Glendale Gumshoe and the CH*EAP VI*A*GRA

REGINA MARLER

THREE BARTENDERS ON DUTY that Saturday and Len Plosner found himself, once again, bellying up to AWOL's work station. Rumor had it that AWOL earned his nom de guerre by getting lost in Bangkok on his twelve-hour leave and becoming the kept boy of a Laotian madam famed for supplying the insect fetish market, but the only confirmation ever offered was a cruelly short pull on the tap if you asked about it.

"You owe me a drink," Len said.

AWOL speared him with a gaze that had witnessed untold tortures. "You got a job."

Len swept his hand toward the high-end bourbons and would say no more. He'd made a mistake in telling his brothers about the job, though their earlier refusal to let him into their lawn care business had exiled him to a sere wilderness of temp agencies, online ads, and bogus job fairs in church halls.

"The old ladies don't like a new face," Huey had told him.

Sam nodded. "They only dig us cause we're the last hablo inglese gardeners in La Jolla."

"And when these lilies fade, we're in the crapper. Like Uncle Evan used to say when some old biddy died, 'There goes a customer for canned beets.'"

Uncle Evan, who made puzzles out of copper wire behind the counter of his corner grocery store, lost visiting privileges for a summer after he brought the

Plosner kids a nursing cat and her litter of six, a gift that entered family legend and boosted the ever-renewing currency of derogation that kept the Plosners tight: You aren't worth a box of cats.

The Plosner Putdown, once installed in each child's psyche, was a self-maintaining internal corrosion engine, as ready to undermine self-esteem and fleeting stabs at independence as to root out bullshit and complacency. The secret weapon of every surviving Plosner, it could be deployed at oneself or one's siblings, both in the present and retroactively. Avoidance thereof was what goaded Len to drag himself out of bed every morning, pick his crushed empties off the floor, and sniff the pits of yesterday's shirt. So it was that two months after his tour of duty in Afghanistan ended—and in defiance of the worst economic conditions since the Great Depression—Len Plosner, PFC, landed work clearing crack houses in Ocean Beach, San Diego.

Fits of laughter met his announcement over dinner at his sister Georgia's house. He'd had been sleeping on Georgia's screened-in back porch since his discharge. In the battle for Len's self-respect, transportation trumped housing, so his last military paycheck had gone to the down payment on his truck, "pre-owned," he belatedly realized, by a heavy smoker with a kimchi habit. To drive was to cycle vertiginously between nausea and hunger.

When the laughter died, Sam shuffled out to his car and returned with his second-best Glock.

"No, no, man. I don't need that," Len said.

"The lady doth protest too much," said Huey. "How you gonna protect yourself? Or didja figure you'd just reason with the junkies."

"Gonna lure 'em out, are you, Lennie? Like the Pied Piper."

"He's got a pipe, all right. A crack pipe."

"Gonna fit right in!"

"Jarhead, meet Crackhead. Crackhead, Jarhead."

Sam slapped his belly and lowered his sweating bulldog face to Len's, his jowls aquiver. He always looked as if he'd just staggered out of the steam room with chest pain. "My wife? Yes," he said. "My dog? Maybe. My gut? Never."

Before leaving the house, Len shaved off his Marine-detox goatee and filled a Thermos mug with iced coffee.

"You the man," Georgia said, lighting her first cigarette from the gas burner.

"Check out my boots."

"Yeah. Those some junkie-stomping boots."

"Got 'em from a yard sale. Steel toe."

"Next door, huh? Janie's yard sale."

"Yeah."

"Janie, Janie. You dream of Janie."

Len stifled his comeback and let the screen door slam behind him. He figured he'd take the 163 to the 8 and head south on Sunset Cliffs. It was warm already. Hot, even. Garlic molecules drifted loose from the cloth seats in search of his hair and clothes. He opened the window, offering the gift of Jay-Z to the passing landscapers and fruit trucks. Now he could smell the ocean. And tacos. And early death. Even in high school, he'd known not to drive to the end of Voltaire Street after dark.

He double-checked the address and slowed in front of a fire-blackened bungalow. No surprises here. Someone had spray-painted a frowny face on the plywood over the front window. Engine idling, he assessed the neighborhood. Three matchbox houses with plain gravel yards or evenly parched grass—probably owned by retirees—and the rest trembling on the cystic lip of hell. Cars on blocks. Shredded porch awnings. Low dividing walls subsiding into rubble. In this company, the crack house was not so much an eyesore as a clubhouse and community youth center.

Ocean Beach had a reputation for hippies and beach bums, but this was ghetto. They called it the War Zone. Something about the surfers dragged it down. They didn't cause most of the trouble but their attention was so narrowly focused on their drug of choice that the forces of entropy dug in around them like fleas in old carpet. You didn't see surfers repainting their patios or brushing up their Spanish with a course from the branch library. Those things just got in the way of surfing.

By "drug" he had meant the waves, the dopamine lull of those hours in the surf zone, waiting for the hint of swell, but there was no disconnecting pot from surfing. Where there were surfers, there was Mary Jane, and it had ever been thus. Down at the pier, hippies hustled their hydroponic homegrown, but most of the supply was cheap Mexican border weed, the soft green tips of the voracious drug trade that kept the crack cabaña open for business.

"Flush 'em out, Sonny, then flush 'em again." Such were the detailed instructions from his employer, whose investment properties had slipped in the last

year from foreclosures and what might reasonably be called fixer-uppers to rat nests and invitations to arson. Driving to the job interview, Len had pictured a retired lawyer in a wheelchair turning from his carved fireplace to lay battle-hardened eyes on his next lackey, but his employer met him out front of a 70s-built split-level ranch house and gave him The Talk in a strip of shade under the eaves while a load of clothes churned in a dryer off the carport, buffeting the air with fabric softener. He had the build of a former athlete—big muscles surmounted by a high, firm, jelly mound of abdominal fat—and the brick red perma-tan of the lifelong westerner.

"Consider yourself the Bug Man. Keep spraying until their legs stop twitching. May St. Jude help and preserve you," he said, passing Len the first address on a rip of newsprint. "If you get arrested, I don't know you."

Making his way over the dead grass and pizza flyers to the back of the bungalow, Len finalized his strategy. He would bang on the walls and wait for the panicked exodus. Some would fly his direction. These were gifts. Whatever he did to these numbskulls they'd talk about later. By the third telling, he'd have morphed into a gang of trench-coated neo-Nazi ninjas wielding flying stars and flamethrowers. A good kick to the knee and he could probably disable one, maybe break a bone. If he got close enough to engage a headlock, he could apply slow, controlled pressure to the carotid, maybe loosen a few teeth. This was a great position for impromptu interrogations, but it wouldn't work if there were more than one of them, in which case he'd knock out the first with a throat punch and uppercut combo, then repel the others with a pulsating field of hardcore Marine chi, sending them choking and retching into the bushes.

Back here, between the houses, under the shade of the neighbor's fruit trees, the rye grass grew taller and greener. He took in the dropped temperature, the microclimate of hidden places—the kind of place he would have built a fort as a kid, or, more likely, waited until Huey and Sam got bored, then moved into their fort. Still, the path through the grass was worn flat. Junkie HQ ahead. He couldn't see his enemies but he could smell them—the grassy sweetness of the side yard complicated with hints of excreta and heat-warped plastic, an unwholesome over-aroma like the sweat residue of a chemo patient.

Something crunched underfoot. Len flew back and covered his head. When he uncoiled, he saw the crushed cardboard carcass of a Happy Meal still clinging to his boot sole.

Easy, buddy.

He side-stepped a seatless armchair, clearly a toilet now, complete with a roll of paper stuck on a nearby branch, and a row of trash bags dragged out of the neighbors' bins and left open for a free-for-all. At the corner, he put his back to the wall and steadied his breath. This felt no different from door-to-door checks on patrol in Marjah, except that he was alone now, unarmed, and without helmet or body armor.

As he lifted his fist, he realized the wall was slump block. This wouldn't make a BOOM BOOM BOOM but a muted, geriatric thip, thip—not enough to wake a baby, let alone send a tsunami of shorts-filling terror through a room of nodded-out junkies. Before he could second-guess himself, Len wheeled into the backyard, karate hands blazing. A roundhouse to the air—ehy! toh!—and he landed in a low, wide stance, eyes like sweeping lasers, ready for the onslaught.

Bare dirt. Weeds at the perimeter. Stripped bike frame.

Yard clear.

He advanced to the rear entrance. The back door was long gone or he would have kicked it in with the fizzing remains of his adrenaline burst. Ear cocked, he poked his head inside. Opposition nil. Place was a dump inside and out. It needed a backhoe. Len picked his way across the fouled linoleum of what used to be a laundry room and stood at the threshold of the former kitchen. Apparently, crack heads had a lot of time to tear out cabinets before the drugs hit. Some were scattered around and others wrenched half off the wall, their doors hanging open like cartoon clocks mid-song. One counter was stacked with squashed matchboxes and other trash from meth cooking. The latrine bouquet of the yard gave way inside to town dump with a sour note of char. Here and as far as he could see into the other rooms, the floor was a guano field of white plastic take-out bags, either stuffed with food boxes or deflated, kicked to the walls, with nothing left to them but the hope of snagging a foot.

Probably he'd just talk to them. The crack heads and tweakers. He'd just cross his arms and let them know he'd be driving by whenever he wanted, the new commandero, laying down the law. Quiet authority. As he passed through the dining room, bags whispered and shifted. Just as well there was no glass left in the windows since the heat was already brain-searing. In the living room the requisite stained mattress filled one corner. The cheap-elegant parquet floor

looked solid but the wallboard on the front side of the house was blackened and partially ripped out, showing the carbonized wood skeleton. Against one of the walls rested a stack of speaker boxes that proved to be full and ready for sale. He would have to haul these out back before he boarded up the house or someone would tear through his work tonight to retrieve them.

Calm now, he rubbed at the rippled surface of a burned post and checked his finger for soot. The sadness of the house touched him. It took Len about three minutes to vibrate in sympathy with any depressed place or person—his body a tuning fork for misery—and he remembered standing in widows' doorways, too paralyzed to speak his five Pashtu phrases or even to step aside to let the females in his unit do their cultural connections work. The same instinct for pain steered him unfailingly toward the most impossible girl at any party, the one with razor scars or a dead mother or discharge instructions from rehab dated that morning. Two a.m. would find Len huddled on some basement couch with the girl who needed a good cry, never the girl who lost her panties and had to swim bottomless. Free-floating disappointment settled on him like ash.

On the other hand, he was young and employed and in the best shape of his life. He'd adjusted to the temperature inside the little house and could have crept up the walls like a lizard, at home in the heat. And like that, he felt transported to the back seat of his dad's Plymouth Valiant in the summer before first grade, when they spent hot nights at the drive-in, the kids narcotized with milkshakes and cheese fries, his parents burning through their his-and-hers cigarette packs, competing for the first cancer diagnosis.

He thought about his neighbor, Janie, about how she would like it here. Brother, you are a wellspring of illusion. No, really. She was down with decay. First time he saw her, between the fence slats, she'd been kicking back in a deck chair in a blue bikini, orally maintaining a fast-melting ice pop. Smoking, too. One cigarette, not the whole pack. Just a single cig waiting unlit on the lawn. She had that slope-shouldered high school swimmer look and about a yard of henna'd hair stuffed into a ponytail. The next day she came out front while he was over-correcting the dent in his passenger door with Huey's suction cup dent puller—"Suck on, suck off," as Huey unhelpfully repeated in Len's head —and he learned she drove around to estate sales in that granny wagon her husband had bought her.

"Old diaries, letters, any kind of old family papers. I've got a bird watcher's log from 1911. I've got a nurse's journal, listing all the patients who expired on her shift. You look in the box of things no one thinks will sell."

She stood against the sun, hair blazing, while he squinted up at her.

"Georgia's got a diary but she hides it."

"They're dead." She smiled. "The people who wrote these. They're beyond hiding anything."

Len considered this, watching her walk to her car. Seemed to him, as an orphan, that the dead hid plenty.

An atmospheric change lifted the hairs on the back of Len's neck. This must have alerted him, because he didn't hear movement behind him and he didn't sense the swinging two by four. He pivoted anyway, in alarm, and took the impact with his right eye and cheekbone. In movies, this will knock a man out. In life, it took half a dozen follow-up punches, a street kick to the groin, and an upswung knee clapping his jaw shut to interrupt consciousness and lay Len out cold on the floor, indecorously spread-legged and bleeding at the nose and mouth.

The gate hung open but the door inside was barred. Walls curved away on either side. His guide shifted behind him, her good foot planted in the dust, her lame foot curling inward, a caged rabbit shying from the hand. Something whistled above, tearing through cloud layers. Len waited at the door until ready to accept that it wouldn't open. When he turned, he noticed that his guide was concealing a rounded belly under her ragged pullover.

The next moment, he was easing the baby out by its glistening, segmented worm end, dreading the face that would eventually appear. The gifts of revelation rapidly degraded to his standard dream fare of being chased, eluding a shape-shifting assailant, and biting into stale food to see if it was still okay to eat.

"Unholy shit, Len. Ya stick your face in a batting cage?"

"Leave him alone. He can't help it."

"God, he's got…what is that? Is that brains?"

"Just wipe it off and shut up."

This time Len dreamt that someone dumped him in the parking lot of a head shop on Newport and took off in his truck, and woke to find it was true. His face was packed in ice. One of his arms was in a sling, the other ached as if it should be, and he observed an ominous tingle in his right gonad that he would not mention to Huey and Georgia to save his life.

"You awake again, big boy? You want *The Young and The Restless* or T*en Most Extreme Dangerous Mammals*? The cable's on the fritz. Good news is you won't lose that tooth if you don't chew with it and bad news is we need to talk."

"CAN YOU HEAR US, LEN?"

He nodded. That was Huey.

"YOUR INSURANCE IS FOR SHIT."

"Len, the so-called Good Samaritan who took you to Scripps did you wrong, honey. Shoulda gone to the VA hospital. Now we gotta chase down reimbursement and hope to hell they pay."

"How bad am I?"

"You remember Madballs? Remember Slobulus?"

"He means your face is a little swollen. And, you know, that one eye isn't looking so great."

Summoning the plow strength of generations of Plosners, Len threw off the afghan tucked around him and lurched to the bathroom mirror. His purpled, stricken visage stared back at him, the white of one eye dyed red, his lips split down the center, and two classic black-eye bruises reaching for each other over the smashed bridge of his nose. When he closed his jaw, something crunched in the joint. Georgia appeared over his shoulder.

"Can you see all right?"

"Fuck."

"Got yourself a real Halloween mask, huh? Sam barfed when he saw you."

Almost always, it seemed to Len, even in the bleakest of circumstances, some element of choice remained. Choice was part of the mantle of adulthood, the anxiety you shouldered, moment to moment, to prove your fitness for greater decision-making. But there was no other choice now, having seen the wreck of his face, than to limp back to the couch. The painkillers, too, removed him from the world of discernment and selection and dumped him in early infancy, fleece-swaddled, the maternal heartbeat almost within range. He stirred only when Georgia tried to tape an improvised splint to his nose and, later

that night, when he heard a muffled rattling nearby, like a cat toy, and Georgia shouted from her bedroom, "Huey! I'm counting those pills."

When he woke again it was to a murmured conversation that seemed to come from inside him. He felt it before he heard it. They were talking about him in the kitchen, Georgia and Janie, and his name in Janie's mouth sounded sweet and dirty. She was going to nurse him, Len realized. Georgia had to leave for work, and here was the angel she'd enlisted to keep coma-watch over her partially-liquified brother. Len was thrashing his way to an upright posture, the better to exhibit his stag-like pectoral development, when the real trouble struck him.

"Hey, Georgia. Hey. I can't move my eye."

Huey always said that VA stood for Variety of Abuse. Although Len had waited three hours for the doctor—Janie, amazingly, beside him, reading obituaries on her cell phone—the exam took less than two minutes, after which he found himself strapped to a narrow white board and subjected to a whirring mechanized movement, pulling and thrusting, with his eyes clamped shut against the mystery rays. Afterward, a volunteer walked him back to the exam room, where Len and the doctor stared at the images.

"Entrapment," the doctor said, sliding away on his rolling stool and executing a little drumbeat on the counter top. "Muscle entrapment. Orbital blowout."

He jiggled on the stool and clicked his pen open and shut while he made notes.

"CT scan confirmation. Advise surgery."

"Surgery?"

The doctor had already explained that the delicate bones of the orbit were like half an eggshell with a leathery yolk resting inside it. With direct trauma, the yolk could rupture. But often, to preserve sight, the yolk remained intact while the shell behind fractured.

"Go in under the eye, shore up the orbital floor—here—where it's broken. You're in. You're out. Day surgery."

Len watched him shimmy on the stool. This was not a man he wanted near him with a blade.

"I can look to the left, see? But I can't look right. It's like a wall. An eyewall."

The doctor stared at Len's face and gave him, for several seconds, the kind of

burning, one-on-one focus that felt erotic in any context.

"Like I said, I'd love to operate on you. Prevent further sinking. But let's get real. Your vision's 20/30. The VA would regard freeing the globe as a cosmetic procedure. Ocular mobility is a privilege, not a right. Shame, though. Facially, you're already way laterally compressed, and this additional injury—well, it's hard luck, Marine."

"Laterally compressed."

"Super narrow face, buddy. Like a door shut on you."

"What was that about sinking?"

"If the bones don't come together on their own, the eye can sink. So eventually, you know, here's one eye," he pointed to Len's good eye, "and there's the other." He jabbed a spot under Len's sick eye, in the black heart of his bruise.

Slobulus.

"And they won't pay to fix that."

"Not unless combat-related." The doctor lifted a clarifying finger. "Military combat."

Three days later Len was still on the couch. Sometimes Sam and Huey checked on him between lawn jobs or Georgia cancelled a work shift to sit near him and apply her home tooth whitener in the heat-and-bite tray. Len couldn't have said which was more deranging: the prospect of one eye melting down his face, or the afternoon he'd spent with Janie, who'd driven him directly from the hospital to a cove in La Jolla and made him walk down the stairs to the beach. Being so physically near her had tipped his crush over like a bucket of red coals. Heat flared in his face.

The stairs had deposited them near a rock wall that seemed to wink with water drops. On closer inspection, these turned out to be tiny purple crabs, each guarding its cave. Janie walked ahead and shouted her life story back over her shoulder, how she'd shaken loose from her churchy parents and the once-welcomed embraces of her high school diving coach and followed the saints' names down the California coast with her guitar—San Francisco, Santa Cruz, Santa Barbara, San Diego. Her odyssey ended with an onstage tit grab at a co-op coffeehouse during their celebrated annual Folk Off.

"Jesus," Len said.

"And suddenly everything I was doing felt crazy and dangerous. Suddenly

my parents were right. Not just right but right inside my head. I'd been out, what, five weeks, and I was desperate to get back in."

She'd said "tit." He missed a lot of words after that.

"The flight of the conquered," she added. She'd been a reference librarian until six months ago, when she'd quit work at her husband's urging. "Now my job is to get pregnant. Yoga, Chinese herbs, relaxation tapes. Whatever it takes."

On weekends, she told him, her husband mixed her wheatgrass smoothies and made her watch documentaries on life in the womb. This jarred with the clanking free weights and agitated management calls Len had overheard outside until it did not jar, until it synched perfectly.

"The next step is heavy drugs. Injections. I'm kind of putting it off."

They stood watching a fishing boat with its shifting escort of gulls angling for handouts.

"You like kids?" he asked.

"They're okay."

This was enough for Len. Now he could dismiss her husband as a thimble-dick who treated his wife like a brood cow and couldn't wait to rub lanolin on her ruined teats.

They crossed the strip of sand to the rocks—Janie barefoot and Len in what he now considered the Boots of Doom—and peered into the last of the tide pools not to be overtaken by rising water. Slow day for the intertidal crowd. A few gravel-encrusted anemones dutifully latched onto his fingertip. The code of the gentleman kept him silent, along with the Plosner Cynicism Reflex, which shot down every free movement of the heart or spirit. Before today, Janie had been beautiful like other beauties, like women in music videos. Now she was the only woman ever, her laugh like a crossbow shot. He wanted to drop to the sand and let her crunch him underfoot. Air spun around them while she pulled a strand of blown hair out of her mouth, oblivious. This was the slow dance, seventh grade. Pure pain. He was trembling so hard that his teeth chattered.

Soon Len was asleep for longer each day than he was awake. This place felt familiar. Not like home but like a guest room always ready for him. Push open the door, flip a switch, and he was there, deep in the dark blue. He couldn't drive, he couldn't work, and since his calls to his boss reached an endless ring, he stopped calling. Then came a piercing light.

"Pooper!"

"Don't call him that. He hates that."

"Get up and piss! Road trip!"

Several hands hustled Len into his tracksuit and out to the car in a bleary pre-dawn.

"Am I my brother's keeper? Sure shittin' I am. I promised our sainted mother I'd take care of you."

"You're hurting me."

"You're fat in your biceps. Did you know that?"

If there were any evidence that Huey loved his little brother, it was this: they took the Corvair to Tijuana. 1963 with factory turbo, aquamarine paint, and original white vinyl upholstery, the Corvair was a sexy secretary's car, a death trap with a rear engine begging to burst into flames and a swing-arm rear suspension that made every hard turn a game of Russian roulette. Georgia kept fiddling with the dashboard buttons until Huey let her smoke—windows down, arm out the window—and the smell of their childhoods blew through them.

"Christ, it all comes back."

"You mean the oxygen tank, Sam? How about the little ceramic sheep planter Dad used to spit his black guts into?"

"Lambie!" Georgia slapped her leg. "I forgot about Lambie."

"How could you forget? You had to wash that thing."

"Aw. Whatever happened to Lambie? Oh, that's right." Georgia turned slowly to look at Len and fell into her movie horror voice. "They called him The Hammer."

So they were going to dig up shit. Trap him in the backseat, half-blind, and rub his face in his one episode of crazy.

"Night of the funeral, yeah," Huey reminisced, scratching his plucked-chicken neck. "Everyone's piling on ham salad and Jell-O and Len's in Dad's room ripping through the paneling with a ball peen hammer. What didn't you break that night? Hardcore, little man."

Sam sniffed. "I torched his La-Z-Boy."

"And I broke Momma's watch."

"Shut up, Georgia. That was an accident."

Len lowered his head until his bad eye throbbed. They drove south in silence as the 805 merged with the 5 and Huey steered them magisterially into a border-crossing lane.

Although there were sections of the city that looked like Reno or the wistful outskirts of the Sunset Strip, Huey turned down a side street that led back to the dusty ol' Tijuana of their childhood memories, a confusion of big hats, ponchos, piñatas, folk art masks, guitars, terracotta tiles, and hand-blown glasses with cobalt blue rims, through which, if you held them to the light like telescopes, the atmosphere of menace in the town took sudden, fantastic shape, a swirl of what looked like distortion but was truth. Beyond the *zona turistica* were furniture and pottery workshops, the industrial engines of the border town, and finally, on an empty street far from the promise of gringo dollars, a strip of shops ending in some kind of clinic with a locked door and no patients. Len studied the unwashed tile façade, circa 1940, and felt the rock in his gut sink another inch. After Huey called on his cell phone, a bearded man in a lab coat and a white turban opened the door from inside and hurried them in.

Once, Len had been made to jump out of a helicopter. All he could remember was waiting his turn by the open door, wind howling around him. The same lockjaw terror seized him as the doctor led them past a waiting room, up a flight of stairs, and into a box-lined storage room colonized by an improbable suite of high-backed dining room chairs.

"No windows."

The Plosners looked around.

"I say 'no windows' because I have blocked the windows. Do not unblock them. Don't smoke. Don't go downstairs. Be very quiet."

He turned to Len and stared hard at the evil eye.

"I'm Dr. Singh."

"Wow," Len said.

"Come with me."

The doctor reached for an envelope from Huey, then held the door for Len. Around a corner were a row of new-looking double doors, not white-painted, as Len thought at first, but coated in primer. Nothing felt permanent or committed. The whole operation could be hustled into a panel truck overnight and taken—where? Where could you run when Tijuana was not far enough?

"Shoes off, young man." The doctor indicated a basket in the corridor. "I have

your records. You'll save a lot of money here. I've custom-made your implant. Don't touch it."

In a plastic tray on the exam room counter sat an oval disc, dull yellow and concave, like a space alien's contact lens. Before he could look closer, Len found himself shirtless on a gurney being wheeled into a white-draped room.

"Almost sterile," the doctor called over from his scrubbing sink. Lights began to change and swivel overhead and Len felt his bowels jerk awake as the alcohol swab hit his arm. The last thing he heard was: "Right eye, young man? Right eye?"

"Sure beats hearing 'a little for you, a little for me!'"

The ruthless love of the Plosners gusted around the card table. With the loss of his job and the restoration of his facial integrity, Len had achieved a psychic balance that permitted him to sip his pale ale and look gently on the ass hats who'd hired an addict to perform his eye surgery. Sam and Huey had boarded up the crack house for him and collected his hundred bucks. They had even sold his truck, found stripped to the frame behind a barbecue joint in El Centro. Now it only remained to secure the affections of his Juliet, who was sitting in the living room with Georgia, the family archivist, installing some kind of photo software on his laptop.

"Mother of God. Let's keep all the diaper shots together."

"You want a file called—"

"Diaper Shots."

Janie typed, Lionel Ritchie passed the mic to Diana Ross, and the mingled scent of night, beer, and second-hand smoke loosened their hold on time. It could have been 1989. Their parents could still be alive. Catching Len adrift in emotion, his hand slack and his hole cards showing, Huey leaned in.

"You're not the only one here, brother, to have loved hopelessly from afar."

Len thought for a minute. "Coach Richards?"

Huey punched his chest. Suddenly, Len remembered a blonde from high school with a crooked tooth.

"Shit—you don't mean Maureen?"

"That's Sister John of the Cross to you."

Most of the time, Janie slumped against the couch cushions, dazed, Len assumed, by the suburban beauties of the Plosner past, the undifferentiated series

of holiday turkeys. Sometimes she bent forward over his keyboard, a positional miracle that permitted Len a breathtaking if morally suspect side view through the V-neck of her crocheted sweater to her black bra strap.

"Anyone know a barber?" He jumped up for another beer. "I need a civilian cut."

Huey sniggered. "Don't ask Sam. He's so bald even his mustache is a comb-over."

During the slap fight that ensued, the duet ended and the room drained of romance like a Harley after a spike strip. As usual, Len walked out with Janie that night and watched from his porch while she crossed the yard. There was a moment at the property line where it went dark, between the reach of their two porch lights, and though he knew she was safe, he loved to study her in that darkness, to find her there, where her edges dissolved and he could follow her into herself, a grey wisp trailing her being. Nothing he saw or sensed in her then was undesirable—no anger or sadness, no detachment, no kernel of resistance—nothing beyond the reach of his protection and his love.

Around one, when his siblings had left or gone to bed, Len opened his laptop and saw that the new photo application had been shut down. His e-mail program was open, though, and the most recent inbox message, sent earlier that evening, filled the screen: CH*EAP VI*A*GRA, it began, promising granite firmness, offering before and after photos of a pants-dropped weightlifter, and closing with a string of random phrases suggesting past purchases, the better to elude his spam filter and ensure he would blow out his brains by morning.

When he woke up alive, he lay there remembering Janie as if she had moved away. Trouble, he knew. She had trouble and she was trouble and all his particles aligned for lift-off when he thought of her. He pulled on his robe and began collecting the scanner and other things she had left. If he could have some kind of contact this morning, top up his tank, he could coast through the weekend.

The first person he saw outside was the old lady no one knew about. All the neighbors wondered when she left the house. She rode past on a bicycle, her pink-rinsed hair lifting off her forehead and her arm flaps catching the wind. Len stopped and watched her, stricken with the small miracles of early waking, then bent to place his box on Janie's doorstep. The door swung open and Janie's husband stood behind the screen.

"What's that?"

Somewhere existed words to answer him but, sensing danger, they'd fled. Janie's husband shoved open his screen door to take in the whole picture: Len's box, Len's boots, Len's face that broadcast thwarted desire like the eyewitness announcer of the Hindenburg disaster.

Too late to step back. Spinning—reduced to a twist of limp humanity slicing the air—Len saw a grey-green smear of house, shrub, lawn, and concrete accelerating toward him, each with their separate damning message. Yet he had also seen and taken in, at last, the fat gold band on the fist flying toward his eye.