

First Place Fiction Prize (tie)
~ In the 25th Consecutive NMW Awards ~

Jacob Appel
The Appraisal

“Sixty-three,” said Abbie. “It feels like only half a life.” She stood at the open window and gazed through the bars. Outside, the city pulsed in its usual frenzy.

A street merchant had spread his wares on the sidewalk in front of the school—books, records, baseball memorabilia. Across Riverside Drive, a dark-skinned nanny wheeled two light-skinned babies in a perambulator. Farther down the block, an elderly Chinese couple was shaking the branches of the ginko trees. They did this every June, collecting bucketfuls of the soft, stinking fruit. Abbie wondered what they did with the fruit, but she’d never gotten around to asking.

“They’re making progress every day,” said Bert. “All sorts of advances.”

Abbie turned to face him. “It’s funny. I can remember when anything past sixty seemed absolutely ancient.” She surveyed the bare classroom. In one corner stood the boxes of picture books and art supplies that belonged to St. Mary’s. Two smaller cartons, marked PERSONAL, would go home with her. “Did you know that when my grandmother turned eighty, she received a framed certificate from President Truman?”

“You can fight this,” said Bert. “Don’t croak on one doctor’s opinion.”

“To what end? To die like Leonard?” asked Abbie. “I won’t go through that.”

She’d married Leonard shortly after Bert divorced her. (Sometimes she quipped she’d lost one husband to another man, the other to another world.) Leonard’s final months in the chronic care facility—she called it the *gulag*—had been wretched. He’d suffered a series of small strokes. Each carried off a piece of him—as water smooths sand.

“Is there anything I can say?” asked Bert. He was sitting on her desk, his short legs dangling over the side. Much of his hair was long gone. The orange tufts at the corners of his scalp resembled giant earmuffs. “What haven’t I thought of?”

“I asked *you* that, once,” answered Abbie. “Remember?” That had been the morning he’d revealed his relationship with Wesley, an episode now almost inaccessibly remote. She crossed the room and settled beside him on the desktop. For the first time in thirty years, she took his hand in hers. “It’s too late to say anything,” she said. “I know what death’s about. And I’m not

afraid of it, not terribly. But to end up alone in a sterile white room with a handful of meager possessions—*that* scares the living shit out of me.”

Bert nodded, polishing his forehead with his fingers.

“I’ve thought everything through,” continued Abbie. “Having a tumor in your lung makes your mind work overtime.” She liked to imagine the growth as solid but delicate, like the heart of a songbird. That, of course, had been months ago—before the diagnosis, before the cancer slithered into her bones. “I haven’t led the life I wanted,” Abbie said.

“You’ve taught all these children.”

“But I didn’t change them. Not the way some teachers do.” For years she’d labored at it, but teaching wasn’t her gift. Her wit confused the children. Eventually, she’d given up trying. “It was a waste. I want my death to have meaning,” she said. “Like the heroes I teach the children about. Like Joan of Arc and Anne Hutchinson and Nathan Hale declaring, ‘I regret that I have but one life to give for me country.’”

“To raise awareness,” agreed Bert.

Abbie squeezed his hand. “In a way. Please don’t think I’m crazy, Bert, but I’m going to set myself on fire.”

Bert said nothing, at first. Abbie stared down at her toes, then across the room at the globe and the filing cabinet. Under the American flag, the oscillating fan whirled with silent grace.

“To protest the war. Like during Vietnam,” Abbie explained. “I know I’ve led a mediocre life. I’m not a fool. But what’s that quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson? *Consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds*. Well, I’m going to do something inconsistent for a change. Something *grand*. I may have lived a mediocre life—at best—but I’m not going to die a mediocre death.”

“You’re serious?”

“Dead serious,” she answered. “That’s why I called you.”

“You can’t do this,” said Bert.

“I can do this. I *will* do this. And I need your help.”

*

The idea had come to Abbie at the beauty salon.

Usually, she had her hair done around the corner. Her stylist, Vin, was a no-nonsense gay kid from the streets of Baltimore. He worked quickly. He had steady hands you could trust not to lop your ears off. Both of his grandfathers had been barbers back in Sicily. She’d always thought his shop cozy, a blend of Old Neighborhood and Old World, but now, with the claw of death reaching for her across the horizon, it struck her as drab. *So much* of her past, her present, suddenly seemed drab—as though she’d lived, unknowingly, to the wattage of a low-energy bulb. Maybe that was why, on the morning after her diagnosis, Abbie walked past Vin’s window and crossed Amsterdam Avenue to the glitzy salon that had replaced the Filipino laundromat. She’d craved change. She wanted to spend money frivolously.

All of the furniture in the new salon was black and angular. The women waiting ahead of her were half her age. Abbie sat down. She pulled *The Forsyte Saga* from her canvas bag. The book seemed excessively long. Was it worth the investment? It might be the last book she’d ever read. The girl in the next chair, a bleached blonde with an eyebrow ring, was reading *Beyond the Perfect Orgasm*. Maybe that was a better choice. Or possibly Proust. Unable to concentrate, Abbie folded shut her novel. A conversation between two of the stylists caught her attention, though several seconds elapsed as she laced together its threads.

“But would you do it?” asked the stylist nearest the window. She was a sharp-featured young woman who reminded Abbie of an angry pigeon. “I mean if there were no personal consequences. If you could walk away scot-free.”

“Fuck, Summer,” said her male coworker. He was tall and emaciated—what Abbie called *concentration camp chic*. His voice rolled in waves. “Where do you think up these questions?”

“They just come to me,” said Summer.

Summer snipped at the bangs of an unsmiling brunette, cutting more empty space than hair. Her work struck Abbie as impersonal. Like getting trimmed by a topiary gardener.

“Think about all the suffering he’s caused,” Summer persisted. “You would have killed Hitler, wouldn’t you?”

“Jesus Christ,” said her co-worker. “I don’t know.”

It suddenly registered with Abbie: These kids were talking about assassinating the President. Abstractly, of course. But none-the-less a statement about the plight of the world, about the lunatics she would no longer live to see destroy it. This was the second time she’d overheard strangers discussing the President’s death. The previous week, she’d had dinner with a retired colleague. The couple at the next table, clearly on a first date, were debating the appropriate response to learning that the madman in the Oval Office had been shot. *He’d* said glee. *She’d* insisted upon relief. Halfway through the meal, they were kissing. Meanwhile, Abbie’s companion lamented a world gone to hell in a hand basket. “When JFK died,” he’d said, “I lost a brother.” When Kennedy was shot, Abbie had been younger than the stylist.

“I’d do it,” said Summer. “I really would.”

Her coworker signaled for the next woman in line. “So it’s settled,” he said.

The brunette rose from Summer’s chair. She was closer to Abbie’s age than the stylist’s, attractive, though the skin of her face looked too tight. “I don’t think you should kill anybody,” she interjected. “Ever.” Her voice held a deep sadness. “If you’re upset with things—and there’s certainly enough to be upset about—you should put *yourself* on the line. Like Gandhi or Martin Luther King.”

“I guess so,” agreed Summer.

The brunette stepped around Summer. Abbie assumed her place in the chair. When the woman had paid and departed, the male stylist said: “Way to upset the customers.”

“Screw you,” said Summer. “I’m still right.” She scooped up Abbie’s hair in her bony hand. “What are we going to do today?”

“Not much,” said Abbie. “I want to look like Grace Kelly.”

The stylist smiled blankly. Abbie felt old and useless.

“Just a joke,” she said. “Whatever you sense works best.”

Already, though, she was thinking about putting herself on the line. She’d never done anything *particularly* political before, but the need had never seemed so great. Besides, it would help make up for frittering her life away. That, after all, was what she’d done. She’d never opened up that catering company, never gone back for her doctorate. Instead, she’d passed her days keeping things in their place. And there’d been so many minor crises—dripping knapsacks, bruised elbows, valises left on airplanes....

And now Leonard was dead. Her parents were dead. Her son, Norman, was as good as dead—she hadn’t spoken to him in a decade. (The boy hadn’t even come to his father’s funeral.) For years it had torn her apart, had nearly torn her marriage apart. She’d tried visiting him once, in prison, when he served time for passing bad checks. He’d have none of it. Another of her failures. Thinking about Norman made Abbie miserable, so she no longer did.

Summer massaged shampoo into her scalp. “Do you think you’d like some color? Maybe a hint of vermilion?”

“Yes,” said Abbie. “Whatever.”

She was recalling the first time she’d seen Leonard teach. He’d been a bioethics professor at Columbia. “Do you know what this is?” he asked, holding up a strand of rope. He paced the

lecture hall, sweat beading at his temples. “Not any old string,” he declaimed. “Not your run-of-the-mill, butcher’s block string. No, no, Nanette! This is my *lucky* piece of string.” Here Leonard had paused, leaning forward over his lectern. The veins bulged above his temples. Perspiration glistened at the end of his nose. “If you intentionally destroy my lucky piece of string,” he demanded, “to how much compensation am I entitled?” And then he’d asked about human life: What was it worth? How was “Grandma”—unemployable, of limited social use—any more valuable than his lucky piece of string? Abbie’s first husband, Bert, was an appraiser of artwork and collectibles. But Leonard—Leonard had been an *appraiser of lives*.

“Maybe you should kill yourself,” said Abbie.

The stylist was still kneading Abbie’s head. “What, honey?”

“Self-immolation. Don’t kill the President. Kill yourself in protest.”

As she said the words, they struck Abbie as surprisingly convincing. Later—when she shared her plans with Bert—she would realize how much easier it was to make the decision than to explain it. She’d compared it to coming up with the idea for a bedtime story. “It wasn’t there. And then it was.” Eventually, if you told yourself the story enough times, as she would do over the coming weeks, its every thread seemed inevitable. These reflections, of course, would come later. Sitting in the salon chair, her hair matted in lather, all Abbie knew was that she’d found an alternative to a death of quiet desperation. The previous night, she’d counted barbiturates in preparation for a private end. Now a public departure rose before her, a dramatic gesture. That was the sort of hook you could hang your life on.

Abbie drew her head up. Soapy water trickled down her back.

“What the hell?” exclaimed Summer.

Abbie rummaged in her purse. She closed the girl’s hand around three crisp twenty dollar bills.

“Fuck, honey,” shouted Summer. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m dying,” Abbie answered, smiling.

She brushed past the stylist and hurried outside. It was a bright afternoon. The sidewalks were crowded. Some pedestrians glanced uncomfortably at Abbie, but most ignored her. She didn’t care. She walked home briskly, trailing water and suds up Ninety-First Street.

*

Bert’s encounter with his ex-wife left him jittery. When he’d driven down to meet Abigail at St. Mary’s, forty miles south of Chatham Valley, he’d hoped to knock off other errands. A college friend had recently acquired an *étagère* at a rummage sale. The man thought it might be valuable and had asked Bert to take a look. Also, Bert wanted to buy fresh oysters for Wes. And then there was the forgery case in which he was to be an expert witness, one of the perks of semi-retirement. For weeks, the lawyers had been on his back about dropping off the affidavits. Before visiting Abigail, Bert had planned to wipe clean his to-be-done list. Afterwards, of course, he’d been useless.

He found Wes out in the yard, digging a trench around his vegetable garden. This was the latest salvo in his war against woodchucks.

“You’re home early,” said Wes.

Bert dabbed his brow with his handkerchief. “What’s that old Chinese curse? May you live in interesting times.”

“That bad, eh?”

“Worse.”

Bert recounted the morning's trauma. Wes continued to dig. He'd slung his t-shirt over a wooden fencepost, baring the lean muscle of his chest. At seventy, Wesley Rockford was still "the straightest gay man in the lower forty-eight." Sport fisherman. Hockey fan. One-time petrochemical engineer. (He claimed that in his native Alaska, some gay men were even straighter.) Wes had lost three fingers in a childhood hunting accident, leaving a right hand like a vintage baseball mitt. When he shoveled, he used only his left arm.

"It wasn't just the cancer," said Bert. "Or the suicide plan. It was all of it together. You had to see her there in that empty classroom—Those stacks of tiny chairs—Good God! She looked so...."

"Diminished?"

"Yeah," said Bert. "Diminished."

He sat down on the grass, using his jacket as a pillow. That portion of the lawn had been newly mowed. Later, Wes would rake up the clumps of fresh chaff.

"Abigail's mother was also a smoker," added Bert—to no particular purpose. "She also quit too late."

Wes kicked a clod of dirt off his shovel. He picked up a stone and lobbed it into the hedge. "Are you asking for advice?"

Bert shrugged. "Who knows? It hasn't sunk in yet."

"I imagine it hasn't. Are you sure she was serious?" Wes kneaded his lower lip between his fingers, a sure sign that he was concerned. "I never thought of your ex as so political. People have a way of talking when they're under stress—and they really don't mean anything by it."

"She was serious. As hard as that is to believe. Jesus Christ! This is something Buddhist monks do, not New York City school teachers." Bert wiped a tear from his eye. "Her sense of humor hasn't changed though—for better or for worse. She said that even a chef as bad as I am can rustle up Abigail Richmond flambé."

"I'm surprised she asked *you*. Doesn't she have anybody else?"

"Apparently not. Or maybe I wasn't her first choice," said Bert, although privately he was sure that he was the first person, the *only* person, that Abbie had asked for help, and this touched him deeply. "I guess she's at the end of her rope. Desperate times call for desperate measures—and all that."

Wes tossed his shovel into a mound of red earth. He settled onto the grass, resting the back of his neck against Bert's abdomen. They lay in silence. Wes's head rose and fell with Bert's breath. Bert knew they were sharing the same thought: How grateful they were that they were together—that *Bert had left Abigail*. Cleaning the attic the previous spring, Bert had discovered the letters he'd written to Wes in Alaska. Their urgency stunned him. Certainly, he'd never loved Abigail so intensely.

He ran a hand through Wes's thick gray hair. "I suppose I owe it to her," he said.

"You don't owe her anything," answered Wes. "But you should stop her."

"I don't know. It's not that simple."

"You're not actually thinking of helping her, are you?" Wes sat up, his shoulders and neck rigid. "Are you out of your mind?"

Bert looked away. A bank of clouds rolled across the sky. Others hunkered at the horizon. Darker clouds, the color of steel wool. As a child, he'd had a knack for finding secrets in clouds—rabbits, dragons. In Pelican Bay, Florida. A long time ago.

"Don't think crazy," said Wes. "You can't go around setting people on fire. You could go to jail, Bert. You could ruin our lives."

Wes was right, Bert realized. Wes was nearly always right. It could ruin their lives. But hadn't he once done far worse to Abbie?

“Let’s go inside,” he said. “Before it rains.”

*

This was the first year of Bert’s semi-retirement. Their friends had warned him against this arrangement. When you’re ready, they said, go whole hog. Half-retired was like partially pregnant. Often, it meant premature idleness. Time would weigh heavily upon him. The reality—in his case—had been decidedly the opposite. He’d had too many offers, not enough hours in the day. He still undertook special projects for his former employer, the city’s leading auction house. Insurance companies offered him lucrative consulting fees. A niche publisher wanted him to lend his expertise to a line of coffee table books. Bert didn’t delude himself. He wasn’t a household name. But by hook and by crook, he’d risen to the top of his field. Not shabby for the self-taught son of a pawnbroker.

“Maybe I feel guilty,” he told Wes. “My life worked out. Hers didn’t.”

They were walking up Broadway toward Abigail’s building. They were late. Parking had taken forever.

“Count no man happy until he dies,” quoted Wes.

“Meaning?”

“It’s Oedipus. Greek for ‘Don’t jinx us.’”

Bert grinned. He pressed Abigail’s buzzer. Her building didn’t have an elevator, so they walked up the six narrow flights of stairs. “Thank you for doing this,” he said as they reached the topmost landing. He squeezed Wes’s hand. “Thank you for *understanding*.”

“Nobody said anything about *understanding*, Bertram, but I do love you—so if you’re going to insist upon making a mess of things, I’m going to try my best to minimize the damage.”

This was good enough, thought Bert. That first evening, Wes had argued and cajoled and pleaded. *What did Bert know about self-immolation? Wasn’t he afraid of the consequences?* But Bert’s partner was a practical man. When it became clear that Bert was seriously considering a part in this folly, Wes determined to keep him from getting caught. He’d insisted upon coming along to see Abigail—as much to keep an eye on Bert as to vet his ex-wife’s plan.

Abigail greeted them at the door. She kissed Bert’s cheek, shook Wes’s hand. “Catch your breath,” she said.

“I forgot how steep those stairs are,” said Bert, coughing.

She laughed. “The cost of high ceilings.”

The flat was just as Bert remembered. Tasteful, a tad stuffy. Walls and walls of Leonard’s books. Several of the volumes were quite valuable. First editions of Freud, of Benjamin Rush, of Lister’s essay on inflammation. A glass and mahogany bureau housed the sterling silver tea service that had once been Leonard’s mother’s. There was also a good share of kitsch: commemorative porcelain, bead bouquets, watercolor seascapes. The apartment’s most interesting fixture—although of minimal commercial value—was a life-size plastic skeleton. It hung opposite the Laz-E-Boy recliner, where one expected to find a television set.

Abigail steered them into the dining room. She followed moments later with a tea pitcher and a plate of scones. “How long has it been, Wesley?” she asked. “You look spectacular.”

“You do, too.”

She poured tea. “For a woman on the verge of death?”

Bert and Wes exchanged looks. Abigail had always been a pale-skinned, curveless woman—but in a comely, country-lass sort of way. Now she looked sallow and stiff like a tarnished candlestick.

“Take anything you want, by the way,” she said. “I know there are some books that interested you, Bert. Help yourself.”

“You know I can’t do that,” said Bert.

“Why not?” snapped Abigail.

Bert spooned sugar into his tea.

“I can’t take them with me,” Abigail persisted. “This isn’t Ancient Egypt.”

“You’ll outlive us all yet,” said Bert.

Abigail held her teacup only inches from her lips. “No,” she said. “*I won’t.*”

Bert added another spoonful of sugar to his tea. He took a small sip. It was too sweet. This visit no longer seemed a good idea. He’d hoped having Wes along would calm his nerves, but he wasn’t as comfortable with helping Abigail as he’d claimed. He’d taken her to the high school prom, after all. And deep down, although he was grateful to Wes for tolerating this insanity, he realized that he was now mistreating Wes as he’d once mistreated Abigail. It was *their* life he might ruin. Not just his own. At the same time, a part of him sympathized with his ex-wife’s plan. He *did* understand. Unlike Abigail, he had been political. He and Wes had rallied against the epidemic in the eighties. They’d marched for Matthew Sheppard. They’d done their part. And over the past month, he’d also become obsessed with the war news. He watched non-stop, religiously, hoping the conflict might end. If there were no war, there would be nothing to protest—no reason for Abigail to kill herself.

Other men might have searched for guidance in religion, or psychiatry, or the classics. These had never been part of Bert’s life. Instead, he’d tracked down Abbie’s son in Utah. First, Norman had hung up on him. When he phoned again, the son called him a shit-packing faggot. Bert saw no reason to mention this encounter to his ex-wife.

“Wes and I are thinking of traveling,” said Bert.

Wes threw Bert a puzzled look. Abbie smiled. “That’s terrific,” she said. “You’ve certainly earned it.”

“Does that mean...?”

She shook her head. “I can work around your schedule.”

Bert reached his hand into his trouser pocket and fumbled with his keys. His strong suit was property, not people. As hard as he tried, he had a difficult time drawing a connection between Abigail and the bloodshed overseas. *Everybody* he knew opposed the war. It was something you opposed in the abstract—like inequality or injustice. But that didn’t mean you had to sacrifice yourself. Abbie didn’t even own a television. He doubted she could name both of their United States senators. Now that he was actually in her apartment, discussing her suicide as casually as a birthday party or retirement dinner, he wanted to shake her. To tell her that she was the second most important person in his world. To say how empty his life would be without her jibes, her quotations from Emerson and Whitman, her ravenous laugh.

Instead, he asked: “When?”

“Not just yet,” said Abigail. “What is it they say after castingcalls? Don’t call us, we’ll call you.”

*

Abbie saw no need for immediate action. Occasionally, reading the names of fallen American servicemen in the morning newspaper, or contemplating the larger number of unreported foreign casualties, she was seized by a twinge of regret. Might she have saved these people? Had she cost some poor mother her son? But Abbie wasn’t fool enough to believe that even her public burning could single-handedly alter national policy—that anything she’d have

done would have mattered. Her goals were more modest, long-term. Also, she wasn't ready to die.

The first weeks of July, Abbie devoted to practical matters. She broke down her apartment as she'd done her classroom. Drawer by drawer, shelf by shelf. It amazed her how much junk she and Leonard had acquired over the years. A pair of pack rats. Now she gave it all away. The silver tea service and the medical books would go to Bert; she'd arranged it with the lawyer. Anything else of value—and who knew what had value these day!—was to be sold, the proceeds going to St. Mary's.

Abbie double-checked the perpetual upkeep on her parents' graves, gave the Dominican superintendent his Christmas tip on Bastille Day, bid silent farewell to her friends. Her death would be messy, explosive. She hoped to leave her affairs tied-up and tidy.

If anything scared her, it was the pain. At the age of eleven, she'd stuck a paperclip into an electric outlet. She still had a scar on her index finger. This, she feared, would be far worse. But as she learned more about Thich Quang Duc and his Vietnamese monks, about Jan Palach in Wenceslas Square, she discovered that self-immolation—like most specialized skills—had its own artistry. You couldn't grit your teeth and bear it, as you might an injection. The trick, it appeared, was to lose yourself in a fugue state. One authority compared it to long-distance running. Through much of August, Abbie explored the subject. She sat in the small island of lindens and plane trees, at the juncture of Broadway and West End Avenue, reading about Afghan brides and Tibetan monks and the Ananda Murga cult. If she'd had time—if life had taken another course—she might have pursued these studies academically. She could already envision the shape of her dissertation: chapters on Indian sati rituals and Turkish Kurds. But Abbie sensed she was growing weaker. She had trouble maintaining her balance, forming fists. Some days she didn't make it to the park or even out of her dressing gown. According to her oncologist, the cancer had spread to her brain.

Several times, Bert phoned. Dear Bert. "Just to check in." He wanted to discuss the war, but truthfully, the details of the fighting didn't interest her. She knew it was wrong. Deep down. *That* was what mattered. Why should she care for particular battles, the names of interchangeable generals? In college, she'd been rebuked for hazy thinking. Her history professor regarded her as pleasantly vapid. (Many years later, she'd run into the same professor at Tanglewood. *A third-grade teacher*, he'd said. *Important work*. She'd wanted to claw his eyes out.) If it were possible to miss anything once you were dead, she would miss Bert. His decency, his lavender handkerchiefs that looked like dinner napkins. And she'd miss children. Their tiny fingers, their solidarity. Being a second-rate classroom teacher, it was Abbie's curse to love young children so terribly.

The morning after Labor Day, Abbie rose early. She'd stayed up late the night before, enjoying the final pages of *The Forsyte Saga*. (She'd read somewhere that John Hinckley and Mark Chapman had carried *The Catcher in the Rye* with them. Maybe, she'd told Bert, she could inspire a new trend.) Outside, the air was damp. A nip of autumn already hung in the breeze. When Abbie arrived at St. Mary's, the children were already getting off the buses. One after another. In little yellow raincoats, carrying brown bag lunches. The light was on in Abbie's classroom. Through the bars, she could see the walls layered with construction paper. Orange. Green. Red. She walked to the payphone on the corner and called Bert.

It was time.

*

Bert picked Abigail up at the curbside. She wore tan slacks, a beige blouse, a matching kerchief. Her trademark canvas bag hung over one shoulder. She couldn't have weighed more

than ninety pounds. On the phone, Abigail had warned him to expect the worst—but nothing could have braced him for the fragile steps, the bony cheeks, the sharp sinews exposed in her neck. Overnight, his ex-wife had suddenly become an old woman. A woman *beyond* a certain age. When she reached the car, he'd had to go around to help her close the door.

"Did you have any trouble?" she asked.

"Smooth sailing," he said. "So far."

He glanced in the rear-view mirror at the stack of press releases. These were to be distributed afterwards. The most critical resource, three canisters of gasoline, he'd concealed under a blanket in the trunk. Wes had provided him detailed instructions about covering his tracks—on the importance of handling the gas canisters with gloves and of shielding his license plates with burlap. Wes had purchased the envelopes for the press releases at a stationery shop in the next county, afraid the FBI might trace the paper stock. He'd warned Wes to deposit them in multiple mailboxes. He loved Wes for taking on this deranged mission as his own. Yet even as they'd kissed on the doorstep that morning, Bert sensed that Wes was hoping he might reconsider. He nearly did.

"I'm glad it's September," said Abigail. "I've always looked forward to September."

Bert started the ignition, but drove slowly. "We could stop for some coffee," he said, as casually as possible. "Wait for the weather to clear."

"Wait until I lose my resolve. Is that it?" Abigail rolled down her window and surveyed the rain with her palm. "Barely anything. Just a drizzle."

They eased their way down Broadway. Block by block, light by light. Both of them aware that Bert had chosen the slowest route. On the drive from Chatham Valley, he'd had so much to tell Abigail. About him. About her. About them. Now his mind had gone blank. "Wes said to send his love," he said.

"Please thank him for me. I always liked Wesley."

Traffic slowed around Columbus Circle. Jaywalkers darted through the intersection. Cabs honked. Abigail had selected the front steps of Federal Hall for her departure. Across from the Stock Exchange. The site of Washington's Farewell Address. She'd considered City Hall Park, Ground Zero. (It was like choosing a venue for a wedding, only cheaper.) Ultimately, she'd sought a place without children. A vacationing family, she'd feared, might break her nerve.

"Maybe we should have had kids," said Bert.

Abigail smiled. Her eyes glowed. "Maybe."

Bert considered reaching for her hand, but didn't.

After that, they rode in silence. Bert watched Abigail while they drove. She gazed out the window, her hands folded in her lap. When they reached the Financial District, she said, "In *War and Peace*, Pierre almost assassinates Napoleon. But, in the end, he doesn't have it in him."

They were stopped at a traffic light. Bert turned to face her. He expected to see tears in her eyes, but they were dry. "If I don't have it in me...." She looked at him helplessly. Her hands were shaking.

"Hush," he said. "It will go fine."

*

The night before, Wes had painted the gasoline canisters black. From a distance, they looked like stereo speakers or lighting equipment.

They parked several blocks away—as far as Abigail could walk—and Bert carried the fuel along Wall Street. They advanced slowly, at Abigail's limited pace. The rain had tapered off, leaving a residue of soggy wrappers on the steps of Federal Hall. In one corner, a woman

Abigail's age fed pigeons. A band of twenty "permanent" anti-war protestors stood entrenched behind a nearby police cordon. Several wore tie-dyed t-shirts, shaggy beards. Others were better dressed, including one elderly man with a bowtie. They occasionally waved their political placards. Across the street, behind an identical cordon, an even smaller pro-war faction marched solemnly in a narrow circle. There was a young man in a naval dress uniform and a handful of homely, overweight girls draped in American flags. Bert genuinely felt badly for them—as he once had when he'd heard eighty year-old Barry Goldwater interviewed on public radio. Yet at least they believed in *something*, he thought, however misguided. Across the street, at the Stock Exchange, the lunchtime crowd was starting to file onto the streets.

"I'm not good at farewells," said Bert.

"Who is?" asked Abigail.

She handed him her canvas bag. How decisive it felt to take it from her. Soon enough he'd be meeting Wes at their bridge club, the alibi they'd chosen, and already the claiming of the body, and the funeral, and the plans for a spring unveiling—all carefully mapped out by Wes—now seemed inevitable. Nearly *fait accompli*.

Bert struggled to find the right words for the moment, but some moments were beyond mere words. Abigail nodded in the direction of the anti-war protestors. "The competition," she said.

"For you," answered Bert. "Absolutely no match."

Abigail smiled. She retrieved a tiny self-striker from a small rectangular box.

"The *perfect* match," she said, holding it up. "Now step back."

Abigail eased herself down to the steps and poured the gasoline over her head. First by tilting the canisters, then lifting them as they yielded weight. She might have been a small child enjoying a public bath. Bert couldn't bear to watch. He felt nauseous. He jostled his way along Wall Street toward Broadway.

Behind him, he heard shouting. He caught a glimpse of the flames reflected in the plate glass of a bakery window. It was done.

Now he was to dispatch the press releases and then meet Wes at the bridge club in Chatham Valley. Instead, he continued walking, running. He'd lost track of where he was heading or why.

He found himself crossing through Battery Park, approaching the water, the canyons of Lower Manhattan receding behind him. Songbirds flitted in the trees. Wes would have known their names. Across the harbor rose Ellis Island, The Statue of Liberty, New Jersey. Several small children were playing in the wet grass, illuminated by a thin white beam of sun. Bert stopped to watch them. It was a perfectly tranquil moment, the sort Abigail had treasured. This was why she'd sacrificed herself so willingly—not for an abstract peace, but for a moment just like this one, a moment of genuine grace for Bert and for humanity. You could close your eyes, and listen to the children's laughter, and imagine that nobody, anywhere, had ever died.