

P E T E R   S E L G I N

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*The Bones of Love*

*“To be taken in everywhere is to see the inside of everything.  
It is the hospitality of circumstance.”*

—G. K. Chesterton

Before the Flood, before the Hurricane, before the Twin Towers crumpled to dust and the glaciers thawed and the world picked up its heretofore plodding pace toward Doom . . . before BlackBerries, before iPods, before that great polluted reservoir of knowledge called the Internet . . . before AIDS, before cell phones, before stem cells and ozone holes, when hitchhiking was still possible if dangerous, a young man stood beside the highway. A clean-cut, All-American type “with a nervous, insecure twist”—so his personal manager, Sid Niderman, had said of Justin Groom. The surname, too, had been Sid’s idea—an improvement over the name on Justin’s driver’s license, an instrument of Connecticut issue, gone now with everything else in Justin’s wallet (including the wallet). He made the hitchhiker’s semaphore. Behind him a green sign wavered in the swampy air: “New Orleans: 68 mi.”

Justin hadn’t meant to go to New Orleans. He hadn’t meant to go anywhere, especially. Soon after his twenty-third birthday, having quit acting and the city of New York, he had moved back in with his parents in Danbury, where he spent his days running laps around the high school football field, and nights hurling darts at the Mad Hatter’s Lounge. A month of said routine engendered a boredom so profound it turned the wax fruits in a bowl on his parents’ Chippendale side table gray, and brought him to the realization that he would have to do something with his life, or end it. So he hit the highway.

Along with his backpack (the one holding the wallet holding a hundred dollars cash, and twice as many in traveler’s checks; the one the smoke alarm salesman from Oswego drove off with in his Ford Ranchero while Justin relieved himself at a Dixie Truck Stop), Justin had carried a phrase, leftover from a recurrent

dream: *be at life's mercy*. He'd been carrying it all the way from Norwalk, where his first ride pulled over, to just beyond Baton Rouge, where he now stood in the heat-undulated air. But he'd been carrying it much longer, the way some people carry regrets and facial tics. It came with its own incidental music, this involuntary mantra, this existential earworm: the desultory strains of Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder*, as performed by a droopy baritone and played on a scratchy record.

*Be at life's mercy . . . Be at life's mercy . . .*

By means of a rusty Oldsmobile Justin was conveyed to the French Quarter, where, on a side street off Canal, he chanced upon a hotel. He knew it was a hotel, thanks to the bulky sign spelling Hotel LeDale in peeling paint and broken neon tubes. He stepped over several inert bodies clogging the entrance and entered what passed for a lobby, a void of gut-colored linoleum at the far end of which a fat human fish gulped in a Plexiglas bowl. The fish told Justin a room cost ten dollars a night, a bunk half as much. Out of his twenty remaining dollars Justin paid in advance for a bunk, then went out to take in the sights.

At sundown the Quarter was just waking up. Justin added his weary flesh to the crowds parading up and down Bourbon Street. With its carnival lights and shops selling pralines and sex the French Quarter reminded him of a toy Times Square, and stirred up a nostalgia for the city that Justin once called his own and the dreams of professional glory he had abandoned there. He stood in the doorway of a jazz parlor, letting the wails of a saxophone wash over him. His reflection in the neon-tinted glass reminded him of James Dean, one of his heroes. He was as good-looking, almost, so Sid Nidermen had told him, an assessment reinforced by the catcalls drifting down from the cast iron verandas overhead. That Justin was vain no one (certainly not he) would have denied, but his was a vanity tempered by doubts, and what the mirrors gave back to him was not himself so much as a shifting panoply of hopes, ideals, regrets and resentments, rendered in bones, flesh, and hair. If he searched for himself in mirrors, it was only because he couldn't find himself there.

A quartet of bare hanging light bulbs cast a subaqueous glow over the rows of bunk beds. A standing fan shoved swelter and

boozesweat from wall to wall. Justin pried off his cowboy boots and damp socks. The man one bunk over cracked open a blood-shot eye and smiled. A cockroach skittered over Justin's toes.

No sooner did he sleep than Justin dreamed his recurrent dream. He stood atop an Alpine mountain, but not really; really, he was in someone's living room, its walls flocked with red *fleurs-de-lis*, its ceiling sprayed with make-believe stars. A rumbling Teutonic voice urged him to reach for one of the stars, the brightest one. *You can, you can, you can!* . . . Justin tried. Oh, how he tried to touch that lonesome star!—and failed. He was a bad boy. He had to be punished. He woke up drenched in sweat for which the humidity bore only part of the blame.

*Be at life's mercy . . . Be at life's mercy . . .*

It took him less than an hour to find a job. The Café du Monde was one of several cafes fronting the river, with round, marble-topped tables, wrought-iron chairs and beige stucco walls that melted, or seemed to, like coffee ice cream under the tropical sun. Long ago some wisecracker dubbed it the Cafe Doomed, and those employed there seldom referred to it otherwise.

Curly, the headwaiter—his bald skull crowned by a sprig of red hair—showed Justin the ropes. The waiters collected their orders of beignets—small, pillow-shaped doughnuts sprinkled with confectioner's sugar—on brown plastic trays, then paid the cashier from their own pockets before filling cups with chicory-laced coffee and steamed milk and carrying them to their customers, who paid them. “That way,” said Curly, “anyone bolts, you're out of luck. Otherwise, keep your tables wiped, your face shaved, and watch your mouth, and you'll do fine.”

Three hours into his shift, Justin took a break. He sat at an empty table. He had barely bitten into a free beignet when another waiter joined him: a short, skinny man with a high, glossy forehead and a drooping handlebar mustache. “Curly tells me you hitchhiked all the way from Connecticut.” Justin nodded. “Lord, you could've gotten yourself killed, what with that innocent face of yours!”

The skinny waiter sniggered. With his drooping mustache and a gold hoop earring in one ear he reminded Justin of a shrunken pirate. In the mirror of his forehead Justin watched a ceiling fan twirl. The shrunken pirate lit a cigarette. “You wouldn't by any

chance be looking for a place to *shtay*?” A gap between his front teeth gave him the drunken slur. “It *sho* happens I’m looking for a roommate. I just gave my old one the boot.” His sniggers broke into a coughing fit.

Justin dipped a finger into the residue of powdered sugar on his plate and was about to lick it when it occurred to him that said gesture might be provocative. Back in New York he had been propositioned often enough by homosexual men to know the signs. There were times—and this was one of them—when he wished he were less attractive to them. He stared at the wall clock.

“Mind you,” the shrunken waiter spoke on, “my place is no Taj Mahal, but it’s a damned sight better than the LeDale.” Justin wondered how the skinny waiter knew where he was staying, then remembered scrawling “Hotel LeDale” next to “address” on his job application form.

“The rent’s only twenty a week, if that’s not too steep for you.” It was half the price a of bunk among strangers. “If you like, I can show you after work.” Like wet marbles the shrunken pirate’s eyes skidded off Justin’s face. “My name’s Donald, but everyone calls me Don.” He held out a small, damp hand.

A nod from Curly signaled the end of Justin’s break.

Two hours later Justin dropped a tray of coffee and beignets. Instantly the shrunken pirate materialized, cleaning up the mess, his black ponytail bobbing. “*Sho*, will you have a look?” Again the marble eyes skidded, so full of pleading Justin didn’t know what to say. Whatever cruelty took, he never had it in him. It had cost him many roles: hoodlums and tough guys; he never could play them convincingly. His vulnerability always got in the way.

At dusk he and Don left the Cafe Doomed. As they walked past the cash register Curly seized Justin by the sleeve of his waiter’s shirt.

“Watch out for Sherman,” he warned.

“Who?”

“Don—he’s a sweetheart, but watch out for Sherman.”

“Who’s Sherman?”

Before Curly could answer, Don snatched Justin’s other arm to pull him the rest of the way out of the cafe.

An afternoon shower had left the streets steaming. The cobblestones gleamed. The atmosphere reeked of mud and fish. Flowing

to their left and below them, the river looked like the *cafe au lait* they'd been serving all day. At the Natchez wharf they stopped and listened to the calliope. "Sounds like a drunken teakettle," Don observed. A maze of streets led them past a series of gates, each locking in its own mysteries. Before a narrow green one Don fished out his keys. "Always keep this front gate locked," he told Justin as if he had already moved in. "There's a certain element we're trying to discourage."

Justin followed Don down an alleway lined with aluminum pie tins piled with table scraps and chicken bones. "Mildred, the landlord's daughter. She likes to feed the neighborhood strays," said Don. "More cats and dogs die of Mildred's generosity than of all natural causes combined."

The alley opened into a courtyard bounded by stucco walls decked with tired geraniums in clay pots. There was a table with a hole for a shade umbrella, but no umbrella. All around them air conditioners wheezed, the sound of New Orleans breathing. A set of rickety stairs mounted to a door painted the blue-purple of a bruise and sealed with an enormous padlock. "I always keep this door locked, too," said Don, unlocking it. "Usually even when I'm home. As an extra precaution."

The opened door released a chilled ectoplasm of tea, soap, and vinegar: clean, domestic smells. Justin stood in a room barely large enough to hold a folding card table and two kindred chairs, a cube refrigerator, and a two-burner stove. A dishtowel lay draped over the sink nozzle. The counter sparkled. An icon of stained glass dangled from a thread attached to a light fixture above the faucet. Don switched on the light. The stained glass scattered bright flecks of spectral color. "This is my kitchen," Don announced proudly. "There's a whole other room." With a flourish he parted a curtain of Mardi Gras beads. "*Shtep* through my rainbow!"

The other room was filled by a queen-sized bed, the cork wall behind it tacked with postcards, napkin drawings, and snapshots, including one of a tow-headed boy aged eight or so. Justin looked down at the bed then up at the shrunken pirate.

"True," Don conceded, nodding. "There's only one bed. But it's big and I'm small. I'm sure we'll both fit."

To have left at once would have made perfect sense. To have

shouted one or several oaths and stormed out, slamming the bruise-colored door and shaking the cramped dwelling to its creaky joists, would have been in perfect keeping with circumstances. Instead, Justin weighed his options. There were, he reflected, arguments for not rejecting Don's offer out of hand. For one thing, Justin's hotel was by no means more inviting. Multiplied by bunks, it was a dozen times as dangerous and dirty. His one night there, he had hardly slept at all. When not dreaming of mountains and stars he lay wide-awake feeling the tug of a rusty razor blade across his throat. Here at least, he knew what he was up against. And the shrunken pirate seemed harmless. His arms were toothpicks. Worst come to worst, Justin could easily fend him off. Besides, he was lonely.

He tested the mattress; it yielded softly to his touch.

*Be at life's mercy . . .*

"Well?" said Don.

*Be at life's mercy . . . Be at life's mercy . . .*

\*

No sooner did his head touch the pillow that Don had put in a fresh case and fluffed for him than Justin was revisited by his recurrent dream, with the Teutonic voice again exhorting him: *you can, you can, you can!* From this lucid dream he was transported through a series of increasingly murky ones, to one that teased the nerve endings in his crotch. His eyes opened to the shrunken pirate's head bobbing in the gloom over his groin.

"Holy Christ!" he said, shoving Don into the crack between the bed and the wall. "Holy Christ! Holy Christ!" He switched on the light and looked for his pants. "Fuck, fuck, fuck: I don't *believe* this!"

From the crack snuffles arose. "I am *sho, sho shorry*," Don said. "Forgive me. I couldn't help myself. Please—"

"Where are my pants? What did you do with them?"

"I gave them a hand wash and put them on the shower rod to dry. I did your socks, too. I'd have asked, but you were sleeping so soundly."

Finding everything as advertised, Justin cursed.

"Go ahead," Don said. "Break my every bone. I deserve it."

Justin put his pants on, or tried. In the muddy heat they had

not dried. He swore again.

“I dreamed you were an angel,” Don said, “my very own private angel fallen out of a clear blue sky. You had the most beautiful white wings, like a swan. One of your wings was broken. I tried to mend it for you. I put it in a sling. Then I tucked you in and lay next to you and—well, you don’t need me to fill in the gory details.” All this spoken from deep in the crack.

In a burlesque of abrupt departure Justin gathered up his toiletries. When he came out of the bathroom Don was still in the crack. Justin ordered him out. “I can’t,” Don said. “I’m stuck.”

Justin helped him out. Don watched him try to put on wet socks.

“Please,” said Don. “Don’t go. I’ll die if you go.”

From Justin’s fingers a sock dangled. He heard the snap of rain-drops striking the air conditioner casing. He leaned his head on his palm. “You won’t touch me again?”

“On my dead mother’s grave I swear.”

“I’ll knock your teeth out if you do.”

“And it’ll serve me right. In fact I’ll insist on it.”

Justin put down the sock. He got back in bed.

“Thank you, Lord,” Don told the ceiling.

From this bumpy start things went more smoothly. Don did all he could to make amends. He darned Justin’s socks, washed his underwear, cooked him meals—bacon and eggs, chili con carne, ravioli and baked beans from cans. He left Justin notes:

*Justin,*

*I put the toilet tissue in the bathroom. The bottle of Joy is on the sink, the bottle of Pine-Oil is under the kitchen sink & so are the trash bags in case you want to use them for a laundry bag but double them up for your laundry because they’re a little thin. I didn’t have time to wash the rugs today so another day won’t hurt them. The outside light and the TV doesn’t work so please do not plug them in. OK? Also don’t forget there is a steak in the freezer if you want to have it before I get home. See you tonight at about 11:30 or so?*

*Donald*

Don refused Justin’s rent payments, insisting that he save his

money for a plane ticket back home when the time came. "Over my dead body will you ever hitchhike again, with that face of yours." At this doting treatment Justin couldn't help feeling grateful, if embarrassed. "I'm just so happy to have you here," said Don. "You're the best roommate I ever had." Spoken with a grin that broke through his mustache and conveyed wrinkles to the farthest corners of his face.

In return for his hospitality, Don asked only that Justin observe an odd ritual requiring him to keep the front door padlocked even when he was at home. Justin would unlock the door, enter the apartment, open the bedroom window, climb out onto the balcony, walk around to the front door, replace the padlock, then walk back to and reenter through the bedroom window, closing it behind him.

"Why not just lock the door from inside?"

"The point is to make it look like there's no one home."

"If you ask me, it seems kind of crazy," Justin said.

"Friend, you're not in Connecticut anymore."

Don made one other demand. He insisted that Justin write home to his parents. "At least drop them a postcard or two," he said, and furnished Justin with postcards, trite ones of Bourbon Street lit up like a carnival at night, and stamps to go with them. Though he complied, Justin resented the request, as he resented any reminders of the past that he had gone to such lengths to leave behind, a past that included his parents, who, when he had most needed their support, had given him so little. Though he'd done all that could be expected of a young man trying to build a theatrical career, despite a string of leading roles in high school, community theater, and summer stock productions, despite winning the Thespian Award for Best Actor at Waterbury High, despite a scholarship to Julliard and acceptance into the Actor's Studio following a single audition . . . despite all this, still, he failed to win their confidence.

But that wasn't the worst of it. The worst of it was that his father, whom Justin once adored, never sat through one of his plays. Once he and his mother attended a summer stock production of *Camelot* in which Justin played Lancelot. They sat in the second row; as the curtain rose he saw them sitting there. But when after intermission he looked again their two seats were vacant. His father had gotten bored. "You know how he is," his



mother said afterwards.

When he got the Julliard scholarship, his father—an auto insurance broker—did all he could to dissuade his son from going to New York. “The city’ll eat you up and spit you out. It’s no place for you.” Three years hence, when this prophecy proved true, his father could barely keep from gloating. “It was like I said, wasn’t it? But you wouldn’t listen. You had to go make an ass of yourself.” More painful by far than his father’s censure was the zeal with which it had been conveyed, the gleam in his father’s gin-soaked eyes, the self-satisfied smirk as pungent as the olive in a martini—as if his only son had been born into the world for no greater purpose than to prove Walter Gerbish right. “Groom,” his father snorted. “Even my name wasn’t good enough for you.” His pen dipped in bad memories, Justin inscribed the postcards with perfunctory greetings. *Everything’s fine. Best wishes.*

And though he got along with the other waiters at the café—gay, graying men, mostly—Justin had to put up with their merciless teasing. Because of his boots they christened him the “Connecticut cowboy,” the tribal name stretched to eight syllables by their drawls. An Eden of private boarding schools and privet hedges, such was their vision of his home state—a place as distant as Venus, as fabulous as Oz. All efforts to explain that he’d grown up in a three-room apartment over a bakery in a town distinguished by brick wire and screw factories were in vain. He was their preppie angel, their great white hope descended from the Connecticut clouds.

And though the greatest role he’d ever landed was an off-Broadway equity waiver in a one-act that went nowhere, to the waiters at the Cafe Doomed Justin was a star. A fallen one, true, but a star all the same.

As June melted into July, Justin’s memories of home and New York City melted, too. New Orleans became his new home, the place where he would reinvent himself—where he would rise, like the Phoenix, from the ashes of his botched, aborted past: where he would become the man he was always meant to be: the real Justin Groom, a person of courage and character, no longer an extra in his own life, but a leading character, a hero.

And since people are bound to love the place where they are born, Justin fell in love with New Orleans. He loved its cobble-

stone streets and sudden, fish-stinking showers; he loved the brown river snaking through its heart, with its coffee and mud smells. And he grew to love the shrunken pirate, who treated him better than his parents ever had, who offered him the next best things to love: trust and companionship.

He had been working at the cafe for five weeks when, coming home one evening, he found the green gate swinging open. The pie tins lining the alley had been upset, their chicken-bone offerings scattered. In the courtyard he found Don, naked to the waist, clutching a geranium in his teeth, tangoing himself from stucco wall to wall. Justin took a tentative step closer. As he did he saw the bruise over Don's left eye, its color a perfect match for the padlocked door. But the door wasn't padlocked. It, too, swung open. The teeth that held the geranium likewise clenched a foolish grin. Justin stood transfixed. Afraid to draw any closer, he turned and walked back down the alley and out onto the street.

He returned a while later to find Don sprawled on their bed, a bony hand dangling over its side, pointing to a red bead on the floor. Next to the red bead was a yellow one, and next to the yellow one a green. The floor was strewn with beads. The rainbow had been torn, its colors scattered. A trickle of blood ran from Don's eye. Justin shook him awake.

"What happened?"

"I fell in the shower."

"Bullshit. Someone did this to you."

"Do me a favor, would you, please, Justin?"

"What?"

"Leave me alone."

Through the remains of the beaded curtain Justin reentered the kitchen. He saw Don's empty bottle on the table, and the empty tumbler next to it. Until then he had been aware of Don's drinking, but only as one is aware of the shadow cast by a moving object. Normally Don took pains to hide his habit. That he had left its accoutrements in plain sight was a bad sign. He thought of his father, of the nights when the old man came home stumbling, spoiling for a fight.

After that Don's drinking took on epic proportions. Justin would

waken to sounds of ice being cracked from a tray, and open his eyes to the shadow play of Don's drinking performed against the kitchen wall. Some mornings Don would be so hung over Justin would have to help him into his waiter's clothes and half-carry him to the cafe, where he would ply him with cup after cup of *cafe au lait*. Come evening, Don would be so exhausted Justin would half-carry him back home.

One evening, as Justin half-carried him home, a sudden rain shower fell, one of those five-minute jobs that left the world steamy and stinking of fish. In the sky above the river the moon lofted, red as a Mardi Gras bead. A breeze flayed the skin of a puddle. "Damn *shitty*," Don muttered. "Whole place is nothing but a swamp. Can't even get buried here. They have to put people in mausoleums to keep them from floating away."

They arrived at the green gate. Justin had gotten out his keys when Don grabbed his arm. Together they looked through the bars. At the alley's far end a man straddled the stucco wall. He wore the blouse of a Confederate uniform, its sleeves shorn and shoulders darkened by rain, and twirled a gnarled wooden cane. In the dimming light they watched him kick the heels of his bare feet against the wall. Seeing them he smiled.

"Better let me handle this," a suddenly sober Don said.

"Is that Sherman?" said Justin.

Don nodded and licked his lips. He got out his own keys.

"Come back in an hour," he said.

At the cafe he found Curly, looking abstracted as he stood by the side door, blowing smoke rings into the dim wet air.

"What gives, Connecticut?"

"Don's got company."

"Sherman?"

Justin nodded.

"I warned you." Curly offered him a cigarette. Justin didn't smoke, but he took one anyway. Like most actors he couldn't resist a prop. Together he and the headwaiter watched the moon, fat and orange now over the river. "May I ask you something, Connecticut?" Curly said.

"Sure."

"What in blue hell are you doing down here?"

“What do you mean?”

“I mean why aren’t you somewhere having fun?”

“What makes you think I’m not?”

“Some fun, waiting tables with a bunch of homo misfits.”

“Maybe I needed a change of scenery.”

“You need something, all right, and pretty desperately, too, to come here for it. That or you got into some kind of pickle up north. But I don’t think so. No, I don’t think you’re running from; I think you’re *looking for*.”

Justin tried—and failed—to match Curly’s latest smoke ring with his own. “Is that what you think?” he said.

“That’s what I think.”

“What are *you* doing here?”

“Me?” Curly laughed. “I’m big and ugly and lazy and lucky to have what I have. I’ve worked my way up to this hellhole. This is all the potential I’ve got. We’re not the least bit alike, you and me. Now Don,” he blew fresh smoke, “he’s a whole other story. He was living up in Detroit, working for Kaiser Aluminum, playing poker on Wednesday nights with his so-called pals, wanting to be one of the boys. Of course, and as you and I know, he wasn’t. And anyway they weren’t his pals; they just liked to fleece him at poker. One morning after a game his wife comes down and finds him sleeping there at the poker table, his head buried in cards and chips. She lays into him, calls him a brown-nosed loser and so forth. He starts blubbing. Then he looks up and sees what? Shannon, his boy, looking down at him from the stair banister. Well, he just completely lost it. He hauled off and belted his wife, breaks her nose. She took everything: the house, the car, Shannon. What little she left him he packed into a duffel bag and rode a Greyhound all the way down here thinking he’d land himself a job in the Merchant Marine.” In the moonlight Curly shook his head. “Guess where he ends up? The LeDale, your alma mater, drinking cheap wine while waiting for his sea-card or whatever to come through. When his money runs out, he starts sleeping between the dumpsters behind the cafe, you know that pair of dumpsters. That’s where I found him one day, begging cigarettes. I took him home, cleaned him up, gave him a job, got him off the booze. Happy ending, right? But the thing you’ve got to remember, Connecticut, is no matter where you come up from or how

fast you've come up, there's always an express elevator waiting to zip you right on back down again. In the case of Don, the express elevator is named Sherman."

"Sherman—his son?"

Curly shook his head. "Shannon, that was his son. Sherman's a horse of a different color, though I imagine there might be a connection."

Justin recalled the snapshot of the tow-headed boy on Don's wall. A few times he had thought to ask Don about it, but never had, afraid the answer might ignite a drunken binge. He tried another smoke ring. The imperfect O ruined its way up into the dark air. With the heel of his boot he smashed out the cigarette butt.

Curly said, "I wouldn't go back there, if I were you."

"Why? I'm not afraid of Sherman."

"You're welcome to stay at my place, if you like."

"He doesn't look all that dangerous."

"He doesn't have to. This isn't an audition, Connecticut. Sherman's already got the part."

He had gone less than a block when he heard what sounded like distant artillery, and turned to see fireworks exploding in chrysanthemum bursts on the far side of the Mississippi. It was the third of July.

He found Don fast asleep, and no worse for wear, apparently. Before climbing into bed next to him, Justin examined the snapshot on the wall. It seemed impossible that the beautiful, tow-headed boy could once have been Don's son; indeed, assuming that he existed, he was still Don's son, if no longer tow-headed, or even a boy. As he switched off the light Justin reflected on how much he himself had changed. No longer the downy innocent from Connecticut; no longer the sweet, sensitive, naive, eternally vulnerable boy. He was a man now, fit to defend and protect—not just himself, but others, too. Fit to play the hero.

And yet the dream remained unchanged. There he was again on that mountaintop, reaching for that star. But this time he must have reached too far: he pitched forward into the abyss. He was tumbling down the mountain when a rapping sound awoke him.

*Open up, Motherfucker!*

Don sprang up next to him.

*Motherfucker, it's raining! Let me in!*

Don rose and put on his pants.

Justin asked, "What are you doing?"

"I'm letting him in."

"Why?"

"Because if I don't he'll break the door down."

Justin grabbed Don's arm. "Don't," he said.

"What choice do I have?"

"Hide—in the bathroom. I'll get rid of him."

"Sherman is not easily gotten rid of."

"Just do it!"

The force of conviction in his voice took even Justin by surprise. A smile squirmed under Don's mustache. "My angel," he said, and without another word he shut himself inside the john. Justin took a paring knife from the kitchen drawer and shoved it in the back pocket of his pants. The rapping noise, wood against wood, meanwhile made it way around the balcony to the bedroom window, then stopped. The silence was punctuated by a burst of shattering glass. In fear and fascination Justin watched the tip of a gnarled cane enter, followed by a bare, filthy foot, followed by a rain-soaked, denim-clad leg. Soon all of Sherman stood in the bedroom, in a puddle of broken glass. Rainwater dripped from the buttons of his Confederate blouse. He blew a party noisemaker.

"Happy Fourth of Joo-lie!"

Justin sized up his rival. Though they were about the same height, Sherman had broader shoulders and a wrestler's neck. His forearms were filigreed with tattoos. His eyes were gassy stove flames. He was dirty; he exuded filth. Despite a drenching of rain he smelled of hot buttered popcorn and v.o. Except for the pale worm of a scar wriggling from a corner of one eye to the edge of his lips, the rest of his face was the glossy brown of pottery glazed and fired under a Mexican sun. In his own way he too resembled James Dean, a James Dean gone dirty and mean.

"So, you're Don's new roommate, hmmm? Just-in from Connecticut. Just in *what*? Just in time? Just in case? Just in deep shit with the human race? Hmmm . . ." He hummed a radio frequency from Mars and seemed to be quite stoned. "Where'd you meet Donald Fuck? Hmm? Cafe *Doomed*? He asked you if you needed a place to *shtay*?"

“Don’s not here.”

Through the naked strands of the beadless curtain Sherman slipped past him and into the kitchen, where he rummaged inside the refrigerator. “Look at this. Fourth of *Joo-lie* and mother’s got no fuckin’ beer. Hmmm.”

“You have to leave,” Justin said.

Settling for a Coke, Sherman leaned his cane against the back of a chair and sat with his bare, bleeding foot propped on the folding card table. Justin stood next to him, clenching and unclenching his fists. Hands were always a problem; actors seldom knew what to do with them. Sherman wiped the blood from his foot with a finger, then licked the finger. Justin recalled a scene from *Rebel Without a Cause*, the one at the observatory, where James Dean is harassed by a bunch of switchblade-wielding goons. What exactly happens Justin couldn’t remember, but Dean prevailed. He pulled the paring knife.

“You gonna stick me with that thing?” Sherman rose from the chair and hiked up his Confederate blouse, exposing a washboard belly. “Go on—*stick me!* No? Then put it away, or someone’s gonna get hurt. Hmmm.”

He sat down again and lit one of Don’s cigarettes. As its fumes filled the cramped kitchen Justin felt his insides go hollow. The hollow feeling reached deep into his bones, sucking them dry. A prickly heat washed over him, and with it a memory long suppressed. He stood in the casting agent’s living room, in front of his white sofa, the *fleur-de-lis* papered walls imprisoning him like a fence made of burning pitchforks. He had been warned by Sid Niderman to be wary of the wily Austrian casting director, that he was “a slime bucket of the lowest order.” “But”, Sid went on to say, “if he takes a shine to you, you’ve got a free pass to the front of every cattle call in town.”

So the heavy curtains had been drawn, the lights dimmed. Mahler’s *Kindertotenlieder* played softly on a stereo. The casting agent called the exercise “the Boy on the Mountaintop.” By means of it Justin would rediscover his lost innocence—an innocence in the absence of which no actor could access, let alone experience, his deepest, most authentic emotions. As the rumbling Teutonic voice alternately coaxed and cajoled, Justin tried to reach for the star—the nearest, the brightest, the most beautiful of all stars in

the galaxy. *You can, you can, you can*—But he couldn't; his arms were too short, too weak. *You are ze saddest, ze loneliest boy in ze world, a liddle boy at ze merzy of vorces zo much bigger zan you. Zurrender to zose vorces, put yourself at zeir merzy. Be at live's merzy; be at live's merzy . . .*

Under a dome of make-believe stars Justin stepped up to the casting agent, his fat knees frowning under the folds of his paisley robe, and draped himself over them. As the casting agent's palm found his backside, Justin looked up at the wallpaper, reading into its intricate curvilinear forms the source of the pain that shot up to the level of his eyes before shivering down to his toes, imagining that it lay in those flocked velvet shapes, and not in the blows of the casting director's hand.

Sherman stood up, grabbed his cane and slapped it into the bathroom door. *Come out of there, Mother!*

The bathroom door burst open. Don stormed out. He snatched the cigarette from Sherman's lips and tossed it to the floor.

*Stop smoking my cigarettes! Stop bringing me dead flowers! Leave me and my place alone!*

*What's the matter, Mother? Forget what your face looks like?*

*Look what you did to my window!*

*Window, what window? Gee, Don, I didn't know you had a window!*

*Get out!*

*Shuttup—it's raining!*

*Rain or no rain, I want you—*

With an Apache glare in his eyes, Sherman bent Don back into a tango pose and kissed him through his mustache. *Whose your best roommate now, huh, Don? Tell the world who your best damn roommate is!*

As this scene unfolded Justin felt himself melting, dissolving, turning into something like rain, or dust, or a mixture of both.

"Do me a favor, would you, Justin?" he barely heard someone saying. "Run out to Sidney's for me and pick me up a quart jar of pickled pigs feet? Would you do me that favor, Justin, please?"

A handful of coins tinkled into his palm. He looked down at the mixture of tip quarters, nickels, and dimes, then up at Don, and then over his shoulder at Sherman, who grinned fiercely and said, "Yankee go home." Justin rehearsed a concise, extemporane-



ous history lesson, one shedding light on his opponent's name and its ironic relationship to his uniform. Did Sherman know—had he any idea—that he was his own worst enemy? But the lesson would have been wasted, and anyway the words wouldn't come. Justin was never good at improvising. Standing there, holding the coins, he knew he'd never defend anyone. He'd never be a hero. He would be stuck on that mountaintop forever.

He was about to climb through the window when something made him stop. A humming sound. Someone was humming. Strains of *Yankee Doodle* reached him through the muddle of his thoughts. He waited for the tune to arrive at “macaroni” before turning and lunging.

Sherman's Confederate clad body offered surprisingly little resistance as they fell together into the puddle of broken glass. In the next few moments Justin reclaimed every impulse ever lost to him in a performance, during a rehearsal, at an audition. As he pounded away at his rival's scarred filthy face he snarled: *Be at life's mercy; be at life's mercy . . .*

So caught up was he in his performance that he failed to register the cane's first blow, and the second: it took a third blow to rouse him. Though still on the floor, he felt as though he were falling—from a mountain; from a cloud. He struggled to grasp at something, anything, only to gash his fingers on the teeth of jagged glass left behind in the shattered window. Blind with terror, he slid out into the wet, unambiguous night.

Justin spent the night curled up between the dumpsters behind the cafe. At dawn, Curly found him. The headwaiter bandaged his wounds, fed him breakfast, gave him two hundred dollars out of the cash register, and phoned a taxi to take him to the airport.

As he sat aboard a Douglas DC-9 bound for Hartford, Justin would never have guessed (his bandaged fingers throbbing, the sun blazing through the cabin window) that in twenty-six years the City of New Orleans—that postage stamp about to slip under the clouds—would lie two-thirds under water and in flames. Nor would he have predicted that Don, Curly, and most if not all of his fellow waiters at the Cafe Doomed would succumb to a simian virus imported from Africa. He could not foresee these things any more than he could have foreseen that in two dozen years he

would be the father of twin girls living in Maplewood, New Jersey, or that, eight days after their seventeenth birthdays, a group of Muslim fanatics would reduce the World Trade Center to twin columns of 60-micron ash.

But those were different scenes in different dramas.

The DC-9 soared higher, climbing the sun's rays, hurtling Justin toward that nearest, brightest, and dearest of all possible stars.

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