Strains May Float

by Anna S (eliade)

Summary

Jim, Blair, car chases, orgasms, and so on.

Notes

So, just to get it out of the way: this story has disciplinary spanking, more or less. It's probably not as scary as you think, but who can say. If you want some more notes about this, without any significant spoilers, scroll to the end. I will say that everyone who initially feared this has, so far, been very relieved. ~g~ Much thanks to Francesca and Sandy for reading this and giving me feedback, and to Seah, who gave me a rigorous and thorough beta, rather like having a charming Japanese woman walk on my back with powerful little feet. Or so I imagine.

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by Anna S

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Author's disclaimer: These guys are Pet Fly's, borrowed and toyed with and so on. Most of the script of Girl Next Door is used verbatim. No infringement intended. No college loans were paid off in the
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It had been one of those days when the unseen forces which govern the universe array in perversity, when books fall, toasters fume, and even one's most comfortable pair of jeans feel as if they belong to someone else, someone ten pounds lighter or of a different gender. Every marginal, gnatsized nuisance that life could devise had inevitably attached itself to Blair Sandburg that day. Faint odors of himself had plagued him; since noonish there had been a whiff of acrid tiredness in the seams of his clothes, and yet when he'd come across them on the floor this morning they'd seemed clean enough. Clean enough, he'd been sure, to wear in public. And somehow also today he could smell the inside of his nose, and a persistent waxy moistness from behind his ears. He felt grubby and inept, and spilling his latte on the steps of the Rainier Building had only made it worse, and then he'd navigated an awkward conference with a failing minority student who eyefucked him the entire time as if to convey to Blair Sandburg, B.A., ABD, that he was a lame and pitiful tool of the hegemony, and by the time his car huffed emphysemically at him, at precisely five ten in the afternoon when he tried to leave campus, he was riled at life.

Gravity was conspiring with mechanics to try and bring him down, Blair had decided, but hey, he would maintain his sunny disposition. This was his challenge, after all, to keep himself in high mettle. Not to let the bastards grind him down...or up. So, gamely, he'd taken a few moments after reaching the parking lot to seat himself in the lotus position on the warm asphalt by his car and find the calm eye of the storm, and then driven his sputtering heap to Lazlo, his mechanic.

"Sumpin' funny here," Lazlo had said dubiously, leaning under the open hood, his greasy hands on the edge of the engine bed, staring at the engine. Lazlo's eight-year-old son had wandered out of the house, stood by his father's hip, and agreed. Lazlo's sister had invited Blair in for a Coca-Cola. Blair sat on the couch with her and leafed through magazines, while Jerry Springer made mad-cow eyes at him from the television.

Two hours, sixty dollars, and one Good Housekeeping later Blair got in his Volvo and bounced tediously off. The squeaking and backfiring started about two miles from home and brought his day to a whole new level of embarrassment, and then he just said fuck it to himself and drove determinedly for the finish line. He couldn't entirely resolve a sense of anxiety though. He had to get home in time to join Jim before he left for the stakeout. He'd been putting off a call, but after tracking the Volvo's unreliable progress for a few blocks he gave in and grabbed his cell phone. The rings segued to Jim's calm greeting.

Blair spoke over the noise of the car. "Hey, Jim, look, I'm sorry I'm late. I was just having my car checked. My mechanic still can't figure out what's wrong with it."

Jim's voice, such a steady contrast to his own--clearly someone had been having a better day--came to him through the line. "The department already gave you replacement money, Chief. Just go get a different one."

"Get a different one? What are you talking about? You just don't replace a classic, man." Blair tried for a tone of voice that would convey shock and an appalled defense of the Volvo, as if vehicular loyalty tugged powerfully at his conscience. And if that didn't work, maybe Jim would buy that Naomi Sandburg's son abhorred the idea of wasting extant resources. Anything would be better than confessing he'd spent the department's grudgingly given fifteen-hundred dollars on upgrading his laptop, a sparse handful of rare books, and a losing bet on Seattle Seabiscuit.

"It's your nickel. Anyway, I got to get rolling."
"Look, just wait five minutes," Blair said urgently. He couldn't stand the thought of his day, his entire sucky day, which he'd endured only with this goal in mind, ending on the same note. "I'll be right there. This is an important stakeout. You'll need me to back you up."

"Chances are it won't go down tonight," said Jim in a maddeningly equable tone, his whole mind obviously on the job itself and not on Blair's concerns. "Why don't you just catch up with us tomorrow, okay?"

And before Blair could keep him from hanging up, he was left with dead air, saying "Jim? Jim?" to no effect. Well, hell. Wasn't that just like the man. You couldn't even call it a brush-off. Blair muttered a few imprecations to himself, but Jim Ellison was the weather. You didn't change it, you just lived with it.

"Just a little further," Blair said to his car as the loft came into sight. The Volvo bucked like a spooked horse and billowed exhaust. "We're almost home, honey. Almost home."

As he pulled into the reserved parking lot in front of the building, a motorbike buzzed closely past the front of the car and headed off down the street. Blair shoved his sneakered foot hard on the brake. "Whoa! Hey, man, watch out." The biker was of course far beyond range of his exclamation.

The nearly missed accident would have shaken Blair more had it not been merely the most recent of the day's series of annoyances. He parked the car and got out as it uttered a syllabic epilogue of knocks. Walking by the hood he heard another flurry, more muffled. He frowned and bent his head to pinpoint their source, but in surprise tracked the sound instead to the trunk of a neighboring car. Thumps continued, and then, as if sensing his presence, a cry of help issued from its interior.

"Hello?" Blair asked. The banging grew more emphatic, and tension sprang up wildly in him as he realized there was a child trapped in the trunk, you heard about foolish kids doing that, and he hoped to god it would not turn out serious. The thumping actually seemed a bit too vigorous to indicate trauma, but you never knew for sure. He heard another plea for help and called out his own reassuring noises as he leaned in the open driver-side window to spring the trunk latch, then darted around to the back of the car.

The hatch rose to reveal not a child but a woman. A fully grown, an extensively grown woman, leggy and lounging on a comforter. He stared agape; she giggled with good humor at their introduction; and then he shook himself.

"Oh, my god. Let me help you, here." He reached to take her hand and she legged it up out of the trunk graciously. He took his sunglasses off, and did another reassessment of the leg thing. Legs. Yes indeed. She had them. Two. They were slender, what you might call coltish if you played the horses, and he did; and the rest of her was on the same page. She wasn't any kind of centerfold, except maybe for *Girls of Outlaw Biker*, but she looked pretty damn good, like she could have been up visiting from Seattle or even L.A. Long dark hair had always done a job on him. She had a nose ring, and her strappy dress was of the same family of thrift debris he usually favored. On her it looked hip. She gave off a trashy, casual, experienced air. It was like cherries lining up on a slot machine--bing, bing, bing, pay-off--and Blair was suddenly far less disappointed at having missed a stakeout with Jim.

"Thank you," the woman said. "It was getting difficult to breathe in there." She smiled, and her lean face suddenly filled with interesting lines.

"Yeah, I can imagine," Blair said, laughing from an excess of nervous energy. He added, "It's none of my business, but how in the world did you manage to...?"
"My ex gets really carried away sometimes."

"Your ex," said Blair, losing some of his surface humor.

"Mm-hmm." The woman's throat emitted the sound dryly.

Self-consciously, Blair pulled out his phone. He was simultaneously aware of wanting to help the woman and of a golden opportunity to impress her. If he dialed the station he could probably snag Rafe or Henri, and he was already formulating his side of the imaginary conversation, how he'd speak seriously into the phone, give a run-down of the situation, and when prompted he'd ask the woman for a description to pass on to the detective, a friend of mine, he'd say to the woman with a brief and reassuring smile, then confer in a professional, knowledgeable manner.

Aloud, he began, "I'd say this is a little bit more than--"

"No," the woman broke in. "We were having an argument, you know. He gets carried away. Who are you calling?"

"I'm calling the police," Blair said. Taking charge. Man on the scene.

"No. Please don't do that."

"You got a problem with cops?" Blair asked her. Blair Sandburg, friend-of-the-law. It was a position he'd matured into gradually and given some serious thought, so that when the occasion for debate, defense, or persuasion arose he could effectively justify himself to friends. With strangers, he could adopt any manner that best suited his needs. He was flexible that way.

"Yes, I really do." The woman gently took the cell phone away from him as it began to ring, and then turned it off. "Thank you. My parents were protesters in the sixties. They got beat up a lot."

"Well, yeah, I understand," said Blair immediately, pleased to scramble up onto some common ground. "My mom, she was a protester, too. She was really into the counterculture. She still is, as a matter of fact." At this point he realized he was babbling; they both seemed to realize it, for he could feel the exact point in time when he lost the momentum and she began to get the edgy look of an escapee. "Yeah," he said more to himself than to her, embarrassed.

She handed the phone back, smiled. "Anyway, thank you for...helping me."

Still, hey, Blair's hormones murmured to him, you can't say that's not flirting. Look at that big smile, all those teeth. She's lilting, man. She's flirting. Right? Right?

"No problem. You're sure you don't want me to call?" Blair's interior heckler, no friend to the hormones, jeered at him for that one. Lame, lame. She said no, she took the phone away, she doesn't like cops, but maybe after thirty seconds she's reconsidered. Man, you could not possibly be more obvious unless you threw yourself on the ground and grabbed her ankles.

"Um, no. That's fine. Thanks." She'd hefted a box from beside the car and begun moving away, but there was enough idle in her stride that Blair was encouraged to call after her, even though he felt like a dork. Laughter at himself buoyed his words into absurdity, but he said them anyway, throwing the line after her with an almost random assay, as if trying to reel back a drifting boat.

"Okay. Yeah, uh--uh, is there anything else I can do for you?"

Amazingly, the woman had stopped and turned, and gave him the eye with new reflection, that mythical second chance. "Do you live around here?"
"Yeah. I do, actually." He indicated the building. "I live right up there."

Charming irresolution showed itself in her face. "Well, I'm moving in here"--shrugging an arm in the direction of her own building--"and they haven't turned on my water yet, so could I. . .could I take a shower at your place later?" She punctuated her request with a laugh, as if to acknowledge its audacity.

"A shower?" Blair echoed her laugh with his own disbelief, then grabbed hold of his doubts and shook them loose. "Uh. . .yeah, that'd be fine. That'd be fine."

"Cool. Here, hold this." She gave him the box of kitchen supplies, grinning complicitly at what was now their shared understanding. Or at least that's how it seemed to Blair. Chick asks to use your shower, what more do you need. He shoots, he scores.

"Great," he said, dazzled by fortune, and followed as she led him into her apartment. He spent an hour or so helping move in her paltry possessions. Everything she owned was in her car, she confided to him. With no heroic furniture-lifting required, he compensated by making a show of investigating her apartment thoroughly, checking the window locks, the vents, the hinges on the doors, all the while regaling her with the Blair Sandburg bildungsroman of youthful travel and allowing her to read between the lines, that here was a man who'd been around, who had the whole moving-into-a-new-apartment program down. Patented, practically. His low-key patter and strut communicated his masculine prowess, and he was, as ever, closely and ironically aware of himself, the show he put on. Anthropology had a way of stripping the illusion of romance from one's sexual machinations. His display was not much more subtle than that of a Venda girl performing the python dance. But when it worked. . .oh, when it worked.

Iris--this turned out to be her name, an interesting and different name, he told her--Iris seemed amused by him. She had a timely way, whenever he suspected that she might be laughing at him rather than with him, of tipping her body off-kilter, hands against hips, and giving him a tiny smile that affirmed attraction.

She came over to the loft for her shower, and Blair made her a sandwich of cheese and sprouts. They sat on the couch together for about half an hour afterwards, P.J. Harvey playing in the background, Iris's choice, and talked in a desultory style about Seattle and Cascade, parties and histories, the being and nothingness of ordinary life. Iris, scanning the apartment with a keen eye, commented that the place was "really tricked out." Blair took credit for the decor and downplayed a passing mention of his roommate.

Remarks on the apartment seemed to redirect Iris's attention toward the practical. "So, what do you do. You work?" Iris reached for her little string bag then slouched sideways on the couch, fumbling within it, not looking at him.

Blair, surprised at the question, answered quickly. "Uh, yeah. I teach at Rainier. Anthropology. Oh, hey--could you not light that?" When she glanced up he smiled at her to soften the request.

Iris put her cigarettes and lighter back in the bag, drew out a small jawbreaker instead. "I know it's bad for me. No lectures, please."

"It's not that--well, it is bad for you. But it's just my roommate. He's really, um, sensitive to the smell."

Iris's brows raised a fraction, like ironic quotes around a remark that was never made. "Rainier, huh." She resettled herself, plucked at her hair. "I didn't go to college."
"Hey, it's never too late," Blair said, earnest and brightening with a proselytizer's enthusiasm. "I have this guy in one of my classes who's seventy-three. Man, he's amazing. Been all over the world, seen and done more than you or I can imagine. He was in the Merchant Marines during World War II, wants to write a book."

"My dad worked with demolition," Iris said. "Went around knocking down buildings."

She'd made some mental connection that Blair didn't know how to address, except to share his own backstory. "I never knew my dad. My mother says she isn't sure who he was."

"Sounds like a woman who knew how to party," Iris said, smiling. "Mmm, sorry. Maybe I shouldn't. . ." She trailed off, a habit of allurement at contrast with her words.

Blair shifted, scratched his cheek with a quick crook of finger. "No, that's okay. It was different then. She's always telling me how much has changed. The sixties. . .you said your parents were protesters. Things must have changed a lot for them, too, huh. For your dad."

Iris's face twisted into amusement, eyes crinkling. "Well, I think he kinda stayed with what he did best, you know?"

It took a moment for this to sink in and detonate. "Oh," Blair said. "Wow."

"Yeah." She shrugged it off, allowed a few seconds for mutual reflection, then spoke again. "So, anthropology. What is that."

Blair blinked, then hauled himself fully onto the couch and crossed his legs. "Well, in the broadest sense it's the study of man. Humankind, I mean. Men and women."

"Sounds sexy." Iris smiled and tilted her head, and rolled the jawbreaker from one side of her mouth to the other. It clacked gently against her teeth, and the suggestive movement of jaw and unseen tongue made Blair's face heat.

"Um. . .some days. Though right now I'm reworking my syllabus and trying to find an interesting way to talk about analysis of subsistence crops and settlement patterns. Pretty dry to most freshmen. They'd rather be out studying the birds and the bees firsthand." He felt suddenly self-conscious, stuffy. He'd been ramping up to present himself as a man in a glamorous profession, but had slipped into the grad student's lament. Struggling to regain his footing, he went on. "Of course, traditionally, you get to travel a lot. I've been in the field in Kenya, Brazil, Paraguay, Peru, Irian Jaya--that's in Indonesia."

"Cool," Iris said, but Blair thought she seemed unimpressed. Maybe, with feminine intuition, she knew his claims for the exaggerations they were.

"I got invited on this expedition to Borneo last year," he continued, regaining his sense of stature as he went. "It would have been like a year-long graduate field course. My mentor was--is--working on this funded study, of the effects of late industrialization on indigenous forest peoples. Deforestation and land clearance, mining, resettlement, encroachment of all kinds--" He broke off, becoming ruefully aware of Iris's selective attention. "Anyway. Yeah."

"But you didn't go?"

It cut right to the point, and to the heart of him. Blair shook his head once. "No. It's over now. Everyone's back." He'd gone to meet his friend Gretchen's United flight at Sea-Tac. Others had taken that particular flight. Not everyone from the expedition, but enough of them to drive home to Blair all that he'd missed. They'd been tired, ravenous for America, but still buoyant with their
experiences, a tanned and scruffy tribe of his own kind.

He let the memory slide away, and raised himself back to lightness and small talk.

Before Iris left, they made a date for the following morning: visitation rights for the shower and a tentative offer of breakfast. In the wake of Iris's departure, his brief plunge into career angst forgotten, Blair shimmied with himself for a few minutes, light on his heels as he bounced around the kitchen, cleaning his mess and singing along with the faint music. The last time he'd been this wound up in recent memory was when he got to meet Orvelle Wallace. True, the thrill of meeting Orvelle beat Iris by a mile, but when you factored in a chance to get laid, things evened out.

Getting laid by Orvelle had never been a consideration. He was a nice, straight guy who smelled of Ben-Gay and had the sex appeal of an avuncular coach, which is to say none. But he had offered access to a locker room full of sweaty, lanky guys full of attitude and testosterone, banging lockers and snapping towels. Fueled by the memory, Blair's mind took five to visit a better, dirtier world, where sleek pro basketball players found short male groupies strangely attractive and invited them over for beer and a few rounds of one-on-one.

"Man," Blair murmured to himself, eyelids curving half-shut.

Content in the knowledge that Jim would not be home for hours, Blair went into his room. With his door wide open, he lay on his bed and lazily jacked off, then fell asleep on top of the rumpled covers. He was up again at nine, and made himself some dinner. He ate it sitting cross-legged on the living room couch among a scattered nest of journals and papers, an X-Files rerun playing in the background, his computer close at hand. He spent a happy while getting to know his newly-loaded laptop better; by the time he shut down later that night, he'd voiced more sweet nothings to the computer than he ever would to Iris.

His mother called at eleven-thirty, from a spiritual institute in Uttar Pradesh where she was absorbing the energies and editing the autobiography of the Supreme Master Ching Sheng.

"Baby," she exclaimed, a two-syllable birdsong. "I hope I didn't wake Jim."

"Hey, Naomi. Nope. He's on a stakeout."

"And you're not with him?" she asked tartly. "I'm very surprised."

"Have I mentioned that I love you call me from five thousand miles away to yank my chain?" Blair unlapped his laptop and wandered to the kitchen for water.

"That's what mothers do, sweetie."

"How's the book coming?"

"The Supreme Master is a very interesting woman. She has resolution and patience, and she's accomplished a great deal with her life." Naomi's words were distinct, as if she were choosing them with diplomacy, but also warm with compassion. Blair marveled at how much his mother could say without saying.

"I went to her website. That's some jewelry she's sporting. Some might question her dedication to nekkhamma."

"Well, she's not strictly a Buddhist. But she did give up her husband in pursuit of enlightenment."

"That's noble," Blair said mildly.
"So how is school, darling?"

"It's. . .school."

"I'm hearing some negativity, I think."

"You're hearing me at eleven-thirty at night after a pretty crappy day." Restlessly, Blair paced the floor of the empty apartment, running his hand along the counter edge, straightening a dining room chair.

"Why don't you tell me about it."

"It wasn't that bad," he back-pedaled immediately, to avoid a lengthy maternal examination. "I just question sometimes what I'm doing getting geared up for the tenure track. Why I bother when I'm not giving it my full focus. The politics and shmoozing and scrambling--I used to be caught up in it. I'd hang out with my friends and bitch about Professor X, Doctor Y. Now it bores me."

"Er zist oyf shpilkes," Naomi said, mimicking a great-aunt. "But work can be an opportunity to become a more accomplished person, darling. More aware, wiser. The universe is always seeking ways for you to move into new and wonderful areas of success."

"Is that an affirmation?"

She laughed. "You caught me."

"I'll put it on my list. Hey, I got your e-mail with that list of books, by the way. Thanks. Sorry I didn't get back to you."

"You're trying to divert my attention."

"I'm just talking, ma." Blair returned to the couch and plumped down on the cushions, then--what the hell, Jim wasn't here--put his bare feet on the coffee table, toeing aside his debris with aboriginal indifference to whether it fell on the floor.

"Tell me something real."

Something real. Blair sighed. "I met this girl today. Her parents were protesters in the sixties. She told me about them, just a little. Sounds like her dad was some sort of campus radical, sort of a Weathermen-like figure. Blew stuff up. I don't know. She didn't tell me much and I didn't ask. But it was weird, thinking about that. Not knowing who. . .you know?"

"I know." Naomi's voice was low, delicate. "I wish I had more certainty to offer."

Or even a short list, Blair thought, but he couldn't make himself speak the words that would hurt her.

"But I look back and I can't regret anything," she added, in a way he found both predictable and reassuring. "To be conceived in an alembic of such intense energies, a time of radical human evolution--it's a great gift."

He'd once made a timeline of notable assassinations and murders within three months of his conception. He often thought of this when Naomi became uplifting. "Yeah," he said.

"And how is the, ah, cop thing going?"

"The cop thing is good. It's going good."
"Now, don't say I'm nagging you."

"Did I say--"

"You know I'm always trying to be more open and question my own biases. Besides, I had a very exciting time on my last few visits. But I wonder if maybe all of this running around is pulling you away from your real work."

Blair yanked at his hair. "Naomi! It's not. That's like telling a doctor that patients are keeping him from practicing medicine. I'm an anthropologist and I'm studying the police."

"I know, I know, but it wounds me. You come from a long line of anti-authoritarian activists and here you are working with a paramilitary organization. Grandpa Bertie would have had plenty to say."

"And he would have let me make up my own mind."

"He'd have to," Naomi said with affection. "No one could make up your mind for you. You're a headstrong goat just like he was. And often as wise."

That stirred thoughts that had been resting in the sleepers of his mind. "I don't feel too wise most days. But I...do you think I...um, listen, what do you think of shamanism?"

"What wonderful synchronicity. There's a lovely man here at the institute who does guided spirit journeys. Nick drummed for me, and I took a deep journey down into the cave of my being and reached an underground sea of serenity. It was extraordinary--I'd been there before, but I'd never been able to see it so clearly. I could look out across the waves for miles. My spirit animal is a dolphin."

"Wow. That's quite a trip. Nick, huh?"

He could almost hear her twinkle. "He has hair just like yours, but longer and darker. He's dark all over."

"Too much information, Naomi."

"I hear that. Oh, darling, I have to go. They're ringing the meditation bells. Listen, do you need any money?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Well, I already sent a check off to you. I had a dream and my heart told me you could use it."

"Thanks," Blair said, with the discomfort that comes from getting something you simultaneously want and don't want. They said their good-byes, and he went back to work on his computer for a while, frowning at his notes, dissatisfied, before giving it up and surfing the web. Shaman. Drumming. Huichol. Ecstasy.

While surfing he joined a discipline chatroom and began running a log of the conversation; he dashed off a greeting then returned from time to time to read the desultory chat among the six members currently there, sifting through acronyms and emoticons for anything of shiny interest. A while later, he dropped into a similar chatroom for men, more erotic in focus. The men's chat spawned a few remarks worthy of note, but the women's conversation wove more complex threads. Undercurrents of religion permeated the talk as usual; Bible quotes, notes of spiritual fellowship. He'd compiled logs for the past few months now, erratically tracking contributions from a handful of
mostly Mormon wives for whom discipline was a secretive supplement to their usual church practices.

_Five paddles if dinner is late_, wrote goodwife. _Most things aren't more than five. Some are hard sins some are soft._

_do you pray together when you are punished_, asked ruth311.

_We pray after to strengthen our Covenant_

Strengthen our covenant, Blair thought. He looked up and saw a commercial for Burger King, colorful and busy, a giant hamburger wheeling across the screen. A breeze scudded through the balcony door at that moment, and the backs of his knees ached from sitting in place, and he questioned once again...questioned everything. Which tribe he belonged to, whether he was too odd to live in the structured, mainstream world to which he'd adapted himself. What he was doing with his life.

All the choices open to him were as cool and strange as the wind.

_Question_, Blair typed, breaking into the middle of two separate threads of conversation. _Do you feel that you are in charge of your discipline or that the law is being handed down from an outside source?_

_Both_, typed ruth311 briefly. goodwife after a minute offered a lengthier response on covenants, agreements, God, personal responsibility and growth.

_My mom used to say I grow like a weed_, wrote Blair when she'd finished. _Then one day I just stopped. Not sure I was quite done._

_LOL_, offered JoBeth, and a few other laughs and friendly smiles followed, assuring Blair he'd connected to the group.

Satisfied, he then spent twenty minutes in a crisp about-face composing a post to anthro-I that examined the etic-emic linguistic paradigm, mathematization of categories, and the challenge to participant observers of finding an etic tool-kit that did not invalidate their subjects of study.

He fell asleep later on the couch, a copy of Anthropology News splayed open on his belly, his eyes following the inward rhythm of dreams as iconic representations of American atomic-age culture flickered phantasmically across the screen via Nick at Nite. Naomi, aproned and brightly lipsticked, stood pumping from the outdoor well at their summer cottage. When she turned and smiled, Blair ran away toward a field of apple-red tractors, big as elephants, roaring riderless in the distance. He crawled under a tractor to find Incacha there, crouched on all fours and gazing at him sideways like an animal interrupted from drinking. Blair rolled onto his back and gazed at the springed underside of his bed, then slid out from under it and entered the woods, where he ran again, chased through darkness, tree branches whipping his cheeks. He reached a clearing where men with rifles sat waiting around a fire; he sat and joined them for coffee and felt the hot tin on his hands. He took several bites from a cheeseburger. When they were both watching and not watching, he stealthily picked up a gun and shot a man in the chest. The gore was elaborate. _Like a Rorschach test_, he thought clearly. And then Jim touched his cheek and he turned to Jim as if hugging a tree, or perhaps it was a tree, and he groaned.

"Wake up, Chief," he heard after a disorienting shift of mind and place.

Blair worked open his eyes against the weight of sleep; raising himself to consciousness was like
crawling from a honeycomb of thick panic and dream. "Jim?" It took a while to focus.

"You were having a nightmare, I think," Jim said.

Something ruffled his stomach; the journal as Jim drew it off, closed it and placed on the table. Jim was sitting by his side on the couch, a beautiful substantial loom of body and shadow. Blair stretched appreciatively; his side flexed against Jim's thigh. No chance of dislodging that. Solid as a bulwark or a dune of warm sand.

"What time is it?" Blair asked.

"Three."

He must have turned the television off before he came over. It was quiet. "You just get home?"

"Yeah. No worries. You didn't miss anything."

"Mmm." Blair gazed up at Jim from his oblique perspective, taking the other man's emotional temperature. He preferred verifying such claims to his own satisfaction. Jim looked moderately tired but alert; no unusual burden was casting the slope of his neck or the angle of his shoulders into the rigidity it sometimes held. A routine night then.

"I met this girl today," Blair said, because he said things as they came into his mind. And as the words drifted loose, he read the minute change in Jim's face, and only too late understood that Jim had been thinking about asking him upstairs. That clinched it. God knows what was wrong with his car, but his own timing belt was shot all to hell.

"That's great." Jim tugged at Blair's hair and smiled.

And of course Jim meant it. He could be a passive-aggressive son of a bitch when he wanted to, but he rarely begrudged Blair a woman. They weren't about that. Unfortunately, once a woman was lined up, the hands-off rule was in effect. House rule number twenty-seven, if Blair recalled correctly. No double dipping. For a moment, he considered changing tack, trading the uncertain promise of the girl for the certainty of Jim.

But Jim was a certainty.

"I found her in a trunk," Blair murmured.

"In a trunk. Right. I hope we're talking about a real girl here, Houdini. Not one of those inflatable models."

"Ha ha." Blair rolled over on his side, nudging pointedly at Jim's hip with his knee. The change of position dislodged remnants of dream from his mind. "I dreamed of Incacha," he said. "And tractors."

Jim's hand rested on Blair's head, cupping behind his ear. "Tractors?"

Their intimacy brimmed with silence for a minute. Then longer. Jim could take himself to a place of stillness and hold it. Blair lacked and envied the gift, struggled to emulate it on his own terms through meditation. But Jim was a natural. Only when tired could Blair achieve that stillness, and only when under Jim's hands or resting against him in bed. Jim's current touch on his skin, the thumbing tenderness of hair behind his ear, grounded Blair to a semblance of peace.

"I've been thinking about the whole shaman thing." Blair's capsized gaze leveled with the door near
where Incacha had fallen.

"Don't think about it."

Blair turned his head, an edgy movement that tore across the veil of repose. "I've been reading, meditating... running. I'm not ready to be a shaman, Jim." He hadn't said the words before, had circumnavigated his fear for weeks.

"Blair." Jim's voice was deep and quiet like the hour. "I wish you weren't taking this shaman business so seriously. Incacha... he was a good man. But most of what he did for the tribe had nothing to do with me or this sentinel thing. He chanted and drank a lot more ayahuasca than he should have. Talked to the spirits. He told me when I was leaving that he'd spoken to them about me. He was worried. He wanted someone to look after me. That's all."

"And what a great job I do," Blair said distantly, gazing at the doorway again, speaking to it.

"You do. You guide me."

Blair couldn't decide if Jim really simplified the issues so easily in his own mind, or if he thought this was what Blair wanted to hear.

"I'm a flake," Blair said. He blinked at a strand of hair in his eye. Jim drew it aside and Blair turned his head back. "I want to study you and guide you. Contradictions. I don't know what I want. School is all about levers and pellets. And it's what pays the bills." He snorted in qualification. "Or might someday. If I think too closely about the tightrope I'm on, I freak. And then there's the police work. No one there gets it. My friend Heidi—you know her, with the bodacious, yeah—she's writing her thesis on a confluence model of institutionalized rape in Bosnia. Mark is studying mental health services on the Makah reservation. Heidi's been assaulted, Mark's been stabbed, but they both tell me I'm the one in over my head. And Stoddard. God. He—" Blair's throat blocked what he'd been going to say.

As Blair's lull stretched, Jim prodded, "He what?"

"Nothing. I'm just... I think I..." Blair paused, swallowed. "I think I've made a big mess of everything. You and this diss don't mix."

Jim gazed down elliptically, and his light-fingered caress grew briefly impatient. He'd heard rambles like this many times before, and Blair could feel the brusque movement against his skull even though Jim's face remained smooth, voice calm. "Tomorrow you'll forget this and be back on track, Chief."

"Yeah. I think that's the problem. Too cocky for my own good. You say I guide you but in the middle of the night I wake up and I think, I'm just a guide dog. Here I am tearing at the leash and dragging you along with me on this sentinel thing, but I'm the blind one. How much sense does that make?"

Jim studied him wordlessly.

Blair smiled against the melancholy that feathered across him like a thin snow. "You have to keep me in line when I get headstrong. You're my law and order, man."

"So you tell me," Jim said. Then, after a few beats Blair when did not respond: "Come on. You don't want to be sleeping here. You'll get cricks in your neck."

"You say the same thing about my futon," Blair noted. But he sat up and shuffled yawning into his room, waving off Jim's predictable objections to the state of the loft with a brief tomorrow. Lights
were snapped off behind him, and soon he snapped off too.

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10 p.m. --camp n. Baliem

It's been drizzling all day, and it turned cold at twilight. The air has that sharp highland scent, and all around the village people have their fires lit, smoke carrying on the breeze. Peta and I walked down to the creek earlier in this big messy break where the reeds had been trampled into the mud, but the water was chilly and brown with tannins and she wouldn't put her feet in. I did and I got looked at severely by a duck. This is supposed to be the dry season, so I don't know what the hell's up. Meni promised that tomorrow it would be hot, and said it as if she were personally authorizing the weather on my behalf. Who knows, right?

Meni: incredible. Face crumpled in on itself, but masculine and big, and when she smiles it's like seeing a weed ripped out of the ground that took a clump of dirt with it. Tiny little tits, granny tits. I love her. She remembers Heider (though not his name), she's that old. And looks it. And she's missing four fingers, two on each hand. I got so excited when I met her, grabbing her hands, I thought Peta was going to chuck her tape recorder at me. She minded more than Meni did and I told her later she shouldn't have. The Dani greet one another by grabbing a finger and pulling so the knuckle cracks. A lot of pull-my-finger jokes among the group.

I'm sitting here in my honai-style bungalow with Rupert snoring oafishly behind me and Chew off somewhere overzealously bird-watching or in search of bandicoots, me running my laptop like a crazy American and hoping I'll have a chance to charge my battery tomorrow. Meni has given me a stone, a ganekhe, for protection from evil spirits, such as the kind released whenever Chew blows his nose. It's small enough to sit on my laptop as I have it now or to carry in my pocket. I've quickly attributed it with great significance and don't dare lose it. I would not be surprised to learn that local spirits have evil designs on my hard drive.

Note: I am already sick of sweet potatoes. But the worms we had today were pretty good.

Today in Chew's local bird guide, such as it is, I saw an entry for the Moss-forest blossom bat, *Syconycteris hobbit*. I'd like to see a moss forest. Rupert says his informant knows of one and we can probably catch a bemo going a little further up the mountain and then hike it the rest of the way.

So far this isn't quite what I'd hoped. The CWHI workers are incredibly condescending to the tribal peoples and I got in a hell of an argument with one of the doctors during a meeting, but it's not possible to listen to their essentialist bullshit without wanting to bite someone. It bugs me, because some members of the group haven't even been in the field before and could pick up some really bad habits. One minute Peta can be spouting PC anthrospeak, which is bad enough, but when she actually describes the village in her own words, she lapses into this unconscious conceptualization of the Dani as some kind of static, pre-cultural society. Maybe everyone goes through the noble savage honeymoon phase. I hope I wasn't such a twerp when I was nineteen. She keeps calling everything "natural" as if beaded skirts and ethnomedical practices were some kind of radical primitivism.

Shit. I think there's a rat on the stoop.

Part of me is wishing I'd hooked up with Bill and headed south, but at least I have a chance of getting an article or two out of this, whereas wandering like an itinerant ecotourist across Brazil again would accomplish nothing more than passing the time for a summer.

I've been rereading Burton's *Sentinels of Paraguay* and wondering if I'm crazy to be thinking of
reviving this full-blown into a dissertation. And I am. But every time I pick up the book it falls open
to the groove I've worn in the spine and I read the phrase "a well-formed man, carrying himself erect
as a soldier, whose jaguar eyes fixed their mark across the river in darkness, a distance of 300 yards."
I can write that by heart. On the plane ride out here, with nothing else to do and to keep from getting
sick, I hashed out a crude outline based on the monograph, the case studies from CSSI, and some of
the field interviews and folktales I collected from the Guarani. It's a horrible farce, in its way, but the
material captivates me as something innovative, all mine, a subject that no one else has the slightest
interest in: my own idiographic (or idiopathic, maybe) and groundbreaking field of study. I doubt I'll
ever go ahead with it, but the rare air here has me dreaming odd things. Last night I had a dream I
was guiding a collection of people through a rainforest and being stalked by a big cat. Trite, as far as
thin words stretch to describe it, but powerful.

I'm fucking hungry but I swear I won't eat that rat. Though if I caught it and gave it to Meni, she'd
probably make me rat tart for lunch tomorrow.

The anthropologist's grace: thank the gods and please pass the bananas.

Wednesday, September 10, 1997

Somewhere nearby, a bag of electric cats was being whipped.

Jim floundered into wakefulness, noise battering at him through floorboards, mattress, and walls. His
earplugs corked an inadequate dam against the blitzkrieg. A moment's difficultly maintained focus
confirmed that the source of sound was within the loft. Surely this could not be Sandburg. He'd
trained the kid better than this. Hell, the kid had trained himself better than this, and from his first
week. Jim sat up, more bemused than irritated, and pushed his sleeping mask to the top of his head
before peering around the edge of his pillow. The source of foul play was a scrawny young woman
who perched on his coffee table abusing an electric guitar. The source of foul play was a scrappy young woman
who perched on his coffee table abusing an electric guitar.

He shoved out of bed and went downstairs, carefully removing his earplugs as he descended the
steps. The woman's bent back delineated a classic pose of self-absorption, and Jim suspected he was
looking at someone who made a habit of being a public nuisance even in private. What kind of
person played an electric guitar in someone else's home at eight o'clock in the morning?

"Hey," Jim said to the woman through the discordance. Then, more loudly: "Hey!"

She played on, oblivious. Jim walked over to the guitar amp and yanked the plug. The woman
uncoiled from her broken communion a beat too slowly, snaking her gaze up to meet his with the
practiced style of a confrontationist. She assessed him while he returned the regard. He got the
impression she didn't take interruptions lightly, and the impression she wanted him to know that and
to apologize. But he said nothing, and she broke the moment first.

"Nice boxers," she said. The laughter which followed held a note of mocking, but she observed the
thin niceties of a guest who isn't yet ready to pick a fight on someone else's turf. "You must be Jim.
I'm Iris, your new neighbor. Blair was just helping me move."

"Right, right," Jim began, and might have gotten in a jab about her being found in a trunk or raised
by wolves; but he'd already tracked Blair's approach and his roommate was entering as he continued.
"I don't mean to be rude, but I'm trying to get some rest. I've been up all night on a--"

"On a big project," Blair interrupted, coming up close and giving Jim the full treatment of those baby
blue tractor beams he called eyes. Jim could almost feel his good sense crumbling and being sucked
away like so much space debris. "Right, Jim? Big project? See, Jim, he works for the city--road
maintenance. He's one of the chief supervisors. Right?"

"Right," Jim drawled, resigning himself to another performance of the Sandburg Shakespeare Company and all the intricacies that would entail. "Excuse me." He headed upstairs, shaking his head and wondering if he'd been that blatant a hustler when he was younger.

Yeah, Blair was saying to Iris. Ooh, hey, look at that. You know, that was actually a present from my mom on my twelfth birthday. It once belonged to Jimi Hendrix.

You can't be serious, thought Jim, pained. He scratched his chest and listened to Iris nail him.

That's a really nice line, Blair, but, uh. . . .

No fool Iris, it would seem.

He signed it, came Blair's prompt reply.

Jim pulled on his bathrobe with a long-suffering sigh, then regarded himself in his dresser mirror, searching for ingrown hairs and pulling rubbery faces at his reflection.

He gave her this guitar?

Jim grimaced, disappointed. Iris, he said silently, I was actually beginning to have hopes for you.

That's right.

Your mom and Jimi Hendrix?

They were pretty close, Blair affirmed.

They were both born in Seattle, thought Jim.

Wow, I would love to do some more jammin' on that thing. I have an amp over at my place.

Of course you do, mouthed Jim soundlessly to the mirror.

Um, you wouldn't mind if I...of course you would.

Of course he wouldn't.

Well, I tell you what, said the smooth operator. You let me cook dinner for you tonight and I'll let you borrow it.

Jim listened to them make a date, contemplated going back to bed, then pushed into his sandals and came downstairs, tying his robe and scenting the territory. The whiff of pot smoke Iris had carried in with her had nearly dissipated; it had been too faint to attribute it directly to her; could have been a party, a friend. He wouldn't mention it to Blair, who might bristle if he perceived his judgment to be in question.

Jim ambled up to Blair, who was closing the door on Iris's departure. The other man gave a small but expressive whoosh of breath, like puffed steam escaping a kettle on the boil. His scent had changed, but his arousal was prosaic. Jim, discerning but largely unconscious of his own response, felt reassured.

"Doing okay there, Chief?"
"Yeah, I think I'll live." Blair tapped Jim's arm in some cryptic acknowledgment of his own, then fluttered around the kitchen, scanning the contents of the cabinets. "Hey, you're still on stakeout tonight, right?

Jim wandered in his wake. "Yeah. Why?"

"Perfect," Blair said.

"Perfect for another train wreck in the ongoing disaster that is your love life," Jim replied in the voice of prescience.

"Yeah, yeah. This coming from a man who I've never known to date the same woman twice."

"At least I'm consistent. Why didn't you want her to know that I was a cop?"

"She's got this thing against cops," Blair said in a tone he clearly hoped was offhand. Or maybe it was. "It's no big deal."

Sure, thought Jim. But he didn't take the opportunity to press the issue. "Road maintenance?" he said instead, glumly contemplating his boring new career. "Road maintenance? Well, at least you made me a supervisor."

"Yeah, you're welcome," Blair said distractedly. "Hey, uh, I used to have this can of grape leaves. Have you seen it? I got this recipe out of this Persian folklore book. There these seven dishes that when eaten together are supposed to create this amazing aphrodisiac effect."

"You're personally testing this theory, are you?" Jim was hurt, in a mild way--more or less just on principle--but didn't show it. Blair never cooked romantic Persian feasts for him. Come to think of it, though, maybe this was a good thing. Damp grape leaves sounded like a dubious prospect for kindling romance.

"Yeah, and it will not work without the grape leaves."

Jim watched his friend go--vamoose goes the caboose--and shook his head to clear it. Blair was out the door before Jim could think to say anything else, and only afterwards did his brain began to inscribe examples of what he could have said, should have said, before letting the kid hoof off to forage for his mating rituals.

And then he was bouncing back through the door, all of his woolly distraction rolled up like a ball of yarn and tossed into sudden focus at Jim. "Jim, can I borrow a twenty?"

"You're kidding, right? I give you twenty bucks so you can stuff this chick with grape leaves?"

"Actually, I'll be stuffing a lamb first." Blair chortled at his joke and jittered briefly like a wind-up toy, then returned the attention of his spaniel eyes to imploring Jim.

Jim waved his hand tiredly and went to start a pot of coffee. "Take it from the jar."

"Thanks, Jim--really, man. I'll pay you back next Friday."

There were times, like now, when Jim just wanted to hand the kid an AmEx card and a whistle and let him run wild. Blair, let's stop this farce, he thought, interiorizing a rich, soapy narration. Be my rentboy. She's just like all the rest. She's no good for you, no one is. I'll take care of you, baby. His sanity sensor pinged uncomfortably. He'd been woken far too early from the stuporous blur of his dreams.
"Okay, back soon."

"Whoa, Chief." Jim caught Blair by the arm as he started to resume his errand. "Before you rush out again, I'm just asking--are you sure this is going to be worth it come the end of the month?"

Blair scowled at him. He had a way of looking fierce when pressured. "Way to kill the mood, Jim."

Jim released him and held up his hands conciliatorily, while reestablishing space with a few steps back. To hell with pack dominance or whatever. "Hey, you do want you want. But the writing's on the wall." Blair had pocketed the twenty and pulled out his keys. He pushed at his hair, keys jangling on his fingers, and blew an exasperated sigh from his lips. "What--the guitar thing? Come on, Jim, are you going to tell me you've never fed a woman a line."

"Jimi Hendrix and Naomi?" Jim parried.

"Hey, it might have been his," Blair said. "She got it in a Seattle pawnshop. Salesguy told her it once belonged to Jimi."

"The signature?"

"Yeah, um... that was me. Right after I got it. When I was twelve."

There was not much by way of apology in Blair's voice, but Jim's ears picked up stress lines of old turmoil. He could guess at the source. Over time he'd collaged together Blair's stories and Naomi's divulgences until he knew Blair past almost as well as Blair present. And he could see that twelve-year-old, fleshed out from one of Naomi's snapshots: a bright shrimp on the brink of adolescence, tousle-haired and too clever for his own good. A fatherless outsider settling down in Cascade after a youth of travel, sentenced to the suburbs and to some close-knit Junior High. Nerd and newcomer, he'd made up colorful stories to win friends and to evade the wildly uneven fights he attracted. He'd observed and found ways to fit in, at least marginally, getting by on a shoestring and his wits until adaptation became his defining principle.

I don't try to conform, Blair had once said to him. I harmonize.

Now, Jim held Blair's shoulders in a casual but attention-getting manner. "You know, you sell yourself short, Chief. You're an interesting guy. You don't need a fancy guitar to get girls."

Blair gave the particular laugh which to Jim always sounded like a tiny, dry cough. "Yeah, and garage bands are all about the music, Mister Cleaver."

Blair would always be younger, of course. And was young enough now that Jim occasionally gazed at him from a distance of seven years, the tunnel between them lengthening with all their differences. Blair bundled himself in attitudes like layers of cheap clothes he could shrug into and shed as the mood fit; a display of good humor worn over irony, irony covering for cynicism, and under the cynicism his insecurity, kept close to the vest. On any given day, Jim's own response to this could vary widely, from irritation to empathy.

Jim unhanded his shoulders, clapped one in brotherly abandon. "Don't say I didn't try."

Blair visibly wavered. "Hey, man, I've got some wiggle room. . .right? Right?"

Jim shrugged.

And then Blair tipped back into his groove. "Ah, I can't think about this now. I'm a man on a mission. Grape leaves, grape leaves."
And like that, he was gone.

Jim had returned to bed and given himself over to several more hours of sleep punctuated only by small domestic Sandburgian noises, which spliced themselves gently into his dreams. Around two he woke into an empty loft and a quiet molecular storm of scents. He lay in bed with one arm flung above him, half-drunk on the air, tracing the source to the kitchen. Between him and the ceiling a haze floated, mixing with sunlight from the windows.

So many scents. His kitchen must look like a crime scene.

When he went downstairs to view the damage—sense of smell dialed down—he discovered his counters heaped with tiny bags, plates, and bowls, as if Blair had tried to recreate a Persian bazaar in the confines of the condo. Twenty dollars hadn't bought all this, and it definitely hadn't been in the apartment this morning.

Mildly staggered, Jim poked around and tried to estimate cost without sneezing on it. Half the spread consisted of items that were not what Jim thought of when he thought of dinner. Or even food. A bowl of rose petals, another of orange peels. Dried limes in a sharp-smelling heap. Almonds, pistachios, cherries, raisins. Many of the scattered, gaping ziplock bags were labeled with Blair's elaborate handwriting: angelica seeds, saffron, cardamom, tarragon. If Blair had been here, Jim would have said, angelica, saffron—sounds like the ex-girlfriend roll call. When Jim uncovered a colander draped in a dish towel the smell of fresh mint and parsley nearly made him dizzy. One large bowl, their salad bowl, held a mix of dates, figs, and grapes.

Puzzled and oddly touched, Jim ran his hand over his head. The kid was crazy. Idly he picked up a bunch of grapes and ate from it while tipping a glance at an open book that was half buried under a twist of carrots. Persian cuisine, he read, is a blend of exotic yet elegant stanzas of taste as one might find in a poem by Omar Khayyam and as delicately colorful as a miniature painting.

Lovely.

He finished the grapes and, in one palm, hefted for examination an eggplant big as a baby, then set it back with care. He looked the mess over again. These preparations for a feast pissed him off in a way he couldn't pin down. Iris was not worthy of Sandburg's enthusiasm, his efforts. And now that he thought about it, Iris bugged him. She looked like she'd been around the block in a garbage truck, and while ten years ago he'd have gone for that type of chick himself, now he was antagonized. He didn't want a piece of it, not even by proxy. Especially not by proxy.

In a dissatisfied mood he abandoned the imbroglio of food his kitchen had become and began preparing for the day. Between shower and shave he wondered if Iris went to Rainier; when getting dressed he thought about her skanky clothes and recalled an olfactory dinge to them that undermined the rose-scented oil she'd worn. At the gym while working out he noticed Lacey Agosta, a dispatch trainer he'd once met, lifting weights with ripe tanned little arms. Why not a woman like her, Jim wondered, to notch the Sandburg belt. Clean, healthy fun. No nose ring.

Clean, healthy fun. And probably boring. Not that that was a bad thing, when it came to casual dating.

"Where's your shadow?" Simon asked when Jim finally hit the station an hour later.

"Found something better to do."

"Something better than staking out a strip joint?" Joel asked in rhetorical disbelief. "You know that
Jim and Simon looked at each other with shared amusement.

"Or, at least, that's what I heard," Joel added. Joel had a wife, but Jim suspected she would be more concerned with the sin of roast beef than of ogling. "All I'm saying is, if you guys need an extra hand, I'm--"

"I think we got it covered."

"Well, Jim, technically--since Sandburg won't be there--"

"We are a man down, sir," Jim finished, pretending to consider the matter.

Joel hastened to confirm the arrangement. "What time?"

"Nine-thirty."

"I'll clear my calendar," Joel said, laughing as he departed.

Jim chuckled as he entered the bullpen with Simon.

"So what's Sandburg got going anyway?" Simon asked.

"Oh, he's cooking dinner for some girl he just met. She's not too fond of cops."

"That's all right," Simon joked as they paused by his office door. "I don't like cops either."

"There's something familiar about this one, though, like I've seen her somewhere before." Jim had spent the drive from the gym to the station rifling through his mental mug book. "I've just got a bad feeling about her."

"Jim, you are taking this big brother thing with the kid way too far," Simon advised. "You got to let him out on his own, let him make his own mistakes. He's got to fail once in a while. If anything else, it'll build character. God knows he needs it." Delivering that summary judgment, Simon entered his office.

During the miniature lecture Jim gave Simon his game face, perfected over time and a hundred administrative meetings, the one that said: oh, really, you don't say. He walked away unsure whether to be amused or appalled at the oblivious accuracy with which Simon had outlined Jim's mission in life. Something to think about.

Simon's insights sometimes glanced the surface, other times hit closer to the mark. But even the hits rarely went deep. Jim guarded the heart of himself, and figured most others did the same. A man carries himself a certain way among his colleagues and friends, nods and smiles and talks the talk; but what the hell does anyone really know about him, about what he's thinking. Mere guesswork. And the domestic flipside of a man's public life--that territory is zoned against trespassing. Jim liked to keep his private life private.

He also preferred reciprocity. He didn't want to know what his friends did, when they were home alone in their Jockeys watching cable. He investigated criminals for a living, dug up their histories and secrets; looked over their shabby houses, went through their drawers. Criminals lied and hid, but they also confessed and boasted and ranted, exploded with displays of rage, wept and vented, soapboxed on their grudges, craved attention and a spot on Jerry Springer. Friends on the other hand
were people who kept their dirty laundry hidden. They showed you respect and kindness by staying within their boundaries.

Except, of course, Blair. He had become established well within Jim's boundaries, could sit on Jim's couch in his dirty laundry and his own brand of kindness, which had something to do with worrying about Jim's stuffy nose and cooking him chili; and when he raised his dusty bare feet to rest on Jim's couch, Jim wanted to tumble the annoying bastard off the cushions or gripe at him; and when he looked up and smiled, Jim did nothing of what he'd intended. Since Blair, Jim often found himself in that moment of good surprise, the left turn of discovery.

Jim took a seat at his desk and signed into the system.

He spent the better part of the afternoon and evening searching tediously through Washington state criminal databases for signs of Iris, beginning with local jurisdiction and then broadening out. It was far more time than he should have spent, especially considering how little information he had to go on. How had so many women named Iris managed to get in trouble, he wondered. At one point he almost called Sandburg on a pretext, planning to slip a few casual questions into the conversation. Hey, buddy, that new girlfriend of yours have any tattoos? Scars? Last name? Hell, he might as well go home and lift prints from his apartment.

But he didn't. He searched, made coffee runs, took several phone calls that actually related to his current case load, did some paperwork, searched again, and in early evening tracked her down via an Everett rap sheet. None of its details explained when or where Jim had seen her before, but here she was now. Proof was satisfaction enough. And she wasn't looking quite so pretty in her mugshot.

He read over the abstract, checked for links to any further criminal record history, then reran a search in WACIC with her newly acquired personal data. He didn't find any current warrants. That was something.

Jim leaned back in his seat and wondered how to justify this to Simon. Captain, I just had that hincky feeling. So I spent five hours of city salaried time running a background check on my boyfriend's girlfriend.

Standing, he grabbed the top case file from his desk and headed to Simon's office. The door was open, and he knocked lightly on the frame to draw the other man's attention. Simon waved him in.

"Seems like all I do some days is read memos," Simon said, looking up from his own stack of paperwork. He picked up a sheet, glanced it over and dropped it. "Deuces and 357s may be having another turf war."

"That right," said Jim, taking a seat.

"We've also got a series of armed robberies taking place in the Stickney Park district. Assistant Chief Nagel is calling for 'proactive' measures." With a derisive sound, Simon rose and busied himself with pouring a cup of coffee. "Not that he came right out and said racial profiling, oh no. But I'm sure we'll hear about it sooner or later."

"Should you be telling me this?" Jim asked mildly, pro forma.

"And in the wake of the Partington settlement," Simon continued, ignoring him, "there's a committee forming to review whether we should increase regulation trigger pressure to eight pounds." Coffee in hand, he sank back into his seat.

"Lovely."
"Not to mention that in the next two weeks everyone not in compliance with firearm proficiency regs is going to be taking a little trip," Simon stared at Jim pointedly over the rim of his coffee mug. "Funny, but my top detective is on the due list."

"Firing range. I'll put it on my calendar, sir."

"You do that. Because for someone who not so long ago. . .ah, that reminds me." Simon pulled open a drawer and withdrew a thick folder that Jim recognized as his personnel file. To its cover was clipped a sheet of paper that Simon detached and slid across his desk to Jim, followed by a pen.

Noting at a glance the official department letterhead, Jim picked up the document. He scanned it, then spent a few minutes reading it over again. "Hmm. They combined both shootings into one letter of reprimand," he said. "Haven't seen that before." He signed it, slid it back.

Simon aimed a cool, level gaze his way. "You're lucky you're a Channel Nine hero, Jim. You account for seventy-five percent of annual weapons discharge in this precinct. Half the review board thinks you're insane; the other half thinks you're the next best thing to RoboCop." His flat voice carried warning. "But even your supporters will sell you out to the media in a New York minute if public opinion turns. You can't give them any opportunity. So don't shoot any more security guards, and get your ass to the firing range before you catch departmental attention."

Simon closed the file and settled back again, easing into a posture of resignation and readiness. "Now, what can I do for you, detective."

Jim, the heat of shame suffusing his cheeks and ears, shifted in his chair and practiced not letting his feelings show. Old hat. "You mentioned yesterday that you wanted an update on the Cyclops Oil case--"

"A brief one," Simon interrupted. "I've got to head out of here soon. Don't you too?"

"Yeah."

"So tell."

Jim didn't consult the file he'd brought as a prop. "Sandefer's been keeping in close touch. Trial date was originally set for next month, but it's been moved to October. Prosecution initiated the continuance. They're trying now to get depositions from a few of the company contractors in Peru."

Simon raised his brows. "Ambitious."

"Last week Spalding filed a complaint that Yeagar was threatening him. Sandefer presented the complaint to the judge, judge revoked release, and Yeagar's wearing the orange. Not too happy either, by the sound of it."

"That makes my day," Simon said with a small chuckle.

Jim outlined some further details on the progress of the case, then cleared his throat as he finished. Simon had already stood up and shrugged on his jacket while he listened. "There is one more thing, Captain."

"Of course there is."

A few minutes later Simon and Joel were standing at Jim's desk and reading from his terminal.

"Will you look at this?" Simon said. He hadn't quite believed Jim at first, thought Jim was pulling his
leg. "Robbery, extortion, suspected drug trafficking, grand theft auto."

Jim, who'd been trying to reach Sandburg at home, said, "I got the machine." He spoke into the phone. "Sandburg, if you're there, pick up the phone. . .okay, listen, I hope you're having fun, but when you're done with dinner, would you remember to count the silverware." It was a mean remark, but vague. Vague enough, Jim hoped. If she was there, it might spook her, and prompt Blair to call. If he got the message later, he'd surely figure it out and give her the interrogation and the boot.

"Why didn't you just tell him?" Simon asked.

"No, not on the phone," Jim said. "I mean, if she's listening, it might get ugly. And besides, what can happen in one night? You know, she was a lot younger when she committed these crimes. And the drug trafficking charge didn't stick."

"Cat like that doesn't change its spots," Joel said with assurance.

"Yeah, and these are just the crimes we know of," Simon added.

"Well, there aren't any outstanding warrants," Jim said, logging off the system and standing up. Irresolutely, he scratched his knuckles along his jawbone, wondering whether to swing by the loft on his way to the strip joint. He glanced at his watch, noted nine-thirty. "I'll try to reach him on his cell phone before we get tied up on stakeout."

"I'll have a patrol stop by the loft," Simon said. "See if he's just ignoring the phone."

"Thanks, Simon."

Tiredness showing for a moment, Simon straightened his shoulders and cracked his neck from side to side. "I've got to get home, but if I get a chance I'll log in from there, see if I can dig up any more information on that dropped charge."

Jim nodded his thanks again, and left for the stakeout with Joel.

At quarter past nine, as Blair was readying the final stage of his creations, the phone rang. He answered, half-knowing who it would be. Iris's apologies echoed a hundred canceled dates. He knew the drill. Funny how the drill always hurt. When he successfully winkled her location out of her, he felt more hope. He offered to pick her up.

"No, Blair, that's sweet," she said, "but I already ruined dinner, and--"

"Don't be silly. I'll be right there." He hung up and muttered a few churlish remarks to himself as he turned off the stove burner. It was already a late dinner. Push back the schedule any further and they'd never make it to cuddling on the couch, let alone bed surfing. Gone were the days when he could easily stay up until three in the morning, then get up again at eight.

It was not a lengthy trip, and when Blair pulled into the garage he immediately spotted Iris, who joined him with a whiff of perfume and an attractive slide of rump across the seat. After exchanging greetings, Blair sketched out a plan to rescue her car, which Iris deferred by requesting to stop on the way for an errand; someone owing her money, yadda yadda. Blair thought about saffron rice softening on the stove, before mentally switching gears and agreeing.

He began to drive, but almost immediately the car backfired and stalled. Iris giggled.

"This car gets a little temperamental," he said apologetically as he worked the ignition. After a few
fumbling tries the engine caught life. The car jerked into reverse, and Iris laughed again as if this were a good joke. He laughed readily with her then got the show out of the garage and on the road.

The night was balmy. A soft breeze was drawn through the car's open windows as they drove, along with the muffled base of another nearby vehicle.

"It's not far," Iris said, slouching comfortably across the seat from him. She directed him down the street, with a right on Colville, and gave their destination as the Heights convenience store, a place he knew. Blair found it without difficulty and parked in its empty lot. He shut off the engine and began to get out.

"Can you wait here?" Iris asked. "My friend gets a little weirded out at strangers."

Blair kept his face schooled to polite wood, a trick of expressive expressionlessness he'd absorbed from Jim without knowing it. "Sure," he said, because there was no other reasonable reply that didn't involve sarcasm. He shut the door with his arm and laid it there. "No problem," he added to himself, since Iris was already heading across the parking lot without having waited for acknowledgment.

It was a nice view. Iris walking away. She had an easy lope. But Blair was beginning to think that Iris was pretty high maintenance, despite appearances.

Weirded out at strangers? What kind of friend was that, Blair wondered. He tried to think of friends he might say that about and couldn't. And it seemed possible, the more he considered it, that Iris had called him not to cancel dinner, but to prompt him into picking her up. Okay, he'd pulled a few maneuvers like that before, no problem. But now they were stopping by to visit her weird indebted friend, he was waiting in the car like a taxi driver, and...and hell, whatever, at least it was a nice night and he might get laid, even if the odds were diminishing by the minute. He imagined Iris on top, hair swinging down as she tilted her head, the sharpness of her clavicle as she leaned toward him. Small breasts. Lips parted. Eyes like kahlua or the burnt-out ends of cigarettes.

His face didn't change expression as he contemplated the evening's potential, and though he wasn't thinking about his face, he knew he was vaguely bored. So much trouble. Dinner, chit chat, and woo. And for what. Last night he could have been face down on Jim's bed, screaming into a pillow and feeling his body open up to the other man's cock, bang, bang, bang, nailed to completion, leaving him a tossed mess, hair exploded, asshole like a split dandelion stem, ripe and spilling milk. If he'd made that choice he'd be on stakeout right now, watching strippers with Jim, shifting his ass on a hard seat and happy.

Que sera sera, thought Blair.

Suddenly the passenger side door opened, and a man's head poked in. Blair jerked back from the intrusion. He would have said something, but while his brain was processing its startlement, the man looked him over and then remarked, "Sorry, kid. I thought you were somebody else." He shut the door with careless force and walked away.

"Easy on the car, man," Blair said, belatedly venting his annoyance. Rattered, but letting it go, he resumed waiting for Iris. A man strode out of the market and passed the car. Automatically Blair tilted his rearview mirror, not thinking about why, just doing it, mimicking an action he'd seen Jim perform a hundred times. Across the parking lot, behind Blair's car, the man caught up with someone and began talking. Blair paid the matter half his attention, and his observation became fully relocated when Iris left the store and walked up to the Volvo.

She opened the door and leaned in, gaze elsewhere. "Start the car," she said sharply.
"Uh, yes, ma'am," Blair said, caught off guard by the peremptory tone. High maintenance. Oh yeah. Definitely. He started the engine. "You know, it works a little better if you're actually in the car." A gunshot broke the quiet of the parking lot. Amazing, the immediacy with which one recognized this. Blair's gut seized as if he'd been kicked. "Get in the car!" he said urgently to Iris, leaning across the seat to pull her in.

She brushed him off, wired but impatient. "Relax, Blair! Relax!"

"The guy's got a gun!" Blair said, thinking of the crazy man who'd started to climb into his car. Instinct pulsed a command to yank Iris in and hit the gas, but in the suspension of seconds, he waited for her to move, and then someone was shoving into the back seat, a crunching mass, a flurry of movement, why hadn't he locked those doors, shit, his security was for shit, Jim would kill him.

"What are you--what are you doing?" Blair shouted. His panic came out sounding like outrage. "What's going on? Hey--get out of my car!" He was looking at some other guy, a guy with long hair and an aggressive face. The guy who'd walked past the car, not the previous intruder.

"Move!" he yelled, pointing a gun at Blair.

"Calm down," Blair said, raising his hands in placation.

"Move, move!" the stranger yelled again, obviously feeling a need to get this point across.

Iris clambered into the car. "Drive now!"

"Easy, easy," Blair said. He had minimal control of the words that came out of his mouth at that moment, and it was lucky his first instinct was to soothe; otherwise he'd have been bitching, fuck fuck fuck.

"Drive. Drive now," Iris urged, despite that Blair was already driving. In a split second of kvetching madness, Blair thought about vocalizing such a response, but driving was enough of a worry. He sent the car roaring out of the parking lot, accompanied by a series of backfires.

"Woo-hoo!" yelled the guy in the back seat, cackling. "Yeah!" He rocked excitedly on the seat. He was high as a kite, but Blair couldn't tell yet if it was from drugs or just adrenaline. "You take a left onto 97 south," he directed Blair.

"Where we going?" Blair asked.

"Shut up and do what I tell you," the other man said.

Blair tried to split his focus between the road and Iris. "Iris, what is going on here?"

"Well, I should have told you, but we needed a ride and I didn't want you to freak out." Iris's voice was blase, condescending, not unlike the voice of Rich Henkle, Blair's undergrad roomie, who'd talked Blair into putting a deposit on three kegs and then laughingly told him to relax as their party guests began rolling the barrels away in a street race.

"Well, I'm freaked out," Blair said loudly. "So why don't you just tell me what's going on."

"Chance just stole a half a million dollars in uncut heroin from a guy named Artie Parkman."

"Oh, my god," Blair said. He experienced the kind of lurching terror that comes from dropping two floors in an elevator or learning that your date is one fucked-up crazy bitch with criminal friends.
"You got a problem with that?" the guy--Chance--asked.

Blair made a slight, noncommittal sound, and then Iris poked a gun into his side. "No."

"Turn on 97," Chance repeated, banging his hand for emphasis on the seatback between them.

There is never a good time to point out to a kidnapper that he's given you bad directions. "Do you mean 92?" Blair asked.

"Did I say 92?" Chance barked in snide aggravation.

"It's 92," said Iris, and then laughed trillingly.

"Did I ask you?" said Chance. "Drive, choirboy."

Choirboy, thought Blair, bewildered and irritated. He pinned his vision to the dark road and, as he became aware of trees whipping by, made an effort to slow the car. Iris's gun still hovered distractingly near his right kidney.

"Chance! Moron. It's 92! Right, Blair?"

"Are you slowing down?" said Chance to Blair. "Don't slow down!"

"Can you get that gun out of my gut?" Blair asked Iris, stressed. "If it goes off, you're going to be flying through the windshield."

"Don't slow down!" Chance yelled, nearly in Blair's ear.


"Iris, get the gun off the man. Can't you see he's trying to drive?" Iris tossed her hair with a huff of exasperation and drew the gun away, while Chance leaned over Blair's shoulder and peered through the windshield. "Where's 97, man. Turn-off's gotta be coming up."

"Just humor him, Blair," said Iris, turning on the radio.

"There's a turn-off for 92 just ahead," Blair noted edgily, disturbed by the looming presence of Chance's face by his shoulder. Freaking out is okay, freaking out is okay, his brain sang. And then, contradictorily, it commanded him to get his shit together.

"Jesus Flying Christ, doesn't anyone listen to me?" Chance was snarling like a Doberman near Blair's ear.

"Look, look"--driving and talking, we can do this, thought Blair--"nothing personal, you know, but 97 runs down the middle of the state. It runs through Yakima."

"Yakima," repeated Chance, sounding briefly thrown.

"Are we. . . going to Yakima?" Blair asked, more pointedly than wisely.

"Shut up."

"No, Blair, we're not going to Yakima," Iris said, her voice almost kind. Then she laughed. Blair was getting damn sick of that laugh.
Blair slowed the car as they reached the intersection. "Do you want me to turn here or--"

"Fuck it," Chance sighed. "Go, just go. Hurry up, man."

Blair hurried.

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Saturday morning. The week is over. I haven't had a chance to write down my thoughts for a while. I was putting it off, but busy too. Nice to have an excuse. All this week I've been catching up on the days I missed last week, listening to Gretchen enthuse about Borneo, listening to Stoddard lecture me about responsibility and career prospects, listening to Tool on my headphones to block out the world whenever possible.

What the hell was I going to write... I have no idea what I'm feeling.

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I feel good and bad, bad and good. My mood swings are predictable. I'm as tropistic as a sunflower. I brighten when I see Jim, can't sit in the same room without turning to face him. I found myself keeping time to his movements the other day when we ate lunch, and realized for the first time how infatuated I am with him as a man. I usually perceive him through a cloud of scientific interest, cataloguing sentinel traits. It was a kick in the head to suddenly recognize the patterns of behavior we were engaged in. I told Heidi, who's met Jim two or three times now, all about it; describing to her the gazes and touches, the intense but subtle pair-bonding we've been enacting. She thought that was too, too funny in a 'no duh' kind of way and she laughed at me. I felt like a third-grader who'd just been caught noticing my teacher's breasts. She said I exhibit popcorn behavior whenever Jim's around, jumping and squealing like an excited lab mouse who's just been given a shot of PEA. I told her she was a rotten bitch for not saying so sooner. Now I'm a bit self-conscious, wondering who else has noticed.

I can't believe I turned down Borneo for him. And yet, now, I'm finding it harder every day to drag my mind back to the place where I actually thought of leaving. He was so relieved to have me stay; it was such a rush, translating the hieroglyphs off that great stone face. Small signs. He bought me a pager. It's the dumbest thing. He was walking by a store, he said, just picked it up because it was on sale. I don't have the heart to tell him I'm never going to use it. I was staring at his hands as he showed me how to work it, turning it all around as if it were a game-show prize, pointing out how to make the display light up. His fingers are so articulate. I felt desperate and loved and wanted to cry. I'll carry the thing around for a few weeks, then let it get buried under my bed.

Wanting to make love to him. It's insane. I'm thinking about it all the time now. I'm going to put the moves on him. I can feel the inevitability. I've gotten laid three times this week, don't ask me how, but it doesn't drain the well of lust for him that keeps rising and brimming. He's looking at me more these past few days, glances I can't read. Puzzlement, knowledge. Same difference when it comes to his expression. I think he smells it on me, though. The chemical signature of desire. I can't decide if I should panic or not. I re-read Elias and Valeta and others of their ilk, trying to decide if my anterior hypothalamic nuclei is really all that different, wondering if it's possible for gonadotropin secretion to suddenly alter drastically, affect my hormones, his olfaction. And if so, where does desire originate in the first place--what comes first, chemistry shaping desire, or desire shaping chemistry? I've got to get my mouth on his dick. All my thoughts about him are pornographic now. I don't know how I ever ignored the curves of his biceps, his chest, his fucking beautiful ass.

And I've decided he's gay. He has to be. Goal oriented, I focused the full power of my mental
faculties on him (ha) and managed to document eighteen observed behaviors in support of this theory, among which: #3, scopes out other buff men, #7, irons his boxers, #11, does not rent skin flicks. And even if he isn't gay I know I can get him to have sex. He'd be so easy. I just don't want him to regret it and kick me out afterwards, now that I've decided to stick around.

Thursday, September 11, 1997

Dawn had come and the Spice Rack had closed for its morning overhaul of floor-washing and restocking. Their suspect, a serial rapist who'd recently upgraded to murder, had not shown. Jim and Joel had abandoned their watch, eaten an unhurried breakfast at a nearby diner, and returned to the station.

Before arriving at the strip club the previous night, Jim had tried a few more times to reach Blair. Failing, he'd abandoned the effort for the duration of the stakeout, not wanting to draw attention to himself by making any calls from inside the club. He might have been worrying by this point, but over the course of the night he'd come to feel certain that Blair had been in the loft with Iris all the time, answering machine volume turned down so that nothing would interrupt his elaborate seduction. While Jim spent his third night in a row glued to a rickety chair, resisting a hundred sensory assaults and trying not to zone on the strobe lights, Blair had no doubt been cheerfully fucking a felon on Jim's couch. Or carpet. Or stairs. Jim felt sure he'd come back to find the younger man sacked out like a rumpled kitten, the congealed remains of his feast still littering the dining room table.

Having reached the station, Jim and Joel climbed from the truck with matching sighs and trudged across the parking garage to the elevator. After eight hours Joel was still crisp and unwrinkled, even though he smelled like a sweaty ashtray. Just an hour earlier he'd walked from the club into sunlight a tired and cranky survivor of Gehenna. Breakfast--plus a quick call home to his wife--had restored the surface of his good disposition.

"First time I had to stake out a strip club," Joel said as they entered the elevator. He'd said this already to Jim. Twice. "Never spent the entire night in one either. Takes all the glamour off."

Glamour, thought Jim. He couldn't recall a time when he'd thought strip clubs held glamour. He knew Joel had been born in raised in Cascade's urban core to a strong church-going family, an upbringing which seemed to have fostered an odd mix of cynicism and wide-eyed marvel at the world's evils. If Joel had sentinel senses, he might never go into a strip club again. Hell, he might never have sex again.

"It's not the Disney version," Jim agreed.

"That poor woman," Joel said, shaking his head in regret. "Slipped on a condom. They should get hazard pay for dancing in that crap. Huh. Slipped on a condom. Now that's funny. Have to remember to tell Tyra that one when I get home."

"You tell her everything?" Jim asked.

"Most everything. She won't want to hear all about last night. She's a nurse, you know. Sees enough on her own job without hearing about mine."

"Mmm. I suppose you could leave out some details," Jim agreed blandly.

Joel snorted. "Yeah, I'll say. The vomiting, that bachelor party, the ping-pong balls, the dog, our friend Pee-Wee Herman. In a shot glass! Man. Can't believe I ever ate there."
"Interesting night, huh?" Jim asked, laughing, as the elevator deposited them on their floor.

"It's the worst night I ever spent," said Joel.

"Too bad we got to do it again tonight."

"Oh, yeah," Joel said. "I'll, uh, check my calendar. Right."

Joel veered off as if Jim were his ticket to typhoid. Jim couldn't really blame him. Personally he hoped Blair would be available tonight, and not just because sensory concentration was easier to maintain with him near. Personal relationship aside, Jim counted himself lucky to have found a partner who suited him; someone with a working brain and a sense of humor not dependent on lawyer jokes, who was willing to take turns getting coffee, who didn't constantly bitch about his salary or insurance claims, or hand off paperwork to make time for a sideline in private security, or snipe if you were less than sociable every single minute. Joel was a good man and by Jim's standards would have made a good partner, but he wasn't Blair.

Sometimes, if honest with himself, Jim thought Blair's appeal might be that he wasn't a cop at all. I don't like cops either, Simon had said, and Jim knew what he meant. Blair, by staying out of the loop, remained uncorrupted. It was a difficult position to maintain. Long ago and briefly, Jim had feared Blair might turn out to be a morbid fetishist, a leech; like the wannabe security guards who hung around cop bars, or the occasional law enforcement groupie who showed up at public service events. Pegging Blair so neatly failed. He complicated everything he touched; it was his nature. He "problematized" things, possessed "ambivalencies"--his words. If the rest of the world was solved tomorrow, Blair would stay an open case to Jim.

Should give him a call, thought Jim. Wake him up, he deserves it. Ditching me. Getting his rocks off and a good night's sleep. Gotta get the story on Iris out of him, then give him the bad news. Tell him to clean the kitchen. See how long it takes him to ask about the strippers.

As Jim walked toward the bullpen, Simon called to him from the control room. "Jim, can I see you a minute?"

Jim followed inside. The room was still dimmed for night shift, and the telecom operators had the desiccated look of people who needed coffee. The majority of dispatch calls were handled elsewhere, but radio traffic still crackled as part of the ambient noise. Being in the room always played on Jim's nerves; for him there was no subaudition. Ghostly voices filtered to his sensitive ears through the hiss of every frequency. The public works line in particular was never silent, even though the operators might think so. In every static lull, Jim could hear what sounded like a chess game conducted via radio in English and Russian.

Even by Jim's standards it was quiet for this time of morning, but business was steady. The NLETS teletype was humming in the background as it discharged new alerts and Gracie was listening to Frank Sinatra on her headphones as she typed in warrants. Casper, slumping in his permanent effluvium of smoke and sweat, had a phone wedged to one ear; tuning in both sides of the conversation, Jim picked up the strains of yet another waltz with the FBI.

Simon had taken up a position at the main bay next to someone whose name Jim didn't recall, though he knew--from Blair's enthusiastic briefing--that the kid had recently been hired as part of an interagency program to digitize analog evidence tapes. Some of the equipment had once been part of the station's closed-circuit security system, which historically served double duty to review recorded evidence when nothing else was handy. Simon's presence here was always a sure-fire indicator that someone had borrowed his video player and failed to return it. There was probably a cranky e-mail about it on every station terminal right now.
"Go ahead. Run it," Simon said to the operator.

"What have we got?" Jim asked perfunctorily as a video began playing. Convenience store, he noted. Security camera tape. He watched the screen with nominal attention, then recognized Iris. She was walking up to a man with long curly hair. "Sandburg and Iris?" he said, but even as he spoke he had focused on the grainy recording and realized it wasn't Blair. The build was wrong, the hair—and he'd learned the curve of Blair's ass, and that wasn't it. Unfortunately, this particular observation didn't lend itself to a credible ID.

"Last night at ten p.m. We got a call of shots fired, convenience store on Sixth. Both the shooter and the intended victim got away. Clerk saw the whole thing. Called nine-one-one. Rafe and Brown went over to check it out, came back with this."

"This can't be Sandburg," Jim said. "He doesn't carry a gun."

"You and I know that," Simon said levelly. "But we also know he had a date with that girl and the clerk said he saw them both get into a green '68 Volvo. Now, how many of those can there be in Cascade? And one more strange thing."

"What's that?"

"The clerk said he saw the girl get in the front passenger seat and the guy get in the back."

"There's got to be a third person driving," Jim said, on verbal autopilot.

"It makes sense."

"Hold it right there," Jim said suddenly. "Back it up and freeze it." The operator rewound the tape and then froze on a shot of Iris and her friend.

"This guy uses his left hand to carry the gun," Jim said. "Sandburg's right-handed. Another thing, Sandburg doesn't own a jacket like that. I'm gonna give him a call." He reached for the phone reflexively.

"Don't bother." Simon left the room, Jim following. "I already tried him at home, the university, every place I could think of. He's not at his usual haunts. I did put out an APB on his Volvo, though."

It took a few heartbeats to process before Jim snapped to attention, appalled as the other shoe dropped. He wasn't sure where his head had been moments before; in a tired reverie, maybe, dulled by a long night of stale smoke and strippers' perfume. Jim had just assumed that Grand-Theft Iris had stolen the car to joyride with friends, and that Blair was safe at home, fuming but rooted—or not even fuming, but giving Iris the benefit of the doubt in that way of his, waiting for word.

"Jesus, Simon. You couldn't have called?"

Simon turned. "We just got this a few hours ago," he said, unmoved. "And I decided it could wait."

"Run it down for me again," Jim's jaw tightened. "Because something's not adding up."

Simon sighed, and a reluctance crawled over his features. He took Jim by the arm and drew him to one side of the hallway, lowering his voice beyond range of casual eavesdropping. "Okay, I'll tell you. But don't pitch a fit. Call came in at ten. A five-car was going down on the Pilchuk Bridge, local patrols tied up. Rafe and Brown were in the neighborhood, on their way in. They stopped, took the report and the tape, bought some doughnuts. It didn't look like the crime of the century."
"So they binned it," Jim said, reaching the finish line ahead of Simon.

"Yeah. Luckily Rafe went over the file again later and connected the Volvo. He called me."

"Lucky for him," Jim said evenly.

"Oh, I think he's aware of that," Simon said with dry certainty.

"So Sandburg was probably the driver." Jim ran a hand over his mouth and chin, unaware of the instinctive gesture to ensure that his mask of composure remained intact.

"Looks that way."

Determination encrypted Jim's face. "I want to see the store."

"I figured you would," Simon said. "I sent a patrol car over there at dawn to make sure the place stayed clean until you arrived. Not sure how much good it will do."

"It's something. Thanks."

Once they'd arrived, Jim spent some time combing the store for any sign or scent of Blair, found none, then did a retread of events with the store clerk. When he finished up he headed outside across the lot to where Simon and a patrolman were chatting about convenience stores and crime trends. He excused himself politely to the patrolman, who took himself off from the company of detectives with equal diplomacy.

"Clerk says he saw some kind of scuffle," he said to Simon. "Bag was dropped. Long-haired guy picked it up and took off with it."

"Jim, I swear, all we have here is illegal discharge of firearms." They walked over to an area of the lot onto which a chalked X had been scrawled. "Shooting took place around here. There was only one spent casing."

"What is this?" Jim said, catching a faint but familiar scent. Simon echoed his query but Jim was focused. He crouched and rubbed his fingers along the rough asphalt, then lifted them to his tongue carefully before spitting the residue out. "Heroin," he said.

Simon uttered a rhetorically inviting what and Jim tossed back the most likely supposition that presented itself. Heroin had undoubtedly been the object of the scuffle. There wasn't much new in the annals of crime. A drug deal gone bad. It was always just that straightforward, that trite. Heroin had exchanged hands with violence, and Sandburg's vehicle had been the getaway.

"He could still be with them," Jim said to Simon, and this possibility, so flat and obvious, struck him to silence in its wake.

Irritably, Blair stood by the car and watched Chance whiz off the side of the road. So far it had been a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, and this little pit-stop was not disappointing his expectations.

After leaving the convenience store last night, they'd spent the better part of two hours driving aimlessly around town while Chance and Iris made phone calls, trying to reach someone named Rob. Once they'd stopped at Burger King for food, and later visited another convenience store for beer. Blair had no opportunity to signal the bored drive-through cashier for help, but he did score fries and a shake. Chance, pissed to learn Blair had no money on him, would have let him go hungry, but Iris
claimed she owed him dinner. Dysfunctional families must be like this, Blair had thought.

They'd eventually crashed in an apartment belonging to someone Chance knew, but currently untenanted. The tiny studio boxed in two chairs, a cheap table, and a mattress covered with elaborate vomit stains. Other than trash and a foul odor, these were the only furnishings. Chance put Blair in a closet far cleaner than the outer room and wedged a chair against the door. In confinement Blair slumped for the next several hours, forced to listen while Chance and Iris outlined inane criminal plans, reminisced and argued. The thumping, angry encouragement of Limp Bizkit from a neighbor's apartment addled his focus; time passed slowly, and he couldn't meditate or even wrap his thoughts around Jim for comfort. His mind circled in a rut of exigency: when would he get out, would they let him out, what if they left him here, what would they do next.

In the morning, his captors had roused early and they'd skulked away from the apartment, past an open door that released snores and a powerful smell of beer, and into the glorious dawn, under whose pink survey they set out on the road again, after first rousing a sleeping bum from the Volvo's back seat. Chance again gave erratic instructions with no destination; breakfast was biscuits and gravy; conversation revolved unexpectedly around Blair. Not unlike a prospective father-in-law Chance quizzed him about his life, his plans for the future, his musical preferences. He maintained this rude display of friendliness in spite of Blair's monosyllabic and dry replies, but eventually began to show hints of antagonism. Aiming for masculine vulnerability, he'd started mocking Blair's moves on Iris and insulting his car.

Blair knew he should have played it better. On normal occasions, even under stress, he could pander to diplomacy with the best of them. Trouble was, it was difficult for him to take Iris and Chance seriously. Their amateur hijinks diverted him from the reality of the heroin in the trunk, and gun and captivity notwithstanding the pair treated him more as a nuisance than a risk. Just an extra piece of baggage on their joyride.

Even now, looking over at the gun Iris was holding on him, Blair had to wrestle down a bravado born of aggravation. Had she ever shot anyone? Not likely. At times she gripped the gun too carelessly; other times too firmly. At the moment she'd actually shifted it to her left hand so that she could hold the phone with her right. He recognized unfamiliarity in the handling. She radiated assurance, but the weapon was a toy to her. It was an affront to Blair's experience, falling prey to this skinny con-chick and bong-headed Clyde over there.

He leaned against the car and breathed in the roadside air, dense with dust and pollen. If Jim were here right now, he'd be... what would he be doing? Blair suspected he'd slam the car door and knock the gun from Iris's hand. Pick it up, turn it on them both. In minutes he'd have them trussed; and if Chance acted up, he'd knock the turkey flat.

Nice to be Jim.

"Where'd you find that thing, a fire sale?" Chance asked, picking up his earlier jeers at Blair's vehicle.

Blair bristled as intended, and said flatly, "For your information, pal, this car happens to be a classic."

"Classic piece of junk."

Blair bit his tongue, then fell watchfully silent as Iris wound up her phone conversation and stood with a lithe stretch. She tucked her cell phone away and switched hands, but kept the gun on him.

"Rob says he can arrange the buy," she said.
Chance, business finished, returned and draped himself over the open car door near Iris. He looked like a roadie for Metallica, fallen on hard times. "Did he say where he's been all night?"

Iris made a sound of negation, and Blair asked, "Who's Rob?" He wasn't sure they'd answer or even if he should ask, but after last night he felt entitled.

"My big brother."

"Well, isn't that beautiful. A family that steals together stays together, right?"

His temptation to needle her might have prompted retaliation, but Chance's cell phone rang just then and the other man took himself off to answer. Iris split her attention between covering Blair and frowning at Chance's back. Shortly, Chance was barking and herding them back into the car, and they were off again.

This time, Chance took the wheel and relegated Blair to the back seat. Blair considered his new odds of vaulting and rolling from the car, but as Chance picked up speed he decided against such a plan except in extreme circumstances.

Iris gave the directions this time, and Blair worked at memorizing them. They were somewhere between Blackwood and Middletown, he'd deduced, in a loosely patchworked landscape of rural, suburban, and industrial lots. They were still in or at least near the greater Cascade area, probably not even very far from where they'd started last night. It looked familiar, but only in the homogenized way of all American outskirts. He didn't think he'd been here before.

Sitting in the back of his own car stirred displaced memories. Even though he'd never known his father, he experienced a childhood flash of riding like this in the back seat, Naomi and a man in front, the man driving. On their way to the beach. All grown up now and a kidnap victim, Blair thought. Life liked its ironies. They passed a gas station with no cars, no one outside. A finger of wind touched Blair's curls, Chance turned on the radio and cursed country music, Iris laughed. Violent potential flowed through the car, natural and ordinary, and Blair's mind escaped the past and scrabbled again at the present. When anxiety unleashed itself, he ended up chasing thought to thought. He could form no plans. Go with the flow, he thought.


Wouldn't it be nice if he could concentrate really hard and project his thoughts right into Jim's fabulous head, along with a homing beacon and a global positioning satellite map.

Hooked with abrupt force from his abstraction, Blair realized they had just passed a highway patrol car cached in a roadside speed trap. He turned around quickly to try and see if they'd been noticed, then sat back in his seat, heart tripping madly. Iris and Chance seemed oblivious to him, and to any danger. At least until the patrol car pulled out after them, lights flashing, and began gaining ground.

"Geez," Chance exclaimed as he finally caught sight of their tail in the rearview mirror. "Where the hell did he come from?"

"Just keep driving," Iris yelled. "Go, go--drive!"

Blair, unable to hold still, twitchily signaled the patrol car as best he could with some slim hope that they would spot him, and that Chance and Iris wouldn't. But Chance drove intently and Iris was swept up in the moment, aware of nothing but the goal of escape. They picked up greater speed,
challenging the car's limits, and Chance began taking wide, careless turns. The patrol car kept an uneven pace, and Blair's agitation wound to a higher pitch with every passing minute.

"We're going to have an accident," he yelled, sliding back and forth across the seat as they careened into another turn and fishtailed onto the dusty, narrow shoulder.

Chance and Iris both laughed.

The next turn they hit was a hairpin curve that brought them unexpectedly into a one-lane tract of converted trailers and dilapidated housing. Shrubs and untrimmed trees created a tunnel of dense overgrowth along both sides of the road, and mailboxes were within striking distance. Chance barreled down the lane and Blair, losing breath and nerve, closed his eyes and waited for something to go bang. Nothing did, but when he looked back, they'd lost the patrol car. A few more turns and they were back on a stretch of anonymous road with a small plot of corn on one side and a farmless farmhouse on the other. A litter of other buildings was coming into view ahead. Chance muttered curses. He seemed to be squinting for landmarks.

"Iris, where the hell are we?"

"How should I know?" she snapped back.

With extraordinary brass, Chance slowed down and pulled into the lot of a makeshift hair salon embellished with hand-lettered signs and pinwheel ducks in a window box. Leaving the motor running, he got out, slammed the car door and went inside. Blair stole a glimpse over the seat to see if the other man's gun had been left behind, spied it with relief. Iris, neck held high and corded like a skittish horse, turned to cover Blair with her own gun while darting glances at the road. Iris immediately took the opportunity to speak. "Iris, come on. This is crazy. Let's get out of here before you get in any deeper. If you turn yourself in, you--"

"Blair, shut up," Iris said. "I wish I'd known you were such a boy scout."

"Yeah, well I wish I'd known you were such a fuckwit," Blair said, anger rising from cracked ground to issue as simple rudeness.

Iris jutted her chin. Yesterday her face had been enigma but today it was jade. No trace of a smile. She slitted her gaze but without reply. Blair looked away toward the building, dearly hoping that Chance was not loosing havoc inside. Glare on the glass prevented him from seeing anything but moments later the other man exited and strode nonchalantly back to the car.

"Okay, camarada, we're on." He peeled out with a few backfires.

What seemed to be the same patrol car was on them again within a minute, darting from a crossroad and gunning to catch up. The reappearance was unsurprising; their detour had brought them into little more than a county backwater of residences and simple amenities, and then windingly returned them to proximity of the highway. Blair glanced over his shoulder at the patrol car. Its siren whooped briefly in warning, then cut silent. Chance shoved the heel of his hand against the horn in crazy response. Behind him, Blair gripped his knees to keep his angry hands from doing anything rash. Both vehicles pulled onto the highway at the first crossing and resumed high speed.

A few minutes later the flat empty highway grew a tangle of smoke and trouble in the distance. "Hey, what's going on up there," Blair said, shoving toward the front seat to see better. As they approached he picked out accident details, an overturned school bus and a skewed car fronted by swathes of fire. From the middle of the road, barely discernible in fumes, a man waved at them with frantic vigor to stop.
"What are you doing?" Blair's attention tore between the accident scene and Chance, who was leaning across his wheel with avid spectatorship and no visible intention of slowing down or changing course. They were heading straight for the center of the accident. Blair, shocked and adrenalized, gained volume. "What are you doing, man! It's a school bus, man--slow down!" Chance, sickeningly keen, ignored him as the car zipped straight toward the man in the road. "Look out--look out," Blair yelled.

Chance drove through the accident wreckage recklessly, swerving to the left while the man in the road dove right. They missed him but Blair, pitched across the seat by the movement of the car, struggled to turn around and make sure. He thought he saw the man upright and safe within the strands of smoke, making his way toward the imperiled school bus.

"We've got to stop, they're in trouble. Those people need our help!" Blair could not govern his tongue, didn't know if he was pleading or trying to give orders, but Chance disregarded him, laughing with wicked lightness at the incident and at Blair's rage.

"Turn around! Those are school kids!"

"You joking, man?" said Chance in simple wonderment, as Blair's exhortations finally grabbed some particle of his attention.

They had lost the police, who must have stopped for the accident. Frustration chewed at Blair like a rabid dog. He stared out the window, eyes on the sunny landscape but seeing nothing. His stomach twinged with every thump of the tires that carried them further away, and twinged with each distress that formed in his mind. Weighing factors and wary of false hope, he tried to judge whether they were near the end of the ride. It seemed that they must be. The spree had sprung leaks. With the police alerted and so near, they were bound to be caught sooner rather than later.

As if responding to Blair's thoughts, a few miles down the road the boxy old Volvo sputtered, making exhausted noises of complaint.

"What the hell's going on?" asked Iris, shriller than Blair had so far heard her. "Chance? Come on, man. Get us out of here!"

Chance was roughly working the gears, but the car stalled and stopped.

Blair spoke up. "Iris, all right, look. It's over, okay? You--you can't keep running. You're just making it worse."

"That's it," Chance said explosively. "Get out of the car!" He swung out, and Iris followed suit, pulling the seat down to let Blair climb out, her gun ubiquitously at hand. Blair pulled himself upright out of the car, and for a moment, poised with arms outstretched, his hands on the warm metal frame of his Volvo, he felt the luxuriant relief that comes with rising from a long cramp. In a blink of seconds, he was yanked off-balance by Chance and shoved with force to the ground. He lay sprawled on a down slope, crushed grass beneath him and the scent of earth around him sweet, fresh, like funerary sod. He did not think this now, but dreamed it later.

Chance pointed his gun at Blair, its eye trained on the vulnerable crux of his body, somewhere between his belly and his ungainly parted legs. "I don't like your attitude," Chance said.

Iris grabbed his arm, restraint and caution in her gesture. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, we got enough trouble. We don't want to leave any dead bodies for the cops to find."

Blair swallowed and maintained his difficult posture, hands raised, neck craned to keep watch on the
wielded gun, body a submissive, anxious heap. "Th--that's, that's right, Chance. That's a good plan. You should listen to her, man."

Iris was touching Chance again to redirect his focus, urging him to stop, to go, to do something other than shoot Blair Sandburg, for which Blair Sandburg was grateful.

Chance's ambivalent impulses showed in the grim consideration of his face, but then he cocked his head and looked down the road in the direction from which they'd come. "It's Parkman," he said in startlement, collecting Iris with a few more shouts.

They scrambled into the car and took off, leaving Blair behind. He rose from his tumbled state, knees wobbly. He stood facing the road, sweating and learning to breathe again and dazed with sudden freedom. He thought Parkman, Parkman inanely through the disoriented buzz in his brain, having just time enough to process this as something to worry about when with nice synchronicity a car pulled up. Its driver, unimpressed in demeanor, checked him out while casually training a gun his way through the open passenger-side window.

"Where are they going?" the man in the car asked.

"I don't know," Blair said both in reflex and honesty.

"Get in," said the man. Parkman.

"Look, why don't you just go after them?"

In Parkman's face congealed the cynicism of his voice. "You were there last night, Sport. You saw my face. I don't get my stuff back, you don't get to live. Got it? Get in."

Blair went to the car and entered, making sure he offered no threatening moves. Parkman began driving at a steady pace. What kind of criminal are you, Blair wanted to ask, but for once he guarded his tongue. Why the man would choose a futile approach of trying to drag non-existent information out of Blair instead of giving chase to his heroin baffled him. But as they drove, Parkman badgered him over and over for the destination of Chance and Iris. In turn, Blair repeated his ignorance.

The car held the acrid smell of Parkman's sweat, and tobacco and cologne. Blair himself felt a gritty dampness all over his body, where his body brushed frictively with his clothes. Sunshine on the road outside, on the car's metal, mesmerized him, and allowed him to say I don't know to Parkman while barely registering the interrogation. At one point an actual thought snuck into his consciousness and he found himself wondering what would happen to his Volvo, how he would swing the money for another car. Life's small worries licked at him like a comforting dog. Fear could be mastered.

They drove around the area for a long time, many times retracing their route. Parkman drove slowly, scanning the driveways of back county residences, checking out parking lots, crunching up and down side roads. Periodically he'd break silence by asking, "Where are they?" or some variation on the theme. He alternated between question and threat. First, "Where are they?" and then: "I'm going to cut off your balls to start with, I think." After a while Blair was chilled to his bones by the creepiness. The other man behaved almost like a cop on patrol, making slow and methodical drive-bys. His intermittent questions, uttered in that flat voice, unnerved Blair, as did his heavy silences. The threats he tried to ignore; he tried to pretend they were small talk. The few times he tried to initiate talk himself, he was told to shut up.

He intuited that Parkman wanted to catch Iris and Chance by surprise, to find them without alerting them. The reasons for this could not be good. Why he assumed they'd still be in the area, Blair didn't know. But he didn't feel all that great about his new ride. Iris and Chance had been reckless loons,
but Parkman gave off a palpable miasma. He registered in Blair a sense of unease he'd rarely felt around other criminals. Parkman was clearly experienced enough to be a professional at whatever he did, but his affect was skewed.

On these dark impressions, Blair brooded.

Eventually Parkman turned off the road into a rest stop, and Blair looked up. Its lot was empty of cars, and the pale blue building had an unattended air. He sat still while Parkman got out of the car and then came around to Blair's door. When he got out, Parkman shoved him against the side of the car and closed the car door. That closure set off the first depth charge of alarm in Blair. He had closed the car door. Closed the car door, with finality. In the middle of nowhere, with no one around.

"Hey, take it easy, take it easy," Blair said. "Take it e--"

Parkman drew his arm out snake-fast from behind his back, a gun in his hand, the gun raised to Blair's throat, the sound of a cocking trigger, everything happening in the space of moments, no longer than it took Blair to draw a breath. And then he held the gun against the hollow of Blair's swallowing throat, and asked again, "Where are they?"

"I've told you a hundred times, man," Blair said desperately as Parkman said, "Three seconds."

"Look, I swear to God I don't know!" He could hear his voice breaking, felt shame, his failure of will and inventiveness and courage, everything he was fractured by the nearness of the gun.

"Three."

"Look, listen to me. I don't know!" Nothing occurred to him. The words spoke themselves and then time caught up with him. If he'd had time he'd have begged, his whole spirit begged even as his throat closed and he braced to leap motionlessly into whatever was to come.

"Two," said Parkman. "One." He pulled the trigger.

It snapped emptily, and Blair jerked. The sound kicked his throat, and his heart skipped like a stone over deep water before time resumed. Parkman lowered the gun, displaying teeth in the semblance of a smile. Blair breathed shakily, near tears. Sensing that Parkman knew it. The edge of life held no dignity, just the face of cruel humor, worn by someone for whom death was an easy practice, like golf.

The other man took his time loading a clip in his gun, and then recocked it. "This time, it's for real." He raised the gun on Blair again. "Where are they?"

Blair breathed, forced out a spill of superfluous words, his larynx raw with last ropes. "I could give you fake directions, but what good would that do either of us?"

"Where!" the other man yelled imperatively.

"I don't know."

Parkman's entire face was a hard squint of rancor. "In there," he said, words nearly a whisper. He gestured behind Blair.

It took effort for Blair to move. To walk with his back to Parkman, his nape prickling with fear, breathing a raw and conscious exercise. He let himself be directed around the building and into the men's room. Inside it was like a pale blue mausoleum, scrawled with graffiti and strewn with condoms, its air stinking of abandonment. He thought: this is the kind of place where bodies are
found. A sudden shove in the center of his back made him stumble and he turned with a reflexive need to face attack and stood with hands raised, back to the nearest stall. This was it. The terminal. His new certainty erased the significance of prior threats, erased apprehension. He would take a shot to the chest at two yards, Parkman would leave him for dead, and he'd need to make it to the road where someone could find him. It was a bad plan. But in his last dissociative moment of resignation and resistance, it seemed to be the only plan available.

And then Parkman removed himself wordlessly, leaving Blair untouched, reprieved again. There was a heavy rasp outside the door of something being secured. The other man must consider him to be leverage of some kind. For now.

Strung out and fed up, Blair looked around the bathroom. One wall had a glazed window. He went over and banged around its surface, testing the thickness of the glass and the strength of its frame. It was solid; solid enough and high enough that he could see right away how difficult it would be to coordinate a break-out whose upshot wasn't belly lacerations and a bullet in the back.

Blair padded quietly to the door to see if his captor had by any chance decided to go walkabout. There was an irregular chunk of cinder-block missing along the edge of the door, leaving a crumbled gap through which he could see and hear Parkman. The other man was not far away, his back partly turned, talking into his phone.

"Now, if I don't get my merchandise back, I'm going to kill him. Got it?" A pause followed, before Parkman added dryly, "You are a piece of work, babe."

Blair moved back from door, thoughts churning. Iris, surely, was on the other end of the phone. Who knew. It was time to stop dickering around. Edgily he cast about for something to use as a weapon, examining the trash can and the towel dispenser in turn and writing each item off as useless. But the mirror caught his eye. Its frame was old, wood, and fixed in place with big fucking nails.

He whacked at the frame until one side board loosened and came off into his hands. Three old, heavy nails protruded from one end. He shook the trembling ache from his hand, then hefted his new weapon and returned to the door. On its other side he heard the scuff of soft-soled shoes, then a clinking sound of metal drawing across metal. Determined to do some damage, Blair raised the board higher, breath quickening, as the door was pushed open. When Parkman's arm appeared through the door, gun in hand, Blair slammed the board against his arm, nail points down.

Parkman gave a yell of pain and dropped the gun before staggering back a few paces. Blair helped off-balance him further, shoving him to the ground on his way out. For a split second he considered grabbing the gun, trying to take the upper hand, but instead he let impulse guide him and sprinted off behind the rest area, hopped a wheel stop and then rabbited across the hard ground, aiming himself at a stretch of train tracks. He didn't look behind him but kept expecting to hear the gun's crack. He took a hard left on the tracks and kept running.

He legged it steadily for what might have been a mile. When he finally allowed himself a breather, he looked back down the tracks for signs of pursuit. He'd heard no gunshots, he saw no sign of Parkman. He bent over, hands on his knees, breath sawing at his chest, then took himself off the tracks to a sidelong tree and rested his forehead against the bark. Blood beat in his ears, he'd been terrified, he knew that only now. Distress, the residue of terror, clung to him as a second skin, itching and moist. It should have felt good to reaffirm himself with a dose of violence. To defend himself, man to man. But he couldn't hone in on the sense of rightness he felt when working with Jim, protecting and serving in his own modest way. When he stood at Jim's side, in the thick of it, he found jazz. But in isolation he had no bearings. Jim was due North. Without him, the needle spun
The woodsy, sap-rich smell of the tree trunk filled his overtaxed lungs, and the salted skin of his own torso wafted its scent up from his collar. His hair swung down to shield his face, and that felt good. It was sort of like being in grade school, putting your head down on the desk for nap time. He wondered if he simply stood here long enough, would Jim find him. An ant crawled on his hand and up his arm, its tread a whisper and a tickle.

"Jim, I really wish you were here now, man. And I wish I'd brought my cell phone. Not that I'd have it by this point. Right." Blair straightened with a sigh and blew the ant off, then turned and surveyed the train tracks. A light wind rustled the leaves above him and licked the skin under his hair. The tracks didn't offer cover, but he had to be nearing a road.

"Keep it up," Blair murmured to himself. "No problem. Almost there." And he sucked in a deep fierce breath and resumed running, letting it energize him, the drive toward a goal. When he got home, beer. Many beers. And his bed. Hell, Jim's bed. And he'd make Jim go get him Kon-Tiki from Quiet Man Video and some take-out tabouli. Or sesame noodles. He would kill for some noodles.

Endorphins kicked in, and the exciting prospects his future held were swept along on the rush. Noodles. Jim. Beer. Somewhere at the end of these train tracks was the heart of his life.

Punishment. I woke up early this morning and realized that I need to write something about this, can't believe I haven't before. I just searched back through all my entries, but there have only been vague, coded references. I guess I knew that, but thought I might have slipped at some point.

It's lame, to have this fear of being found out. But it makes me understand Jim better. My thoughts on this are lucid this morning. I was dreaming of Jim.

We were both drinking, the first time I almost talked about this with him. We were drinking long and steady, through evening into the small hours, sitting on the couch facing one another, both of us fully dressed but intimate. We'd been having sex for months, on and off. Short bursts of weeks where we couldn't keep our hands off each other, and then we'd work up an argument about something or other, mainly just so we could rebound to women, to a safe distance. We got along despite everything, well enough. We'd cemented a friendship.

That night he spent hours paring off a careful chain of short military anecdotes, many of them not even about him, but they told me a lot. In return I'd told him about this and that, about traveling with Naomi, about field trips. I made up some stories. Others were true. Later I found myself draped into the crook of his body, like a kid in a tree, between branches, and I turned to curl against his body, its hardness, and he told me more military stories, dirty ones. I liked that, and we made out for a while, talking during breaks, never going all the way. I remember the back of my neck resting on the curve of his arm, its solidity. Then the conversation tacked in a different direction again, and I told him things, I can't even remember what, about my childhood and adolescence, and I told him what a bastard I was, figuratively, not literally, though that too. I vomited up some guilt, the dark Jewish stew that nourishes my secret inner life, and he was silent while I talked, and I bitched about my therapy, years of it subsidized by my grandparents, and how pointless it had all been. Not really all pointless, but enough to make me feel disgusted as I fished up details of the past and recounted them. As I talked, I went further toward the line that I'd never crossed before, prodding him subtly—as subtle as I can be when drunk—toward the subject I was circling. I asked him about his own childhood, and when he wouldn't tell me anything useful, I asked him about the military again and about its discipline, its punishments.

We didn't talk about it then. Just almost. But he remembered the conversation. I could see it in his
eyes the next morning, and in his speculative face. But he let it go, and I was afraid, and I let it go too. Two or three weeks later we were driving home from a case consultation in Oregon, late at night. He was usually the quiet one on highway drives, and I was the talky one, to keep him from zoning. But he kept picking at me that night, like a man picking scabs, except they were mine. I think the case had some militaristic details, and that's what got him started. He did it with skill. The man is an artist at interrogation, and his secret is, he doesn't let you see it, and you don't notice, and after you do notice, you forget until the next time. The great Ellison facade is smooth as stone. He went at me first with quiet, casual questions, then with a broad, joking fusillade, and then he just dug in with his gun and targeted the one vulnerable spot he knew was there somewhere, and kept at me until I cracked. Which is to say, I broke down at last and said: "I wonder sometimes what it would be like to just give up all the guilt we live with, to know that if you do something, it's punished and accounted for, like a kid who gets spanked and he's okay with it, because that's the trade off." Something along those lines. And he knew what I was thinking. And the weird thing was, he was interested, as if I'd suddenly become worthy of a different kind of respect. Wanting punishment, discipline. To take it like a man, despite the guise of this childish need. He understood, maybe better than I did. I recognized another face of Jim, sharp and unfazed, in the darkness of the truck as we drove.

I want...structure. Half a lifetime ago I said, "Today I am a man," but I've never really felt as if that's true. I was supposed to have taken responsibility for all my sins beginning that day. And I guess I did because Naomi stood up there and relinquished them. But I kind of think--I know--that I was responsible for them even before that day, too. And it was always heavy.

It took a while to work out the details with Jim, but the exchange fit unexpectedly well into the puzzle of our life together. It became a monthly thing. End of the month, confession, penance. No regression or role-playing, though, no elaborate scenario of masochism. Just this day of atonement, my own private ritual. If I were another kind of man, maybe even a better and wiser man, I'd probably pour all my angst into religion, say ashamnu and al chet at the proper times while beating my chest with self-flagellant force. Instead I let Jim whale on me. I don't know that I'm pure of my aberrations when he's done; not when what I'm doing is an aberration itself. But it keeps me thinking about my sins and makes me feel as if someone gives a shit. It feels like compliance.

It's one of the few areas of my life I don't apply anthropology to. I'm afraid to examine this through any lens. It would only be distorted.

I read back over what I've written above and think: I'm so self-deluded. When am I not an anthropologist? I collect logs on irc as if they were field notes. But does that count? I save them, thinking that someday I'll make more use of the material, even if it's only to write a private and unpublishable organization of thoughts, but I never look at them again once they're tucked away behind their password-protected barrier.

Twenty minutes after Jim stopped, the local fire crew had arrived on the accident scene and order was appearing quickly and efficiently from chaos. Jim felt confident enough of the scene management to walk away for a moment and take a breather. He stared down the road in the presumed direction of Blair's vanished Volvo. He hadn't yet been able to touch base with the reporting officer, but sensed the rightness of the direction and that he'd been close to catching up with the chase. Now there was no telling where Blair had gotten to.

When Jim concentrated his vision, it tunneled down into a blurred impression of green foliage, along a blur of asphalt, and stopping in a hazy vanishing point where the road could no longer be distinguished from its surroundings. He strained his sight but the pollen, dust, and smoke corrupted his potential range. Conscious of his guide's absence and the risk of zoning, he shook himself out of
his exercise after a minute.

Twenty minutes lead time. Jim's gut ached at the missed opportunity. By now they could have veered off in any number of directions, be on their way anywhere. He wondered what his odds were of getting a set of road blocks authorized, but knew the answer.

Smoke and the dusty tang left by dry-chemical extinguishers still hung and drifted heavily in the atmosphere, and every inhalation dragged the tainted air scratchily through his nasal passages and downward into his lungs. If Blair were here, he'd be muttering anxiously about toxins and nudging Jim toward fresh air.

Jim turned and strode over to the officer who'd been on the scene when he arrived, and after a quick introduction confirmed that the man, stationed out of Blackwood, had been in pursuit of Blair's Volvo when he dropped out to handle the accident. The deputy, McMillan, summarized the incident but had few helpful details to impart, not even enough for Jim to bother making mental notes.

"You'll be keeping an eye out for them," Jim said to McMillan, handing over his card and giving him a detective-grade stare to make sure his seriousness was appreciated.

"Yes, sir," McMillan said crisply. He put the card on his clipboard, aligning it with the clamp. "I reported it when I called this in."

"Call me directly if anything turns up."

"That we will."

It had to be accepted as enough, so Jim perfunctorily offered further help, had his offer politely declined, and returned to his truck. He sat there, sideways on the edge of the seat and with the door open, absently scanning the accident's debris while he called Simon on his cell phone.

"Banks."

"It's me. We lost the Volvo. There was an accident on the road. School bus."

"Serious?"

"Luckily, no. Just a few kids, and they're okay. The officer who called in the sighting had to stop. There was no one on the scene. I stopped too." Jim swallowed unreasonable guilt, as if he were speaking these words to Blair instead of Simon, explaining why he'd lost him. He was hungry, tired, and suddenly aware of his deep anger and frustration. He glared out through the clearing smoke, down the blameless but empty road.

"You going to keep scouting or come in?" Simon was asking him.

"Hadn't decided."

"I'm waiting for a fax from the Everett PD. Copy of some pertinent outtakes from their file. Stuff not on the system."

Jim hesitated, then made up his mind. "I'm coming in."

He hung up and climbed into the truck. Turning it around wrenched him, and he drove away in a knot of conflicting impulses, thinking about Blair, one ear tuned to radio traffic for reports. His foot was heavy on the gas pedal and he did not stop for food, despite his need; he made good time. When he reached the station, he took five in the break room for coffee, and a package of cookies that tasted
like wood pulp and fruit juice, then went to the bathroom to wash the dust off his face. He had to study himself in the mirror to make sure he was calm. He looked calm, was the funny thing. Tiredness sometimes exaggerated his expressions, and other times ironed them flat.

You're a cop, Jim told his reflection.

And with that reminder in place, Jim went to Simon's office, where he looked over the fax that had arrived and listened to Simon recap an assessment of what he'd found. Iris had a brother, Rob Johnson, with whom she'd been arrested in the drug-trafficking case, and they were both a pair of freebirds.

"Says he's a mechanic out of a garage near Freemount," Jim noted.

"Worth a look, don't you think?"

He was obviously intending to come along. Jim, unable to voice his thanks and not sure if he was supposed to, gave a wordless, awkward acknowledgment.

They rode separately to the garage. On the drive over, Jim could not stop speculating on how dangerous Iris and her pals might turn out to be. At points during the trip he got so pissed off he would have accelerated had he seen her in the road. But he tamped his loosening emotions down again and let them smoke. He had to concentrate, deal with one thing at a time. If they didn't find Blair by the end of the day, he'd force Simon to open this up into a full-fledged kidnapping investigation. He had to keep his nose to the trail, get some evidence that would support this action. . . .if it came to that.

When he reached their destination, Simon was just car lengths behind. Jim exited the truck and attuned himself to the feel of the place, giving it a sharp once over without looking anywhere directly. The weathered garage was hung with signs, mismatched hubcaps and tires, its door raised to display a work in progress. A few other cars sat on the lot, one with its hood open. To the left of the garage was an old grey house, a blue jeep parked in front. None of the vehicles were Sandburg's Volvo. Jim absorbed the quiet, alert for his guide's heartbeat, his breath. Heard and felt nothing. His senses seemed dulled, hard to dial up. He felt no immediate human presence, but the hairs on the back of his neck tingled with awareness.

Simon had already pulled up and begun walking past him in the direction of the house when Jim froze in place and inhaled the air. "Hang on a second," he said to Simon.

"What's up?" Simon asked, turning.

"Sandburg's car. I can smell the burnt oil."

"You sure?"

"It's the special synthetic stuff," Jim said. "It's unmistakable." And he had never been so happy to smell burnt oil before. A twist of satisfaction went through his gut.

"I'll check the house," Simon volunteered.

"I'll check the garage." Jim headed inside, barely glancing at the mess of equipment that reefed its walls. Smells of oil, exhaust and grease hung densely in the air, seizing his unwelcome focus. It was a long but narrow building and he went straight to the back, glanced at the contents of a creaky shelving unit, then peered around for a view of the rear door. There was no one around.

He heard his name called by Simon, no distress in the tone, and then his captain appeared in the
doorway with a short, stocky man in tow. "You'll never guess who I found."

Jim moved to the front with long strides until he came to stand near them. "That's the guy from the surveillance tape," he said in recognition, interest sharpening like a knife. He swept a glance down him. Hair aside, the man looked nothing like Blair.

"Hey, look," the guy said, "I don't know what's going on here, man."

"We were kinda wondering ourselves," Jim said with deceptive mildness. The guy's voice was slow and stupid, and he was clearly stoned.

"Well, I swear I'm not trying to put anything over on you guys. I had the stuff. It was right here and then that bitch, she takes off on me, right?"

Simon nodded with a show of earnest understanding.

The man eyed them, an uneasy grin sliding along with his words. "You guys--you're the--you're the ones that--that Rob called, right?"

Jim and Simon traded glances and shared a traditional handshake of laughter, the kind that truly dumb perps prompt in a cop. True to form, their perp took it as further encouragement.

"You're here to buy the. . .stuff." The man's gummed and uncertain voice strung the statement out slowly.

Simon shrugged and looked at Jim, ceding the floor.

"Where's Blair Sandburg?" Jim asked, point-blank.

"Who?"

"I'm Jim Ellison." Jim drew out his badge and ID, flashed the tin then put the case back in his pocket. "I'm with the Cascade P.D. This is Captain Simon Banks."

Simon gave the guy a friendly tiger of a smile.

The perp made a muted noise of shock and lurched for escape. Simon caught and hauled him back easily with just one hand, and then gripped him by the collar. "You didn't answer the man's question," he noted. He unhanded the perp in a gesture that unfurled into a shove, sending him staggering back against the wall to knock against a set of shelves.

Jim closed the distance, pinning the man with his gaze. "Let's just try this again. Where's Blair Sandburg?"

"I plead the sixth," the man said anxiously. "No, fifth! Yeah. The fifth."

"You can't plead the fifth," Jim growled ominously. "You're not in court. Yet."

"Hey, are you arresting me? 'Cause if you're not--"

"Yes, I'm arresting you." Jim swung him around and handcuffed him. "Discharge of a firearm in city limits, reckless endangerment, and if we like you for that, let's add carjacking, kidnapping during the commission of a carjacking, grand theft auto--" He paused and patted the guy down, then dug his fingers quickly into his left front pocket and pulled out a bag. "Possession of a controlled substance."

"Shit, man! I just--"
"You have the right to remain silent," Jim said over the other man's objection, and rattled off the rest of Miranda in clipped, grudging bursts while Simon went to radio for back-up. He finished the warning, found the guy's wallet open and glanced at the license inside. "Charles Vaughn," he read aloud. He turned the guy around, eyed him. "So, Charles, you want to tell me about it?"

"Um. I think I want a lawyer. Yeah. Yeah, I definitely want a lawyer."

Jim sighed, then grabbed his arm and walked him out of the garage. "Our little friend here has lawyered up. I'm going to double-check the house." He handed the guy off to Simon. "See if there's anything interesting."

Simon nodded and let him go, and Jim went and sniffed the house with distaste, turning up by sense alone a rolled bag of marijuana, two cached joints, three guns, a jar of GHB tablets, and a stickily fingerprinted copy of Pamela and Tommy's honeymoon video. He didn't bother to do more than uncover the goods carefully and leave them in view. He could hear the arrival of the locals, and headed out of the house to fill them in on his findings before trudging off again, this time around the back of the garage. He surveyed the environs with grim thoroughness, ensuring that he missed no possible traces of blood, no stashed bodies.

It was a relief that nothing red-flagged his senses, but it was also a disturbance. Of course Blair was innocent of wrongdoing, but Jim was beginning to have moments in which he questioned whether this was a simple abduction or some kind of harebrained Blair adventure. Maybe he thought he could help reform Iris, bring her in safely. But he would have called the station, or Jim, had he been able. That alone was significant. Jim shook off the doubt, which was no more than optimism in disguise. He wanted Blair to be safe, not lying in a ditch somewhere.

And he was safe, Jim decided. Because nothing else was acceptable.

As he came back to the front of the lot through the garage, two police officers were leading their perp away. Jim stopped to touch a dash of oil on the ground, and rubbed it between his fingers thoughtfully.

"The guy's still not talking," Simon said as Jim reached him. "I'm sending him back to the station. Let Detective Adams have a crack at it."

"Looks as if Sandburg's car is leaking oil as well," Jim said, crouching down to dip up another spill of oil from the gravel outside the garage. Simon hunkered down next to him.

"I don't mean to put a damper on things, Jim, but this is a garage. There's oil everywhere."

"No, trust me on this one, Captain." Jim could suddenly see the oil clearly, as if a paintbrush had been dragged lightly across the ground. He didn't know whether its visibility was personally enhanced or not, but it didn't matter. "The drops are leaving a trail," he told Simon. He stood, focus sharpening, and stared off across the lot. He could see traces of oil all the way to the road. Roused, pleased, he gave Simon an encouraging thump and called, "Follow me." He took off without a glance back, counting on his captain to follow.

Blair ended the next leg of his run by veering from the tracks and making a triumphant arrival at the highway. A semi was heading his way with perfect timeliness. Exhilarated with relief, he bounced in place and pumped his fist at the air. As the semi approached he tried to flag it down but it roared on by with a blast of its airhorn. Blair groaned his outrage. Man, he'd driven a rig. He'd been an honorary member of the fraternity of the road. What happened to all the good samaritans? Aggrieved and frustrated, he spun to watch the truck barrel on down the road, then turned as a car rolled up to
A cheerful young man with an anchor beard and close cropped hair, whom Blair had never seen before in his life, smiled at him from the driver's seat. "Great car, dude."

During the short, startled beats while Blair was processing--trying to figure out why a millennial Maynard G. Krebs was driving his car and how he'd recognized him as its owner--Iris stepped out of the passenger side of the car and trained her gun at him across the roof.

"Get in the car, Blair."


Iris fired the gun and the bullet stroked the air next to Blair's head, close enough that he felt its riffling wake. He throttled back his defiance. "All right, so I was wrong. I'm coming. Relax. Calm down."

He went around the car and climbed into the back seat where he settled with deep tiredness. Iris took her place in the front seat and aimed the gun at him once again over the seat back. Blair suspected he should be far more worried about the possibility of an accidental discharge. Iris should too. Hadn't these people seen Pulp Fiction?

"What do we need him for?" the man, obviously Rob-her-brother, asked.

Iris turned a smile her brother's way. "I just thought of a new plan and we need him to help us."

"Oh, god," said Blair, heartfelt, and listened in disbelief as she outlined an insane plan to tape heroin to their bodies and smuggle it into Canada.

"Cool," said Rob. "Just like Billy Hayes in Midnight Express." He and Iris laughed together in familial unison.

"You guys are crazy," Blair burst out. "Billy Hayes spent eight years in a Turkish prison."

"Well, we're not in Turkey now, dude." Rob made it sound like a rebuke.

They took off and Blair slumped on the seat and closed his eyes. Tired, tired. He was tired of these people. He cocooned himself in denial as the wonder twins elaborated on their plans to conquer Canada. He was hungry and the two in the front seat were goofing around like kids. He almost kicked Iris's seat but reason prevailed in time.

They ended their relatively short ride at the train station. Iris butted up to Blair like white on rice as soon as he got out of the car. She'd wrapped the gun in her bag to hide it, and dug it into his side while she took his arm. The parody of girlfriendliness irritated him, and he finally dared to tell her that Jim was a cop.

"Yeah, nice try," Iris said.

"I'm serious," said Blair, threading his pervasive fear into a blanket voice of confidence. "He's out there looking for me. There is no way you'll get away with this."

Even a caution from Rob didn't convince Iris or sidetrack her plans, and they continued inside the
station, which was heavily trafficked with arriving and departing crowds. The throng made it impossible for Blair to consider breaking away; someone might have gotten hurt if Iris decided to shoot. He allowed himself to be led, then prodded, into an "Employees Only" storage closet.

They stood among the shelves, cleaners, and mops and Blair watched in surreal disjointure as Rob took off his shirt. The other man caught his eye. "Let's go, man."

Iris neared enough to playfully began unbuttoning Blair's shirt. He'd never had a girl do that with a gun in her hand. "Yeah. Come on, Blair. I thought you were dying to get naked with me."

Blair drew back slightly and did the job himself. "It's not exactly what I had in mind."

It took a while to tape the drugs on effectively and he wasn't impressed with the results when he finished. Rob did not appear to be enthralled with the effect either.

"Great idea," he said to his sister, pulling his shirt down to demonstrate the disproportionate bulk that now padded his stomach.

"Yeah, well, we'll just have to repackage it," said Iris. She looked around, located a bunch of plastic bags on a shelf and handed them to her brother.

Blair, idling with his shirt buttons, began to surreptitiously track the movements of the gun in her hand. She switched it from right to left as she tried to help rip the tape off her brother's drug pack, and as they fussed with each other, Blair made his move, abruptly grabbing the weapon and then swinging around to knock Rob flat with one prayerful blow.

He held the gun on Iris and, heart tripping with his audacity, struggled to catch his breath. It was heady having the upper hand at last. "Okay...um...you take the tape and you tape up your brother. All right?" Iris carefully moved to comply. "Then you take the rest of the heroin and you put it in the bag." He left her to it while awkwardly and one-handedly yanking the belt of drugs from his midriff. From beyond the closet came the drone of boarding announcements. He knew the station must have security. He'd find them, hand Iris and the bag of drugs over, get to a phone and give Jim a call. Plan settled, Blair left the storage room, the bag over his shoulder and Iris firmly in his grip. Iris was slinking smiles at him which were hard to ignore. He didn't understand what her knowing look knew, but it got under his skin. He shoved the gun into the back of his trousers as they entered the lobby.

"We split everything three ways...everything," Iris said suggestively.

"I'm not into threesomes," Blair replied, lying. Right now any chance to cut her appealed to his animosity.

Iris grinned. "Ooh, come on, baby, don't knock it till you've tried it."

Her seductive if mocking croon made the tips of his ears heat. Embarrassed at his own residual fascination, he brushed her lures off with a mutter and glanced through the crowd toward the front entrance. He wanted to get her outside; it was too risky to stay in here. If she screamed for help, he'd be the bad guy. He hoped she didn't think of it. He wasn't sure if there would be security outside, but it would be worth a look. Establishing a more reliable restraint on Iris, he resumed a fast march despite her grating noises of protest.

They were nearly out the door when the deliberate slide of the bag down his arm pulled him up short. A gun materialized alongside his cheek, long enough to make its point, then was removed. He was motionless, as was Iris beside him.
"Hey, Sport, it's your unlucky day." Parkman's voice was satisfied, the bag in his hands. "This is mine, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Blair had to let his grip on Iris go as the bag was drawn away. Enveloped by strong cologne, he felt his gun taken next. He endured the rude slide of gunmetal against the small of his back and the other man's gloating tone.

My life has become farce, thought Blair. He'd ridden so many switchbacks today he frankly just wanted to get off the road entirely. He didn't want to drive, didn't want to be driven. Nope. He wanted out of the trip altogether.

Iris strolled sulkily as Parkman guided them both out of the station through a side exit. No one they passed noticed a thing. Iris, self-serving and a born opportunist, didn't waste time working Parkman around to a new alliance.

"You're never going to get the drugs through customs by yourself," she told him. "We'll have to go with my original plan."

"Which is?"

"We tape the heroin to our bodies, smuggle it across the border, and when we get there, my brother's got the connections to unload it quickly."

"I've got my own contacts," said Parkman. "Why should I risk bringing in your brother?"

They paused for criminal conferencing near a cluster of dumpsters and debris, not far from what appeared to be a baggage loading area. Blair followed the implicit instruction of Parkman's gun and audited their conversation without comment. As they spoke he stood, hands raised, hoping someone would notice him. Daddy, look, that man has his hands in the air--and the ugly man has a gun.

"Because if anything happens to Rob, I'd be very sad," Iris said. Honey sweetened her throat and poured out with her words. "And that would mean you wouldn't have the opportunity to get to know me better, which I'll bet is something you'd like to do."

Iris wound herself to Parkman like a skinny alleycat and smiled up winningly at his bland dough-colored face, the soured currants of his eyes. Blair experienced a mild pang of nausea. If he felt any regrets for Iris's sake, it was that she was getting herself into far more than she knew. The fucker was dangerous and if she didn't watch herself she'd end up hurt, or worse.

"Yeah, maybe," the man said without enthusiasm, then looked at Blair. "What about him?"

Iris shrugged, gave Blair a dismissive smirk. "He's your call."

Parkman's gaze narrowed, fitting him for a shroud, and Blair took a breath. He'd whacked the man with a board of nails and chances were he'd be persona non grata on the next leg of the trip. And he wanted to get off, but not offed. He had no idea what to say. He knew admonitions to gun-toting weasels were of dubious survival value, but the only thing that came rolling out of his mouth was,

"Look, Parkman, this is crazy, man. You'll never get out of here with those drugs. You might as well just throw them away."

"Yeah?" The man's voice was dry as toast. "Says who?" He paused, then a shutter dropped over his empty eyes, and Blair felt himself edited out of the other man's view. "Moment of truth, babe." He handed his gun to Iris, who took it easily and without hesitation. "Do it."
Blair backed up instinctively and found himself stumbling off the edge of the sidewalk. A heap of trash hemmed him in at the rear, and with a dumpster to his left and a fence to his right, he was going nowhere.

"Such a waste," Iris said smoothly, raising to shoot.

Blair flinched to one side and heard a sharp crack followed by a ping and the skipping force of something bouncing on the ground near his left foot. He went down with a gasp, hands flat on the cool asphalt, one trousered knee grinding against something sharp. Other noises came too quickly for comprehension, a clatter and a small cry, more shots. He looked up to see Parkman running off, Iris spidered flat on the sidewalk. He stood, shots still echoing in his ears, and made himself wait in relative safety as Iris snatched up the bag of drugs and ran off. But no more shots came and after long, shuddery seconds he detached himself from his pen of refuse and looked around.

And then there was a touch on his arm and Jim was standing next to him.

"Oh, god, what--I'm glad to see you," Blair said in an honest daze.

"Me, too," Jim said. And he could have said a hundred other things, but he was Jim, so the next remark out of his mouth was, "We're not done here yet, Chief--and, Sandburg, when you find her, forget about the seven-course meals."

And then he was off like a cat chasing its prey. Good old Jim, a practical hero and a funnyman for all occasions.

Okay, Blair, rise to the occasion and the example, he told himself in an inner voice that sounded a lot like Jim's. Another more Blairlike voice in his brain was nudging him to go park himself on a bench, have an orange soda, and leave the rest to the professionals. It was sensible, but he ignored its kvetching with long practice. He'd been recalled to duty.

As he stood gathering his bearings and trying to decide exactly what duty entailed and which direction to take first, he spotted Iris skulking off. Nice. Purpose found, he followed her to front parking lot. She beelined for the Volvo and unlocked its trunk to put the bag of drugs inside. Some nerve this bitch had, going for his car again. Piqued, he eased up behind her, waited until she'd stashed the bag, then tapped her gently on the arm. She turned and Blair felt the tumblers of closure click into place. He gave the first truly pleased smile he'd felt stretch his face in nearly a day.

"You want to get in the hard way or the easy way," he asked cheerily.

"Look, Blair, I wasn't going to shoot you. . .anywhere fatal," she said, trying it on and twirling her hair at him with a little girl smile. "And going halvsies is even better."

He uttered an amazed laugh. "You never stop, do you."

Leaving her smile on, she touched his chest. "I know what boys like," she said, and her tongue performed a jawbreaker swirl, without the jawbreaker, as if to remind him of possibilities.

"I can't believe how you turned out," Blair said, shaking his head. He watched her face change, the trick of her eyes which made them glass darkly to basalt; the way her mouth folded down.

"How I turned out," she said, sounding honestly pissed. "I thought we were alike. You're a free spirit--I can tell, Blair. But now you're acting all Mister Mod Squad, 'I work with the Jakes.'" She made a face, then softened again with deliberation. "You could let me go. I know you want to."

"You know wrong."
"C’mon, Blair. You can keep the drugs. Turn them in and get your merit badge. I don’t need the car, even. I can hitch a lift, be out of your hair in a minute."

Blair touched her shoulders, held them lightly. "Look, Iris. I’ll do what I can for you, really--"

"I knew you were a forgiving kind of guy."

"--but I can’t let you go. You can’t just go around breaking the law. Guns, drugs--it’s wrong. You have to take some responsibility for this." He let the day’s grudges drift abeam and focused his powers of persuasion on her. "Trust me. I know how hard it is, but you have to face up to it."

She stared at him, lips twitching. "So what are you, the poster child for reform school? Bad boy made good, huh. I bet your mom would be real proud."

The aimless digs riled Blair more than he intended to let her see. "Get in," he said.

She darkened, her lips a sly pout, her eyes measuring him. "Fuck off," she said, turning her back and reaching up to close the trunk.

He grabbed a handful of her hair at the nape, and the rear belt-loop on her jeans and held her there, ignoring her ouches, and how they sounded like plaintive meows. He hardened himself. "In," he said again. Her slim hands grabbed for purchase and she climbed in and curled there as he shut the trunk lid on her. He was surprised at himself, and at her—she didn’t begin cursing at him until the lid was closed, and then only briefly. Was he so fearful, he wondered, or was she.

He went and climbed in behind the wheel of his car, spent a few minutes adjusting the seat and mirrors to their norms, then pulled his back-up sunglasses out of the glove compartment. There was a weak thump from the trunk. "Yeah, yeah," he said. He sat another minute with his hands on the wheel, breathing deeply from his diaphragm. "A job well done," he said. He cleared his throat, smiled consciously. "Jim, what’s up?" He started the engine. "Iris? Oh, well. Um... Iris? Well, you know, my mother always said. My mother always said. He pulled out of the parking space. "Naomi always taught me to put things back where I got them from. From where I got them. From where I found them."

With care, he drove toward the front of the station, where he could see the flash of a police car. "I’m a happy, happy guy," he murmured as he peered down over his sunglasses and circled the lot. A child passed in front of the car, hands clasped by a parent on either side. The mother wore pink shorts, the father wore plaid. "Naomi--my mother--always told me. Taught me. . .told me. . ."

Blair spotted the truck and drove up alongside it. Jim and Simon stepped out to greet him and he grinned at them over the top of his sunglasses.

"Simon, Jim, what’s up?" he said heartily. The other men loomed authoritatively next to the car as he put it in park.

"So where’s your girlfriend?" Simon asked. Jim said nothing.

"Hey, you guys are going to love this." He got out of the car and walked to the rear, laughing for effect on the way. "You see, my mom always taught me to put things back where I found them." He popped the trunk. Iris sat up and gave them a wary regard. After a pause, Simon chuckled and Jim made a low hum that may or may not have been amusement.

Blair drew off his sunglasses with a dramatic flourish and did not meet Jim’s eyes.

"Okay, miss, come on." Simon reached for Iris and helped her out of the trunk. Blair stepped aside,
still smiling, still ebullient. Because he needed to be. That's what he did. He bounced a bit as Jim tugged on a pair of evidence gloves then reached in to pull out the bag of drugs. Jim opened the bag and poked through it, his elegant face studying the contents. Serious, absorbed. Then he looked up and their gazes locked across the trunk. Blair palmed the lid down.

"Good work, Chief."

Blair's heart stuttered, but he was used to this. "Hey, yeah, thanks. Man. Man, was I glad to see you. Whew. What a day." He sidled over to Jim as he spoke.

Jim raised a brow. "I'll bet."

He stood by waiting, jittery and restless, while Jim and Simon logged and secured the evidence, and then while Simon called the district attorney's office. Jim was filling out a clipboard of forms with a methodical hand that made Blair want to levitate off the ground in impatience. He tried not to look, and watched Simon instead. The police captain had gradually eased off to one side and was at turns muttering into his cell phone, and more often listening, with an increasingly grim face. Blair hoped it was just pure chance that Simon's gaze had focused his way as he frowned.

"Jim, can I talk to you a moment," Simon called out when he'd finished.

Blair leaned on the nearest car and fidgeted for five minutes while Jim and Simon stood at a distance, talking, then shooting glances at him, then gesturing his way, then clearly arguing. Oh oh, he was thinking as they walked back over to him. He tried to figure out if he'd dropped the ball in some way.

"Oh, hey--did you find Rob?" he asked, as they reached his side. At Jim's headshake, he went on, "He's inside, taped up in a storage closet."

Jim looked intrigued by that. "You don't say." A smile touched his lips. "You've been busy." He reached up and rubbed the back of Blair's neck, squeezed. Blair's head dipped a fraction. If he could have, he'd have pressed like an affectionate pony to Jim's chest. He shook in odd places, his body a sudden archipelago of nerves--one wrist, the length of his neck, knees--the shockiness of aftermath hitting him out of the blue, as it usually did. The fact that he'd eaten or drunk very little all day probably contributed too. He could tell Jim noticed, but the other man didn't make a big deal of it.

He led them to Rob, who was lying on his side on the grey floor with surprising serenity, head by a mop bucket. He didn't seem displeased at the nature of his rescue, and agreeably allowed Simon to cuff him, Mirandize him, and lead him off.

"Thanks, dude," Blair heard him say as they walked away. "That duct tape tastes for shit."

They were left standing in the storage closet alone, Jim looking down a bit, Blair looking up. Jim long-armed the door shut with a gentle click, and Blair hitched a breath as Jim turned back and slid his bare, warm hands around to cup Blair's neck and skull the way you'd hold a certain kind of vase, thumbs stroking his jaw. Then Jim kissed him. Tongue, even.

The strung-out tension in Blair's muscles melted by degrees, and he let his body relax into Jim's, let his arms wrap around that tight waist like a loose bow. His own mouth had a sharp, ketotic taste that Jim couldn't enjoy, but, oh god, he was tongue-fucking him with relish, dominant and reassuring. Blair ground his dick against Jim's thigh and in response felt Jim's thumb press harder below his ear, against the throbbing of his jugular. Pleasure spiked and he almost came, spoke love moans into Jim's hot mouth, encouraging; but Jim eased away.

Blair's breath came raggedly. He undid his heavy slitted eyelids to meet Jim's gaze. The other man's
pupils were dilated and everything else about him had flared to life; he was breathing heavily through his nostrils and the sharpish lines of his cheekbone were pinked by inner heat. Yeah, I made you like that, Blair thought, happy for himself, for Jim. He closed his eyes as Jim stroked his hair, up from underneath, lifting it from Blair's head and letting it dust his knuckles, run between his fingers. Jim got off on that, had told him so once.

"How're you doing, Blair," he said in a gentle voice.

"Hmm. Good." Blair smiled and rubbed his cheek against Jim's mouth and felt Jim smile.

"No damage? No trauma to that armor-plated skull of yours?" His hands roamed a bit over Blair's head in search of head wounds, half joke, half true concern.

"No damage."

"Yeah? Your stomach's growling. You probably need a candy bar. Soda."

"Sounds good."

"We'll get something on the way out."

"Cool."

"Chief, I want you to take it easy..."

"Oh, I'm way easy, man."

"That's good, that's good." Jim detached himself from their embrace with care and rested his hands on Blair's shoulders. "Because I have to arrest you, buddy."

Blair gaped. "Excuse--what?!"

Jim grimaced. "Sorry, Chief. It's just a formality. Some prick in the DA's office is having a go at us, wants us to take you in on a possession charge. Idea being that if we didn't know you, we'd be doing that anyway until we got it all sorted. We'll work it out. They'll probably drop the charges within--"

"Probably?" Blair shoved Jim in the chest and bounced back in disgust. "I cannot believe you, man!"

Jim looked to one side with patent guilt, then back. His face had firmed during that gesture, and when he spoke his voice was stressed, sharp. "Cut me a break here, okay? If I could avoid this, I would."

Little joy in that.

"Jim, you know I'm innocent, right?" Blair heard the vehement pressure in his own voice. The question was embarrassing but uncontrollable.

"Of course." Jim's gaze was officer-on-the-stand steady, leaving no doubt he spoke the truth, but the whiff of impatience he gave off was more comforting.

Blair swallowed, throat strained. "But I'm being arrested. What if something goes wrong, what if they say I was in on it. I could go to prison." He was aloft, but Jim shot the wild flight of worry down.

"Not a chance. No matter what happens."
Questioning that flat certainty in Jim's voice, and its implications, would have been dangerous for them both; Blair let it go for now. "Maybe I should have taken that train to Canada," he said instead darkly.

"Too cold for Sandburgs up there, I hear."

"Yeah, well."

On that note they went back to the lobby, Blair trying not to display his ill temper, Jim wisely silent. At the snack machines, he handed over several dollars from his wallet and waited while Blair grabbed his goods.

"We can hit a Wendy's on the way back," Jim offered as Blair tore into a bag of pretzels.

Blair grunted as he chewed. Jim could take that for assent if he liked, and he seemed to. On the sidewalk, Blair stood like a post and crunched pretzel after pretzel while Jim conferred with Simon. He armored himself in a casual pose, bored, as if convinced by Jim's persuasion that the arrest would be routine. He believed he'd learned a lot from watching the body language of perps, but Blair also knew he was bad at hiding his belligerence. Naomi had told him so long ago.

Uninvolved, he endured the discussion and pretended to watch a patrolman who was directing traffic to move on past the hubbub. The hunch of Jim's shoulders and the glances from Simon were hard enough to take, but the arrest itself was excruciating: Simon standing close, his low voice reciting Blair's rights, his broad face at its most unreadable, his voice at its most toneless, creating a distance cultivated for Blair's sake. Or for his own. Or, simply because he was an asshole. Blair liked Simon most days, but today he didn't want to be within ten feet of him.

He couldn't even drive his fucking car home, and that was what pissed him off the most. It was impounded for evidence, and he resigned himself to regaining it ripped to shreds, even though Jim and Simon both promised otherwise.

They didn't cuff him, that was something. Left more or less on his own recognizance, he went to sit in Jim's truck. From there, downgraded from participant observer to mere observer, he watched the methodical deconstruction of the crime scene. He couldn't see everything but he inferred most from experience. They were thorough. Simon was standing next to his car, logging evidence as the bags were brought to him. Iris's gun caught his eye, but they also appeared to have collected duct tape and other miscellany from the storage room.

After an hour, the scene wound down, and a few cars pulled off. There were one or two people standing near the entrance talking to a uniformed officer who was jotting notes, head down at his work. Statements of witnesses, presumably, except where the hell had they been when he was being escorted at gunpoint back and forth across the station lobby?

And there was Jim, arms crossed, back straight, the thrust of his chin showing an attentive but critical listening posture as another of the ubiquitous uniforms reported something or just chatted him up. Blair watched through the windshield, Jim close but distanced by the glass. He'd pulled on his role, Detective Ellison, and it looked almost natural, though Blair's eye could pick out the idiosyncracies that said he was listening on two levels, and that maybe he'd captured a scent he didn't like. Then the officer said something and Jim laughed, the generous Ellison laugh that was sometimes granted to others of his kind—badges, the fellowship of law.

Blair, next to the open truck window, heard the laugh clearly and hated him for a moment. It had been his adventure, his wild reckless ride. They'd stolen it from him, without a thought, Jim and Simon and the others.
Jim reached out in a familiar fashion and clapped the uniformed officer on the arm, saying a few words that were unintelligible to Blair's ears, and then they broke apart and Jim walked over to Simon.


All this because he was Jim. And he'd stood there and laughed with someone else, a stranger undeserving of that gift. Blair admitted easily to himself that he was jealous, and dissected his jealousy with a cool eye, peeling down to the gelid organs of spite and longing. He wanted--part of him wanted--to stand by Jim's side not just as a friend or even as a guide, but on an equal level, with badge, gun, and the force of an official position.

Respected.

Trouble was, his aspiration burned neither from love nor innate insecurity, but from pure greed. He was used to measuring himself as the peer or superior of anyone he knew, of being the brains of any outfit, and he had no intention of letting a badge and some extra muscle mass undermine his personal authority. He'd pushed himself into every corner of Jim's life and if not stopped he would keep at it until he assured himself that he'd achieved status.

I really am a son of a bitch, he thought, brooding on his own faults. Worried for Jim's sake, he directed his mood to change; to let brooding ebb, acceptance flow. He was being unfair to Jim and Simon both; he was glad it was over. Let them take care of it, clean up the mess. He would sit in the truck and be a martyr to legal red tape.

The rest he would take care of himself.

A few minutes later, Jim came to the truck and stood next to the open passenger side window, one hand on the edge. His blue eyes studied Blair. "Won't be much longer," he said.

"I'm cool," Blair said, in the spirit of obfuscation.

Jim nodded and moved off; and a few minutes later, true to his word, returned and climbed in the truck. He made it all the way out of the parking lot and a few miles down the road before his head twitched to one side, to look Blair over. Blair sat comfortably in his seat, head back, and gave no ground.

Unsurprisingly, they were at the Wendy's drive-through before either one of them opened his mouth.

"Grilled chicken sandwich, double cheeseburger, two large fries, two ice teas," Jim said to the speaker, ordering without consultation.

Blair almost asserted new and different preferences just to be perverse, challenging, cross. But his glance slipped sidewise and he was moved to dote on the shape of Jim's turned head, the vulnerable line of his neck, his arm outstretched to lay its grip on the steering wheel.

He let Jim order for him, said nothing, ate, listened to Jim eat. Jim was unsettled; Blair could always tell. But Jim could fucking well get it off his chest if he wanted to. No one was stopping him. Great apes did as they pleased. And, frankly, Blair liked getting Jim worked up. His silence and tension were aphrodisiacs. The more tightly wound Jim got, the looser Blair became. He distracted himself with an imaginary plot to hijack Jim. Take him home, tie him to his bed, straddle his hips and ride.

Resentment and sudden desire battled within him. Bemused, he ate a french fry.

When they reached the station, Blair's stomach clenched on itself. After getting out of the truck he
stood rigidly in place in the middle of the parking garage. Jim, who'd walked ahead, stopped and looked back at him.

"Come on." He waited until Blair unfroze and reached his side, then touched his back, an escort and a friend.

"We going through booking?" The thought of becoming the station joke du jour--for what had to be the hundredth time--hurt his pride, but he tried for a stiff upper lip.

"Nah," Jim said. They reached the elevator, stepped in. He pushed the button for their usual floor, Major Crimes. "We can do the paperwork in Simon's office."

They strolled down the hall and into the bullpen as if it were any normal day. Swing shift was on, and none of Jim's poker buddies were among the current complement. The detectives he knew best, Lisa Bintliff and Terry Service, both prairie-dogged startled looks at him as they walked in. Blair felt that he could read knowledge and humor in their eyes; his face flushed at their brief greetings. Jim ushered him into Simon's office, told him to stay put, and left him there to wait.

As soon as Jim was gone Blair stood up and thought about wandering off, then hit Simon's bookshelves instead. He grabbed the copy of *Verbal Judo* he'd been meaning to borrow for two years, started a pot of coffee, and sat down with the book, schooling himself to patience.

"There you are," Simon said, coming in twenty minutes later. He carried a handful of processing equipment which Blair viewed warily.

"You aren't serious," he said. "You're going to fingerprint me?"

"Well, it won't be the first time," Simon said, getting off a jab despite his gravity. "Going to take your picture too." He set his paraphernalia down on the table and went to pour himself a cup of coffee.

"Great," Blair said, his earlier anger returning. "You know, this isn't the same as being vetted for a ride-along pass. This is pretty damn serious. I mean, I'd be happy to take a hit or two on my record for public demonstrations, but suspicion of drug trafficking is not something I want to be remembered for."

"When I'm in my dotage, I plan to remember you for your cheerful attitude, Sandburg."

"Funny, funny. Why're you doing this, anyway--Jim too chickenshit to do it himself?"

"He said something about being afraid you'd bite him."

"He should be."

Simon walked along the wall of his office, lowering blinds. "I really hope you're not planning on busting his ass, Sandburg. The man doesn't deserve it. He went to a hell of a lot of trouble to find you. Above and beyond his job."

"Bust his ass?" Blair snorted. "I'm the one getting arrested for being kidnapped." He subsided with a sigh. "I'm not going to bust on him, Simon. Much. But it's freaking me out, being on the other side of the line."

"Look, kid. Don't worry," Simon said, sitting down at the table with his coffee. "We're all a bit punchy, but no one's taking this lightly. We've handed the case to Adams and Brown. Adams is primary--I stopped and had a chat with her, emphasizing the importance of your quick release. We've already conference called with the DA’s office. I reached the *right* people this time. I told them we..."
wanted to cut a deal with everyone who'd take it, and they'll go along with dropping all kidnapping charges for statements and testimony exonerating you. The wild bunch are separated, of course, and pissed at each other--if we put a fast and hard enough spin on the deal, they're unlikely to pick you for a fall guy. "Blair leaned forward with his hands clasped across his knees. "But the arrest is still going in my jacket, right?"

Simon made a slight, wincing face that finally betrayed his sense of guilt. "Well, yes. But you can have it expunged. Shouldn't be much of a problem."

"Works for me."

"Good, now get over here."

He went and sat and let Simon fingerprint him, compressing his lips to say nothing as the pads of his fingers were rolled firmly over the ink, then failing as he inspected his grubby fingers.

"I guess I don't merit the inkless version, huh."

Simon snapped him a cool look. "You want to finish this in booking where the system is?"

"Um, no."

"Then put a sock in it."

"You treat all kidnap victims this way?" Blair wondered aloud, then ouched as Simon pressed extra hard on his pinky.

"Sandburg, you probably irritated them into a tizzy. I'm surprised they didn't come by the station to drop you off."

Simon finished up the job, snapped his mugshot, then let him wash his hands. When Blair returned from the men's room, Lilith Waterman, a familiar face from the DA's office, was just sitting down and removing a leather-cased yellow notepad from her briefcase. She and Simon both looked up as he entered.

"You two have met, right?" Simon waved a quick intro. "Lilith Waterman, Blair Sandburg. Ms. Waterman is working with the ADA assigned to the case. She agreed to come down and sit in while I take your initial statement so that we could expedite this."

Blair made agreeable noises and hellos. Waterman, all business, pulled out and thumbed on a small tape recorder, into which she noted the time, date, and purpose of the recording, before focusing on him, her voice neutral.

"Blair, I'd like to remind you that you're entitled to have legal representation for this statement, and that it might be in your best interests. Also, if you'd prefer to have someone other than Captain Banks take your statement--one of the detectives in charge of the case--that would be a reasonable request." She glanced at Simon. "I assume they have no personal relationship to Mister Sandburg."

"No, they don't. But we have four other perps, three of whom are being interviewed right now. . . ."

Blair tuned them out as they wrangled, leaning back in his seat and scoping out Waterman's chalky bosom on the sly. Her upswept hair was secured with a pencil and she wore small jade earrings. He remembered that she'd once chatted with him about applied anthropology, and that her sister was a bacteriologist with the CDC. He remembered also that he'd asked her out and she'd pleaded a previous engagement, in just those words. But he liked her, nonetheless.
"Blair?" Waterman was looking at him blandly.

He jerked to attention, realizing she'd repeated the question about legal counsel. "Huh? Oh, sorry. No, no--I'm fine. I don't need a lawyer. I mean, not yet, at least, right?" He managed a dry, nervous laugh. "And I'm okay with Simon taking my statement."

He ended up delivering it to Simon as planned, Waterman monitoring him closely as he spoke, jotting notes now and then. It was freshly embarrassing at times to confess his behavior and motivations; his interest in Iris, his fear, and what he viewed in retrospect as his relative passivity during the abduction. To his relief, Simon didn't ask him elaborate questions and the interview clocked in under an hour. He was relegated to detention again when they left, and lay down on Simon's couch to watch TV.

"Glad to see you've made yourself comfy, Sandburg."

Blair startled awake, leaping upright on the couch and breathing erratically. Simon, cigar lodged in one corner of his mouth, stood within the doorway with Jim and Joel behind him. Seeing the effect he'd had, the captain appeared apologetic; but he was not prone to mushiness.

"You can go. DA's office has signed off. We've got an officer here to take you home."

Blair nodded and wiped a bit of grit from one eye. The wall clock showed he'd slept hours. "Officer Jim, isn't it," he joked back lamely, as he shook off his bad dreams. "I follow all your cases." He stood up, rubbed at his hair, and looked up to find all the others watching him with concern they immediately concealed, their faces altering minutely, their various movements aiming for casual.

"Hey, Blair." Joel smiled and patted his shoulder when they met in the middle of the office. His touch was friendly. "I hear you had quite a ride."

"Yeah, pretty crazy." Blair smiled crookedly in return.

"You gotta watch it with the ladies. Try to pick a nice girl for a change.

"Um, sure." Blair stood with his hands in his pockets. The other men were clustered loosely around him, tribals intrigued by their pygmy captive. Blair frowned. He had plenty of questions to ask, but the atmosphere was stifling and he was tired; he wanted to get resituated on his own territory, such as it was. "Listen, I have this big dinner I was making for Iris. Most of it was in the fridge when I left. Should still be good. Unless--" He looked at Jim.

"It'll still be there, Chief." He glanced at the others. "Come if you want," he said in an offhand way. "Bring your own beer."

"I have wine," Blair broke in. "To go with. . . ." He trailed off, shrugged.

"Sounds good," said Joel. "Tyra's at church tonight for choir practice."

Simon chimed in, and they planned to meet later, giving Jim and Blair some advance time, and everyone else some time to regroup. Every man in the room except Joel gave off the whiff of someone yearning for a shower, Blair included. He left as he'd come in, Jim walking him down the hall, this time with an arm slung lightly around his shoulder for most of the way. Jim amazed him. Blair had no idea how he reconciled his contradictions; how he could be so paranoid about his sentinel abilities yet so oblivious of the inferences people might draw from his public displays of affection. If Jim hadn't been so deeply habituated to his bisexual closet, a casual observer might think him completely out.
He smells good though, Blair thought, noticing it again. He smelled of a day's sweat. He smelled raunchy and fuckable. He let Jim see his thoughts as they rode down together in the elevator. Jim met his gaze with a sedate veneer and a carnal edge to his jaw.

"So did everything work out?" Blair asked.

"Pretty much. They were just getting started on Parkman's interview when we left. He'd been in the ER to have his arm looked at. That's quite a number you did on him."

"I tried. I hope he gets tetanus."

Jim smiled. "Johnson started dealing soon as he got his lawyer. Iris too. Vaughn hasn't been very chatty, but he'll come around."

"Who's Vaughn?"

"Your pal with the curls." Jim tugged Blair's for emphasis. "Charles Vaughn."

Blair mused on that, quiet until they hit the road. Jim was eagle-eyeing him again, sidelong, as he drove. "Did you hear the whole story?" Blair asked.

"Pieces."

He pieced out the rest in far less detail than his formal statement, answering Jim's questions as they arose, and that carried them to their building, up the stairs, and through the door, at which point Blair veered for the bathroom and locked himself in.

"I call dibs," he murmured, knowing Jim would hear him. The shower was modern plumbing's crowning glory. He pruned up, shaved his face at leisure, then vacated the bath in rolling plumes of steam. Dressing in clean clothes was another high point of his day, ranking in the top five so far, along with trunking Iris, tonguing Jim, french fries, and hydrotherapy. When he popped open a beer and swallowed, he added number six to his growing list. He stared into the open fridge, sucking at his beer, idly trying to decide if he'd round out the top ten with four orgasms, or three orgasms and a handful of kalamata olives.

When Jim came out of the bath fifteen minutes later, the mortuary remains of the previous dinner had been scrapped and a new assemblage was in progress. Jim, towel at his waist, padded around the counter and picked from a bowl of mixed fruit.

"You don't have to go to a lot of trouble, you know. Cops aren't known for their culinary discernment."

Blair cut his lashes Jim's way. "But you are."

Jim paused with a grape halfway to his mouth, then tossed it back in the bowl. "I really wish you hadn't invited them over," he said matter of factly, as if just realizing this, in a tone so calm and thoughtful he might have been planning an errand. "I would take you on the kitchen floor, right now. I'd fuck you like a dog."

Blair's wrist twitched and the spoon he was stirring with clattered the pot. His dick woke up, heated and achy. "W-we have time," he managed to stammer out. He was so turned on that breathing hurt.

"Yes, but I'm going to make you wait." Jim came up behind him, stroked a hand up under his shirt. Blair made a mournful sound in response. "Then I'll do it right." He stole Blair's second beer and sauntered off, removing his towel as he went. Blair watched him go, licking his lips and tasting his
own readiness. Fuck the olives. Four orgasms.

Dinner would be interminable.

Some days it's not what I expected. Not at all. If I'd never met Jim, never intersected the path of my life with his, would Janet be dead? Would Jim have been the one who somehow met up with her, and told her so casually, so self-importantly, to pay a little attention to her company's involvement in Peru? No.

I meddle without authority, and an old friend gets killed. Wiped out. She's never going to walk into her apartment or office again, never call her mother, never get married. And I'm sitting here drinking beer, listening to Jim watch TV in the other room, trying to figure out when I became so callous that I can live with that. There's a knot of anguish I can feel under the detachment. I want to dig it out and cry, but instead I sit here and stare out the window and type.

Today I am a man. Right. Tough and coplike and adult, pushing through it without tears. I used to think I was a sensitive guy. I used to get teased about it. Now I'm not sure I know what that means, or if it was true when I believed it was true.

I want to cry. But I need to be made to cry.

I don't cry much on my own anymore.

Simon came bearing gifts; his own bottle of wine and Blair's guitar.

"How the hell, Simon." Blair took the case from him and opened it, pleased at the recovery, even though he'd barely given its loss a thought.

The older man smiled. "Stopped by her apartment. They're searching now on warrant. I saw this and had a look. Good thing you had your name inside. I still had to throw my weight around to take it with me."

"Very cool. Thanks, man."

Joel turned up next, dressed down, and of them all the most awake after the day's events. He brought his characteristic geniality with him, and Blair was moved to socialize despite himself, and despite Jim, who flirted with him covertly while maintaining his breeziest, just-one-of-the-guys air—a protective camouflage Blair himself often adopted, which tonight didn't sit well with him. He discovered that he was too wound up to eat dinner, and instead perched on the edge of the sofa apart from the others, handling his guitar and thinking of when he'd received it; the far and complicated past mixing with the day's events in his mind.

The other men were chowing down with the vigor of a successful hunting party. Blair supposed they'd earned it. It was nice to have friends who gave a shit, who'd track you down when you went astray.

"Blair, you've outdone yourself this time, buddy," Joel said between bites of dolmeh baadenjaan and morasah palow. "This stuff is great. There's only one problem. Um, I'm not getting turned on, man."

Simon oohed a laugh, which irritated Blair. This was merely the latest in the evening's series of juvenile ribbings which had reduced his entire experience to the level of sitcom humor. "Ha, ha, ha.
Very funny, very funny. It's almost as funny as being in lockup for four hours."

"You were in my office the entire time watching TV," Simon replied dryly.

To Blair, it seemed that any earlier concern was now totally eroded by levity. "I got booked, I got fingerprinted, I got photographed. Do you know how humiliating that is?"

"It's just procedure, Chief. You had a half a million dollars' worth of smack in the trunk of your car. Lucky for you, Iris was more interested in putting Parkman and Chance away than having her revenge on you."

Jim was being reasonable and distractive, a warning in its way. Blair got the message. It's over, you're safe and sound. Let Simon get his digs in. Don't dig back.

Simon chuckled again. "If she hadn't corroborated your story, right now you'd be in a place with sweaty guys and no TV."

"Where they'd take away your guitar strings," Jim added.

Thanks for the support, Jim old man. Blair went to the kitchen, speaking conversationally as he did.

"Anything but that. You know, I should stay in touch with her. I mean, she's still pretty young, you know. What she needs is a positive influence in her life." He brought out a dish of date cakes and handed them to Jim, hoping his needling was making it through the other man's hide. "Here's some dessert. A role model...people change, you know?" He returned to his place on the couch, took his guitar in hand.

Jim said over his shoulder, "Why don't you do yourself a favor, Romeo. Get some therapy."

Oh yeah, he was needled and needling back. Blair lazily stroked his guitar strings as the other men forked up the dessert and made appreciative noises, and on Simon's inquiry shared the recipe with placid ease on his guitar as the men at the table exchanged glances.

"Well, actually, I take some dates, I put them in water till they get really nice and moist, then add lemon juice and sugar, then I stick this underneath the sink for a few weeks and let it get real moldy. You know when the fur starts growing on it? Stick it into a blender, put maple syrup on it. There you go." He riffed with placid ease on his guitar as the men at the table exchanged glances.

"Um, you are just kidding--right, Blair?" Joel managed to sound dubious but hopeful.

"Well, I left out the maple syrup this time."

"Right," Simon said, then shrugged. "Oh well." He forked up another bite.

"Now where'd you learn to play the guitar like that?" Joel asked as Blair segued into "Black Magic Woman."

"I was at the 1968 Monterey Pop festival and Woodstock."

"In the womb?" snorted Simon.

"Actually, prenatal cognitive development has been widely established, and they say that musical intelligence can be facilitated before birth. Of course, I was eight months old by the time we hit Woodstock. Man, that was a crowd."

Simon looked at Jim. "Is he for real?"
"Some would say so," Jim said, finally resuming the diplomacy that would ensure he got laid. Blair riffed approval at him, at which cue Jim rose and began clearing the table, darting tiny glances Blair's way as he did.

It took half an hour to pry Joel and Simon from the table and shove them off, even after it been cleared of every last plate, wine bottle, and edible crumb. When they finally deigned to decamp, Blair washed the stacked dishes while the three cops stood in the doorway, shooting the bull until it was staggered and bloody. He turned the radio on to 101.5, the Living End, and cranked it up just high enough to cut into conversation. "Do unto others what has been done to you," he sang sotto voce beneath the music, as he smashed the cutlery around and rattled the Pottery Barn plates within the suds. He could feel the others eyeballing him, and looked up winningly.

"Hey, drive safe," he said.

"I guess we'll be going now," Simon observed.

More farewells, more yadda yadda, and then they were out the door, and Jim was deadbolting it behind them. Blair snapped off the radio at once.

"Care to be more obvious?" Jim asked.

"Hey, they're great guys. And now I want them off the premises."

Jim nodded. "So I can fuck you like a dog."

"Right." Blair abandoned the dishes, peeled off his gloves, and washed his hands. He brought himself over to Jim, hands wet and soap-scented, and patted his cheeks. Jim flinched slightly and wrinkled his nose, then Blair pushed his hands up through Jim's hair and dried them there with feline kneading. Jim at first gave him a patient look, then slitted his eyes and released whuffs of incited breath through his nostrils. He liked that.

"It's been a hell of a day," Blair said, nuzzling Jim's chin and working around to the edges of his lips.

"And then some." Jim gripped his face, thumbs fitting along his sideburns. His blue eyes studied Blair, had an entire conversation with Blair's eyes on some other level.

Blair held onto Jim's waist with both his hands and stroked him up and down one side; the other man twitched. Then Jim kissed him, manipulative, tilting Blair's head to just the right angle, lithe tongue flexing inside his mouth. He wielded the kiss as a prerogative. One hand slid up behind Blair's head and worked his hair free of its tie with rough tugs that made his eyes sting. His other hand steadied a grip around Blair's throat. Blair made ragged noises of pleasure.

When his hair was loose, they wound their arms around each other. Jim's hand wed the small of his back. His thumb--god, he loved Jim's rudely skilled fingers--rubbed knots there, making his skin scream in a circle, a localized storm of fire. His entire body leapt upwards against Jim's, and tried to topple him down. Jim grabbed his ass through his jeans and pulled him close in quick humping motions that he used when he was being deliberately dirty. Blair's knees unlocked and he let Jim secure him in place.

Jim's lewd tongue danced another minute in his mouth, then he undid their kiss. "Upstairs," he ordered. His face was chafed red with arousal, eyes glittering. Not at all nice any more, not at all patient.

"Just take your dick out," Blair countered. "Let me get down on my knees and suck it."
The taut angles in Jim's face shattered and reformed. He shoved loose of Blair and reached down to unzip himself. Blair swayed, almost imperceptibly dizzy, and watched the darkish length of his cock appear in hand, withdrawn from the parted jeans and white briefs, indecently bared for him. Porno Jim. God, yes. The thick column strained upright and Jim jacked it to greater hardness and then released it. With the fabric of Blair's shirt twisted in his grip, he manhandled him down to his knees. Immediately his cock rubbed itself against Blair's cheeks, balls smacking his chin. He pried Blair's mouth open and cupped his jaw, while his other hand rested on top of Blair's head, fingers threaded through his hair. He shoved himself inside without request, cock sliding across waiting tongue, and Blair, exultant and throbbing in every particle of his body, let him.

It was difficult to suck when his mouth was getting fucked, but Blair accommodated until Jim's uneven thrusts slowed into more luxurious use. Jim was staring down at him, watching his lips as he always did; he was a man who liked getting blowjobs—and he took them as he should, with a classic pose of entitlement. The arrogant cant of Jim's hips thrilled Blair and he dug a handhold into the meat of his glutes, urging him deeper, mind flashing through a choppy reel of the day's events, gun clicking at his throat, bullet whisking past his scalp, bringing the board of nails down on Parkman's arm. He shuddered and glazed Jim's dick with saliva and worked the point of his tongue against the underside of its crown.

Jim cried out and his hands tightened agonizingly, needily, on Blair, and then his trim hips were jerking, come shooting breakers against Blair's throat. He pulled out to the tip and Blair laved him clean.

"Christ," Jim gasped, his head falling back to display a smooth bow of neck. "Fuck."

Blair grunted and sat back ass on heels for a moment before staggering to his feet; Jim remained handfasted to him the entire time, helping him rise.

"Upstairs," Blair said, now that he'd established the upper hand. He walked off, unbuttoning his shirt with shaky fingers as he went. Jim followed, flowing up quietly behind him as they reached the bottom of the stairs and then holding him still to maul his shoulder.

Blair wrestled free and leaped up the stairs two at a time, reaching the top with a laugh. Jim was right on his heels and solidly behind him again, and had grabbed him between the legs before Blair knew what was happening. Blair slumped with a groan and rocked himself into the cradle of the other man's hand. Jim's other arm wrapped like a restraining bar around his waist, and then—strong bastard—Blair was lifted and tumbled forward onto the bed.

"Umph," he said conversationally, before rolling over on his back and levering himself up on his elbows. Jim was undressing, yanking his shirts off over his head, wadding and chucking them at the floor. His dick remained out, half-mast from his open jeans. Then he shucked those off too, and stood naked and buff with his arms folded, eyeing the sprawl of Blair.

In return, Blair slid back and laced his arms behind his head, spreading his legs wider.

"You didn't get lucky with your girlfriend, did you," Jim said smugly.

"Being held at gunpoint kind of puts a crimp in the Sandburg libido, if you want the truth."

"Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"I'll remember that." Jim stroked himself idly, free hand fondling his balls.
Blair wriggled his toes and scissored his knees with invitation. "Why don't you return the favor, Officer Dick?"

Jim came over to stand between his legs. Blair lifted his feet off the floor and tied his legs around Jim in a bow, hugging the backs of his knees. Lips masked upon amusement, Jim untied himself and raised Blair's legs with a manacling grip at the ankles and brought them to rest against his chest. Blair ground the balls of his feet obligingly against Jim's nipples, then toed them, biting his lip and frowning with concentration at the task.

"You're damn cute when you're horny," Jim noted in a friendly fashion.

"I'm always horny."

"Q.E.D."

"What does that mean?" Blair said disingenuously.

Jim looked caught off guard, then his eyes narrowed. "It means what it means."

"Which is?"

Hesitating, Jim appeared to fish in memory. "Quad erat. . .demonspawnnum."

Blair snickered as Jim accompanied this with a tickle on his left calf. "You are such a faker." He felt great, but his cock and balls ached for release. He began to kick at Jim. "Come on, Jim, do me." Not receiving direct obedience, Blair reached down and undid his jeans; he arched with difficulty and lifted his ass off the bed to snake out of them. Cooperative in his low-key way, Jim helped by holding his legs steady and then, when Blair whuffed with frustration and glared up at him, he dragged the denim skin off Blair's body. Blair's released feet hit the floor with a thump.

He'd have removed his undone shirt as well, but Jim said, "Keep it on."

"Sir, yes sir." Blair sat up and saluted the flagpole with a kiss. He ate Jim again like candy, and Jim put one of his big hands in Blair's curls, while the other held his dick out for attention.

"You are such. . .a fucking. . .slut," Jim breathed with the erratic cadences of lust.

"God, I love your dick," Blair murmured. He plunged his mouth down on it, watching the wealth of Jim's rod sink between his lips until he almost became cross-eyed. He jerked himself in time with his own bobbing head, then surrendered it with a slurp. "Get it inside me," he commanded, scooting back on the bed to lie down.

"Not on the comforter," Jim complained. "Get up."

"I'm up," Blair sniped irritably, but he rolled off and allowed Jim to tear the bedcovers aside. "Like it would be so tragic if you got come stains on your downy quilt, man."

"Well, not if you take it to the dry-cleaners next time."

"I'll do that between kidnappings."

Jim's head jerked and he knifed a look at Blair. His lips had compressed with tension and Blair realized he'd hit a button.

"I want you to fuck me hard," he said to Jim in his everyday voice. "Make me scream until the neighbors hear, until I can't sit down without thinking of you even when we're in Simon's office and
"He's bitching you out--I'll just be sitting there remembering your dick in my ass."

"Get on the bed," Jim grated out, jaw tight. Anyone who didn't know him would have thought he was angry.

"I think you should make me."

"Jesus, Blair. Get on the bed or I'll come and make you."

Blair raised his eyebrows and assumed a skeptical face, the kind he gave students who fumbled out tales of hard drive crashes for an extension. "You're such a pussy, you kn--" he managed to get out before Jim was around the bed and twirling him to face the back wall. He was fast and wasn't gentle; he forced Blair's hands high and flat against the brick and knocked his legs apart, then breathed ferocious words in his ear.

"If you move, I'm going to make you beg like a bitch. I'm going to make you crawl and cry for it and then I'm going to jerk off in your face."

_Jesus fuck_, thought Blair frantically, as his balls tightened and pulsed. He whimpered and turned his face to the wall as Jim moved away. His shoulders trembled with the effort of not bringing a hand down to swipe his drooling dick. One broken sound, a gasp for air that was almost a sob, escaped him.

Jim returned with his dick already sheathed and lubed; his hands, greasy with his preparation, parted the cheeks of Blair's ass but gave no further preliminary as the head of his cock pressed in. Blair stiffened for a heartbeat and then relaxed with another sob of pleasure. It hurt, it fucking hurt, but it rode into him huge and thick and split him up the middle and he cried out it with how perfect it was, rising up onto his toes helplessly, pressing his forehead against the hard wall.

"Son of a bitch!" Jim yelled and Blair jerked all over, heart skipping with the kind of fear that is ecstasy in disguise.

"Oh fuck, Jim, oh fuck, oh _god_ yes--" Blair tried to grind his ass down onto its impalement and breathed wetly; he was crying. When had he begun crying.

Jim shoved forward, entire body launching itself against Blair's back, and with this he was fully inside, balls deep and groaning, his damp hot muscled weight draped across Blair. He breathed and rested for a true half minute, until Blair was strung out and squirming in the meekness of his need, then he wound his fingers through Blair's, lunged once, twice--and Blair came with a wail, shooting spunk up across his own chest. His untouched dick leapt and pulsed, sizzling a brand across his belly while Jim continued to ride him mercilessly. "Oh, motherfuck..." Blair breathed, nearly losing it again as Jim riveted his prostate with cruel accuracy and repetition. Blair's mind melted into the bowl of his skull and he began squeezing himself around Jim's slick organ, working his ass around its fullness. He could feel Jim's face in his hair, buried in its loosened curls; Jim's sounds labored from his throat to become muffled there. His back was beginning to twinge, and his fingers were sore within Jim's, but the rest of his body was buttery submission. He thought Jim might not come again so soon, but suddenly Jim's hips were whipping him forward with awkward desperation and his cock seemed to swell and pulse, and then he was groaning, the movements of his pelvis spasmodic as he released himself in Blair.

A short period of waiting followed, as Jim regained his bearings. Don't zone, Blair thought at the other man, don't you dare. But the other man recovered and slid off Blair by degrees, first letting go of his hands, then gently--with caresses down his side and hips--detaching from his body.
When Blair managed to turn himself around, Jim was dropping the dead soldier in the trash. His skin was flushed, pink with exertion. They didn't say anything, just smiled rather goofily at each other. Jim's eyes had nearly closed, and did close after he folded onto the bed and lay there motionless, a sculpture of spent manhood. "Dead meat," Blair said with tired accomplishment.

Jim hummed low in his throat, but didn't open his eyes.

"Too bad I'm not finished with you yet."

Jim hummed again.

Blair climbed onto the bed and draped himself across his friend's body, cheek resting on the musky juncture of his shoulder, and fell asleep that way.

Friday, September 12, 1997

Jim peeled open his eyes and blinked as he oriented himself. Exhausted but replete, he lay on top of his sheets with a Sandburgian mess of hair fanned out across his shoulder and chest. The lamps were still on, upstairs and down. He turned his head and caught the digital flicker as time changed from 4:02 to 4:03.

He sniffed a few times, cleared his throat, and hauled himself up against his pillows. Blair sighed and rolled off onto his back, giving Jim an appreciable view of the terrain. His gaze roamed with an infinitude of fascination. The other man was so different from himself, in every way that was good. He'd long ago decided he liked Blair's type. Hadn't liked Blair's type before liking Blair; but now... yeah, he had it bad. He still hit the clubs once in a while looking for sleek muscle men with hard eyes, and he'd find them and fuck them, and it was good; but it wasn't quite good enough anymore. He had grown accustomed to this. this Jewish kid with his blitz of curls and curious face, his perfectly ordinary body with its hair and freckles and moderately endowed dick. Jim liked him. Liked how serious he looked in sleep, the way his lips hung open and showed the white arc of his upper teeth. The slight puppyish fold under his chin. And how when he turned his head ten degrees into the light, he became exotic and Biblical and beautiful. Beautiful man.

He never went looking for that in the clubs. Why bother. He got it here.

After a trip downstairs for water and to switch off the lamps, he reascended the stairs to his bedroom and woke Blair up. It took a while, which was fine with him. He ran his face along the other man's chest, checking his chest hair, licking traces of semen from his skin. Blair grumbled in his sleep and pushed at his face. Jim kissed his fingers.

"Whrrrr..." Blair said.

"Hmm," Jim replied. He worried at Blair's left nipple, licking it stiff, biting, tugging it away from the nest of light curls then releasing it to repeat the process. It crinkled on his tongue and he lost himself in its small, crumpled fineness for an unmeasured time before he refocused and felt Blair caressing his head, palming the short hair gently.

"Other one."

Jim hefted himself a half foot over and obliged. Blair stretched sleepily beneath him, crackling at the joints. He switched grips, resumed stroking Jim's head with one warm hand, slung his other arm across Jim's back and rubbed between his shoulder blades.

"It's four o'clock," Blair said, voice dry and thick, intensified to a lowness that pitched woo to Jim's
ears and woke a flush along his skin. "Didn't you have a stakeout?"

"Covered," Jim said. "Dolinski took it." He rested his ear against Blair's chest, absorbed its cached beat.

"He ought to, the big slug. So, you going in tomorrow--today?"

"Yeah. . .you?"

"Why not." Blair sighed. "Back from my road trip. Back to work."

Jim raised his head and propped himself up on his arms. "Take a day off. You don't have class on Fridays."

"Guess I could do that."

Jim hitched himself further up Blair, the segue of thigh to hip coming to rest across his partner's interested dick, himself a skew of muscle against muscle. He tented his upper body protectively across Blair with chest and arms. Blair cocked his head on the pillow. Jim could feel the deep thumping of his veins through his own leg, belly, everywhere their bodies met.

"What are you thinking about?" Blair asked.

And as if on cue Jim thought unexpectedly of Carolyn, who'd sometimes ask the same question immediately after sex--sometimes, for crying out loud, during sex--when in both cases he had nothing in his brain except a loose pinball of a thought rattling around and hitting the blinking lights as it passed: good yeah good. Unless he was thinking at that moment of a hoagie or a good night's sleep, in which case there was no honest answer a man could give to such a question. With Carolyn he'd felt challenged to come up with something romantic. With Blair, something interesting.

"I was thinking I'd like to hit Vegas, become a showgirl." Jim salted the words with his irritation, but lightly. "What the hell am I supposed to be thinking?" His cock hiccuped with interest against Blair's abdomen.

"Think whatever you want. You don't have to tell me, man. Just keep it all tucked up in there until you stroke out from the stress. When you're a non-verbal vegetable I'll take good care of you. All this practice will come in handy then."

"You're a pain in the ass, you know that." The words came out more admiringly than Jim had intended.

"Not yet," Blair said. "But if you want." He moved his hips in a giving grind.

Jim returned the motion unhurriedly. "Nice or nasty?"

Blair's eyelids blinked with the smooth roll of a doll's, and the horizon between his heavy lips straightened. Jim could smell the languid heat of him. A tropical beach hippie, washed up on his bed.

"Be nice to me. . .slowly."

He stretched his arms back above his head and the scent from the hollows of his arms exhaled to Jim. Jim's nipples contracted to points as scent pulled a thread through his body. He kissed his way into the small flourish of hair on one side, and tongued it relentlessly and roughly, cat on catnip, ignoring Blair's soft keen. He rubbed his face into that sharpness, then lapped upwards to Blair's neck where his pulse jerked with excitement under the skin. Scraping his teeth across veins and tendons he
lavished himself on the other man's throat.

"You're going to leave marks," Blair complained breathlessly.

Jim moved to cover Blair, chest to chest, hips to hips. He pinned the other man's shoulders and chewed the hot drape of skin across his collar bones, where the curls of his chest began appearing like ivy climbers on a wall. His dick rubbed Blair's, dry hot kindling. Jim broke off to spit in his hand and reached between their bodies with slick fingers. He aligned their dicks and welded them together with a sliding grip until slow torture became ecstasy. Blair moaned. Jim teethed his nipples again, and he moaned with more aggression.

They moved around a lot on the messy bed, jockeying for position. Jim without trying could have named a dozen other lovers with whom any unusual maneuvers would had been awkward. With Blair, it was all good.

Usually.

"Ow," Jim said, as Blair's kneecap, hard as a turtle, bumped his nose. "Watch it, Chief, watch it." He pulled the sturdy body down the sheets until Blair's warm breath clouded his cock, until Blair's cock rose in front of his lips. He pushed his lips down along it and heard Blair gasp, a moment before his own cock was engulfed with skilled sucking. Blair's hot little tongue wrestled with the blunt head of his organ, then lured its length further into that mouth; on release, his tongue slid with the precision of a wet paintbrush down the underlying vein where Jim's pleasure was thrumming. Jim tried to reciprocate. Tried to remember to breathe.

"Oh, baby," he groaned in worship when Blair speeded up his attentions. He propped himself up on one arm, abandoning his share of the job and trying to lunge forward. Blair's breath rasped like a file through his nose as he sucked, and that sound rasped Jim's ears in turn and he grabbed Blair's meaty ass and bit his thigh. Blair sizzled around him, then slid off.

"Do me, do me," he said, snaking away to sprawl on his belly, thighs splayed apart, face turned to one side on the pillow. His shoulders and back dimpled, making his trapezius a broad shallow valley, his spine a river that poured into the delta below.

Jim climbed astride and dug his thumbs into Blair's neck.

"Oh, man. Oh...man. That's better than sex." He straightened his head and pushed his face into the pillow with whimpering sounds.

Under Jim's hands the warmth of skin over muscle softened, and under its mantle he could feel the clean lines of bone, smooth and unyielding. He slid his fingers through the soft grassland of Blair's scalp, kneaded his shoulders, massaged lower along his ribs. When Blair was subdued to a quiet storm, Jim draped himself down on the bed behind the other man, laying his head to fit the small of his back. Blair moved to a diagonal stretch to give him more room on the bed, and Jim moved heavily with him, the python length of his body resting between the other man's parted legs. He lingered for a while on the backs of Blair's thighs, rearranging the light hairs into patterns with his tongue, kissing the reddened skin around his bullet scar. When Blair moved restlessly, Jim tongued between the cheeks of his ass, licking away the faint taste of soap to find the musk underneath and then drilling down into the tightly muscled hole, opening it up with slick, forceful stabs, gliding across residual lube from their earlier session.

Blair had pushed up to give him access and was unrolling low, crazy tones of pleasure. The ring of muscle loosened then snugged helplessly against Jim's tongue, over and over, as he teased it. The younger man's thighs were shaking, his balls tightening. Jim stopped and let him draw back from the
edge, then slid a hand under him to jerk his cock with a swift rhythm, gnawing roughly at his balls while he did. Ass and thighs flexed as Blair twisted to push into his hand.

Jim rose, keeping a hot grip on his partner. He would have killed to get his dick inside again, if he hadn't wanted it so bad himself. He slapped Blair's ass once, then released him. "My turn," he demanded, arranging himself as if to do push-ups, then settling to his belly.

"Selfish bitch," Blair muttered, but he came to Jim readily and opened him up. Jim shuddered as the other man's jaw prickedled against his balls, lips and tongue working him gently. He broke out in a clean sweat, already aching, the hair along his thighs stiff and articulate with nerves where Blair's fanned curls clung. When Blair, long and tortuous minutes later, slid his dick inside, Jim's brain was swimming drunk out in dark headwaters.

He grabbed the railings behind the bed and absorbed the fullness inside him, twin weight to his own stiff cock below. Blair's damp warm hands clung to his cheeks and held him wide open as he rode, cowboy style, bucking and prodding his prostate, fingers sharp as spurs in his flesh. Jim managed, with lopsided and practiced skill, to grab hold of himself and match that painful sweetness by stroking the notched ache under his cockhead. More than once he almost came, but stopped short.

They struggled upright together, until Jim knelt with his head against the railing and one hand still wedded to his dick, Blair lazily fucking him from behind with soft little grunts and sighs. Jim went deep into himself as well, indifferent to whether he came back, or came. Every time Blair's swollen length bumped wickedly against the hot spot inside him, Jim hitched a breath and his consciousness thinned further, out over a broad spangled darkness. Eventually he could not continue touching himself, and his hand fell slack; he grabbed for the rails and held himself there with submissive grace that he knew turned Blair on.

"Oh, fuck, Jim," Blair choked out. He worked his hand down between them and around the front to grab Jim's dick. Jim could feel Blair's bone-heavy wrist stroking between his legs like a second cock; face rubbing his shoulders, nipples etching his sensitive back, both of their bodies slippery with sweat. The younger man was losing his rhythm, humping erratically against Jim's ass, cock a thick live wire seeking the single connection in a tangle of nerves that would complete his circuit, and then he found it and the breaker tripped inside Jim as Blair shot within the painful confines of latex, a stifling ecstasy Jim knew well and could almost feel mimicked in the tensing of Blair's fingers on his cockhead as his own come jetted free, hitting the railing in front of him, spilling into the shadows below.

Minutes later, through a granular differentiation of light and darkness, he stared down into his living room as if from a hayloft, at the geometrical confines in which his furniture was arrayed like silent animals. He could see a few wet drops on the hardwood floor. Essence. He'd once heard a serial killer call it that.

Blair had withdrawn, leaving him draped on the cool rails, first with his cheek to the painted metal, then his forehead. The crack of his ass felt hot, the breach of him sore. Strange, that there was this opening to his body, through which he took shits and passed gas, and most of the time he gave it no thought, or treated it as an abstraction, as he would any subject of discomforting locker-room humor. It was either an epithet or utilitarian as plumbing. And then, Christ, he got laid and he didn't have a fucking clue how his body could feel so good, brutally good, like a shotgun of pleasure striking home inside his guts and blowing his head clean off. Too fucking embarrassing, to think about it too much.

He turned around. Blair was strung out like a junkie on the bed, head backwards, floating in bliss. His eyes were closed and his arms akimbo but limp, strong tangible hands resting on the edges of his
belly as if he felt something moving within. Mercurial hair strewn across the sheets. Blair Sandburg, ragged and heartfelt, in his bed. Jim felt eight years old, fourteen, twenty, getting something he'd always wanted but couldn't put a name to. An odd sort of comfort, sexual, and beyond sex.

And then Blair opened his eyes. The blue creature looked at him, lucidly but as an alien. Jim gazed back. He remembered a time once when he'd been in an airport waiting room at three a.m., plane delayed, Blair sitting next to him with no intention of leaving until Jim was safely on his way. Insane kid. No one around. Snowstorm outside. But the announcement system kept talking to itself, asking for anyone to report irregularities they may have seen to security. Blair made stuff up. Driving him up the wall. *I saw a midget with a suspicious suitcase duck into the bathroom. I saw one of those ashtrays move a minute ago. Should I say something? Do you think I should let them know, Jim? Huh? Fruitcake.* How'd he get teamed up with this kid, he'd wondered then. You didn't pick your partner, though. And his flight had been cleared, and he'd stood and readied himself to board. Middle of the night, darkness, a little light snow still falling outside, the airport empty except for a handful of people, some snoozing, some awake but not really awake, placid zombies of the night shift. And Blair, looking up and him and smiling, wide awake, those blue eyes ridiculously frank and intelligent even at that hour. He'd said something light and unmemorable. Remarks you make when someone is about to take a trip; reassuring, humorous. Spinning into the dark like snowflakes. Jim had clapped him on the arm, left and boarded the plane. And from the plane had seen him, at the windows, watching, face erased of animation. Worried, maybe. Impossible to tell. Face blank and distant, Blair wrapped in his own thoughts.

And now he stared at Jim, eyes a mix of inextricable colors. Blue sky, sea below, algal greens and browns strewn in.

"Will you punish me?" Blair asked.

It sucker-punched Jim; he hadn't had time to prepare.

"I don't think that's a good idea right now. It's been a long day. Why don't you give yourself some time to recoup." He tried not to let obdurateness and anger show, but his tone was the one he used when pressed; rising flat from behind his tightening ribs. He was honored. He was angry. To punish Blair gave him a rush of power, a sense that he controlled this whirlwind of will and intellect who in truth controlled him.

Blair frowned. "I don't need time."

"Now," Jim said, as if he'd been asked to wash the kitchen floor or take out the trash at this inappropriate hour, for no particularly good reason.

"I know it's not the end of the month. But it would help."

"Great. Help. That's what I'm here for, isn't it." Jim looked away from Blair. He was aware of his own used nakedness, the rumpled bed, the clock ticking off its minutes with plastic regularity on the night table. It would have been silent, if he could have switched himself off. It was never truly silent any more, but it was quiet.

"Just yes or no, Jim," Blair said irritably.

Jim fixed him with a stare. "Sounds like a choice."

Blair looked tired, sat up. He was bent slightly, shoulders gleaming with light, freckled. Face snub and terribly young-looking, at odds with that calm, deep voice of his. To others, he looked like an average twentiesomething guy with no deeper challenges than juggling jobs, friendships, dates. The
worst that could happen, maybe his handful of rubber balls escaped his grasp and fell. But in secrecy, he was complicated, juggling psychic chainsaws. And the shameful thing was, Jim found it a relief—a relief to know it wasn't just him who was fucked up. To know that Blair Sandburg was not what he seemed on the surface; was not simply the soothing, articulate, politically correct, new-aged animal who'd caged himself in civility and good humor and Jim's spare room, but a wild, weird creature who craved control, just as everyone else did.

"You always have a choice," Blair said now, as if it were true.

Jim might have argued that, but he supposed it was true. He could refuse. Things would continue on in some form or another. Probably not unacceptably. But he'd agreed to this course, to Blair on his own terms.

He slid down along the bed, set his feet on the floor. "You're nuts, sweetheart." He could have added, but I love you, but he didn't have to. It was understood.

"Yeah. . .so." Blair rubbed beneath his lip, then flipped back a strand of hair.

"And I'd be doing this why?"

"The usual. Coveting, evil thoughts, bearing grudges. I also, uh, spent the replacement money for the car on my laptop and some books. . .and other things. I fudged the expense report on the Kephart case a few weeks ago. And, you know, everything with Iris."

"Maybe you should let that go. No one expects you to sniff out every criminal chick who bats her eyelashes your way." In a mutter, he added, "Of course, that begs the question of why you can't let it all go." He regretted saying this almost immediately, knowing that the words were a nod to convention, that he was covering his ass in a meaningless gesture of. . .morality, maybe. Good sense that he didn't really have.

Blair's head jerked up, eyes snapping. "Jesus, Jim. Thanks for the headtrip."

Jim rolled his head to one side, looking away from Blair, tense and frustrated. The clock said 4:57. "Never mind. Let's do it."

Blair laid a hand on his thigh. It felt warm and familiar and for a moment Jim resented the easy connectivity of their bodies.

Someone was singing in the alley below, off-key and drunk. The dumpster rattled as the singer or a friend stumbled against it. Jim glanced from the corner of his eye at Blair, who'd gone to his dresser and was handling belts. He was all too real at five in the morning, too much. Jim briefly fantasized about taking a long drive to Canada some night, leaving Blair asleep here in his bed, driving in the dark and the rain past Vancouver and into the soft, cow-chipped farmlands of foreign soil. Deciding to come back when he was good and ready.

"Okay," Blair said, looking at him.

Jim found his boxers on the floor and stood to pull them on, then took the belt from Blair's hand. He sat down on the edge of the bed, and Blair came to kneel in front of him.

"Have you been bad?" Jim asked.

"Yeah," Blair said, breath hitching. He didn't look up. His face was smooth, still.

Jim slapped him once across the face, hard enough only to sting. It would have been easier if Blair
had been aroused; if this had been something else, a different kind of need. "What do you say?"

"Thank you, sir." Blair lifted his head slightly. "I'll try to do better."

Jim acknowledged this with only a twitch. "Do fifty push-ups."

Blair moved to perform the exercises with an absence of expression, lost in his own inner space, which was probably not unlike riding out a zone. Jim sat on the bed, folded the belt in two, and periodically gave him an encouraging whack on the back, his ass, the backs of his thighs. Blair faltered a few times, but finished the set. Jim made him follow this with a hundred ab crunches. The younger man had metamorphosized into a flushed, wrung-out mess by the time he finished. Attractive, but no Olympic contender. He needed to start visiting the gym again, Jim thought.

"Get over here," he said.

Blair came and stretched out across his lap, face resting in a valley of sheets, hands bunched on their fabric. His back had a renewed sheen of sweat. Jim began belting him, Blair counting off. The strokes were noisy and rhythmic. Jim was in no danger of zoning. He felt sharply alert, grounded utterly in flesh. Blair's flesh: the muscles of his back, the heat coming in waves off his backside, the reddening skin. He was heavy and tense across Jim's lap. It took him only a little while to falter, a longer while to cry. Fifty strokes, and then they were done.

Jim let the belt drop to the floor. He gave Blair a few minutes to compose himself, stroking the other man's flanks and back gently while his labored breathing eased, then helped him stand. He was tear-streaked and subdued, as if some vast sadness had touched him and was passing.

"Okay?" Jim asked.

"Yeah."

Jim cupped Blair's head, stroked his hair. He bowed his neck so that their foreheads touched in a warm tingling circle. Blair smelled ripe and saline. Sniffling wetly, he withdrew from Jim and went downstairs to the bathroom. Jim climbed into bed, pulled the sheet up over himself. He turned off the light, waited with eyes open to see if Blair would come back.

But his voice drifted up from below. "I'm going to crash down here, Jim." There was a pause. "Good night. . .thanks."

"Night," Jim said, inaudibly to the other man's ears.

Breakfast was pancakes. The mix needed only water. Turn the griddle on, watch the bubbles form, dump on a plate with some bacon. Easy enough.

Blair came out of his room in bare feet, wearing a brown terry-cloth robe so threadbare and so pilled with age that Jim made a mental note to lose it during the next spin cycle. His hair was like kelp floating on the ocean, jaw sandpapery, eyes bleary. He looked rough, as if he'd come off a bender, and his body was a mass of fine hair; hair on his chest, on his calves. He was redolent, masculine. Cute. Pillow creases on his face told Jim that he'd slept on his belly.

"Pancakes, wow," Blair said, cracking a yawn.

"How's your ass?" Jim asked.

"Toasty," Blair said, coming to lean against the counter.
"Good."

Blair made a disgruntled sound. "You weren't so sure last night." He scratched one wrist, stifled another yawn, throat rippling with the effort.

Jim wielded his spatula aggressively against the pancakes. "You could use a sanity check once in a while."

"That's your job, huh."

"Apparently so."

"Mmm." Blair went to get coffee. "Too bad you couldn't save me from Hurricane Iris."

This casual comment offended Jim's protective, not to mention detective, pride. "Well, it wasn't for lack of trying. If you'd just called your ladyfriend a taxi, you'd have been well off."

Blair came up to his side. He picked a pancake up from the closest plate and took a bite from it, ignoring Jim's squint of irritation. "What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that I called, must have been just before you lit out of here, and left a message warning you."

"About Iris?" Blair's voice was surprised.

"No, about Mahatma Gandhi."

"Wait." Blair put the pancake down. "You're saying you called about Iris before she and that goofball kidnapped me?" He seemed unduly excited. "Wow, this is like--this is amazing, Jim. I mean, that's, I don't want to say precognitive, it's too soon to jump to conclusions, but okay, how did you know? Did you get, like, a vision or a flash or what?"

"Yeah, Tonto, I had a vision. So did the Washington Crime Information Center."

Blair's mouth hung open a moment before he spoke. "You ran a background check on her? On my date?"

Jim tossed two more pancakes onto Blair's plate. "Don't get your dander up, Chief. She looked familiar."

"Man, I don't believe you. You really take the cake." Blair paced abruptly, sloshing coffee on the kitchen tile and apparently on his toes. "Shit," he said, dancing off the burn, and sloshing more.

Ignoring the spectacle, Jim went to the table to eat. Blair joined him a minute later, muttering in a dark way about friendship and boundaries and abuses of police authority. Jim let him rant and wind down until, as expected, Blair grudgingly thanked him for the intrusion; then like a whirligig toy making its reascent Blair perked up into a good mood.

Jim kind of hated to go into work and leave him; he covered for this by making Blair clean up the breakfast dishes. He showered, dressed, and left in the usual way, without a kiss. By the time he reached the lobby of the building, three floors down, he could hear the light, unmusical thump of chick rock in the loft. He smiled. The kid was all right.
Meditated this morning after Jim left. Had Iris on the brain, but also kept thinking of Borneo and thinking back over the past year. An entire year of my life went by in a flash, and I could have spent it somewhere else, enhancing my career. Instead I stayed here, and at times I feel like I'm running in place on the academic treadmill. Running in place on every treadmill, including the Jim treadmill. Meditation accomplishes only so much. I'm not sure that I ever reach a point of being particularly mindful or empty of regret. Of course, it didn't help today that my ass hurt.

Iris called me around noon. They gave her a phone call from the jail and she wanted me to bring her cigarettes and junk food. Chips Ahoy cookies, actually. I asked her how she'd gotten my phone number and she said she'd memorized it. What a waste of brain cells. I did talk to her for a while, then began to get that creepy back-of-the-neck feeling as I listened to her gab on about her problems, and flirt and wheedle. Like, what if she fixates on me. Sends me letters from the pen. Then, five to ten years from now, she comes back and wants revenge and kills my bunny. Or whatever. I asked her not to call me again, and didn't go to the jail. So much for my plans to be a positive influence. I'm such a chickenshit. I wonder if I should tell Jim.

I can't believe he ran her rap sheet. What a dick. But I've never had a friend like that, someone who really worries and checks up on me. And all the other stuff. I keep thinking I should realize something with him, something bigger than this sentinel thing; that there's something more to him than the collection of data and anecdotes I've reduced him to in my notes. I mean. . .what do I mean. He's a friend, he's a good man. I love the way his dick feels inside me. And that he lets me make demands of him and answers them. Not many guys would spank you, just because you asked. Or if they did, it would be some kinky thing to them.

It's this shaman thing. I haven't yet accepted that Incacha bestowed any mystical phlegm on me, that I'm now supposed to become some kind of ayahuasquero and blow magical darts into Jim's head every time he zones. I mean, that's great when you're in the middle of the rainforest and stoned out of your gourd on a regular basis, but it's not as if I can hunker down on the asphalt in downtown Cascade, drink down a mouthful, and then wait twenty minutes to bring Jim out of a zone. If my own methods didn't work, I'd consider it, but he seems to tune into me okay.

But that's all just an excuse. The truth is, I'm afraid to go there. The same part of me that wants to dive deep, to find out how far down it all goes, fears it. How do you go deep when you live on the transient surface of the world the way we do here in Western Civ? Some days I think how great it would be to give up the rat race, the diss, the earned income, and be this simpler man who dwells in the moment, climbing the vine of souls down into comprehension, vomiting and shitting and purging all the uncleanness from my body, chanting magical icaros until I saw visions. Why should Jim get all the fun trance states, if I'm supposed to be his shaman? And it's kind of an attractive prospect, taking on that role for him, the idea of being an integral member of a tribe of two, cultivating a relationship in which Jim needs me, really needs me, as his spiritual advisor, his personal Jesus.

If I did let go, my obvious fear is that I could persuade myself to give up school and become this brain-burned groupie who did nothing more than follow Jim around and drag him down into a flaky mystical underworld of my own devising. Speaking to the spirits, to the dead. Here's this guy I seduced into buddyfucking, and convinced to spank me; how hard would it be to turn him further from the mainstream? I tell myself he's this dominant, authoritative force in my life, unchangeable as the weather, and I pretend this because I don't want to believe the observer is the primary influence in his subject's life.

And my subject's life is already one screwy mess after another. Now he's got me adding to his problems, not to mention his caseload. Criminals. Dangerous chicks. Guns and drugs. When did I become such a trouble magnet? Should I give up women altogether?
Nah, that's crazy talk.

I look back over what I've written, and keep thinking: there should be a realization. A man gets passed on the way of the shaman, what does he do. He wakes up the next day, eats breakfast. He goes to school, comes home, sleeps. He meets a femme fatale, gets kidnapped, arrested. What does he do. Sleeps, writes, meditates, listens to P. J. Harvey, has a beer. There should be more. More to me than this.

More to Jim, more to me. More to Jim and me.

Sometimes I just don't know.

But I guess I'm thinking about it.

End.

Notes:

This is pretty much the result of a self-imposed challenge to write a good domestic discipline story, or, maybe another way of looking at it, to write a good story that integrated domestic discipline. I worked on this goal with certain guidelines: to make it as in character as possible; to build it around canon; to have some degree of humor; and to make the relationship more or less healthy instead of wrong. (At least, not to write with a premise that they're trying to "escape its trap" etc.) The discipline would be consensual and non-sexual, and adhere to scenarios typical of the genre, but not to its emotional dynamics, which for me have always been the biggest turn-off.

I think I failed in that goal; this is far tamer than what I originally envisioned. However, the betas seem to feel that this is a good thing. ~g~

I don't usually write author's notes about why I wrote. But for this story, I'll say: I was writing originally because the challenges interested me: the challenge of working in a despised genre, of working a J/B relationship into an ep where there's an obvious female interest, and of writing around a script for an episode that has never held much interest for me, except in that it's canon. As I wrote, this became a weird, hybrid beast of a story and maybe not what I'd hoped, but at least it's done. Always a relief.

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