw as foolishness, recklessness—getting involved with someone like that, putting her in his house of all places. What he needed to do was get her settled. That was the ultimate display of charity. Not only that he, the Good Samaritan, would tend to his Levite now, but establish her for the remains of her days. His mother's friends, the kind church people, how could they disregard the goodness of that?—what with all their praise of adoption and the African missionaries. After they left the church each Sunday, he would always ask Virginia if there was anywhere she needed to go—fancying that they might drive past a nearby senior living facility—but she would tell him no, and they would drive back home.

Virginia didn't have a lot of things to leave out, but just a bobbin or a stocking—long, thin orange hairs in the downstairs bathroom sink—Charlie was always aware of it. Or he would open the refrigerator to find half a tiny burger, unwrapped, sitting in the open rack as if a child had placed it there, or a full bottle of red wine, cheap Merlot or Malbec, and the next day it would be gone. And then there was the incense which caught him off guard.

“Inside the house!” he had exclaimed, after following his nose to her door and finding the

room filled with a sweet, herbal haze.

“Smells good, doesn’t it?” she said. “Much better than these old walls.”

“Yes, but, is it safe?”

“Safe as candles.”

Silently, that night, he considered the things his mother would have said about people who burn incense in their homes—careless, negligent, new age—and yet, hadn’t she been liberal with the candles all around the kitchen counter, some nights, and the living room and even up the stairs like some personal ceremony? Still, for a few nights at least, the idea of Virginia burning incense bothered him in a way that candles with their open flames never had. What if she went out and left it burning? What of the smoke? Would it create a permanent effect in the room?

In some ways, Charlie became more sequestered after she moved in, spending a much greater percentage of the time in his room than he had before. What could account for the insecure behavior? When he was home he wanted to be home, and now his room, often in bed under the covers with his magazine or his evening movie, was the only place where he felt like he was.

It took her weeks, but Virginia finally opened up to him about Brett—the man she had mentioned only once, declaring her engagement at the coffee shop. What happened to Brett? Charlie wondered, assuming that the so-called engagement had fallen apart and not wishing to bring it up. Afterwards, when he learned that the marriage was still very much a reality in Virginia’s mind, he realized that she must have been planning to live in his home until the general finally came for her.

That day, he’d been cleaning on the main floor, and she had been around with a cup of tea. Weeks before, he’d showed her the drawer where he kept it, which was mostly still the supply of

his mother's minus the ancient package of Darjeeling he'd thrown out.

It was such a strange way that Virginia restarted the conversation about Brett. They weren't even talking when she called to him from the sunroom. "Is there no woman, then?" she said.

He heard this but did not understand and went into the sunroom where she sat, calmly, with her phone upside-down on the glass side table.

"Did you say something to me?" he asked.

"You don't have, I mean, you haven't ever been married and there's no girlfriend or anything?"

"No," he said. "There isn't."

She nodded. "And there never has been." It was not a question.

"Well, no, not in any exact way," he said, feeling exposed. He never thought Virginia to be terribly interested in his life. She was courteous, but she was also self-absorbed. The prospect of her having thoughts about him, his life and his ways of being, caught him off guard.

"Pardon me," she said. "Who am I to pry with questions like that? It's just..." She shook her head with a slight, sad smile. "I know you don't really believe me, what I was telling you, about Brett."

He was shocked. "You haven't said anything about him," said Charlie. "I wasn't sure if—."

"Not sure if it was really going to happen?"

"You talked about him, but because you hadn't met him yet, it seemed like the sort of thing that might not always work out, unfortunately."

"Well, it is working out," she said, not harshly but happily. "It is going to happen. Let me

show you.”

Virginia’s smart phone was a few years dated, a model they sold at drug stores. She used it often, but Charlie had not inspected it until then. Now she held the phone in one hand, slowly pushing the buttons with the pointer of her other. A listing of names popped up. “No, that’s not it,” she said. He waited as she fumbled with the phone, her lower lip creeping up beneath the other. “Well, shoot,” she said. He peered over her shoulder, and—as if just by his young gaze—her phone snapped into compliance, pulling up a blue and white page of text.

Virginia handed Charlie the phone and reached with her out-stuck pinky to scroll through dozens of personal messages. There were two photos, profiles, one of her, or so it seemed, and the other of a grinning, gray-haired man in his sixties. He wore a white polo shirt and looked to belong in a golf commercial—the exact archetype of a man you might use to scam an elderly woman, Charlie thought.

“He’s certainly very handsome,” he said.

“I just count myself as blessed,” said Virginia. “Here I’ve been searching for a husband all these years. Praying for one. Waiting for my positive energy to line up. I can’t tell you what all I’ve gone through, the websites and the services, and it’s just these creeps out there. I get a lot of attention on the Internet these days because of my picture, you see.”

“It’s a really good photo,” he said, realizing it was the same photograph of her as a younger woman in a blue dress which he had seen weeks ago when they were picking up her things after the eviction. “Where’d you get it taken?”

“At church, for the directory,” she said. “A different church.”

“Must have been a long time ago?” He knew, as he said this, that he shouldn’t have. But it was such a startling photo. Handsome, pleasant, strikingly professional in her elegant posture

with legs crossed, back upright—though clearly much younger, and that disturbed him, how she kept using it as her personal promotion.

“No, not long at all,” said Virginia. “Three or four years.”

“Sorry,” he said, seeing that, indeed, his assertion had bothered her.

Virginia lifted the phone close to his face, reminding Charlie of a child who didn’t care about person space. He could smell the stale perfume on her hand. “You see,” she said. “He is real. We’re having real conversations.”

“I see that.”

Then, as if aware of his thoughts, she said, “And that’s how I know I won’t need to stay here very much longer.”

Now that the conversation was happening, he wanted to shrug it off. “Well,” he said. “We don’t need to worry about that right now.”

He left her and went to his room. So that was it. That was what she was hoping on. Her plan. Wait until the general, her fiancé, came to her rescue. It was laughable and yet it made sense, as a fantasy, for understanding how her belief in the scam or whatever it was validated her life at this period of time. Because of that man, she could go on occupying his house with the constant intention that she would be in some far better place within a few months. He doubted it. Still, his hope remained that this would all be real, that Brett would come forth and save her, lift her out of her situation. Charlie couldn’t help but want to think that way, though he was quite bothered by the extent of her belief.

CHAPTER VII

Over the next few days, Virginia began to tell him all about Brett. Now that they had at last broached this topic, she loved talking about him and Charlie was the only one—late into the evenings after she'd had a glass or two, laying fully horizontal on the couch with her hands gently folded across her stomach—with whom she had to share this essential drama of her life.

“He always says the right things,” she would say, poring over the messages on her phone. “Always. I feel a connection to him. I have never felt so connected to anyone before.”

Charlie faked his approval and felt guilt and unease over the subject which she would not stop bringing up. Brett. How great it would be when, like some prophesied savior, he stepped off his plane and came for her, carrying her to the better life he had promised in his beach home on Lake Michigan for the remainder of their days. What could Charlie do except nod, comment on how it sounded nice, such a splendid opportunity to settle down with someone when the day finally came. He wished for it, but knowing better, he also wished her foolish dream would come to a swift conclusion. What sort of person was he to affirm these outlandish beliefs of his confused old friend? A coward and an enabler. What real friend would hesitate to tell her the uncomfortable truth? Unmalicious honesty—it could seem so important, so necessary, yet no more feasible than willing himself to leap from a cliff.

And he would head to work thinking that way, forgetting the whole mess for an hour only to be reminded when a prospective seller came in with a dusty box of books hoping to make a fortune. Grandma's oil-splattered cookbooks weren't worth but ten dollars for the box, and Virginia Day was not going to be rescued from his home by some retiring general.

One night right before dusk he was outside on what he considered an exercise walk, listening to Radiohead, as he became infested with the idea that he needed to go and address it

with her, his reservations about Brett and the near certainty that the man was a scam. Don't let it go on for another hour, he told himself. Riled and determined, he wished he was already back at the house and was dismayed to find her gone when he arrived.

But half an hour later, Charlie stepped from the shower just as he heard the squeak of the front door. There she was in her in a reddish blouse, clutching a wrapped bundle of incense bound in twine.

"I've been thinking about the future," he said. "You know, what's next for me and all that. I don't plan on staying at the store forever."

"No, I suppose you wouldn't if you could do any better," she said. A strange comment, he thought, although he knew it wasn't hostile, just her way of speaking.

"Where I am going with this," he said, "is I have something I've been meaning to ask you. Something that's been on my mind. It's about Brett. I know he messages you, but you haven't spoken on the phone yet, and I got to wondering is there any possibility of him being not quite who he says he is? I mean, it will be really important for you to meet him in person before you count too much on this being your answer for life and where you're going to live from now on, correct?"

He wasn't doing a good job explaining this. "What I mean to say," he said, starting again.

"No, I know what you're trying to say," she interrupted. "And I do agree. It looks like somebody trying to scam an old lady, doesn't it?"

"Yes, it would say does," he said, shocked that she had those notions and was even capable of expressing them.

"I'm not that crazy old lady, though. I know when I need to be cautious."

"Absolutely." He felt better, the mountain of anxiety evaporating instantly. "I'm glad and I

must say a little surprised that you're willing to see it like that.”

“Well, I am,” she nodded, almost wisely as she sat on the couch with her knees together. For all her comic manner, that night he thought she seemed ladylike. Elegant, in a way, like some dignified older woman who didn't at all reflect the deviant character in the coffee shop, nor the thief at church.

“I've been scammed before,” she said, “that's why I'm being so careful this time.”

Scammed before? Either she was worse off than he had thought, falling for the same thing twice, or more on top of it than he imagined.

“Now as far as the matter with Brett,” she said, “I am going to get a chance to meet him very soon. At least, I certainly hope I do. I've been meaning to tell you the news. He messaged me yesterday. He's coming to America!”

Charlie had not imagined the conversation going this way. He had assumed she would disagree with him, act defiant and stubborn towards his suggestion. All he'd wanted was to know that he had brought the concern of Brett's credibility up, that he hadn't left it sitting in the dark of his brooding head. “That's wonderful,” he said. “So when is this happening, that you'll meet him?”

She frowned. “I do hope I get to meet him. He's only going to be in Toledo.”

“What for?”

“A conference.”

On the one side, Charlie was thinking good for her. To his surprise, there was something to this mysterious general. Who knew who the man actually was, but he was someone and by some incredible circumstance, he was indeed pursuing Virginia or so it seemed. On the other hand, if Brett was interested in the woman enough to marry her, and if he came across the ocean for a

conference not two hundred miles from where she lived, and given his position of apparent authority, wouldn't he take the extra step of visiting her himself?

"I could pay you back," said Virginia. "For gas, if there was some way you could help me get there."

She had hopeful yet distant eyes, a pursed mouth which dissolved into the wrinkles of her face. She didn't look wise anymore.

So often with Virginia it seemed a coincidence. A coincidence that she asked for his number right before the eviction, a coincidence that they attended the same church, that they'd met at the coffee shop. Now he wondered if she had planned to solicit his help as soon as she'd learned of Brett's travel plans, or if this was more in response to the concerns he'd finally addressed? He had entered the conversation in attempt to resolve some confusion, to put things on a path of clarity. But with these revelations it was as if Virginia had turned the tide on him, and now he was further invested in the mystery of Brett even at the expense of his willingness to go along with it, to ignore the outlandishness like some chump no better off than an old woman following the trail of a false lover.

"He's coming soon then?" Charlie asked.

"Next weekend," she said.

"Ten days from now?"

"No, this coming Saturday." Virginia hesitated. "Three days from now."

Well, that certainly was brief notice. Although he had more going on due to the job, he was by no means busy, especially on weekends. He could drive her to Toledo. It wouldn't be that difficult, and yet he couldn't help feeling like a sucker. What would people think? Jo-Ellen Roots, for example. Once, he had hoped to impress those ladies with all that he had done for

Virginia. Now, it seemed like the opposite. A pathetic story of what he was willing to do and how he was being taken advantage of. *Crazy fool. Actually gonna drive her there. Big waste of time and energy.* Yet here he was, committed by his curiosity.

“Three days from now,” Charlie said, “and he's coming to Toledo?”

“Yes, for a conference,” said Virginia.

Truth was he hated trips. The whole three years he'd lived in Iowa, he'd gone nowhere. Hadn't left Des Moines area, not once. At best, he had a romantic wish to be someone who traveled and enjoyed it, to get lost on adventures in distant lands. But that was not him. He was not an adventurer. Still, there was a piece of him, years later, that would imagine walking into the yellow, urban dusks of some other country, foreign smells and sand.

Charlie's decision to take Virginia to Toledo wasn't the first time something he'd least desired became the obvious next step. You could deliberate for months, years, but moral decisions were made in the flash of a moment. His decision came from the underlying obviousness that this was a futile experience, that there couldn't possibly be a general out there who wanted to marry her. It was the notion of surprise, of contradiction that drove him onward. So impossible, and yet there had to be something behind it. If Brett was a scammer what business would he have in saying he wanted to meet her in Toledo? Certainly, if he had asked for money, if he had some story about being a missionary whose passport had been stolen and now he needed \$3000 to return to the states. Charlie didn't know what he was getting into, but it couldn't be a situation of that sort.

Finally, the endeavor would be of help with the task at hand: figuring out where Virginia could live reasonably and comfortably apart from his house. Either the experience with traveling to Toledo would miraculously solve her situation, and she and Brett would happily live out their

remaining years or, more likely, it would help Virginia to view her life in some nearer scope of reality. Otherwise, how could any suggestions to her that she might accept her age and apply for subsidized senior living, as his great aunt had done, carry any weight so long as the possibility of “The General” hung over her head? Yes, he had to help her see for herself, and the trip to Toledo would do just that. A lot of people wouldn't do this for someone, wouldn't waste their money and time, but Charlie liked to be different—liked to defy the common mentality.

“And Brett expects that you're coming?” he asked, thinking that he had better make sure there wasn't some mistake.

“Oh yes, he expects that I'm coming. I told him I would do whatever I could to get there.”

So it was settled. “We'll have to be very prompt,” he said. “I'm afraid I have to work the Friday before. So we'll drive down in the morning and then have to leave around the time it gets dark. You okay with that?”

She smiled. This was real for her. He could see it. She had no doubt.

That night, Charlie took the liberty of finding Virginia on Facebook, having observed that this was the means through which she communicated with Brett. He had not done this before, didn't even have a Facebook account. His reason for finding her was all because of the image, the circular photo he had seen on her phone. It had driven him to curiosity as well as unease. There was only one reason the general, if he really was a general, might want anything to do with Virginia, and that was because of her thirty-year old photo. That was the key to the whole ridiculous situation although it still felt like a stretch: Brett was a retiring general who certainly must have some wealth, not to mention the prestige of being a general, and he was seeking someone to settle down with, some decently attractive woman in her forties or so. But then there

was the photo, and say he became infatuated with it, with Virginia as she appeared. It was viable if you thought of it that way. Although, this prospect was no better, for Virginia was in denial about her age, her appearance, and still manipulative enough to use the old photo. “It’s not old at all,” she had said. “Three or four years.” He had felt bad, but how could she lie to his face and in that innocent, bewildered manner? This angered him.

As he enlarged the photo, however, Charlie realized he had been wrong. Though her heavily powdered face did evoke that of a younger woman’s, the loose and wrinkled skin of her hands, posed on her resting stomach, gave her away. Old lady hands. It wasn’t an old photo, probably not more than three or four years.

They didn’t speak much in those last three days before the trip to Toledo. He hardly saw her. The night before they left, Virginia sat in the living room, in the big green chair which predated his father’s death, although it was hardly used. She bore the same vacant expression he’d now seen many times—the crimp of her lips, the glassy eyes—the look he always thought of as slightly intoxicated. Maybe she was in a state of shock, he thought, that so soon she would actually meet the man. Maybe she knew that no matter what, this was the end of how things had been. No longer the blissful texting with this mysterious individual. Even if it was all somehow real and good and decent, she would not be living her life as she had grown used to with the constant glimmer of distant hope. Instead, it would be hope brought into tangible comprehension, revealed in all its ordinariness or deception, kind or unkind. Charlie had some lofty thoughts for himself, doing so much to help the woman. He hoped he had a friend like that when he was her age.

They spoke only once before he went up to bed, when he at last mentioned the trip which,

he figured, must have held them both in unaddressed anticipation.

“So we're all set for tomorrow?” he said. “Still leaving at five a.m.?”

“Oh yes,” she said, “I'll be ready.”

Sensing fear or doubt, he tried to assure her that they'd do the best they could to meet the man, that he dearly hoped it would work out as she intended.

“Oh, it will,” she said, surprising him, as she had many times, with her doubtless assurance. “We certainly will.”

She must have walked upstairs as he returned to his reading, *Palace of the Donkey*, the final novel in a fantasy series he'd attempted to read three times. When he looked up, he was all alone with the clicking of the kitchen wall clock. It occurred to Charlie, then, that he deeply, almost painfully, wanted Brett to be real for her and also a general—even a reenactment general, even a confused old veteran who referred to himself as “The General.” He'd gladly have given up more than a day of his meaningless downtime and the price of gas to see it work out.

CHAPTER VIII

At four thirty in the morning, he was up with a heavy head as he leaned against the kitchen counter, a tall cup of coffee by his side. If he hadn't guessed, this was indeed going to be an exhausting experience—Toledo and back, one damn day. He had not forced his body to do something so intense since the day his mother died, and it was then with an energy that was foreign to him, and one he didn't now possess even despite his curiosity to see Virginia's story through to the end. Perhaps he'd find a way to nap in the afternoon while the lovers had their time.

At five, Virginia came down the stairs dressed handsomely in a flowered blouse and a dark green skirt he had not seen before. She lugged a larger tote bag which she had acquired without his knowledge. Excessive, he thought, given that this was only to be a day trip. But he took it from her and carried it to the car. It felt heavy enough to contain just about everything she had brought into the house thus far.

The drive was nearly six hours. He had mapped it on his phone. They would arrive before noon, and that would give her about five hours before the early evening when they needed to head back. According to Virginia, Brett was busy with a speaking engagement all morning, but had time to see her in the afternoon. So that should have worked out perfectly.

They were quiet for most of the drive. It was a spectral kind of day with the lightly traveled highway and the cold morning feel of lusterless fog. He'd taken this route into the city the day his mother died, but it had been later in the afternoon by the time he got to Milwaukee and much busier. The cars flowing into the urban center of his childhood had seemed to beckon him forward with a certain intrigue, a mix of nostalgia and novelty, which reassured his instant decision to move. Now he felt a solemnness as he drove into the increasingly rural towns and

fields, aware that the truth of the mystery which had dominated those last few weeks was growing near. Virginia's hope had become his story as well, over the past few months. The personal need to know: whether *he* was real, whether *he* resembled anything like she assumed him to be, like he said he was. It unnerved Charlie. Made him almost sick with anticipation.

Often, as they drove, he would glance at Virginia who faced forward nearly the entire ride, hands steady in her lap. The events of this day could get very awkward. He wanted to know and yet, in another sense, he didn't want any part in it. But he was invested, mentally and physically, and so he took to silently laying out all the possible outcomes in his head, as if the process of attempting to understand might grant him peace:

- A. Brett was (remarkably) as close to who he said he was as possible. He was a retiring general, and he wanted to marry Virginia.
- B. Brett was a scammer. He didn't exist beyond the front of someone who had adopted this persona. They would try to find him, but there would be no Brett to be found.
- C. Brett was real and wanted to marry Virginia, but thought she was significantly younger because of that foolish photograph. Virginia was actually scamming Brett, though this was unintentional. It would be a great misunderstanding.
- D. Brett was both real and a scammer. He was real in the sense that he was a real man who wanted to marry Virginia, but he was not really a general and the profile image was not really him.

Those were the four options. The reality would be deeper and messier and coated in layers of confusion, but ultimately the outcome of the situation would have to be some variant of these four. As he drove through rural Wisconsin, Charlie thought it reasonable to hope for option D, although he thought C and B were far more likely, and A was completely out of the question.

Why had he even included it?

By eleven, they were a short way outside of Toledo. Running early, he took an exit so they could get something to eat.

“You hungry?” he asked, coasting diagonally through a large parking lot. If she didn't get to meet with the man, or some man, they would probably go out to lunch at least, but he was starving and didn't want to be sitting in the car for two hours on an empty stomach waiting for the guy not to show up.

“A hamburger,” said Virginia.

“One regular hamburger,” he told the man at the drive-through.

“Rare,” said Virginia.

“I don't think they do rare,” he said. It was a Wendy's.

“I say that because they make it fresh, sometimes.”

Such a perfect example of her mentality, Charlie thought, as they pulled away. Make things complicated and unorthodox, get as many stares as possible. On the rare occasion that he ate out, all he wanted was to order food and have them bring it to him. He hated, dreaded the thought of being viewed as a bothersome customer in the eyes of an employee. Never did he have much of a problem with the systems in place.

“Is it good?” he said.

“It's fresh.”

Virginia took a long time eating her burger as they drove first into the outskirts and then approached the center of downtown Toledo. Minuscule bites, “bird bites,” his mother would have called them. After a while, she folded the remaining half of the sandwich and put it on the dashboard, and, for whatever reason, that reminded Charlie of how old she was. Somehow the

intensity of her situation with meeting the man and the uncanny playfulness of her recent pursuit for a “rare” burger had caused him to forget.

“So, we’re heading to the Amtrak station, right? That’s where he said he’d meet you.”

“Yes, that’s where I’m supposed to be.”

“That’s interesting,” Charlie said, turning down Broadway as the GPS directed him, “that he’s meeting you at the train station. Must be a conference center nearby or something. Can’t imagine a general would take the train to get there.”

He drove past the tracks and parked in the driveway. They stepped out, and a strong wind sent leaves into their faces, a pile of strays that would soon be covered with snow. Hardly anyone walked about. Charlie decided to follow Virginia into the station, not wanting to leave her there, not wanting to sit in the parking lot all afternoon wondering if Brett had showed up or what had happened.

Half way to the station, she stopped. “Oh, my bag,” she said, spinning back around. “I need it.”

“You need all that for the train station?”

“Yes... I need it for the restroom.”

So he went back and lifted the heavy tote out of the backseat and wheeled it inside behind her.

The station was nearly vacant. A woman stood inside a ticket booth and a bearded man sat in one of the far corners, his back to the wall. Virginia and Charlie stood in the open lobby and waited for a time, fifteen minutes at least, while the woman behind the glass kept looking over at them as if she wondered whether they were going to buy tickets or if they were lost.

“Maybe you should message him in a few minutes?” he finally said. “Let him know we’re

here.”

But she just stood there, hardly respondent, and he thought it was like she didn't know where she was—as if she'd forgotten that they'd driven all the way and who she was supposed to be meeting. Finally, she turned to him, declaring, of all things, that she was sorry.

“Sorry? For what?” Charlie asked.

“Well, thank you, anyways,” she said, “for taking me here. Thank you very much for doing that.”

“You are welcome,” he said.

“I don't know how long you wanted to stick around.”

“As long as we need to,” he said. “We've got all afternoon.”

“Yes,” she said, and they continued to stand there for a time, only now she kept glancing at him offhandedly and then turning back, casting her more distant gaze over the entire room.

To their left there was a terminal with a rotating gate. He felt that Virginia wanted him to leave, like he was making her uncomfortable, but that seemed to be a poor idea. Still, wasn't this exactly how he figured the trip would go? An awkward experience of driving all the way and not finding the guy, but that was what was needed to help Virginia see reality so that she could advance into a more rational outlook with the remains of her life. He was about to ask her to please call the man to determine if he was still coming and where she needed to be when a buzz sounded from her purse.

Virginia took out her phone and played with it for a moment, her palm and her pointer doing the work.

“Looks like he'll be nearby soon,” she said.

Good, Charlie thought, relieved and even excited. Praise God, it was actually happening

after this agonizing wait. Now, he was curious.

“We’ve still got some time, though,” she said, pleasantly. “I think I could go for a refresher.”

He thought they were heading to the Starbucks across the street, but then Virginia turned in the direction of a dirty orange door with a neon sign above it that simply read “BAR.”

He followed her down three steps into a dark, tiny venue, surprised that it was open at that time of day in an area that was otherwise lifeless. They were the only ones in there, besides the bartender.

“I don’t think I need anything,” he said, claiming a booth on the far side of the room, next to a bluish window. Heat radiated from a nearby vent, loud but warm. Far ahead of him, Virginia leaned at the counter a long time, as if rather than ordering her midday glass she wanted to have a conversation with the bartender. He couldn’t hear the exact words they were exchanging, but she kept lifting her hands while the bartender, a young guy with a brown beard and a tight v-neck, shook his head. That’s one of her main problems, Charlie thought. She gets herself into these discrepancies for no reason. He thought about what she had told him of her kids, of the shelter, of Tuma, and he wanted to cringe because he could see how the guy probably viewed her as an old bitch, as if in his mind he was thinking, *that bitch who wandered in here...* Charlie did not wish to be affiliated, but here he was, and now she had turned around searching for him as he waved her down, and she came without her “refresher.”

“My credit card,” she said. “They haven’t put the money back on it yet.”

“Oh, no problem,” he said, relieved by the simple need and its easy solution. He took out his wallet and handed her a twenty. That was just like him. Could never resist Virginia. Every time she needed something, he’d snap into this mode of compliance as if he knew no other way.

She took the bill in her hand, but made no move.

“This gonna work?” he asked.

She frowned, her eyes veering toward the ceiling as she spoke. “The guy said they can’t make change yet. It’s too early.”

“Got it,” said Charlie, taking the twenty back and getting up from the booth so he could pay for her drink with his credit card.

“Don’t trouble yourself,” she said. “You’ve done plenty—just sit.”

She put out her hand, and in the midst of the odd remark—for he was less than half her age and had been sitting in the car all morning—Charlie handed her his Visa. “Run it as credit,” he said.

She went back to the counter. A glimmer of daylight flashed across the room as the front door opened and a guy in a dark cap walked in, tramping down the stairs. He looked older, the way he walked, poorly kept. Charlie would think back on the image of the man, of his body in the light before the door closed and it became hard to see; the single black shape with the belly and the thick neck profiled in all white light. He would try to recall the image exactly, refiguring the man and his large frame. And this was strange, too, but at the time Charlie had the thought that he could smell him despite the distance of probably forty feet. After the door shut, there was a tint in the air, a raw staleness that had not been there before.

Even though it was just for a minute, the man wasn’t happy to have to wait to order his drink. Charlie couldn’t see his expression, but he seemed to watch Virginia with such a pressing eye as if she were an absolute spectacle. As if he was any better off than she, Charlie thought, stomping in here alone in the middle of the day with his noticeable stench. Charlie turned to the window above the booth where he could catch a fuzzy view of the parking lot.

The day was a waste. Nothing fruitful had come of it. What a frivolous pursuit, driving a few hundred miles, to prove that Brett was fake, to try and help an old lady understand. Maybe he felt bad. He didn't know. He was just disgusted. He had known all along it wasn't going to work, but how else could he have communicated this to Virginia so that she would have taken it to heart? No, this was right, she needed to see for herself.

Turning back, he squinted in the dim lights. The bartender and now another customer were engaged in discussion. The older guy, who had walked in, was not among them. And neither was Virginia.

"I don't know, man," said the bartender, after Charlie had searched all around the place, waited outside the restroom for ten minutes, and finally inquired. "It was the weirdest thing. I kept asking her what she wanted, and she just shook her head at me and walked out the door, and it was like the guy was going after her. Guess they knew each other."

"Do you know the man?" asked Charlie. "He come here regularly?"

"No. Never seen him either."

"Thank you," he said, running out the door.

Virginia was nowhere near—not in the back by the dumpsters, not at the Walgreens next door, and not up the street. Now his phone was dead, for the battery had barely gotten them there using GPS. Retracing their steps, he crossed the street and re-entered the train station. She wasn't around, at least not where he could see, and there was a different attendant behind the counter who gave no notice of his search. Charlie wondered about the older man, the shabby guy in the bar. Was it that simple? Was this "Brett," the general, who she had gone off with even though he looked nothing like the man in the picture? Of course, he hadn't actually seen the full face, just the boxy outline of a body heaving an overgrown gut down the stairs; unlikely, that this could be

the same guy Virginia had shown him on her phone. But then, the image had been no larger than a fingernail, and Charlie had only seen Brett's face.

This was a perplexing scenario, and that was when it hit him that she still had his credit card, that it was starting to seem as though he might be a victim of a scam himself. Was that possible? Didn't he have more trust in the woman who had been his friend, who'd been living in his house for more than a month? Then, this also suggested that Brett was somehow real, for Virginia couldn't simply scam him by herself, falsifying the whole story about Brett just to convince him to drive her to Toledo before she stole his credit card. What would account for the pages and pages of phone messages she had shown him a few days before? Or, perhaps he didn't know her for who she really was. After all, that was how it worked with scammers—appealing to your emotions, using your generosity and your loneliness, your beliefs, your human decency against you. She had asked for money, but cash wouldn't do. She had wanted his credit card. She had told him to sit down, leave it to her.

Option E: Virginia was scamming him by abusing his curiosity and even his notions of scamming itself!

After walking up and down the premise and waiting for a train to crawl over the tracks, he headed back to the car and found his way to the police station, having asked for directions from a passerby. It seemed unnecessary, not at all the place he wanted to be, but not having been from around there and not wanting to leave Virginia to drive back home when he still hoped this was all a big misunderstanding, he didn't know what else to do. And then there was also the matter of his credit card.

He explained the situation to a police officer who was patient and attentive but clearly found the story unusual. "If what you're saying is true," she said, "you've got to get that card

canceled right away.”

“I will,” said Charlie. “I think that was just a mistake on her part. I can’t imagine she intended to take it with her, wherever she went.”

“You’d be surprised how many thefts get reported on account of friends of family members,” said the officer. “Even from couples.”

“Of course,” he said, not willing to believe Virginia would do something like this.

The woman was kind enough to run an extension cord from an outlet, and as soon as he got his phone to turn on, he tried calling Virginia. It was possible she could have stepped outside the bar for a minute, walked through some other door never intending to abandon him. She was a scattered, wandering sort of person. She could have turned left and he’d have turned right, and they just hadn’t found each other.

No luck. So he went online to find the number to cancel the credit card. For the next fifteen ten minutes, he waded through the automated voices, thinking all the time how this was just a precaution, probably wasn’t even necessary, only to experience, to his shock, that a transaction had gone through—twenty or thirty minutes ago—for \$642.90.

What had Virginia done to him? He let the police collect their report, and then he walked back to his car, shaking his head like an old man betrayed by the world which had surpassed him. What he wanted to know right then was how far into the past Virginia’s ploy extended? Clearly, it was reasonable now to believe that the whole trip—from the night they’d first discussed Brett’s visit, to Virginia’s expert manipulation in convincing him to drive her—was with the intention that she would ditch him after they arrived and make off with some money as well. There must have been somewhere she desperately needed to go, he figured, and through her crooked perspective she’d decided this was the easiest way. On the phone, they said the

unknown transaction occurred at the train station. He realized what immediately seemed obvious: she had purchased train tickets—two of them, at least, given the expense. Maybe she'd even road the train he'd heard in passing.

Back inside the train station, the woman at the desk didn't know what train he was talking about. "You want to know which ones are coming?" she kept saying.

"No, I want to know about the train that came though here already about half an hour ago."

"Which one?"

"That's what I want to know. I was wondering what its destination is?"

"Most of the trains, they got multiple destinations. They stop, sometimes every one, two hours."

"Thank you," he said.

As he drove home that afternoon, Charlie remembered Brett and the list of messages he had seen. Virginia had been talking about Brett since before they lived together. That part couldn't have all been made up. She couldn't have faked his information and then faked all those messages. No, she was definitely talking to someone. Everything felt strange, like a different shade of the natural reality. Would she do this to him? Had she planned it all along? It couldn't be. So outside her ability, which was maybe a naive thing to say given the hints at her thievery she had often made.

A hundred miles down the highway, he was thinking that really he had not lost much in this. It was something, the \$643, two weeks' wages give or take. But in the larger scheme if she had hurt him was it so great a hurt? He had plenty. He was still much better off than Virginia would likely ever be, so if this was a betrayal on her part—using him, robbing him, the wounded Levite running off and taking his purse—it was a soft betrayal. A rude, impersonal, but not

entirely damning gesture. It was still a real friendship, and one he would not soon forget. Just the idea of some old, washed up woman and finding her more capable than you might think.

Malicious, but capable. He was practically laughing about it by the time he got back to

Milwaukee in the evening and turned on to his street. It's okay, he was thinking, to let her win.

CHAPTER IX

The next few weeks were not bad weeks. Virginia had come into his world as a swift, moral invasion commanding him to do what was right, to be vulnerable, share. And in a single afternoon, all of that had passed. It was almost like he'd purchased her leave, wrote her a check for a month's rent, paid the inn keeper upon his return. Crises avoided, Charlie thought. Free again, he would tell himself. He just didn't know what had happened, and for so long it would gnaw at him like a painless though itchy wound. Had she intended to use him all along, or had the opportunity merely presented itself?

Indeed, Virginia had taken all her things with her in that tote case. Not a trace remained in the room but for a few empty wine bottles and a brown paper bag, not to mention the persistent smell of incense. He washed the sheets and the blankets thinking, no, it wasn't a bad thing at all that the room had gotten some use and, besides, he would have given her the \$643 had she asked—so what difference did it make? For weeks and months the room would remain empty, the smell of the incense long gone as well. He would pass it in the hall thinking of her and anyone else in that situation. Just an empty room, someone in need might have lived there. Eventually, around the time the bookstore closed down and went exclusively online, he would turn the room into a home office, and then it didn't seem so bad now that it served a purpose. He would forget he had once been bothered by the prospect of its emptiness, but that was how life worked with its moral assertions striking forth at one moment, disappearing the next. He had known this before.

That first Christmas after Virginia's disappearance was not unpleasant. Though this was a time most ripe for loneliness, he felt none. No, he was happy to keep to himself except for when he went to work. Happy to have his living room again; his house all his, no longer a resident of

the public space. He cooked a fantastic goose, eating it little by little for days. Still, beneath the surface of this peace, Charlie was haunted by the questions that arose inevitably from Virginia's disappearance. He could almost be okay, almost forget, and then there'd be another hour gone just thinking about it. Not the betrayal; the unrequited mystery. What exactly did happen that day? Many times, he revisited the events in his head. The train station. The bar. The figure of that weathered, boar-shaped man. He would think, maybe that was Brett. It could have been Brett, couldn't it? And then he would think, no, probably not. Meanwhile, he knew or could deduce certain things: the fact that she, or someone, had used his credit card to buy the ticket; the fact that Virginia surely had anticipated that she wouldn't be returning that day, having packed up all her belongings; the fact that all those months she had been messaging someone, someone real. But what about her storage unit? Had she let go of her whole life here in Milwaukee without looking back? What about that time, near the beginning of her stay, when she offered to pay rent? Most of all, he wondered where she had ended up and with whom? Whether it was safe? Whether it was good? It always came back to the question of Brett.

Every day he checked Virginia's Facebook. Frequently, she had added new posts, political quotes and memes she liked to copy. But two days before the Saturday they had set out for Toledo, it all stopped. The last post was something to do with U.S. Veterans not getting their health benefits. He wondered if she no longer had a working phone, or more likely she had blocked him.

Without success, Charlie continued to dial her number all throughout December and into January. Always the same recording of her name, "Vir-gin-ia," followed by a beep. He understood that she might be avoiding him. After all, she had done him technical wrong, and, afraid of retribution, probably didn't want to face him. Once or twice he tried calling her using

different phones—the line at work and then a line from the church. He tried locating her kids on Facebook. That was the week between Christmas and New Year with the city dusted in a layer of snow. He found nothing of those four. Whoever they were, if they existed, they either weren't on Facebook or they all had different last names.

Sometimes, even years later, Charlie would have the idea on his mind that one day he'd get a piece of mail and there would be a check for the money, \$642.90, not that the monetary value would mean anything compared to the gesture. Eventually, it got to the point where she would have been very old—well into her nineties, yet he still fancied that one day he might receive a call from a lawyer saying she had passed away, leaving her meager funds to his name and a handwritten note for a dear friend who had once been so good to her—like a son. It seemed foolish to think like that. And it was; too story-book-like, he thought. No such letter ever came. Probably, she had forgotten him, a fact that seemed as inevitable as atheism, some days, when he continued to struggle with the doubts all around him—life and livelihood and God.

Charlie stayed on at the bookstore some six years, before he took over as manager during the online transition. Oh, how he changed between the age of thirty and forty. Went from being technologically inept to something of an expert: programming, advertising, web content management. At one point, he might have gone out on his own with sales had the aging owners not given him such a generous commission. Likewise, what began as a part-time store job became an obsessive career—hence the need for a home office. He was always astonished that in a world moderated by financial needs and limitations, his own money just kept accumulating without effort, piling up in the bank like the mindless loot of a hoarder. Always more than he could ever need and no real sense of whether he ought to invest or give, just savings.

Over the years he did spend some of the money—renovated the house, created an extensive

vegetable garden, even acquired the antique iron fence. All those things he'd planned since the first week following his mother's death, so long ago now. All of it and then some. The house became a very nice, modern, updated middle-class home. Even still, some seventy-five, eighty, eighty-five percent of his net income, he couldn't find a use for every month—and that was counting tithe. He'd had notions that it would all go somewhere important after he died, a sound trust fund or a foundation. Not that he was anybody, just that he had an old-fashioned life savings while the rest of the world fell into debt. One week, out of paranoia, he finally met with a lawyer and wrote a will. Half for the church and the other half—well, he still hadn't figured that out.

After he turned forty, Charlie started having people over on rare occasions: employees who worked for him, neighbors, church acquaintances, and sometimes his mother's very old friends.

"All this and still alone?" said Jo-Ellen Roots one Saturday afternoon. She'd been his most consistent guest. He liked to give her opportunities to leave the assisted living, and also she marveled at his crab cakes. "Will it always be this way, Charlie?"

"Perhaps," he said. Perhaps not.

He did start dating a little. Not often. Might go two or three years, and then there'd be some high school teacher or a dental hygienist—divorced or widowed or generally just a loner like him—and that was life, all crazy and different, for a few months. How he loved to cook for his dates. Nothing better than that joy, though it was hard for them to trust him, to believe that all he wanted they had already given—just appreciation for the food, for the pleasantries of his home.

Unlike other things, the memory of Virginia did not fade. Not like the memory of his mother and father, like those unhappy years of his late teens and early twenties which became a rough mental cloud of work and boredom, yelling and annoyance—though few distinct words.

Perhaps if he'd lived a life either privileged or cursed with more significant mysteries, Virginia's wouldn't have mattered so much, wouldn't have stood out as that one very strange, very different season of time.

When he turned fifty, he was minutes away from hiring an investigator to determine what had happened to her. It was the kind of service wealthy people, wealthier than himself, used to find lost family members or love interests. But money wasn't the reason he didn't go through with it. He was attached to the mystery at that point. She was the mysterious creature who had touched his life for such a brief time, a few short months, but those months beat on inside him like an anthem. It was such a special secret. The whole Virginia story; the great curiosity. What about Virginia? What about "the general" named Brett? Just to know where she had gone, when she had died. To hear someone affirm that she had existed in some space after her disappearance, that she hadn't vanished as a ghost, a false memory. That was an intriguing thought, yet, strangely, he felt that its fruition would dilute the potency of the memory. It would give that closure, that capping off—move on with life. So he let it be, as it was, resigned to the fact that he would never know what had happened to her, or whether *he* was a real man or not, whether *he* was a general or not, or some mixture of fiction and truth.

THESIS READING LIST

1. *The Sense of an Ending* - Julian Barnes
2. *Burning Down the House* - Charles Baxter
3. *Jayber Crow* - Wendell Berry
4. *The Stranger* - Albert Camus
5. *Peace Like A River* - Leif Enger
6. *As I Lay Dying* - William Faulkner
7. *Ask The Dust* - John Fante
8. *Aspects of the Novel* - E.M. Forster
9. *On Moral Fiction* - John Gardner
10. *The Power and the Glory* - Graham Greene
11. *A Farewell to Arms* - Earnest Hemingway
12. *Mariette in Ecstasy* - Ron Hansen
13. *Enon* - Paul Harding
14. *A Prayer for Owen Meany* - John Irving
15. *The Remains of the Day* - Kazuo Ishiguro
16. *The Curtain* - Milan Kundera
17. *The Dwarf* - Pär Lagerkvist
18. *Catholics* - Brian Moore
19. *The Edge of Sadness* - Edwin O'Connor
20. *Mystery and Manners* - Flannery O'Connor
21. *The Violent Bear it Away* - Flannery O'Connor
22. *The Missionary* - Sydney Owenson

23. *The Green Child* - Herbert Read

24. *Gilead* - Marilynne Robinson

25. *To The Lighthouse* - Virginia Woolf

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Education

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing, English Department, College of Arts and Letters, Old Dominion University, 9000 Batten Arts & Letters, Norfolk, VA 23529. Emphasis: Fiction.
Thesis: *Museum of Unforeseen Circumstances*. Director: Professor Janet Peery. May 2018.

Bachelor of Arts, English-Writing, Spring Arbor University, Spring Arbor, MI. February 2014.

Employment

Centura College, Norfolk, VA. English Writing Instructor, 2017 - Current.

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA. Honors College Advisor and Instructor, 2015 - Current.

Community Rebuilders, Grand Rapids, MI. Housing Resource Specialist, 2013 – 2016.

Gerber Scout Reservation, Twin Lake, MI. Camp Director, 2013.

Publications

“Origin Story,” *Crack the Spine*, Flash Fiction, 2017, Online.

“Frogs,” *Mount Hope*, Short Story, 2016, Print.

“Scabs,” *Storm Cellar*, Short Story, 2016, Print.

“Small Things,” *The Sonder Review*, Short Story, 2016, Print.

“Can,” *Dewpoint*, Short Story, 2016, Print.

“The Accident,” *Inwood Indiana*, Flash Fiction, 2016, Print.

“Eating Jessica,” *Blotterature*, Flash Fiction, 2015, Print.

“The Wall,” *Meat For Tea*, Short Story, 2015, Print.

“The Fisherwoman,” *The Blue Hour*, Short Story, 2015, Online.

“The Spot,” *Oak Tree Review*, Flash Fiction, 2015, Print.

“Swallowing,” *Grand Writers*, Short Story, 2015, Print.