

# FRAGILE

CHRIS KATSAROPOULOS

LUMINIS BOOKS

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Readers and reviewers love *Fragile*:

“When your own life is shattered, sometimes the pieces needed to repair them lie in the broken lives of others. *Fragile* tells the story of three individuals who face their life-long celibacy, their loveless marriages, and their own self-loathing. An elderly virgin yearns for her lost lover, the lost lover faces the passionless life he chose, and a mother bottomed out on her luck wonders what drove her to try to end her own life. Poignant and thought-provoking, *Fragile* is a fine piece of fiction to add to any collection.”

--*Midwest Book Review*

“In *Fragile*, his first novel, Katsaropoulos has written an experimental book that, like its title, is fragile. This is a book of fragments that, not unlike the encounters we all face in life—moments that seem coincidental and unimportant at the time but which later lead to insights and even behavior changes [that are] completely unexpected.”

“There is an element of ‘higher meaning’ in this story that makes it fascinating to finish and to contemplate the experience of reading it. For lovers of experimental literature, this book is tasty.”

-- Grady Harp, *Amazon Top 10 Reviewer*

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“*Fragile* is a fine first novel by Chris Katsaropoulos. It takes getting used to the ‘broken story’ technique as three people are introduced and then followed about in succeeding fragments. Bit by bit we come to know the main characters, Amelia, Tris, and Holly, and what happens to them through choices they make, and how they affect and are affected by others through a series of relationships that stop-start in present/past with inner monologues and outer dialogues.”

“The wonderment is how easily we are able to edge into this disjointed style, and how readily we become part of this shattered and shattering story. At the end it’s a ‘whew’ and a ‘wow’ because it was a pleasurable demanding experience.”

“When we’re thrust into a different setting mid-sentence or mid-word, it seems natural because of the circumstances. These characters are not whole—pieces of their lives are missing. Why? Perhaps what we learn is the most fragile truth about ourselves—would we, could we be these people?”

--Rita Kohn, *Nuvo Newsweekly*

“*Fragile* is a beautifully-written novel . . . the writing is uniquely refreshing. After reading *Fragile*, I found myself feeling very contemplative. Readers will enjoy *Fragile* and will find meaning in it that applies to their own lives . . . Highly recommended.”

--Paige Lovitt, *Reader Views*

“Katsaropoulos does a wonderful job of developing the characters and intertwining their stories. The tale he creates is intriguing and attention-grabbing. Unlike anything you have read before . . . !”

--Kam Aures, *Rebeccasreads.com*

“*Fragile* is like a version, in words, of Paul McCartney’s song ‘Picasso’s Last Words,’ in which the former Beatle used an unconventional, interweaving song structure to pay aural tribute to an unconventional, gifted artist.”

--*Joseph’s Reviews*

“*Fragile* is an experiential novel about what pulls us together and apart . . . Three very different people who are all struggling to feel love and be loved are all portrayed as vulnerable by Katsaropoulos . . . The stories are sad, but Katsaropoulos does a wonderful job of keeping the thread of hope alive in each of them, as though a happy ending is just around the corner. It’s a small story with a large impact.”

--Christina Lockstein, *Christy’s Book Blog*

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On the earth the broken arcs; in the heaven a perfect round.

*Robert Browning*

Or ever the silver cord be loosed, or the golden bowl be broken, or the pitcher be broken at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern. Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it.

*Ecclesiastes, 12:6 – 12:7*

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INSTEAD OF SKIPPING out to lunch for half an hour, Holly has to take a walk-in who wants a full cut and color. Holly tries to slip past the front desk and down the stairs, but the insolent girl working the desk calls her over with a smirk and points to the old woman trying to situate herself in one of the sleek, cone-shaped plastic chairs in the waiting area.

“I would’ve given her to Trent,” the girl whispers slyly, “but he has a two o’clock coming.” Then she adds what amounts to a warning. “She wants a special.”

Holly nods and wonders what she’s in for this time. Ever since she started running around with Rick Oester, the bartender at the Midtown Grill, Holly’s business has taken a nosedive. She leaves the kids with her mother and stays out late, drinking too much, smoking too much, waiting for Rick to close. Then, when it’s 2 a.m., maybe 3, they go out—or, more often, they end up at his place. The next morning, she feels like death warmed over, and the customers notice. She’s been late to her morning appointments and missed a few altogether. Now she has big one-hour, two-hour gaps in her book, and this is what she gets: Whatever leftovers wander in off the street.

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“How are *you?*” Holly says, trying to perk up her voice and hide the disappointment in her face. She extends her hand to the old woman, who has found herself trapped by the peculiar ergonomics of the tipped-up cone chair, more an offer of assistance than a greeting. The woman places her hand into Holly’s and latches on with a surprisingly forceful grip. The appendage Holly holds in her hand has a curious parchment-like feel to it, as if a small sack of bones has suddenly sprung to life and grasped the first thing that passed by. Holly’s initial reaction is to let go, but the old woman’s hand clutches at her as she tries to pull away. The cool skin of the hand is thin and papery, the round knobs of the knuckles bulging white as the woman yanks on Holly’s arm to hoist herself up.

“My foot fell asleep,” she says, gasping from the effort of raising herself. “No circulation. These chairs send all the blood to your . . .” she gasps again audibly, as Holly gives her one last tug to get her on her feet, “to your backside.”

“I guess they’re not built for—” and then she stops short, trying to come up with a kinder way to say *old people*. The only thing she can think of that doesn’t sound offensive is “senior citizens,” but the words feel awkward and mean as they come out of her mouth. The woman glances at Holly and lets go of her hand. “I’m Holly, by the way. We’re heading over here,” she says, striding towards the row of hair-washing sinks lined up beneath the tall picture windows on the far side of the shop. High above their heads, huge, four-spoked ceiling fans slowly churn the air. The heels of Holly’s beige pumps click with a solemn purpose on the hardwood floors, adding a staccato beat

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to the undulating whine of Trent's blow drier as he waves it over the head of his one-thirty. The fronds of the large potted plants quiver from the currents of air circulating around the shop. Holly points to an open basin and watches the woman carefully lower her head into it, resting the base of her skull against the dip where the neck goes.

Holly steps to the back of the basin, looking at the woman's tired upside down face from a great height. From this vantage point, the normal geometry of the face is inverted, giving Holly precisely what she wants—the true picture of what she has to work with, the hair separate from the nose, the mouth, the eyes; an entity unto itself. She makes a quick assessment before the wash: faded blond tinged by gray, a respectable cut with layers feathering back over the ears, collar length—maybe a bit too long for a woman this old. How old is she really? Holly wonders. It's not the kind of question she can ask directly, and that's the problem with picking up these strays off the street. With her regulars, she can work with a known quantity, rejoin the conversation in mid-beat from the previous appointment—“How are the kids? Oh, a new dog? What kind? How sweet.” There's more effort with a walk-in, finding out what they like and don't like in their cut, making small talk about the weather. Long periods of silence such as this.

“So,” Holly says, staring into the upside down eyes of the old woman, “what are we doing here today?”

“My name's Amelia,” the old lady says. “I had trouble finding this place, upstairs and all. One of my dear friends said you could help.”

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A referral—it's been a while since she's had one of those. As she's been losing her stockpile of regulars, she's also been losing the people they recommend her to. She reaches down and touches the woman's hair lightly, getting a feel for it before she washes.

“Really?” Holly says. “What's your friend's name?”

“Dolores,” the old woman says. “Dolores King.”

Holly sifts through a list of names, faces, customers she has or once had, even friends of customers, and finds that the name means nothing to her. Then she realizes: Dolores King didn't refer Amelia to Holly. The girl at the desk said she would have given her to Trent.

“Dolores told me this place has the best beauticians in town.” Holly nearly laughs to hear her use such an old-fashioned word. “About a year ago, the lady who used to do my hair—did it for more than twenty years—passed away. Since then, I've tried a lot of places, but no one can get it right. The color is off somehow, the length of the bangs is never right. Then I tell them it's wrong and they look at me like I'm some kind of crazy old coot.”

Amelia glances up at Holly with a kind of stern defiance, as if to rebuke all the other haircutters who have given her poor cuts. Holly touches her hair again, gently lifting it away from the compartment of the sink and letting it fall strand by strand. She still has plenty to work with, not thinning like she sees in many women Amelia's age. Lots of hair, but very fine, like the angel hair in the hollow center of the ornament they used to cautiously place on the top bough of the Christmas tree when

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she was a child. The light catches each filament as they fall away from her hand: silver, white, gray, gold. No roots, not a trace of auburn or black. Clearly, there's been some coloring, but it's hard to tell how much.

"Oh, you're not crazy," Holly says. "You just want what you want."

"Can you help me? I'm looking for something . . . special. My fiftieth high school reunion is tomorrow night."

"And you want to look great. Let's wash up here, and you can tell me all about it."

Holly starts the water from the jet nozzle at the end of the hose and adjusts the temperature to warm the water. Then she soaks Amelia's hair, transforming it from a fine halo of golden gray into a limp solid mass that hangs from her head, dark and slick. She spurts a glob of fragrant shampoo into her palm and plies it onto Amelia's glimmering head, massaging the scalp, working her fingers into the hair. In all the years she's been cutting hair for a living, Holly has never tired of this part of the job. Weaving her fingers into the heavy, wet hair of her customer, she lowers her voice and murmurs a reassurance that everything will be okay, she will take care of her. She can feel the tension ease out of this woman as her eyes close and she slumps lower in the reclining black leather chair. Once again in this second-story shop high above ground, the inexorable force of gravity pulls Amelia's body towards the earth. Holly's fingertips press into the contours of Amelia's skull, massaging the scalp, exploring the interlocking bones of the crown. She works her way around to the sides of the head, probing the soft

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areas around the temples. In the hidden pockets behind each ear, a knob of bone protrudes and there are paired clefts, indentations where the plastic earpieces of Amelia's glasses have worn their way into the soft bone over the decades, two groovelike canyons. Our bodies are surprisingly pliant, conforming themselves to the forces that mold us day by day, year after year. Holly's hand

wends its way across the top of my head, pressing hard, now doing something with the water, squirting another glob of shampoo or maybe conditioner. This time it smells like cocoanuts, like a tropical drink with chemicals from a perm someone else is getting mixed in, tingling at the top of my head and down my back. It hurts where this hard sink presses into my neck. If she doesn't stop soon, I will have to tell her, but it feels so good where she massages that I don't want it to be over. I'd come back to this woman again just to have her wash my hair this way, but I doubt if she can cut it as well as Claire used to. No one else has been able to, why should she? Dolores says this shop is the best, so maybe this Holly will be as good as Claire was, but will you ever see me Tris? We could meet at the show, at the five o'clock show like we used to, or I could see you at the lunch counter at Haag's and have a soda, you know there's no point in avoiding me any longer. We could be together again, the way it was before. We could see each other every day, but you have to come now.

They say they're going to tear the Lyceum down, Tris. It's not a big hotel and theater anymore, now a boarding house for old people like us. They say they're going to knock it down with

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a big wrecking ball, crumbling to a pile of dust, the whole wonderful thing falling into itself, all the beautiful carpets and the walls inside, the pastel walls cracking into a pile of dust and rubble. They're going to knock it all down and then the phone is ringing, playing a tune. Her hands went away, digging in her pocket. "Hang on a sec," the phone is playing a tune.

The fan twirls up by the ceiling, and it's cold in here with my hair wet. The frond of the potted plant waves at me, "No Mom, I can't tell him to forget it . . . That's fine, if you insist on screwing up my life again, you've done it so many times before. Well, how can I ever repay you for that?. . . No, you go ahead. I'll find someone else to watch them." She clicks the phone shut and twirls around behind me, her face high up, her chin, and the dark holes of her nose release a heavy sigh. She stares ahead at the empty space above me not looking down, not doing anything, filled with rage. "What's the matter?"

she says, tilting her head back and peering up at Holly from the dark confines of the sink. Holly doesn't want this old woman to be here, doesn't want her prying into her problems, her battles with her mother. For an instant, the old woman in the sink has *become* her mother, the head that stares up at her is the same as the fearful, reprimanding head of her mother, a sink full of shoulds and do's and don'ts calling up to her from somewhere in the depths of her soul, telling her what she must do and berating her when she doesn't obey the commands. Though the voice that floats up to her is meant to be helpful, it fills her with dread, eats away at the thin membrane that protects the

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innermost part of her from the outside. Then, a wheel in her head turns a notch, and she knows she must answer the question.

“Nothing really,” Holly says. “Babysitter problem.” She grabs a fistful of the woman’s hair and squeezes, ringing the water out.

“You sound upset.” The whites of the old woman’s eyes rotate further back into their sockets. Trying to get a better look at Holly. “Is there any way I can help?”

You could shut up and go away, Holly thinks. She squeezes the hair tighter and imagines herself starting to pull, yanking the head down. If you pulled on the wet rope of hair hard enough, you could easily snap a person’s neck against the fulcrum created by the smooth lip of the sink. The skin on Amelia’s face looks like parchment, like the high-resolution color x-ray pictures of a mummy she saw in a news magazine recently, layers of papery parchment the color of a grocery sack bronzed with great age. The reedy lips move almost imperceptibly, the tongue still remarkably pink behind yellowed teeth and flaring gums, blowing puffs of stale breath, forming another set of words.

“If you need a babysitter,” the old woman says, “perhaps I can help you. You have kids that need watching, and I’ve got nothing but time on my hands.”

The words are so incongruous with the images flitting through Holly’s head that it takes a moment for Holly to process what she’s saying. She has never left her two girls with anyone but her mother. And as vexing as her mother can be,

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Holly feels confident that nothing bad will happen to the girls at her mother's house. Plus, leaving them there frees her to stay out all night if she wants. Her implacable need for Rick injects itself into her thinking, races through the air above their heads like the swift shadow of a jet plane on its way to the point where it will meet with the jet itself on the runway when the plane touches down.

“Well,” Holly says, calculating, getting down to business, “where do you live? I mean, I usually drop my girls off at my Mom’s house—instead of having someone come by.” The force of habit, the power of her need, frames her thinking: She wants to leave the girls at someone else’s house, as she normally does. In the instant before Amelia answers, she tries to picture where someone like Amelia would live, and the results are not good. She imagines linoleum floors and empty tins of cat food stacked on the kitchen counter. Flock wallpaper and mildewy shag carpet, tinged with the smell of mothballs. A trailer park or an old farmhouse in a cornfield outside of town.

“I’m on the number 8 bus line. East Washington. I take the 8 downtown, and the 15 over here.” Then Amelia adds, in a voice lacking any hint of embarrassment. “I don’t drive, you see.”

Amelia’s lips form themselves into a broad, unassuming smile, a pressed shallow arc that reminds Holly of pictures she has seen of FDR’s wife smiling in spite of hard times. Holly knows she must choose soon or the offer will be withdrawn, an idea whose sheer absurdity is revealed by gradual exposure to the light of day. The faces of her two girls loom before her,

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images that have been stylized in her mind's eye from dozens of photographs she has hanging on the walls of her home and mounted in art frames on the table behind this sink in the salon: Jenny and Zoe standing next to a snowman they helped her build, their faces beaming with joy; their first family portrait together, the one with their father still in it; a Polaroid of Jenny from her fourth birthday party, the father no longer there, chocolate icing smeared across her chubby cheeks. And then the shadow of Rick's need darting past, her own need racing to meet it. Holly says

“What time can you take them?” as if they are a burden to be unloaded. She twists my hair again to wring the excess water from it. Don't worry. Though I haven't even seen them, they are just as precious to me. I have taken care of children before, and Tris and I were children once together. We played in the yard behind the house in Elmer's garden, we ran behind the big swing, wrestled in the hammock.

“Whenever you need to bring them by. I can give them dinner, if you want.” We ran behind the swing and wrestled in the hammock. Tris had his arm around me and Elmer came by, Tris called out and rolled over, his weight tipped the hammock hanging between the two ends of the pole, he tipped it and fell out. She stares down at me with her eyes dazzled, glazed over by her wanting. It's okay, I want to say to her, it's okay for you to want a man. I wanted someone too. I wanted him, but he tipped and fell out. He fell and chipped his tooth, blood spilling across the grass. He fell and I wanted him even more, he fell and he

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slips the plastic card into the slot, the green light blinks above it, the door yields with a satisfying click, and he is in. The maids have turned the air conditioning down too low, as usual—all these air conditioned spaces he inhabits, airports, rental car buses, hotels, restaurants, convention centers, are chilled to a temperature that's uncomfortable without a sweater, a sports coat, or a long-sleeved shirt, as if the wonder of air conditioning is not self evident without cooling the room to sixty-five degrees. He tosses the overnight bag on the bed and tests it, dropping his weight onto the side edge and bouncing up and down a couple of times—not too bad, firm. Plenty of pillows and several different sizes. He will use some for sleeping on his back, other larger ones for sleeping on his side, propping his head up at just the right angle to avoid getting a stiff neck.

In his years of travel for work he has become a connoisseur of hotel rooms, and though he is not a snob about it, he understands there are certain things that will make the brief segment of his life he is wasting in this rented space more tolerable. He always requests a king instead of two queens, because it means the large faux mahogany or cherry cabinet that holds the television will more likely be situated directly in front of the bed for optimal viewing—again, he avoids the stiff neck because he won't have to turn his head at an awkward angle to see the screen. He always requests non-smoking. There is an iron and ironing board. Wireless internet has become a must as well, though he notes that minibars have become much less frequent denizens of these tight, temporary compartments where he spends a good portion of his life. Too much pilferage?

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The only reason he can imagine for them to eliminate the profit center that provides the \$6.00 cans of beer and \$4.00 packages of candy he used to enjoy. The obligatory small couch or chair fronted by a coffee table. The work desk and lamp, all furnishings in a comforting traditional style. The print of ducks on the wing or a bland, non-threatening landscape hanging on the otherwise blank walls.

He avoids the trendy, modern boutique hotels because they usually get something wrong in their efforts to be funky and bizarre. He drags the heavy curtains aside and opens the shades, letting the late afternoon sunlight filter in through the dust. A view of a parking lot and a city he will not even bother to explore. To him it is just another airport, another meeting. It could be Denver or Des Moines or Detroit just the same. Many years ago, in the first decade he traveled, he used to try to walk the cities he visited, to avoid being completely sedentary and to get to know the place. Now the thought of going beyond the constricted tube of airport/hotel/conference center/office space is repugnant to him. The more he sleeps and watches television, the sooner the trip will be over.

He pulls a wrinkled dress shirt out of the overnight bag and hangs it in the closet tucked behind the wall that partitions the vanity from the rest of the room and, as he sees himself doing these things, he catches himself thinking about himself in the third person again, as if he is a kind of benign, observant, godlike being or one of those tiny security cameras mounted in a corner of the room tracking the actions of this person who has entered and disturbed the muffled silence of the place—not

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a person so much as a sequence of states and events that lead smoothly from one to another to another until the ultimate and final event has occurred. In a swift instant his awareness has skipped outside itself and he has lost all sense of being a single, unique person—Mr. Holloway was the name they addressed him by at the front desk—and instead he sees himself as merely an aperture for experiencing the sensations of this world for a brief time, a tiny hole that has opened in the fabric of time and space to capture bits of light and vibration, converting electromagnetic waves into images and sounds. Why me? Why this person, here, in this room: Tristan Holloway? He feels himself rising to a great height, outside himself, the world melting away beneath him. He has left behind whatever it was that comprised his self, and the sensation is one of dizzying freedom—everything that went into making this person, Tristan Holloway, is momentarily no longer there. In its place, a vast emptiness, the aperture expanding to encompass everything outside that narrow tube that was him.

The odd sensation is gone in a second.

Tristan Holloway finds himself standing in front of the closet again, staring at his blue dress shirt hanging on the hanger where he hung it a moment ago. He takes a deep breath and feels the hole he fell up through tightening around himself again. The aperture closes to a tight little point.

He walks to the bed and picks up another dress shirt, hangs it in the closet. Then, instead of finishing unpacking, he slips off his shoes and lies down on the

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bed where Tris and I used to lie down when they made us take naps in the afternoon. We were all up here, Louise and Elmer, me and Tris, and they made us take naps, but we never slept, running around hiding and making noise, talking until one of them came up to quiet us. I could let the girls sleep here in this bed or maybe in Karl's room, the single room in back, if they have to stay all night. She wants them to stay all night, and everything's ready, they can stay all night and all the next day if she wants. I have taken care of children before, and Tris and I were children once together. He saw me, then I touched him. Now the bell is ringing, it's her ringing twice, she must be in a hurry.

"Hang on a sec!" The stairs are still narrow and steep. At the landing you can go either way, towards the front or the back, but on Elmer's side you can only go one way through the living room and she's ringing again. "Hold on!" She's not patient, young and wanting her man. The children are standing behind her, their faces hiding and cut into slats by the venetian blinds, jiggle the lock and the door opens with a catch. She steps through

the doorway and into the dank living room, not what she would consider impoverished but slightly musty somehow, the furniture must be fifty years old most of it, antiques in all likelihood. Maybe some of it is worth something, if the old lady ever had the inclination to sell. A flattened recliner floats in the middle of the room aimed at the television, flanked by a teetering oval end table draped by a lace doily stained with yellow arcs, empty cans of diet soda, and a half-eaten bag of

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corn chips. Holly envisions the hours the old lady must spend slouched in the tan nappy chair soaking up afternoon soap operas, her body sinking into the plush overstuffed fabric, slowly becoming one with it—as soft and pliable as it is. But Amelia it seems has dressed up for this occasion. Her hair is of course looking much better since this afternoon, trimmed and a better fit for her head, a long head with cheeks that have become jowly over the years, loose flesh hanging and drooping a bit as you would expect, the cheeks spotted with bright patches of rouge Amelia has applied. Her eyebrows have been tended to carefully, plucked and primed to a fine cambering line over each glimmering eye. She has on what Holly would consider to be nothing less than a pant suit constructed from acres of pastel blue synthetic fabric, a relic from the seventies or early eighties—what a woman from that prehistoric age would wear for a day at the office, clearly dragged out of the closet as a means of putting on her best for Holly and the girls.

Holly extends her hand tentatively, and for the second time this day Amelia takes it. They don't shake in the direct one-to-one grasp of two businessmen. Instead, it is more a brief holding of hands, the way women do. The grip from Amelia is taut, more full of feeling for her, but the bones are still there, still swimming it seems beneath the thin mottled skin she felt before, blue veins surging in gnarled meandering channels across the top of the hand. Holly lets go first, but she tries to convey through her touch a multiplicity of meanings: how much this help means to her, how grateful she is and also how hard it is to leave her girls here.

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“Come inside girls,” Amelia says, reaching to the bureau that crouches along the wall by the door. “I have a treat for each of you.”

Startled and enticed by the prospect of what the old lady hides in her hands, Jenny and Zoe move towards her with furtive shy steps, their heads downturned but peering at the two arms hiding something behind her broad backside.

“Pick one,” she says, challenging. “Go ahead.” Jenny, being the oldest, after a tick of hesitation, steps forward and points to Amelia’s left arm. It comes out from behind her and the hand opens to reveal a pale blue ball the size of a large marble, speckled with pinpricks and swirls of white, a miniature model of an earth-like planet. Jenny stares at it, not quite knowing what to do.

“Now you. You must be Zoe. The youngest.”

She nods her head almost imperceptibly and points to the other arm, as if she still has a choice in the matter. The right hand appears and releases another swirling blue marble, nearly identical to the first. Both girls are surprised by getting the same thing—they thought the act of choosing a hand meant there would be two different gifts. They look towards their mother as if to inquire whether this is all quite right. Holly smiles to reassure them.

“They’re jawbreakers, special candy,” Amelia says. “You don’t eat them—they’re too hard to chew. But if you suck on them for a long time, they change colors and taste different too.”

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Holly peeks beyond the exaggerated shoulders of Amelia's suit jacket towards the dining room.

"Is there a phone . . . I can use?"

Jenny has popped the blue ball into her mouth, her cheek bulging from the effort to contain and control it. She bites down once, testing, and her teeth crack against the unyielding rock in her mouth.

"Don't bite," Amelia says, heading for the dining room. "They'll break your teeth." She points at a beige desk phone complete with a cord and a rotary dial, almost as old as the furniture. Holly picks up the handset and begins to dial, plugging her finger in the notch for the first number and pulling it around to the dull tusk of metal that stops her. The dial tone hums and then is interrupted by a series of clicks that signifies the number going through.

It takes a while to dial this way, but it still works. Rick comes to the phone after one of the cooks tracks him down. Busy kitchen noise, people talking, pots and pans clattering in the background. His voice is strained.

"Yes," Holly says. "I think it'll be okay." She turns her back and faces away from Amelia, who has drifted towards the living room and is talking to the girls. "A nice old lady." Holly listens out of her other ear to catch what Amelia and the girls are saying. "The neighborhood? Not so great. There are Mexicans next door." But she tells him what he wants to hear. "No—it's okay. Really. I'll be there soon," knowing full well that he doesn't get off until midnight, if then.

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Holly looks around the dining room, her mind's eye scanning it as she listens to Rick complain about work, neither one of these inputs fully registering. A table and four chairs. Old as the furniture in the front room. Rick saying the bastard was supposed to come in so I don't have to close. A hulking breakfront that looks handmade—a real antique maybe—with a display of silver-framed photographs on the lower shelves. And on top of the breakfront a fine porcelain vase, more of a pitcher really, now that she looks, a vessel meant for carrying liquids, the only lovely thing she's seen in this house, the modulation of its curves evoking nothing more than the dip of a woman's waist as the line goes dead—he's

gone to school, a bright young man they all said, you'll be a famous architect Tris, designing grand buildings like the Lyceum Theater. The girls are playing with the animal cards, the game I gave them, Flinch or Pit. The oldest lays a card down and the other puts down three, they don't even know how to play. We could've had girls like this, two lovely girls, I would have given you children like when we played house together. I was always the mother and you were the father and Elmer was the child and Louise would never play, off doing something else, too grown up for us. She was always better, and we always thought she would tell

me your phone number so I can have it, just in case." In case, Holly thinks. In case something happens to the girls. Amelia writes the number with a blue pencil that says GRAIN DEALERS MUTUAL ASSURANCE along one side of it, in tiny white block

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letters. And just as Holly is gathering the nerve to take her leave, one last look at the girls before saying goodbye, she's startled by a black moth that flutters into her frame of vision and brushes against her face. She jerks her head back, flinching, as her hand comes up involuntarily trying to sweep it away. "Jesus!" she says, swiping at it again, and the moth dances away, fluttering towards the ceiling, dancing around the crenellated light fixture that holds the two bare bulbs in place.

"Must have come in with you and the girls," Amelia says. "Here, before you go. Let me show you my garden."

Holly tries to gather herself after her brush with the black moth, which flutters and dips its way around the light. Her heart is still racing from being startled.

"Oh," she says, not knowing what to say. She doesn't really want to see any garden. Rick is waiting for her, her need for him bearing down on them, pressing out across the miles. "Sure. I bet it's a wonderful garden."

"It is," Amelia says, holding out her hand for the girls to follow. "It certainly is."

The lots in this workingman's slum are long and narrow like the houses they contain. The sidewalks from the back doors at each side of the double angle towards each other, forming a Y, the resulting single sidewalk heading towards the garage and alley at the far end of the yard. A towering oak tree shades the Mexicans' portion of the yard, its shadow cutting across from Amelia's side where a round bed of flowers nestles underneath the thick trunk. The girls take off towards the bird bath, and

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before Holly can stop them start splashing their hands in the water held by the shallow plaster dish.

“It’s okay,” Amelia says. “I change it every day.”

There’s a bird feeder on a metal pole nearby and a long narrow flower bed flanking the fence on the Mexicans’ side, forming a river of color to separate Amelia’s domain from the ragged and trash-strewn lot of the house next door. The August evening is beginning to settle in, the insistent dry chirring of the cicadas swells to a crescendo, gathering itself then quickly dying away, the leaves of the trees swaying in the first cool breeze that signals a hint of autumn coming. Holly watches as a starling lands on the lip of the birdbath, peers at its reflection in the water for a moment, then, with a casual flip of its wings, darts away.

“The neighbors are good people, the Salgados. They let me keep my beds after Elmer passed away.” She must mean the Mexicans in the other half of the double. Amelia is walking towards the long phalanx of flowers along the far side of the yard, pointing to one of the splotches of color there. “My asters,” she says. “Just starting to come in. Early this year. Black-eyed Susans and phlox. Cone flowers and snap dragons. Lord, how I love my snap dragons.”

The girls have run to a bench-like swing that hangs from an inverted U-shaped iron pole towards the rear of the yard. Together they’re sitting in the swing and laughing, their legs pumping in rhythm at the back of the arc, kicking against the air to make the bench go higher with each tinkling chink of the loose end of the chain as it swings them up into the sky. Holly’s

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mind freezes them in a slow-motion vision captured at the top of arc, a holographic moment captured and bound up into the giant ball of emotion that rests within her, the girls' laughter and the pink and white and purple of the flowers swirled together into the knowledge that they will be safe here. Amelia will keep them safe.

"I don't know anything about gardening," Holly confesses. "Never had time for it." She gazes at the garden once more, her eyes trying to associate the names of the various flowers Amelia has just listed with the dazzling shapes and hues she sees before her. "Which ones are the snap

dragons?" she says, knowing full well which ones. She must know in her head even though her mind won't tell her, she's just talking to fill the air with words. Her mind is somewhere else, but her head already must know that the ones with the delicate curved lips reaching out over the bright tongues inside are the snaps. They were always our favorites, and Elmer's favorites too. He gave them a special place near the back porch so he could see them from the kitchen window, so they were the first thing you saw when you stepped towards the garden. Still the first thing, because I kept it all the same for you, Tris. It's all still here just as you would remember. You'd never know a day had passed since we rode in the swingset, we kicked our legs high, just the way these girls are doing. We went higher, higher, just like these girls, and we would swing

his legs off the bed after an hour and a half of watching the television sports recap and two consecutive re-

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runs of a sitcom. He hadn't intended to lie in bed so long, but he wanted to check the pennant races and then a good episode came on when he was flipping through the channels. On the desk at the far end of the room, his cell phone plays a tune that he downloaded only yesterday, a synthesized classical melody that sounds familiar to him but whose name he cannot remember, or, most likely, he never even knew. He checks the number before answering and sees that it is one of his customers, probably trying to reach him to ask about a problem they're having with the product he sold them. The digital readout on the phone says it's past 6:30—past 8:30 on the east coast—after hours as far as he's concerned, so he presses the IGNORE button and lets it roll to voice mail.

He sits for a moment at the chair by the desk and picks up one of his loafers, about to slip it on, but he decides that it's too early to go down for dinner. Within the gentle hush of the air conditioning, between the worn pile of the tan Dacron carpeting and the granulated white moonscape of the acoustic ceiling tiles, there is nothing left inside the frigid crypt-like space of this room but him and his failed ambitions. A thought invades the smooth emptiness the television has forged within his skull: *You will never make a difference.*

He will never fulfill his childhood ambitions. All those things he dreamed he would do are gone; they have been worn away by years of doing what he was told he should do, by listening to the voices that told him, one by one, over and over, to do the right thing, to tow the line and do what's expected of him.

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He takes a deep breath of the chilled air and leans his head back, staring at the ceiling. His life floats there above him like a sinuous, gently twisting tape measure, the years ticked off from one to sixty-five across the tapered, faintly glowing surface of this object he has unwittingly fashioned. It seems to have an ebb and flow to it, as if it's being nudged along by a current in a stream, and he realizes that the rightmost end of the tape is narrowing to a blurred tip that must be the future: wavering, dim and indistinct, as opposed to the bright shining surface on the other end of the spectrum, where his hopes and dreams shone like the sun.

Then, from this image of despair, a vision of an expense account dinner appears, enticing him with the prospect of a beer and a steak at the hotel restaurant. This is what his life has been reduced to now: the momentary pleasures of eating, sleeping, and ingesting pre-packaged mass entertainment. Go ahead, a voice inside him says, you deserve it. You worked hard today, traveled all the way from Spokane to wherever it is you are now. The line at the airport check-in counter was long, the line at the security checkpoint even longer. They made him take out his laptop and take off his shoes. Even subjected him to the indignities of the probing metal wand and the pat-down search after his loose change triggered the x-ray alarm. The customer he met with this morning was unconvinced—no, the model 2006ZX server doesn't have the capacity we need to manage the entire food processing plant we're bringing on line in six months, and the new model 2007YZ is at least fifty thousand over the competitor's comparable. They wouldn't listen to

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reason, didn't try to work with him as he showed them how they could make it work with a simple upgrade to the 2006ZX. He left them the specs, promised a call back tomorrow, checked the box off his to-do list, and dropped the rental car at the airport.

But some yearning remnant of that glowing bright end of the tape measure, some indistinct notion of his own immortality hidden away in a compartment deep within him makes him open his briefcase and pull out the pad of drawing paper and a mechanical pencil he bought last week at the art supply house near the university campus in the city where he lives. The blank sheet of paper feels rough in his hands as he slowly, carefully tears it from the pad. He places it on the desk and sets the pad aside, the empty white sheet staring up at him, challenging him to make the first move.

It has been at least ten years since he last attempted to draw. He reads blueprints for his job on occasion, when he's looking at plans for a plant or office park where a server he has sold is going to be installed, but they are highly technical schematics that show the details of the network cabling for large industrial factories, huge boxes of steel and pre-fab concrete slabs where grape jelly or precision electronic circuit boards or jet aircraft engines will be manufactured. He knows how to read these schematics, but the pinpoint of light that shines within him, a remnant of his earliest ideas about himself, still seeks something beyond this transactional application of his talent. The first mark on the page is the most difficult, the act of prime commitment that will introduce a definite direction to the work.

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Yet the bulk of the form he imagines has set itself before him, hovers in the near foreground, somewhere between his brow and the lamp on the desk, and takes him, by the pure act of willful envisioning, outside himself, outside the deep regrets and fears that have haunted him. The form establishes itself as two smoothly curving arcs, and that is the essential problem of perspective that must resolve itself in his mind before pencil can be put to paper: the building occupies one quadrant of the circle that is the central plaza of the small Midwestern city where he was born. He must see it from a particular vantage point and then translate that view into a certain shallowness of arc that is less than the degree you would see if the building were viewed from directly above or directly in front.

A plinking of raindrops on the windows behind the drawn shades gives him a rhythm to work to, gathers force and becomes a solid undercurrent of rushing water. Yes, he thinks, remembering. The viewpoint should be from the steps that lead down from the monument that occupies the center of the circular plaza. That is where the viewer would stand: not at the top of the steps where the tall plinth of the monument rises, but midway down so the perspective can take in the entire building, the full ninety degrees of arc, from Kendall Street all the way around to Jefferson, each end of it surmounted by a fantastic and elaborate cupola.

He closes his eyes and lets himself see it. Hovering before him in the darkness, a shallow arc, the essence of the form. His eyes open and he places pencil to paper. With one effortless sweep of his forearm he traces the line across the virginal page,

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lightly delineating the pure and uncorrupted loveliness of it. In an instant the line is finished, the page is cleaved in two. He has done it.

He stands and walks to the window. He tugs the heavy curtains aside and stares through beads of water at the lights of the cars inching their way along the street below, the headlights  
coming  
at us, careful girls, hold my hand before we cross the street. Wait now, wait until this car goes by.”

The cars parked along here make it hard to see. Where do so many cars come from? They should park in the garages by the alley, but they’re lazy and don’t want to pull all the way around back. The tinkling of the bell the vegetable man rings, he rolls his truck down the street the opposite way. It must be Friday, a broad twinkling of the bell calling us to the truck, gears grinding down to slow and pull up at the curb.

“Hold onto my hands girls, while we cross. We look both ways.”

“Evening Amelia.”

“Hello Tassie, how have you been keeping?” Out here in her bathrobe and a pair of beat up sneakers; I must look like I just came from church or a funeral. Flecks of sunlight striking her black hair, she dyes it darker than coal.

“Who you got there?”

“This is Jenny, and this one’s Zoe. Babysitting for a good friend of mine.”

The Mexicans are out and the blacks too, all of them ambling out. If we go a little faster we can get there before it’s a

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line. Five years ago, there wasn't a single Mexican on the block. Fifteen years ago not a single black, but things must change, always things must change. Now look, it says *Fruteria Los Compadres* on the truck. The vegetable man rings the broad bell twinkling, parks it and hops around to the back.

*“Buenas noches, mi amigos y amigas. Vienes comprar mi excelentes productos del campo. Manzanas, tomates, melónes a la venta.”*

The words roll off his tongue like a song.

“What are you buying tonight, Amelia?”

Tassie cut in front, she had to get there first. The littlest one holds on tighter. All these strangers and the smells, green beans with a crisp dry smell of the dirt in the fields, and the peaches too ripe it seems. The full round smell of ripe peaches, they waited too long on those. Now the other man comes to help, Miguel is his name. I cannot speak a word, but he smiles and pointing there, there, he knows. A handful of beans in the metal scale hanging from the back of the truck, he nods and puts another handful on the scale, slides them in the bag, then the oldest girl takes the melon, not too big to carry

his portfolio  
down to the lobby and look for the restaurant on the other side of the trickling slate-backed fountain, the Atrium Lounge or some name such as that, they did a nice job with the porterhouse the last time he was here.

Even though it's a hotel restaurant, the plump blond waitress gives him a squinty look when he tells her he wants a table for one, as if what he has asked for is an impossibility. She swivels her head around, scanning the half-empty room with its

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cherry paneling and wall sconces that each generate a surprisingly dim cone of light, then brings her eyes back to him, still trying to decide whether to show him to a seat.

“Do you have a reservation?”

“Do I need one?”

“We generally recommend it,” she says, as if reading from a cue card, “especially after six.”

A familiar and unwelcome sensation crowds its way into his head, coalescing into a lingering thought: *I don't belong here*. Even though he has inhabited this earth for sixty-five years and for most of the past forty has earned a salary that places him in the top ninety-five percent of wage-earners on the planet, the feeling that he doesn't really deserve to be here still haunts him. Ever since he can remember, a persistent sense of displacement has trailed him wherever he goes, as if he is mistakenly living someone else's life. As if he should be somewhere else, doing something else.

“There are open tables,” he points out, his voice rising, defensively stating the obvious.

“I know, sir,” the waitress says, “but we have a party of thirteen coming at seven, as well as several four-tops.” She gives the word *sir* a special emphasis that manages to convey her annoyance with him.

“Well, okay then. I suppose there are other restaurants nearby.” Defeated, he turns to take his leave, though he typically tries to stay inside the hotel as much as possible on these business trips, rarely venturing outside into the nameless cities he visits. He plans his next move, the elevator ride back to

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the room to get a sports coat and an umbrella, walking in the rain in search of a decent place to eat. The waitress consults a laminated map of the restaurant's tables, then reaches a decision. With a deft slight twitch of her hand, she marks an X through one of the tables with a black magic marker.

"Here," she says, jerking her head towards the back of the room. "I can give you number three." She bolts in the direction of a large aquarium that's embedded into one of the wood-paneled walls. He thinks of the rain again and the prospect of the porterhouse he remembers from last time and follows her. The table she leads him to is off by itself, wedged into a space between the aquarium and the swinging double doors to the kitchen. She tosses one of the thick leather-bound menus onto the table in front of the chair that faces the kitchen doors, but he sits in the other chair instead, the one with a view of the murky aquarium.

"Soup of the day is seafood gumbo. My name is Maggie," she says, back on track with her pre-rehearsed script. "Leo will be your server tonight."

He settles into his chair and watches Maggie waddle away, anticipating the sharp bitterness of a cold beer. A waiter swoops around the corner and bangs his forearm into the metal door with such force that the door whipsaws three times on its hinges after he's disappeared into the kitchen. Soon, another waiter zips by, holding aloft a circular tray loaded with steaks and the humped, steaming back of a bright red lobster.

The jaunty classical tune starts chiming on Tris's cell phone. He quickly flips it open to stop the noise. The blinking message

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on the screen reveals the name and number of the caller who launched the snippet of symphony:

LAURA HOLLOWAY 415-555-9256

The brief message, a tiny electronic packet transmitted across hundreds of miles and laden with a wealth of conflicted meanings and emotions, scrolls across the screen and winks out of existence before returning again, number by number, on the left side. Tris hesitates for an instant, then presses IGNORE. Like magic, the music stops, the name goes away, at least for a while. Then, as if to demonstrate that he cannot shirk his responsibilities quite so easily, the phone chimes again. He makes a mental note to download a new ring tune—this one has proven to be quite annoying. He flips the phone open anticipating another call from Laura, an immediate response to his rebuke, but it's Hal Pope from Integrated Logistics, the customer he flicked away earlier by not answering the phone. It's past 9 p.m. on the east coast—this must really be trouble. Tris grits his teeth and presses TALK.

"Tris Holloway."

"Yes, Tris. I've been trying to reach you."

"Hal," he says with forced enthusiasm. "Kinda late out there."

"We got a major problem," Hal says, and proceeds to explain in excruciating detail the technical flaw in the mid-range server Tris sold him several months ago that has prevented it from coming on line properly and has subsequently transformed Integrated's refrigerated warehouse in New Jersey

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into a vast cavern piled high with rapidly defrosting frozen foods.

“I’m certainly aware of the ramifications,” Tris says, using the biggest, most neutral, concern-filled word he can come up with.

“This is ten million dollars of product on the line—what are you going to do about it?”

“Well Hal,” he says, mind racing through an algorithm of emergency phone calls he can place to various technical support staff at his company, “I’ll get my tech guys in touch with your facility manager within the next thirty minutes.”

“Too late! My ass is toast if you don’t have someone out here on site in the next fifteen minutes. I’ve been trying to reach you all night—why don’t you answer your goddamn phone?”

That’s a very good question, he thinks, eyes scanning the menu, wishing he had the green-bottled beer and the steak already in front of him. His eyes search the room, looking for help to come from somewhere—Leo the waiter perhaps—someone, anyone to get him out of this life of talking people into buying things that he has sullenly trudged through for the past forty-five years. Maggie the hostess is leading her large crowd of anticipated diners to their preferable spot in the center of the restaurant, the excited high notes of their laughter rising above the clink of silverware and glasses as tables are shoved together to accommodate them. A quick, furtive movement in the aquarium catches his eye: there, in the corner, something moved.

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At first glance the large dim box seems to be devoid of life, the murky water filtered with bubbles from a hidden pump, glowing with a yellowish light from a lamp that's been latched onto the top rim of the tank. In the lower corners of the tank are two complementary piles of brown that he first assumed were merely accumulated filth. This is where the movement came from. An abrupt, precise wave of a tentacle that stirs a swirl of water and registers the objects squashed into the corners of the tank as lobsters—stacked in a seething, swarming pile of legs and beaks, pincers and eye stalks and fluttering tails that curl and uncurl as one of the creatures struggles to extract itself from the slumbering mound of its brethren. Hal Pope and his warehouse of spoiling food seem very far away now. Tris's thoughts are locked on the brown speckled creature making its way across the floor of the aquarium towards the stack of lobsters on the opposite side, wondering what is going through the tiny brain of this animal, what makes it do what it's doing? Then, suddenly, a bare arm thrusts itself into the tank and reaches for the fellow who singled himself out by emerging from the pile, the hand missing once as he scrabbles away, but catching him with a second swipe, lifting the poor fellow up and out of the water, the limp, segmented carapace of his tail dripping as he's hoisted to his doom.

"Listen, Hal," Tris says, his voice coming from some other compartment of his being, the area he has come to think of as 'auto-pilot,' the part of him that sends the e-mail and checks the voice mail and files the expense report spreadsheets once a week. "I'll get my best guy on it—Teddy Kucic. You met him

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when we did the installation a few weeks ago.” And now the vague promise turns into a lie. “I’m sure I can have him reach you in no time.”

Maggie is just as busy as she said she would be. Now she’s seating a family of four at a table directly in front of him who look for all the world as if they’re here on vacation, the two small children, a boy and a girl, clutching souvenirs the parents bought them at the local museum or zoo or theme park. The father is solicitous of his wife and his two young children, making sure they have what they need—he reaches over to another table and hands the boy a roll of silverware wrapped in a linen napkin. It’s clear that this is a special occasion for the family, having steak at a fancy restaurant. Tris’s heart swells to think of the planning discussions that must have gone into this choice, the wife perhaps questioning whether it’s too much money to spend on a meal the children might not even enjoy, the father insisting that they deserve to eat at least one meal in some place other than a fast-food joint—it will expand the kids’ horizons—Tris knows, he can picture every last detail, he has been in these same situations before, two children of his own, raised and sent to college and gone now, leaving him with only memories of long-ago moments such as these. Hal’s tiny voice is saying something to Tris from very far away. Instead of listening to him, Tris watches the back of the little girl’s head as she tries to read the menu, her

hair parted very precisely down the back of her head, her mother for all the wanting must have taken the time to comb the hair out very carefully as she got the

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girls ready to come here. The part divides her head into two perfect halves, a line down the back of her head where I can see the pretty pink scalp, the pig tails braided out to either side as she bends her head down. The other one with her hair in curls that dip down over her eyes while she eats the melon.

“Go ahead girls, salt it. This is the way we eat it.” Her mother must love them very much, in spite of the wanting. When Tris went away I never had another—never had Tris in that way as a matter of fact. I kept myself whole, I saved myself for you Tris, but you never came back, you never came, and so I kept you in my heart. I kept us together in my heart, and you have always been here with me even though you are still so far away. I kept myself for you all these years, went to work after high school, Father said if you’re not going to get a man you have to get a job. Went to work at Grain Dealers Mutual for thirty-eight years, they gave me early retirement when the company was sold, and lived with Karl while he was a minister here, while he stayed here. He came back from Philadelphia and then Dennis died in the war, the Purple Heart is still on the bureau in Karl’s room. It will always be there, along with the Bible Karl left me. I have it here and read it every evening.

I never read it straight through or follow what the Sunday teacher says, I flip the book open and see what it has for me today:

*Phillip came and told Andrew. Then Andrew and Phillip together went and told Jesus. And Jesus answered them, The time has come for the Son of man to be glorified and exalted. I assure you, most solemnly I tell you, Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just*

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*one grain; never becomes more but lives by itself alone. But if it dies, it produces many others and yields a rich harvest. Any one who loves his life loses it. But anyone who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal – Whoever has no love for, no concern for, no regard for his life here on earth, but despises it, preserves his life forever and ever.*

The car rolls by slowly, big town car color of champagne, big Lincoln with its headlights on against the dusk, slowly rolling and watching, looking for something on this street. The drugs and the women are a problem now, this neighborhood used to be so nice with the tall trees lining both sides of the street and the houses set up on the hills, but now these fellows roll by in their old cars looking for something, looking for trouble.

“Come on girls.” Her pigtailed flounce in silent reply, turning to look at me, questioning, sensing the fear in my voice. “Let’s finish the melon inside.”

We go

inside through the front door tonight for a change, Holly wants to make it more of a proper date instead of sneaking into the kitchen from the service entrance at the back. She ignores the cordon of hostesses lined up at the front to stop people and take their names—the wait is typically at least an hour and a half by this time of night. Who knows what they come for? Holly has convinced herself that the food isn’t really that good, but you get less of it, so people flock here thinking it must be something special. And it has become somewhat of a scene at the large dimly lit bar in the back of the restaurant: People come here to see and be seen, to show off their cars and

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their jewelry and their facelifts and boob jobs and trophy wives and mistresses and designer T-shirts and handbags. These fads come and go, however. In six months, the same crowd of social climbers will have determined through some unseen, unspoken mutual decision that the Midtown Grill is no longer the place and some other newly named or freshly opened disco or bistro or Thai-Cuban gastropub will assume the mantle of hot spot in this prosperous, slightly-behind-the-times Midwestern city. Holly feels a pinch in her chest as she strides through the clattering din of the main dining room: She is one of them, part of the scene. Eyes lock on her as she floats her way towards the bar, taking her in, watching, calculating, assessing—is this someone I know, or someone I should know? What’s so special about her? She knows she’s being examined like a model strutting down the runway, and she does her best to hold up her end of the bargain even though she’s only a single-parent hairdresser who grew up in a farm town twenty miles away. The fullness in her chest grows until she’s back at the bar, smothered by the throng of people standing there, safe in her accustomed domain.

She scans behind the bar for Rick, but doesn’t see him.

“Hey Charlie!” she calls out, raising her voice against the competing throb of the piped-in technopop music and the mumble of the baseball game on TV. “Where’s Rick?”

Charlie gives her a welcoming smile as he slings gin into a tumbler. “Cigarette break.” He slides the G and T to a man with slicked-back hair in a business suit and without asking pops open one of the saccharine sweet malt liquor beverages that

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have become Holly's mainstay over the three weeks since she started seeing Rick and spending as many evenings as she can possibly manage here. She promised herself on the way over that she would play it a little cooler tonight with Rick, not let herself look quite so desperate to see him when she arrived, and she felt that she was all set to go through with the act, but now that she's here and he's not, she feels the need pressing down on her even more acutely, an unbearable weight that must be lifted.

Holly sips on the cool sweet liquid, like drinking the syrup they use to make Sno-cones but laced with alcohol, the benefit being that she can consume three or four of these in rapid succession to quickly get a buzz going. Rick always tries to make her do a shot, but she hates the burning feeling of the raw alcohol going down. This way is much more pleasant, like drinking your desert. The alcohol taste is almost completely hidden.

The man in the suit is looking her over, trying not to appear obvious as he stares down her shirt. She gives him a smile and turns away, peering up at the TV screen where a baseball player tugs at his crotch, waves his bat back and forth peremptorily, and spits. Still no Rick.

She really doesn't want to do this—it is counter to her plan of action for the night—but she circles around the bar with drink in hand and goes into the bright noisy whiteness of the kitchen searching for him. She finds him, standing with his tall lean back to her, his short-cropped black hair thinning on top, gazing out the open back door at the night sky beyond. His

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form is for her essentially nothing more than a template of a man: the broad shoulders, narrow waist, small bottom, and lean legs evoke a rush of all the old feelings, an aching sick need that wells up from a tight precious sanctuary within her. The thinning hair, the bald spot, is a trigger too: He is older. She needs him, has something to give him, so she can connect with him. She must make him want her. And so, without a word of warning, she silently comes up behind him and wraps her arms around him, holding on. Holding on

tight to my hand again, the youngest one is afraid as I go to the door. I shouldn't even answer it. Maybe Tassie Jensen came by again to talk, maybe Dolores or one of the Salgados, could be anyone, but that car was watching us, slowed down to take a look in our direction, inspecting as it went past. There's another series of raps on the window of the door, slow and careful and precise, determined and patient, not wanting much to intrude, just letting us know he is here. I can tell it is a man's knock, the weight of it heavier, more direct, slow, careful, and precise, letting us know he is

here by the elevators, Tris punches the button with the arrow pointing up and waits, the meal done, the twelve ounces of beef sitting heavy in his stomach, the acidic flavor of Hal Pope's anger and disappointment still settling over his palate, mingling with the aftertaste of the beer from the green bottle. The meal was essentially ruined by a series of unpleasant and disjointed phone calls to track down a technician within short driving distance of the New Jersey plant to deal with the meltdown on

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site, and now the gurgling water from the fountain that dominates the hotel lobby seems to flow through him like time passing, moments of his life trickling away, lost, never to be recaptured again.

He wonders why it's taking so long for the elevator to arrive, and his impatience makes him punch the Up button again, as if pressing the button another time will make the elevator come sooner. He stares at the brushed metal doors in front of him, willing them to open, when he sees out of the corner of his eye a woman walk up to the farthest of the four elevators and go in. This doesn't make sense—the arrow is supposed to blink off when an elevator arrives—but now he glances down at the button as he hurries to the far doors and sees that it is indeed dark. He senses that the doors will soon close on him and he'll be left behind. The feeling of running late, being slightly behind the curve, descends upon him again, a brief flutter in his chest like a bird landing on a power line. He launches himself towards the rapidly closing doors and thrusts a foot and an arm in just before they close. It seems as if the doors will clamp down on him with a crushing force, and he braces for the hit. Somehow, though, the doors stop short with a jerking clunk. The woman has put her arm in front of them just as he leaps in, triggering the automatic stop mechanism. The doors suddenly slide all the way open again, and Tris pulls himself up short, slowing down the momentum of his leap and trying to maintain a semblance of grace as he steps lightly into the dim glass box and swivels around to get a look at his savior.

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She's tall, slim, surprisingly pretty. Thick reddish brown hair straight past her shoulders, a color that makes Tris think of a fox's tail. She's wearing business clothes: form-fitting slacks and a russet-brown jacket cut above the waist. The doors stand completely ajar for a few seconds now, dumbly awaiting any further passengers who might choose to board, and Tris presses 18, the button for his floor. Tris smiles at the woman and notices that she doesn't press another button, as the doors slither shut and the floor starts to lift, the sensation of rising up making it seem for a transitory instant as if he is floating there in the box with her.

Only 18 is lit.

For several seconds the elevator passes through a gaping interval where the only view out of the three glass walls away from the doors is a black shaft of darkness, as if instead of going up he is descending deep into the earth. Instinctively, both Tris and the woman stand facing the doors at the front of the elevator, and Tris politely keeps his gaze focused on the bank of thirty or so buttons, staring at the glowing 18. Then, a sudden wash of light floods the box and both of them irresistibly turn to face the back of the elevator as it soars above the vast open space of the lobby. Having been buried in darkness, they are now rocketing up to heaven. The hotel is one of those that has been designed around an atrium—Tris can see the floors stacked one on top of the other as they swiftly rise over the fountain and the potted trees and lobby where people walking here and there dwindle to the size of ants. The woman surprises him by talking.

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“I don’t like these elevators that you can see out of. It’s such a long way to fall.”

Neither does Tris. As a matter of fact, this glass box being hoisted into the air is one of the least pleasant places he could find himself in. His claustrophobia is only slightly offset by the sense of open space that the glass walls afford, and that benefit is marred by the fact that he is also profoundly afraid of heights, but usually when he’s in a high, open place such as the corridors of this hotel. The combination of being in an enclosed place that’s also soaring up to the sky engenders a feeling of floating, drifting nausea, the dinner he just ate churning like a chunk of molten lead within him.

“I’d rather fall,” Tris says airily, “than be trapped inside here.”

“It wouldn’t be bad, if you had the right person with you.”

Tris wonders at first if he’s heard her correctly, then checks himself to see if he has not misinterpreted the meaning implied by her remark. She must be twenty years younger than him, but he has been told by many people that he looks much younger than his age. And after forty, he thinks, who cares? We’re all damaged goods, even this woman, soon to be no use to any one, not even ourselves. Tris allows himself to glance at her, and she returns his look with a smile that is dazzling, gorgeous. His first impression was correct: she is young, attractive, and flirting with him. His mind spins through the possibilities that unfurl from her smile, a businesswoman traveling for work like him, lonely, perhaps single or divorced, looking for some excitement where the opportunity presents itself. Discreetly, he

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places his left hand, the one with the ring on it, in his pocket, hoping she hasn't already noticed. Yet even in doing so, a wave of conflicting images ripples through his head—his wife's number scrolling across the phone, this woman standing naked in his hotel room, the gently twisting, glowing tape measure that haunted him earlier in the evening, the lone scabbling lobster being snatched from its tank. Tris turns away from the yawning chasm outside the glass box to face the doors again, anticipating his stop, and she turns with him.

Staring straight ahead, he catches a blurred reflection of himself from the burnished metal doors. He can make out only the faintest impression of a nose, a mouth, a shock of black hair, but no eyes; only the glinting of light from the rims of his glasses. The digital readout above the doors flashes in rhythm, 14...15...16...17, as if counting his heartbeats, then pauses an extra long moment on 17 as the lifting force decelerates, finally lurching to a stop on 18. The doors swoosh open and a bright, quiet anteroom awaits him, empty hallways to either side, no one watching, no one here to witness what is happening. An invitation to do whatever he decides.

As is customary at these hotels, the front desk for some reason has given him two keys when he checked in. Tris finds this practice vaguely annoying, because he typically keeps his room key in his wallet and he doesn't like leaving the extra key lying around where the maids or service people can get it—an irrational fear; they're already in your room if they can take it from your desk. Still, just to be safe, he always puts both keys in his wallet, the two plastic cards making it extra thick and bulky

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in his pocket. Tris allows the woman to step out of the elevator ahead of him, and as she does so, he deftly retrieves one of the room keys. Then there is a moment when she is just in front of him, as they both step into the quiet vestibule together, when he can smell her fox-colored hair only inches from his face and peer down her spine to the tight slacks that cling to the curve of her bottom.

She turns to face him, her lips parted by something she's already planning to say, but the key card he extends to her makes the word stop coming and her mouth twist into a smile. She's slightly startled by what he has done, her eyes blinking once, twice, but she doesn't hesitate—she opens her hand to accept the key. As he hands it to her, he has the impression that he is fulfilling some obligation of polite courtesy that a man must extend to a woman in this particular situation—that, having been conjoined by fate inside the same tight, enclosed space and having received the gift of the woman's flirting words and smile, he is duty-bound to invite her back to his room in order to avoid appearing rude. But even as she takes the key, Tris's mind is performing a back flip at the apex of its precipitous dive from this height of presumption. All the old rules and proscriptions, admonitions and commandments he has absorbed since his earliest days combine to form a chorus of guilt that says: *How can you do this? You have never been unfaithful to your wife. You are a good person.* In the backwash of the next heartbeat, his mind has achieved a nimble solution and his smile is tinged with self-righteous regret as he says, "I need to make a couple of phone calls, but come by in a few minutes if you'd

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like to join me for a drink. I'm in 1836," he says, completing the gesture, carrying out all his duties, knowing full well that he has given her the wrong room

number of reasons to keep this man out of the house, a stranger with these girls here. Even as the door is opening and he steps in, the smell of aftershave, cologne, a wave of bristly whiskers shorn and perfumed, a sweet sour smell of flowers dying. His face is dark, a shadow hangs upon his smile, his crooked teeth. He says "Look who's here, hello Zoe," even as the girls come closer, but still they stay away. They know him, know he is someone to make them not frightened, but only give him a shy smile. He is a remembered stranger.

"Come here girls and give me a big hug."

They go, but only Zoe goes first with short small steps. He stoops down and brings her to his chest, dressed in a pair of blue jeans and a plaid shirt, a country gentleman in for a visit, but how did he know? The bells of St. Monica sound out loud from across the block: one, two, three times, the stroke of the big iron bell, we used to run to the tower and watch it toll back and forth, its slow swinging like being in the hammock back and forth, it seemed to pause at the top of each end of the swing and hang there, slow and without effort, when you get to the top the earth will pull you back down. The big iron tongue clanging seven, eight, nine, it is nine already, the August light goes too soon. The youngest girl releases herself from him and the oldest one steps forward, leans in, and lets herself be held

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by small degrees. He reaches over and around her shoulders and pulls her close, and still she shies away.

“I came to see you girls, stopped by for a visit,” he says, arching his back to its full height again. “I brought you something from the stables. See,” he says, and hands her a rusted brown horseshoe. “I know you like horses.”

The youngest one turns away and says, “I want to go out to the swing again, can we?”

It is only just outside, only the bells have stopped tolling, and the last fragment of their sound is still sending across the houses and trees, sending its note to you, its solemn hollow note says I am still here, I will always be here with you, we will always be together. The rope was frayed at the end when you pulled it and nothing happened, too heavy, then we both jumped up and grabbed on as high as we could

fall down in a heap of writhing lust for each other right here in the damp alley behind the kitchen but that would not be right, not keeping with the plan for tonight, Holly thinks, what has happened to the plan? She was going to be in control tonight, in control of the cruel wanting need she has, but here she is with a man in her arms pressing her self against him, running her hands up his back, his broad strong back, rubbing her breasts against him. He bends to her and puts his mouth on her. His hands are on her ass, finding their way there, and she must get it under control. She says, “No, wait,” and pulls her self away from him. “Not here.”

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She can make herself wait for him, she must prove it, to herself. She will wait for him until midnight or later, until after he closes. It is a test she must not fail, she is trying to gain control of her self, to push away the latticework of her need, to crawl out from inside it.

“Isn’t there someplace we can go?” he says, his voice low, nearly a whisper. “I have a few minutes. They can handle it while I’m gone.”

Through the filminess of her dress, he latches on with two fingers to the taut elastic of her panties and drags it up her bottom, like pulling a cord that turns on the electricity to a certain finely tuned instrument. Her mind is swept by a cold blankness that clarifies her thinking. She grabs his hand and removes it from her, then leads him down the alley, damp with humid night air and the dull resonance of reverberating bass notes seeping from the bars and nightclubs. One of the clubs actually has its main entrance on the alley, a bright doorway where a cluster of young drunks staggers beneath a neon sign that flashes THE CASBAH. A bald, puffy-looking bouncer in a leather jacket calls out to them as they hurry past.

“Fifty cent pitchers and two dollar shots! No cover for the lady.”

Holly has been in the Casbah before, trolling. Now that she thinks about it, she may have met Rick there—it’s only been three weeks, but it seems like a very long time ago. She tugs on his hand to make sure he knows not to go in. There are iron bars on the windows of the buildings that back onto the alley. A scrawl of graffiti mars the wall of one of them, an illegible

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design that looks like a group of letters but might also be a pitchfork topped with a crown. There are more people here, mostly young, in their teens and twenties, packs of them crowding the sidewalk, girls outnumbering boys. Holly thinks of them as predators, searching, seeking, their laughter somehow sinister. At the light where they wait to cross the street, a huddle of girls in jeans and tube tops surrounds a woman in a white wedding dress, complete with headpiece and a long, gauzy train. The light changes and the women lurch into the busy street, laughing, as they struggle to avoid the idling cars and keep the train of the dress off the pavement.

“I think I know them,” Rick says, glancing over his shoulder. “It’s Mitzi Kluger’s bachelorette party.”

Holly doesn’t know them—doesn’t want to know them. The red door to her shop is there, ahead of them, a few feet away. She digs the keys out of her purse, fumbles for the one that opens the shop. She tries to jam it into the hole, misses in her hurry, gouging the red paint. Tries again and feels it slot in, tongues of grooved metal interlocking. Turns the key and they are inside, the echoing chamber of the stairway leading to the second-floor shop lit only by the diffuse light of the moon reflected through broad panes of glass high above them. She leads them up quickly, feels his face a few steps behind her, seeking, directly at the level of her thighs. With the moon bouncing around the many mirrored surfaces of the salon, there is enough light to make their way. She has spent so many hours of her life here, she could lead them even if there were only darkness. She takes him to her station, her sanctuary, the place

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where she performs her best work. They have screwed in the back seats of cars, against the wall of a building in the alley, in his apartment, and once on the hard dry dirt of a jogging path in a city park, but this is the best yet; leading him to her sanctuary. At first she thinks of the chair in which her customers sit to have their hair cut, then she has a better idea: The chair where she washes their hair tips all the way back.

She stands next to the sink, turns to face him.

“Wait . . . ” she says, trying it out, testing it, her mind still wanting to put it off a moment longer.

He grabs her by the wrists and pins the small of her back against the edge of the table that holds her brushes and combs, presses her down onto it, scattering the framed pictures of the girls to the floor. She struggles against him, lifts her knee into his groin and pushes him away. In the small opening this creates, she slips out from under him, yanks her arm loose, feels his fingernails claw at her skin, and even as she twirls away from him, he latches on to her

hand and leads me out past the snap dragons and the azaleas, the cone flowers and the stone dish of the bird bath, all faded pale in the new shadows of the moon, their colors dim and washed away, the whirring of the cicadas shimmering over the traffic sounds, the swish of the cars going by and the calls of the Mexicans out in the street singing their dancing words to each other. The bench of the swing holds us, her small body tucked against mine.

“Higher,” she says, “make it go higher.” We kick, kick at the back of the arc, and the wind races through our ears, *down in the*

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*valley, valley so low, we sang, bang your head over, hear the wind blow.*  
We sang this Tris, our legs kicking up higher, higher. *If you don't*  
*love me, love whom you please, throw your arms round me, give my heart*

ease

back into the chair, feeling it slide down beneath her, tilting her head back onto the smooth lip of the sink, the U-shaped channel where the neck is supposed to go, like putting her head into a type of harness. Now he has her there, wrists pinioned against the arms of the chair, he throws his weight on top of her, the bulk of his chest pressing her down. His mouth is seeking, she feels his lips against her collarbone, then further down, to the flattened exposed flesh of her right breast. He always goes for the right one first; she arches her back to meet him. In the basement office her stepfather led her, said *I have something to show you*. His secret place, his sanctuary. And he opened the drawer of his metal Sears desk, brought out a small leather-bound book. Red. Its cover was bright red with gold lettering embossed into the spine, like a holy book. Rick is pulling her blouse off now, she tilts herself up in the chair and complies, undoing the bra, she helps him, his hands fiddling with the latches, tangled up with hers. The pages he flipped through in no particular hurry, not especially eager, like a lesson in school. He was going to show her something, and she knew it was somehow not right, a vibration in the air between them, hanging there, like two dissonant notes in a chord on the piano. But she wanted so much to please him, she leaned over his shoulder and there—on the glossy slick page of the book, a photograph in black and white. He paused and they saw it

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together, without comment, he turned the next page and another photo, he said *This is what it looks like, have you ever seen it before*, as if he were telling her a story. And still she trusted

him

to be there inside the house alone with the other girl, they seem to know him, he said I brought you something from the stables, the horseshoe rusty and brown. I came to see you girls, stopped by for a visit. The youngest one turned away. She says, "Look at the moon," and it's still rising past the roof of the house, it swings up and away, then down and back towards us again. "Look at the moon." Almost full, a bright orange ball looming up in the sky, not a harvest moon yet. What do they call a full moon in August, is it a harvest moon? Up and away it swings, then down and back it approaches us, then pulls away. The feeder and birdbath are swathed in yellow light, now more golden than before. The flowers in Elmer's bed shimmer in the light. The other girl has been inside some time now, his crooked teeth and the sweet sour smell of his cologne. "Honey, let's stop now, it's getting late. We better go

inside her, he pushes himself close and her legs go wider, knocking against the hard metal arms of the chair, she feels her self locked into place beneath him, underneath him, within him, she rocks her back up to meet him. They are together now, at last, she has given her self to him, the bones at the base of her skull knocking against the hard ceramic lip of the sink, she feels as if she is pouring her self up out of this basin into him. There is nothing more she can do for him, she is giving all that she has to give

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and when he closed the red book with the startling odd pictures in it he took her hand and placed it where it wasn't supposed to be, where she never should have

left that girl inside the house with him alone, what was I thinking? I'm an old maid who has no understanding of the world, only my own little slice of it, my own little tunnel, a cave I live in, my house, my garden, and the shame of it is I have chosen this way, this enclosure, this structure I have built around myself like a framework of steel that sustains me, holds me together. My memories, my visions hold me together. I have nobody but you. The girl tries to go ahead of me, but I hold onto her hand and keep her beside me. We go up the steps, and I pull open the screen door, and the moonlight

bounces off the mirror beyond his shoulder, bounces its golden light at her as she loses her self within him, as the red book goes away for a moment it is all washed away, all the guilt and shame and anguish he bestowed upon her, all the fear wrapped up in her need to please the person who was supposed to take care of her, all wound up in a distortion like the weird tremors of light that move back and forth, back and forth from the mirror, a secret a child knows but can never say. Her head bangs hard against the ceramic lip of the sink, pounding the pain out of her, yet even so the smell of him flooding back to her mouth, smell of fish and wet hay flooding her

way through the kitchen, the dishes not done, the sauerkraut still in the can, past the door to the dining room

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where there is no sound. I am missing my shows tonight for these girls. Usually the sound of the television fills the house, keeps the darkness outside, but nothing now. The room is dark except for the rectangle of light that comes from the living room, illuminating the breakfront.

“Wait,” I say to the girl in a whisper. I put my hand out to the wall to feel it, to hold me steady. The wallpaper is smooth and cool. I tell her with the force of my other hand to stop a moment, stay behind me, then I peer my head around the doorway into the living room.

They are sitting on the couch, a book open in front of them, a book he must have brought. I have no book in there but the Bible Karl gave me, and that is not a story book or a Bible either, then it is there like an object out of place, condemned to never fit, his hand where it should not be placed in such a matter-of-fact way she sits there transfixed, her whole body pinned down by it, that awful flat hand in the one place in all the earth where it should never be, and the only thing to do is to reach for the nearest thing I can find. I let go of the girl. The closest thing is the vase, the beautiful vase, grab it by the handle and hurl it through the door across the room. It sails so fast and misses, striking the wall above his head. His head dips down automatically to protect itself, the one thing in this house that doesn't need protecting. It hits the wall and shatters, it flies into a bright star of fragments and the moment is

broken,     lying

with him on top of her still, her skull a precious vessel will be

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broken if he keeps going this way, the small compartment that holds the giant ball of her self will be

broken never one whole together

again he finds himself lying awake on the king bed with the television on, the sound turned down low, staring up at the ceiling and thinking about the woman on the elevator, the woman who offered herself to him, whom he deceived and could not offer himself to. He is safe here, always taking the safest way out, the easiest way, the cleanest way out. Yet he wonders what has happened: Did she try to come and find him? Did she go back to her room first or wait a moment in the vestibule and follow him down the corridor and see him go into his room—not the room he told her. A moment of panic which swiftly converts itself into a perverse wave of hope: Perhaps she will come by and knock on the door, any second now. Of course she will. The way she smiled at him in the elevator, *it wouldn't be bad, if you had the right person with you*. Of course she will—she wants him, loves him, in her mind in the elevator while he was still thinking about the floating lead-like feeling of the dinner in his stomach, she was entertaining images of the two of them trapped in the box together taking each other's clothes off and having sex.

Now he wants her to come to his door and knock, he wills her to. This is the kind of fantasy Tris has read about in pornographic magazines, the kind of brief set up shot they use to get the action going in the pay-per-view movies he sometimes samples as a diversion to sway himself to sleep in

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these nameless hotel rooms he inhabits. And yet, he is so pilgrimatically programmed for the straight and narrow path that he turned this lovely woman away, he knowingly denied himself the opportunity to enjoy this beautiful woman's body, and it fills him with regret.

Tris imagines what the woman is doing now—perhaps she's trying to figure out a way to find him. His only hope is that she would have tried other doors, knocking on the ones nearby the one he told her. Perhaps she's simply allowing plenty of time for him to make his calls.

Tris presses himself up off the bed and pads over to the door, looking out through the peephole. The hallway is empty, quiet. The view through the tiny opening seems to expand into a kind of rounded off perspective, the walls in one direction absurdly huge in the middle of his view and then shrinking down to a narrowing middle distance in which a few of the other doors down the hall are bent into a strange curving shape, and finally collapsing in the far distance to a kind of nothingness, an obscure edge. The view is also distorted by seeing it with only one eye, giving it a flatness that seems to compress everything towards him, depriving it of depth. His eyes blink at the effort of seeing this way, trying to maintain focus. He pulls his head back for a second, then tries again, aligning his right eye, the dominant one, to the hole, looking first left and then right down the hallway. Across the hall, an opposing door is large and almost undisturbed by the peculiar curvature that shapes the rest of the hall. Tris imagines that in some way this aperture is showing him the present moment

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straight ahead, with the past narrowing down towards the left and the future shrinking down to the right, both directions of the hallway empty and increasingly distant and unclear.

He has an idea—for a split second it seems like a good one. Maybe he can call the front desk and somehow reach her. But even as he backs away from the peephole, he realizes this is absurd. He doesn't know her name or her room number—all he knows is that she's on the eighteenth floor, and maybe even that is not true. Perhaps she just followed him to the floor he is on by not pressing another floor in the elevator. Still, he has nothing better to do. He goes to the phone and dials the hotel operator, letting it ring a long time before a man with what sounds like an Arabic accent picks up, carefully pronouncing the hotel's pretentious marketing phrase.

"It's a wonderful night at the Windsor. How may I help you?"

Tris frames the words in his head, deciding the best way to ask this, thinking, I'm trying to reach a woman on the eighteenth floor.

"Hello?" the Arab says, pinching the o sound into more of a rising oo. "How may I help you?"

Tris stays on the line a moment longer, then calmly puts the phone in its cradle without saying a word.

Back on the bed, Tris lies there, staring at the ceiling, and he knows now that the woman is not coming. Another opportunity lost. Another door not opened. And here he is, safe, secure in his cell. His mind slowly spins back to other situations such as this over the years, other women he turned

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away in favor of the confines of his marriage. He ticks them off in his head, working backwards one by one, making a list. The woman from the church Bible study group who phoned one day a year or two ago, sounding surprised to reach him, asking if she could come by to drop something off, a parcel for the outreach ministry, knowing full well he was alone and Laura was out of town, visiting her sister in Tulsa. There was the co-worker from the home office, confiding to him over drinks at a cocktail lounge in Chicago that she didn't mind being married—she loved her husband—but she missed the wild, wanton sex she used to have with strangers.

There was the neighbor long ago when he was first married, who used to flirt shamelessly with him, dropping hints every now and then that she was available if he wanted her. Tris ticks off their names in his head, a dozen or more—too many to count really—some of them nameless, like the woman tonight, nothing more than blurry memories, each of them turned away through a combination of fear and an overriding desire to stay in the right. And this brings him back to the first one, whose name he will never forget, so long ago it seems like another person's life. Fifty or sixty years ago it was. Whatever happened to Amelia?

The ceiling above his head is too low, eight feet at most, and the ceiling tiles seem to be shifting slightly, pressing down on him. The acoustic tiles are filled with thousands of little holes to absorb the sound, a dizzying random configuration like black stars in a white sky. Tris stares at these holes as they move, shift. There is something about them, one tile separated from

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the next by an aluminum strip. And then he sees it, in the first tile, directly above his head: A repetition. There is a certain pattern, a kind of pinwheel arc aligning one sequence of holes, like the arm of a galaxy, and as he lifts his head to look closer he sees it again, several inches away from the first, the same swirling pattern of holes.

He looks at other sections of the tile and he can see different alignments, different sizes and shapes of holes, and as his eye moves across the tile he recognizes other recurrences, other places where certain arrangements reappear. For an instant, it's as if he's seeing down into the sky and the wide expanse of nothingness he fell into earlier is back. The patterns are all evident—they were there all along, but his mind wasn't attuned to this level of detail. He remembers reading something in a magazine article, something that seemed strange at the time, but makes perfect sense now. The article said that a scientist in eastern Europe, a mathematician most likely or a physicist, was debunking all the recent research about chaos and randomness. This man said there is no such thing as randomness—nothing is random. There is a pattern—a design—for everything: weather, the forking of a tree's branches, the shapes of clouds, constellations of stars. It's just that the patterns are at a level of complexity our brains cannot possibly process, so we see them as random. And Tris imagines now a machine in a factory somewhere—a plant that may well be using one of his computer systems—punching a precise pattern of holes into thousands upon thousands of acoustic tiles, diligently,

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mindlessly repeating the same sequence of holes over and over again.

