

LIONEL SHRIVER



ALSO BY LIONEL SHRIVER

The Post-Birthday World
We Need to Talk About Kevin
Double Fault
A Perfectly Good Family
Game Control
Ordinary Decent Criminals
Checker and the Derailleurs
The Female of the Species

So Much for That

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OVERVIEW OF THIS NOVEL

So Much For That, by Lionel Shriver, was published in the same year that President Obama signed The Affordable Care Act, although Shriver did not think the law would do enough to ease the problem of "underinsurance" described in this novel.

Shriver's main characters include Shepherd (Shep) Knacker, who is a "handyman" in a home repair business in Brooklyn, and his wife Glynis, who has just been diagnosed with mesothelioma when this book begins. Shep had hoped to retire early to an inexpensive island on the coast of Africa, but that plan must be abandoned because his wife needs medical treatment and her husband's health insurance policy to pay for it.

Jackson and Glynis have a son in high school and a daughter recently graduated from college. Shep and Glynis's best friends are the couple, Jackson and Carol Burdina. Jackson is Shep's co-worker and a deeply cynical observer of politics and government in the United States, including dissatisfaction with the way that the health system operates. Some of the book's harshest attacks on American medicine come from him.

Two other significant characters in this book are Shep's father, a retired minister whose health is also declining sharply, and Shep's boss, Randy Pogatchnik, who bought the repair business from Shep some years earlier and has been antagonistic toward him ever since.

What follows is a series of (relatively) brief excerpts from *So Much For That*, each of which is preceded by a brief introduction that gives context for what is currently happening in the story.

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Excerpt 1 - A note on the context (pp. 45-54)

In this first excerpt, Shep meets with Glynis's oncologist for the first time.

rays, a CAT scan, and an MRI. Memories fell into place. On two mornings in December she had declined not only breakfast but even coffee, which for Glynis was unheard of. He couldn't recall the excuse, but it mustn't have been persuasive, because the refusal of coffee in particular had injured him; she had spurned one of the sacred rituals of their day. On two evenings, she had kept rising for another drink of water, and yet another. So she'd not been quenching a powerful thirst, but rinsing contrast medium from her veins. Likewise one odd, floating memory finally lodged into an orderly narrative: of walking into the bathroom before she had a chance to flush, and noticing that the bowl was red. It had been awfully early in her cycle, but she was fifty, perhaps getting irregular; aware that she was touchy about the approach of menopause, he hadn't passed comment. Now he realized: that was not her period. He also realized that she had started to wear a nightgown to bed not, as she had claimed, because she was cold; it was to hide the laparoscopy scar on her belly, which he had now seen. Though only an inch long, it alarmed him: a first violation, and not the last. The nightgown had injured him, too. They had slept for twenty-six years skin to skin.

Since that signal Friday evening a week ago, she had shared only bits and pieces about the tests. So her mention that weekend of one small technicality had stood out. Before the MRI, for which all jewelry must be removed, they had to do an extra X ray before sliding his wife into the tube. "Because they learned I was a metalsmith," she'd said. "The imaging is magnetic. Metal screws it up. You can't have any fragments or filings stuck to your body."

He should have recognized why she had told him this: because she was proud. He shouldn't have asked her, "So did they find any?" An effective but infuriating gambit increasing in frequency, she hadn't responded to his question at all, which in this case meant no. They found no fragments or filings. She had worked so little in her studio for months that she could have taken the MRI just like anyone else. Even at such a juncture, he'd had to rub it in.

Your own little world. Her subterfuge would never have succeeded

without his corresponding neglect. If he had noticed that despite the recent fullness around her stomach she'd grown thinner, he had made little of the observation, which was as good as not having noticed. He thought, I'd no idea that our marriage was in such disrepair, and then he remembered that until last Friday evening he was planning to leave her.

"That night," he said. "You didn't have to let me go on like that, about Pemba. You could have stopped me."

"I was interested."

"It wasn't nice."

"I haven't been feeling," she said, "nice."

"How do you feel?" Shep was ashamed. In the last week he'd been so-licitious, perhaps annoyingly so. Yet in the months beforehand he could not remember the last time he had asked her how she felt.

She took a moment. "Frightened. For some reason it was easier when you didn't know."

"That's because you can give yourself permission, now, to be frightened." He pressed her hand, just. "I will take care of you." It was a big promise, one he would fail. But he would fail valiantly, and that was the promise he made to himself.

Dr. Edward Knox extended a hand to Shep, his clasp firm and generous. The oncologist gave off the astringent tang of antiseptic, as if he were one of those rare physicians who really did wash his hands. It was a smell Shep associated with anxiety. "Mr. Knacker, I'm so pleased that you could finally arrange to join us."

In this phrasing Shep detected reproach, and his wife's outrageous misrepresentations. In other circumstances, he would have taken her to task for them. Since now he would not, he sensed that taking her to task for anything was now pretty much a thing of the past.

The familiar air with which Glynis took a chair indicated that she had been in this office before. These two had a history together, and though Shep was "finally" here he felt excluded. He got the peculiar impression that for Glynis this office was a seat of power.

As the doctor assumed his swivel chair, Shep adjudged that the oncologist may have been in his latter thirties, although he'd grown ever less certain about ages. While he could still tell the difference between sixty and sixty-five, lately his juniors all entered an undifferentiated category of Younger Than Me, which was odd, since he had been that age before, knew what it felt like and how it appeared in the mirror. But from the perspective of a greater age it always turned out that you hadn't, at the time, understood being thirty-seven at all, what it was, what it looked like. Unfortunately for current circumstances, younger people always seemed callow to Shep now, their confidence, which Dr. Knox radiated in pulses, hollow and unjustified—that is, enviably self-deceiving. Still Shep wanted to believe in this man, and rather hoped that with friends he went by “Edward” and not by the flip, less reliable-sounding “Ed.” Fit and trim, Knox probably chose fruit for dessert in the cafeteria and made time for the treadmill in the hospital gym; he practiced what he preached. Personally Shep always had a soft spot for medical practitioners who carried twenty surplus pounds and sneaked cigarettes in the staff parking lot. The hypocrisy was reassuring. From doctors, Shep had always sought less authority than forgiveness.

“I apologize that it's taken us so long to arrive at a positive diagnosis,” Dr. Knox began, addressing himself to Shep. “Mesothelioma is notoriously difficult to identify, and we had to rule out a host of other more commonplace explanations for your wife's fever, tenderness, abdominal swelling, and gastric dysmotility.” Shep didn't know what *dysmotility* meant, but he didn't ask, because then the doctor would know that this was one more of his wife's symptoms that he hadn't known about, or cared about, or noticed.

“After all, as I'm sure your wife has told you, peritoneal mesothelioma is very rare,” Dr. Knox continued. “And I won't mislead you. It's also very serious. Because the peritoneum is a very fine membrane surrounding the abdominal organs, almost like Saran Wrap, diseased tissue can be tucked into corners that are difficult or impossible to get at surgically.” Shep admired the doctor's locution, which at least pretended that of course Shep knew what the peritoneum was; Knox was loath

to imply that his patient's husband paid so little heed to his own wife's grave medical distress that he wouldn't bother to look up her diagnosis in a dictionary. “And I'm sorry to say that symptoms of mesothelioma don't generally make themselves felt until the cancer is fairly advanced. Nevertheless, we have a range of therapies at our disposal. New treatments, new approaches, and new drugs are being developed all the time. The survival rate has done nothing but improve.”

Shep knew all of this from the Internet, but felt it would appear impertinent for him to say so. Besides, it seemed important to allow the oncologist this formal introduction. Shep had already read enough to have registered that most of the nostrums in Knox's grab bag of tricks were poisons. In the face of being able to do so little, it must have been comforting to the doctor to seem to be useful in this discursive way. His manner methodical but warm—he smiled encouragingly and looked Shep in the eye—Edward Knox had struck Shep from the start as very kind.

But even when doctors *acted* kind, the extent of their capacity to *be* kind was often out of their hands. However gently put, many a message that physicians were forced to deliver was cruel, and if it did not feel cruel it was a lie and thus was even crueler. Personally Shep didn't understand why anyone would want to be one. Oh, certainly the tasks of stenting an artery and clearing a bathtub drain were technically akin. Yet a doctor was like a handyman who, some appreciable percentage of the time, had to knock on your door and say, I'm sorry, but I cannot clear your drain. That's all the acting kind was good for: the *I'm sorry* part. And then he walks away and maybe he waves, leaving you with scummy standing water in your bath. Why would anyone want a job like that.

“And I do have some good news,” Knox continued. “First, as I assured you last week, Mrs. Knacker, the MRI did not reveal any anomalies in the pleural—in the lungs. Even more critically, I now have the lab report from the laparoscopy. Mesothelioma comes in two flavors, if you will—two types of malignant cells. The epithelioid are less aggressive, the sarcomatoid much more so. In the samples we extracted, only epithelioid cells were detected. That makes the prognosis considerably more optimistic.”

Glynis gave a schoolgirl nod, as if she had done something right. Shep was about to ask, so what prognosis is that? He opened his mouth and it was dry. He closed it, and swallowed. Instead he said, wanting to be grateful, to play his part, to enter into the spirit of gung ho that was clearly expected here, "Yes. That sounds like very good news."

At once, he could not help but reflect that only a week ago "good news" comprised the value of his Merrill Lynch portfolio increasing by \$23,400 without his lifting a finger. Their son finally passing second-year algebra. Randy Pogatchnik playing hooky at some golf resort, so that for three days working at Knack would be, if not quite the same as the olden days, at least collegial. Glynis being in a playful, indolent mood he could barely remember now, and up for watching an old episode of *The Sopranos*. Now on a dime he was expected to enter a world in which "good news" comprised his wife's abdomen coursing with vicious "epithelioid" cells rather than the even more vicious "sarcomatoid" kind and this information was meant to cheer him.

"As for where we go from here," said the doctor, "you may want to commission a second opinion. It's always possible that other specialists will recommend an alternative approach, but I thought I'd prepare you for the standard course of treatment for epithelioid mesothelioma. Assuming the diagnosis is confirmed, Mrs. Knacker, you'll probably be scheduled for debulking surgery as soon as possible. This is to remove as much of the cancer as can be reached. We've located three patches of diseased tissue in the peritoneum. I'm afraid that the surgeons I have consulted concur that one of those patches is inaccessible. Both to shrink the little bit we can't reach and to discourage further malignant cell growth, chemotherapy will almost certainly have to follow once you've recovered from the operation. To that purpose, a thoracic surgeon will install two ports in your abdomen. This way we can deliver intraperitoneal infusions of heated cisplatin that will wash over your organs, rather than administering chemotherapy through your bloodstream. Unpleasant side effects with this direct application should be markedly less pronounced."

"Does that mean I won't lose my hair?" asked Glynis, reflexively touching her crown, as if to make sure her hair was still there.

A shadow crossed the oncologist's face, a sadness, a pitying, into which Shep could read that such a small damage to his patient's vanity was bound to be the least of Glynis's problems. "Patients react differently to treatments," he said gently. "There's no way to predict."

"Besides, it grows back, doesn't it?" said Shep. This was the role. He was supposed to be upbeat.

A second shadow, and this time one that Shep could not decode. "Yes, once treatments are completed, it certainly does," said Dr. Knox, seeming to rouse himself. "Some patients find it grows back in even more thickly than before."

Shep had the sudden impression that this visit, if not the whole song and dance from the X rays and the CAT scan to all the scalpels and "abdominal ports" and vile medications to come, was a farce, a macabre charade. As helpful and soothing as this doctor was trying to be, Shep felt distinctly humored. In turn, he also felt co-opted into a collusion with the doctor, whereby together they were humoring his wife. The joke was on Glynis. It was a wicked joke, a despicable joke, for which she would pay with every fiber of her being. He did not want to be a part of it. He would be a part of it.

"But before we go any further?" the oncologist continued. "Because this is such an unusual cancer, I have limited experience with the disease. Phelps Memorial has seen only two cases in the last twenty years. However, there's a specialist in internal medicine at Columbia-Presbyterian, who works in tandem with a skillful surgeon. They both have extensive clinical experience with mesothelioma, and have a terrific reputation."

"Are you trying to get rid of us?" said Shep with a strained smile.

Dr. Knox smiled back. "You could say that. Mesothelioma patients come to Philip Goldman from all over the world. You're lucky, because for you two he's effectively right next door. Now, he doesn't come cheap. It's likely as well that he'll be out-of-network for your insurance. You'd need to get permission from your insurer if you want them to fully cover an out-of-network physician, and you'd certainly have a good case. But even if your provider declined, I'd urge you to consider Dr. Goldman."

Your insurer would still pick up most of the bill; I don't know the specifics of your health plan, but you might just be levied a higher percentage of co-insurance. And given the stakes . . . Well, I assume that money is no object."

"Of course it isn't," Shep found himself saying. "We'll pay whatever it takes to get Glynis well again." Given his wife's milk-money income from a chocolatier, the *we* was more farce. That the *well again* might also qualify as farce Shep was not yet prepared to contemplate.

Nevertheless, as Knox wrote out the contact details of this famously expensive shaman of the black arts, Shep considered this quantity now officially of "no object." Of course it had no value by itself. Money was a means. But to ends not readily dismissed as "no object." Food, shelter, clothing. Safety, insofar as there was such a thing, and thus also the capacity for rescue. Efficacy, power, sway. Ease, freedom, choice. Generosity, charity; if not love, for his children, wife, sister, and father, the palpable evidence of love. Education; if not wisdom, its prerequisite of accurate information. If not happiness, comfort, which could stand in for happiness in a pinch. Airplane tickets—experience, beauty, and escape. From the description of their apparent savior in Columbia-Presbyterian, raw, animal survival. For in the face of a virulent cancer, they would not simply follow directions, and marshal their forces of will; they would buy life. They would buy Glynis's life, day by costly day, and in the end you would be able to affix a price tag to every one.

"So far, do either of you have any questions?" asked Dr. Knox.

"The side effects . . ." said Glynis. Of course, there was nothing "side" about them. They were effects—big, brutal, and anything but ancillary.

"Each drug and each patient is different. You'll be alerted what to be prepared for, I promise. Let's get through the surgery first. Not get ahead of ourselves."

In the proceeding silence, Shep looked to his wife, then to the oncologist, beginning to panic. He did not want to shake hands and find himself in the car and have the omission, the elision, the craven evasion, steeping the inside of the vehicle like toxic emission fumes. But he also did not understand why he had to be the one to ask. Glynis might have

raised this obvious matter before, but if so she hadn't shared with him the upshot of such a discussion, and that seemed impossible.

When trying to get up to speed about a disease he'd never heard of before last Friday, through the following weekend Shep had spent hours at the computer. Know thy enemy, he figured. Yet on one medical Web page, well into its patient, hand-holding explanations of every test and treatment that mesothelioma patients might expect, he had finally arrived at a section headed "Survival Rates." He had nearly memorized the first paragraph, having stared it down for so long:

Following on this page is quite detailed information about the survival rates of different stages of mesothelioma. We have included it because many people have asked us for this. But not everyone who is diagnosed with a cancer wishes to read this type of information. If you are not sure whether you want to know at the moment or not, then perhaps you might like to skip this page for now. You can always come back to it.

It was his initial impression that the authors of the text were being patronizing. His first impulse was to scroll down. He had always faced difficulty squarely. But this was different, if only because it was not his difficulty. It was bound, at points, to seem like his difficulty, but he would have to be mindful about that. Still, there was no question that as that paragraph burned on the screen, what bloomed in his gut was terror. He reached for the mouse. He withdrew his hand from the mouse. He did not scroll down. Taking the page's advice, *skip this page*, he had returned to the same point on the same website three other times. He had never scrolled down. He wasn't ready. In this office, with a fellow human being who could speak with all that useless kindness, it was time to scroll down.

"What are her chances," said Shep, so leadenly that he was unable to lift the end of the sentence to imply the interrogative. "How long." This was no juncture at which to be unclear. He formed the question fully. "How long has my wife got to live."

But it was Glynis who spoke. "There's no way to say. Every patient is different, you heard the doctor. Every patient reacts differently, and, as he said, new drugs are coming on the market all the time."

His glance darting between them, Dr. Knox seemed to appraise the couple carefully. "It's important to remain optimistic. I've often been pressed for a specific prognosis, and even when I've relented I can't tell you how often I've been wrong. How many times I've predicted that a patient had such-and-such an amount of time left, and then years beyond the point at which I'd have expected to be sending flowers they're thrashing their best friends at squash."

"And it helps, you said," said Glynis, "that I'm in very good health to begin with. I'm not overweight, my cholesterol is good, I exercise, I don't have any complicating conditions, and I'm barely fifty years old."

"Absolutely," Dr. Knox chimed in. "Committing to a specific doomsday date is like going to war and choosing ahead of time the day on which you plan to lose. In medicine just as in the military, it's a positive attitude that gets results."

Shep was familiar with this talk of illness as armed confrontation: the "battle" with cancer, whose patients are invariably classified as "real fighters," with "an arsenal" of treatments at their disposal with which to "defeat" an invasion of wayward cells. But the analogy felt wrong. His small experience so far was more one of bad weather. So it was as if the doctor had declared they would "go to war" with a snowstorm, or a gale wind.

"Yes, well, I didn't mean to sound pessimistic, and there must be a huge variation . . ." Shep dutifully backed down. Still, he was surprised. Given her ferocity, her defiance, her darkness—of the two, he was far more constitutionally inclined toward the very optimism that Knox was promoting—he would have classed Glynis as the scroll-down type. Doubtless there were more things he would find out about her as this proceeded. Maybe you never really knew anyone until they were dying.

Thus blocked from "getting ahead of themselves," Shep worked backward.

"Asbestos," he said. He found it odd that they had spoken so long without anyone mentioning the word. "Mesothelioma is associated

almost exclusively with asbestos. How could my wife have been exposed to that?"

"She and I have discussed this, and I'm afraid we didn't solve the mystery. She tells me that, to her knowledge, she's never worked with the material. Nor, I gather, have you ever had the insulation replaced in your home. But it was once so pervasive . . . and it only takes a single inhaled or ingested fiber . . . The gestation period for mesothelioma is anywhere from twenty to fifty years. That makes it incredibly difficult to identify a particular product as the provenance of the disease. Does it really matter?"

"It matters to me," said Glynis hotly. Her demeanor thus far had been so meek; finally in the flash of anger, she sounded like herself. "If some stranger on the street stabbed you in the belly with a butcher knife, wouldn't you want to know who it was?"

"Maybe . . ." said Dr. Knox. "But I'd be much more concerned with getting to a hospital to be patched up. If the misfortune was the result of 'wrong place, wrong time,' who—or in this case what—was the culprit would mostly be a matter of idle curiosity."

"There's nothing *idle* about my curiosity," said Glynis. "Since I'm about to be slit open and gutted like a fish, then pumped full of drugs that make me throw up and go bald and sleep all day—sleep if I'm lucky—I would *rather* like to know who did this to me."

The oncologist chewed on his inside cheek. This office must have seen its fair share of impotent fury. "Maybe I should have asked before. What do you do for a living, Mr. Knacker?"

"I run—I work for a company that does household repairs. We send out handymen, basically. Provide the materials . . ."

The eyes of the physician sharpened. "Do you, or have you done, any of this kind of work yourself?"

Handyman sounded down-market—it had always had a low-class ring to his father, and Jackson had invented all sorts of clunky euphemisms to avoid using the word—but Shep refused to regard the occupation as shameful. If Glynis, too, preferred to describe his more executive capacity at dinner parties, he saw nothing ignoble about physical labor. He was more likely to find ignoble lolling for years at a desk. "Sure, of course."

"And would you have worked with insulation, or cement products . . . fireproofing, soundproofing, roofing materials . . . gutters, rainwater pipes . . . vinyl flooring, plaster . . . water tanks?"

Shep felt a flicker of wariness, an intuition that this was the point at which savvy criminals in police interviews took the fifth. The innocent, by contrast, believed that they had nothing to hide, and idiotically blabbed their hearts out. Little wonder that *innocent* had two connotations: without sin, and ignorant. "All of the above, at one time or another. Why? I never took Glynis out on the job. If any of those materials had asbestos in them, wouldn't I be the one who got sick?"

"You might have brought fibers home on your clothes. In fact, I came across a story recently about a woman with mesothelioma in Britain, who's suing their Ministry of Defence. Her father was an insulation engineer at a naval dockyard, and she's certain that she was exposed to asbestos from hugging her father as a child."

As a grown man, Shep rarely blushed, but now his cheeks stung. "That seems far-fetched."

"Mmm," said Dr. Knox. "A single fiber, on the hand, touched to the mouth? Unfortunate, but not far-fetched."

The wave of heat was followed by a wave of cold, as Glynis turned to him and her expression was accusatory. First he's so caught up in his "own little world" that his wife doesn't confide that she's being tested for a deadly disease, and now he gave it to her.

Shep finally broke their silence as he unlocked the car in the parking garage on Ft. Washington. "I thought asbestos was banned a long time ago."

"It's *still* not banned," said Glynis, bundling furiously into the passenger seat. "The EPA *finally* banned the shit in 1989, but in 1991 the industry got the ban overturned in court. You can't use it in insulation and some other whathaveyou anymore, that's all, or building anything new."

Shep was immediately struck by the homework Glynis had done on this subject—there was no way that this regulatory timeline had been

long lodged in her head as general knowledge—when she had conspicuously refrained from availing herself of the copious information at her fingertips about her illness. She was hazy on the side effects of drugs whose names and downsides were meticulously listed on a host of websites; she would not *scroll down*. Yet her searches on their home computer had apparently regarded not what was happening to her or what would happen to her next, but who was to blame. The misdirection of her energies was painfully typical.

"I'm not quite sure how I could have known." He didn't start the car, though he stared intently out the windshield as if he were driving. "The materials I used to work with were the same ones everyone used. Licensed plumbers, professional roofers . . . I never cut corners, or used a material that I knew other repairmen were careful to avoid."

"You could easily have known, and you should have! Evidence about the dangers of asbestos goes back to 1918. The evidence was really beginning to accumulate by the 1930s, but the industry had the research suppressed. The specific link between asbestos and mesothelioma was made in 1964. That was before you even started Knack! By the 1970s, that asbestos could kill you was basically a known fact. I grew up surrounded by these stories, and so did you!"

"Glynis, try to think back," said Shep, keeping his voice calm, reasoning, quiet. "During the early years I was putting in twelve-, sometimes fourteen-hour days getting Knack off the ground. I didn't have time to read the papers front to back. Much less to bury my nose in a microscopic list of ingredients every time I opened a can."

"We're not talking about your not having time to follow every twist and turn of peace talks in the Middle East. You had an obligation to keep up with health and safety issues that bore directly on your work. And to do whatever modest research might have been required to choose safe products over *lethal* ones. Never mind just you—or, by the way, your wife and children. What about your employees?"

"I no longer have employees," he said quietly. "Glynis, why are you doing this? Are you getting back at me for Pemba?"

She was not to be sidetracked. "All these companies being sued up

Second Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 62-71)

In this second excerpt, Shep and his friend Jackson take a walk together during over their lunch break, and they end up talking about Shep's problems navigating the health system while trying to arrange and pay for his wife's care. Please note, also, that Jackson's daughter, Flicka, has been struggling with a serious chronic illness for a number of years.

Chapter Four



At Randy Handy—a salacious staff sobriquet so obvious that you'd think Pogatchnik would have headed it off with a company name less vulnerable to perversion—Jackson had adopted a new perspective. He'd let his co-workers make all the sarcastic remarks about Shep and his pathetic "escape fantasy" they liked. Eventually they were bound to find out why the former owner was still yes-massaging Pogatchnik, and then they'd feel bad. Really fucking bad. Jackson was looking forward to it.

He'd concede that in the friendship he'd long played something of a sidekick, but starting with the god-awfully stupid sale of Knack, which demoted Shep from boss to fellow schmo, and now with the plain god-awful business of Glynis and the Fall of Pemba, that dynamic had subtly flipped. These days he was Shep's protector. The role came at a price. He couldn't ask for anything. When Shep had been the stoic stalwart, he could lean on the guy. No, he hadn't ever put his hand out (like everybody else in the schmuck's life). Still, what with Flicka, an on-again-off-again predilection for gambling, and a not-unrelated little difficulty with credit card debt, he'd always been the one with the problems who needed advice. Now he had to keep his mouth shut, and for Jackson keeping his mouth shut, ever, about anything, was unnatural.

That said, there was one subject he'd been tempted to raise for some time, and at least on this point he was relieved to have a better reason to put it off than the usual cowardice. It wasn't the sort of thing you talked about with other men, even if it should have been, since you sure weren't going to talk about it with women. Besides, there was something to be said for the restoration of the concept of privacy in a country where at the average bus stop you were as likely to be regaled with the story of some stranger's abortion as asked for a light. He'd set the date anyway, so there was nothing, really, to discuss.

When they left at 1:00 p.m. for their stingy forty-minute lunch break, Shep asked if maybe they could walk instead of eat; intent on getting straight home to Glynis after work, he could no longer make time for their tri-weekly weight-lifting sessions at the Fifth Avenue Gym. (Jackson was a *little* relieved to get out of the team workouts; Shep always showed him up.) Though forgoing his sandwich made him petulant, Jackson had to say no problem. Basically in the face of cancer, even of cancer once removed, you had no rights.

"You know, Glynis would never have been able to keep her secret much longer even if she'd tried," said Shep as they hustled down Seventh Avenue; it was too damned cold for a casual stroll. "The bills have started to arrive."

"Yeah, tell me about it," said Jackson. "Let me guess: it's not one bill, it's dozens, right? Going on for fifteen pages, from every little radiologist and every little lab. And that 'EOB' thing!"

"Explanation of Benefits—or lack of benefits, more like it. It's byzantine."

"Carol does the paperwork for Flicka, and I'm so grateful I could cry."

"What kills me is how near-impossible it is to figure out what you owe. Before I brought in an accountant, I used to do the books at Knack myself, and I'm no slouch in that department. But it took me *hours* to sort out what to send in and where."

"Fucking hell, you'd think they'd make it easy to give them money," said Jackson. "Still, I think it's deliberate. The blizzard of paper, all the numbers and codes. It's a smoke screen. Behind which you get charged three hundred dollars for a Band-Aid and you don't notice."

Jackson shot a ritually despairing glance down the avenue. He missed the old Park Slope—a few failing pizza joints, coffee shops that didn't charge four bucks a pop, hardware stores with barrels of screws instead of little packets of four all wrapped in plastic. "Gentrified"—though he was hard pressed to see how an army of whiny Barnard grads plowing them into the gutter with strollers the size of troop transporters qualified as "gentry"—it was all yoga parlors, organic smoothie bars, and pet therapists.

"And, you know, what Carol mentioned?" said Shep. "But I didn't understand at the time. This World Wellness Group. They cover procedures according to prices that are 'reasonable and customary' in your area. In other words, what the fee *should* be, and not what it actually is."

"This stuff is news to you, pal?" Jackson felt a surge of pitying condescension.

"I did some digging online. The outfit that generates this 'reasonable and customary' figure? It's another unit of the *same company*. They're under no legal obligation to tell you how they arrived at it. And it's in both outfits' interests for that figure to be as low as possible. As far as I can tell, they could be making it up."

"Here's how it works," Jackson explained benevolently. "We're going on a trip, and it's your car, so I've agreed to pay for gas. We stop at a station, you fill up the tank, tell me the gas was fifty bucks, hold out your hand. With an expression on my face like I'm doing you a big favor, I hand you a twenty. You say, what's this? I say, but that's what a tank of gas *should* cost—since that's what it cost when I was twelve. Basically, the insurers live in a fantasy world, and we Mugs are stuck in the real one."

Shep shook his head. "Glynis and I have always kept to a tight budget. Trying to build that nest egg for The Afterlife. We've waited for the two-for-one offer on shampoo. Bought toilet paper in the economy size of twelve rolls, single ply. Got the special on turkey burgers even if we were more in the mood for steak. Now it's five hundred for this, five thousand for that . . . And they never tell you in advance what it costs. It's like going on a spree, piling all this shit on the counter, and none of it has any price tags. We only pick up twenty percent in co-insurance, but that's after the five-K deductible. One single lab bill—that's a hell of a lot of toilet paper."

"Double-ply," said Jackson.

"I'm thinking, why did we ever eat turkey burgers? And then I remember that I'm not supposed to care. Ultimately, I don't care. All that matters is Glynis."

"That's what they're counting on, bud. That's the whole scam in a nutshell. Same with Flicka. It's your kid, right? So what are you gonna say, no we're not going to treat her pneumonia—again—cause we want the kind of DVD that records? And, friend . . . I hate to say it, but for you this is just the beginning."

"I know," said Shep quietly, as they hung a left on Ninth Street and headed for Prospect Park. "Even to cover the last stack of bills . . . Well, you know I've kept this other account, where I put the proceeds of the sale of Knack once I paid off the feds. It's earmarked for The Afterlife, and I've never touched it. But there wasn't enough in our joint checking, so I had to tap the Merrill Lynch. I'd never written a single check on it. Number 101 went for the CAT scan."

"My guess is you're already on 115. Take my advice, and order another checkbook pronto."

"Signing that first one was strangely emotional. Even if it's 'only' money, as my father would say."

"Yeah, 'only' the proceeds from over twenty years building your own business. 'Only' eight years of humiliation with Randy Pogatchnik."

"It doesn't matter. I just didn't realize at the time what I was really saving for."

"You ever think about it? Pemba?"

"No," said Shep, and changed the subject. "I guess we're lucky, though. We live in the States. Hey, we get the best medical care in the world."

"Think again, pal. In comparison to all the other rich countries like England, Australia . . . Canada . . . I don't remember the rest. Look at all the statistics that matter—infant mortality, cancer survival, you name it? We come in *last*. And we pay *twice as much*."

"Yeah, well. At least we don't have socialized medicine."

Jackson guffawed. Shep wasn't stupid, but he could be painfully cooperative. That "socialized medicine" bogymen went all the way back

to the 1940s, when Harry Truman had wanted to bring in a national health service, just like the Brits. Nervous that doctors wouldn't keep raking it in, the American Medical Association concocted this inspired cold war buzz phrase, which had struck terror in the hearts of their countrymen ever since. A genius stroke of labeling. Like when supermarkets came out with that "no frills" line, packaging a perfectly standard, decent product in stark, ugly-ass black-and-white, thus ensuring that no one with any class would buy it, at half the brand-name price. It worked. Even Jackson's cash-strapped mother hadn't wanted to be caught dead with no-frills tissues in her cart.

"You realize fortysomething percent of this country is either on Medicaid or Medicare?" said Jackson; history lessons always put Shep to sleep. "All this *ooh-ooh* about how we don't want 'socialized medicine.' Well, we *got* socialized medicine, for nearly half the population. So the other half is paying twice. Your Mugs are paying for your Mooches' CAT scans with confiscatory taxes"—*confiscatory* was a wonderful word Jackson had learned only about a year ago, and he used it at every opportunity—"and a second time for their own damn scans."

"You sound so down on Medicare and Medicaid. But you're not saying that you wish old and poor people didn't have access to health care."

Jackson sighed. That line was so predictable. Shep was a class-A Mug. For the ranks of complacent dupes to which, alas, Jackson also belonged, Shep Knacker could be the mascot. "No, I'm not saying that. My point is, guys with health benefits don't *think* they're paying their own medical bills. They cling to their precious employee health insurance as if it's this great freebie. It's not free! They don't understand they'd be getting, like, fifteen grand more in salary if it weren't for the damned health benefit! It's fucking sad, man."

"Money's gotta come from somewhere, Jacks. Some big national thing would send taxes through the roof. There goes your fifteen grand. Worse, if you earn a decent living."

"It seems like it's all the same dough, but it's not. Think about it. Every piece of paper that just landed in your mailbox cost money. Some officious twit was paid to fill in all those codes, and tick the boxes, and

fire off copies to five other places. *Thirty percent* of the money spent on medical care in this country goes to so-called 'administration.' Fact is, there's a wholly fatty layer of for-profit insurance companies larded between Glynis and her doctors, a bunch of bloodsucking greedy fucks making money off her being sick. And not one of them knows how to set a broken arm. Kick those assholes out of the picture, and for the same cost the whole country would be covered, without fifty different bills a week arriving in your mailbox."

"*You* of all people want the government to take over health care?" said Shep, shaking his head with a lopsided smile. "Jacks, you hate government. You're an anarchist."

"These companies are so in bed with government that they might as well be the government," Jackson charged back, irked by Shep's superior bemusement; yeah, maybe he wasn't totally consistent, but at least he read stuff, he thought about things, unlike *some* people, who took everything they were told as gospel. "Why else do you figure that no halfway credible presidential candidate, Democrats included, ever dares suggest eliminating the bloodsuckers altogether? Besides, if the feds wouldn't do it much better, they couldn't do it worse. And the whole concept of insurance is to spread the risk, right? To pool the healthy people and the likes of Flicka together so it all evens out in the end. Well, what could be a fairer 'risk pool' than the whole damned country? Health care is about the only thing the fucking government *should* be good for. And maybe, just maybe, if you could at least go to a doctor without having to take out a second mortgage, people would figure that, okay, they pay taxes but at least they get something back. Right now, you get dick. Oh, sorry"—Jackson kicked a rim of raised concrete—"you get sidewalks. I always forget."

He'd promised himself to shut up, to focus on Shep's problems for once. Still, none of this stuff was off-point. "Hey," he said, as Shep stared dully into the blanched, glaucous vista of the park, which in winter looked like a drawing that had been erased. "This isn't an off-in-the-clouds rant, bud. This is about you and Glynis, right now, what you're going through, and you're not even paying attention."

"Sorry. It's just . . . well, we got our second opinion. From this pair

of hotshots at Columbia-Presbyterian. They work as a team, an internist and a surgeon. And don't get me wrong; they were great. In a way."

"In a way," said Jackson, forcing himself to listen. It wasn't his strong suit.

"I wanted them to say something different," Shep said glumly. "This mesothelioma thing, it's incredibly rare. Nobody gets this disease. I didn't realize how much I was counting on their saying it was all a mistake. When they confirmed the diagnosis, I thought I was going to be sick. Honest, my vision went blurry and black around the edges, as if I was going to faint. Like a girl. Glynis was the one who took it like a man. She'd already resigned herself."

"This is some hard shit, pal."

"It's *mainly* hard for Glynis. She's weak, and exhausted, and scared. Alone most of the day, too, so when I come home all I want to do, and should do, is keep her company. No such luck. Like, you think other people will take care of at least the paper-shuffling side, but they don't. Just to get the second opinion, I had to request the pathology slides. The radiology reports. The 'tissue blocks.' The results of every frigging test from each separate hospital department—all in writing. I had to fill out forms giving Glynis's medical history a dozen separate times. I was up til two a.m. every night. Meanwhile I have to cook. Shop. Show up at work and at least look like I'm doing my job."

"Yeah, I meant to warn you. I overheard Pogatchnik grumbling about how many personal days you been using up. You're gonna have to watch the absenteeism."

"I haven't had any choice. I lost two solid days wrangling with the World Wellness Group. The hotshots at Columbia are out-of-network, just like that Dr. Knox warned me. So I had to beg these HMO people to agree to cover Glynis going to the dream team, which meant talking to a human being. You know, ten different automated menus. Then you're on hold for forty-five minutes, listening to 'Greensleeves' several hundred times. I can't get it out of my head; it's driving me crazy. Finally get connected, turns out it's the wrong department. Back to 'Go.' With that open-plan office, I can't sit on the phone for hours at work unless

I'm talking about the fact that, thanks to our *expert* services, some lady's boiler just exploded."

Shep was usually so cool-headed, and Jackson had rarely heard the guy talk so much.

"Anyway," Shep went on, "I can appeal, but. This provider Pogatchnik has signed onto, they're real assholes, and so far they're not budging. Edward Knox has treated one case of mesothelioma in his whole career. As far as World Wellness is concerned, that makes him a mesothelioma whiz. If we go to Columbia, we'll have to eat forty percent co-insurance."

"Forty percent of what?"

"Forty percent of a blank check."

"Jesus. Can you really not use this Knox guy?"

"This isn't a question of putting up with single-ply toilet paper. If these doctors at Columbia know what they're doing, then I'll spring for them. We're talking about Glynis's life—"

"*Jim!*" Shep would usually have found the allusion to Dr. McCoy's sanctimonious refrain in *Star Trek* funny (*We're talking about human life, Jim!*), but he didn't even crack a smile.

"I'm not going to buy turkey-burger medical care."

"At least you're lucky you got a cushion. Most suckers in your shoes would be putting this crap on their credit cards."

"It's a pretty weird version of lucky. But yeah, I am lucky. Shit, I'm rich."

"Not these days—"

"I'm rich," Shep cut him off, and Jackson knew this preacher's son well enough to know that he wasn't bragging. He felt guilty. Shep may have been a lapsed Presbyterian, but with this deep-down stuff there was only so lapsed you ever got. "You haven't traveled enough."

"Well, *excuuuse* me. I plumb forgot to put in my ten years with the Peace Corps in Malawi."

"I shouldn't be talking about money at all. Maybe I'm just getting this out of my system, because in comparison to Glynis . . . I have no business complaining. You should always remind me of that."

"I hardly ever heard you complain about anything. I'd recommend

you get more practice. It's not good for a man to take every lump of shit life throws at him lying down."

"We both take it lying down, Jacks. You just lie down with a mouth."

"Speaking of which, I came up with a new title for my book," said Jackson, hoping to lighten the tone. "Ready? *FLEECED: How Shrewd Spongers from Vagrants to Vice-Presidents Are Living Off Us Poor Spunkless Sheep.*"

A half-smile. "Not bad."

"I liked the *fleeced* and *sheep* thing. You know, keeps up the metaphor."

"But the 'spongers' doesn't quite fit in. Do you sponge sheep?"

"I'll work on it."

"That 'spunkless.' Ever notice how almost all your titles have something to do with dicks?"

Jackson shot an uneasy glance at his friend. "As in, having mine cut off? Like, every day? Obviously the experience is central to my thesis."

"The castration thing is . . . well used. My favorite of yours is cleaner."

"Which is?"

"*Democracy Is a Joke.*"

"Yup. Nice and punchy," said Jackson with satisfaction. "Good thesis, too. It's theoretically possible for fifty-one percent of the population to soak the other forty-nine percent for everything they're worth. This guy in Venezuela, who's it's, Howard Chavez or something. That's how he does it. Really, he just sends the underclass checks. You give the Mooches other people's money, and then they vote for you."

"Think you'll ever write it?"

"Maybe." Jackson was noncommittal. "But the key is the title. Get that right, and it doesn't matter what's inside. You could sell a pile of blank paper called *How the Irish Saved Civilization*. All those micks are so flattered they'll pay twenty-five bucks to put it on their coffee tables even if they never read past the copyright page."

"Maybe that's the trouble with your titles. *PENISES AND PRICKS*," Shep remembered. "*How We Gutless Weenies Are Being Bilked Dry While*

the Other Half of the Country Is on the Tit. You couldn't call that complimentary."

"The idea is you make your book buyer feel like a little less of a sap because he knows he's a sap, unlike everybody else, who're such incredible saps that they don't even know it."

"I bet they'd prefer to save civilization."

"Not my book buyers. They'd rather light it on fire."

On the way back, Shep put his collar up and huddled into his scarf. "Anyway, Glynis is scheduled for surgery in just under two weeks."

Jackson grunted. "Been there. Flicka's operation for scoliosis was terrifying. Personally, I didn't want a knife within a mile of my kid's spinal cord." He would have to watch himself, always claiming seniority in the medical nightmare department.

"Actually, I've been meaning to apologize," said Shep.

"What the hell for?"

"All you've been through with Flicka. I don't think I've been sympathetic enough. I didn't have a feel for what it must have been like for you guys until I sank up to the neck in the same shit myself. I should have been a lot more understanding."

"Balls, my buddy. You been plenty sympathetic. And how you supposed to be 'understanding' til you understand it?" Still, the exchange was gratifying. Shep hadn't had any idea, and the truth was he still didn't.

"Anyway, I've heard about people 'going in for surgery' my whole life. I never thought about it. Now it seems medieval. Like taking your wife to a slaughterhouse."

"It really wipes you out. You think the hard part's going under the knife, but the real hard part's after. Takes forever. Flicka said she'd lie around and have to think for, like, an hour about whether it's really worth the trouble to ask her mother to hand her a magazine from the dresser. Not to go get it herself; just to *ask* for it. It's like you been taken out back of some bar and had the crap beat out of you."

"Thanks," said Shep sourly. "That really helps."

"Look, whadda you want, I should tell you fairy stories? Glynis is

Third Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 187 - 201)

In this excerpt, Shep and Glynis talk about the early stages of her illness and treatment, including the high costs of care.

"One course, but it's finished. I've applied Bacitracin."

She touched his cheek, and he could smell the infection on her fingers. "We've got to get you to a hospital."

Jackson looked away. "I'm too embarrassed."

"Better embarrassment than blood poisoning. And if you let that get any worse, it's going to fall off. Honestly, I'd go to New York Methodist right this minute if it weren't for the kids. Once they're off to school tomorrow, you're taking a day off and we're heading straight to the emergency room. I'll go with you. Even if you don't deserve it."

"Carol, it's really important that this doesn't get out, okay? Don't tell anyone, please. If they find out at Knack, I'll never live it down."

"Does Shep know about this? What you did?"

"No! Especially don't tell Shep."

"Men's version of what it means to have a 'best friend' totally bewilders me. What's the point of having one?"

"Just promise me."

"The last thing I'm about to advertise is that I married a fool. Besides, you're the one who can't keep your mouth shut. You're the one who told everyone in the office about Glynis, when Shep told you not to."

"It was for his own good. They kept making fun of him about Pemba, and for a little while Pogatchnik's pretending to be sympathetic got the asshole off his back." He didn't care if she was castigating him; talking about anything else besides his *penis* was a relief. After they'd brushed their teeth, Carol removed her robe and slipped under the sheets naked.

"At least now that you know," he said, thinking that a bright side was hard to find, "I don't have to sleep with you wearing boxers."

Carol turned on her side, facing away, and switched off the light. "Actually, my dear, I'd really rather you put them back on."

Chapter Ten

Shepherd Armstrong Knacker

Merrill Lynch Account Number 934-23F917

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Net Portfolio Value: \$571,264.91

He knew it was wrong. But all his life he'd kept an eye on the future—naïvely, on the assumption that there would always be one. So as stringently as he tried to forbid himself, to draw a line in the sand, his mind shuffled forward and past a certain advent, crossing blithely into no-go territory that should have been intolerable to contemplate. That sand metaphor was peculiar anyway; whatever dire consequences you may have been warned will follow, crossing a line in the sand is a cinch. Moreover, the sand he compulsively pictured was white, knotted intermittently with mangroves, dotted with beached hand-carved canoes, scored from the wheels of ox-drawn carts, and bright with variegated *kangas*. If Shep Knacker was drawing any line in the sand, it was on the coast of Pemba.

He was upstairs in his office writing checks. Though the room was really, really a home office and nothing but, his accountant had warned him off claiming it as a tax deduction. It was a red flag, said

Dave, and sent your chances of being audited sky high. Every April—last month being no exception—Jackson railed about the fact that the feds put that box “Did you deduct for a home office?” high up on the front page of the 1040, virtually the first thing they wanted to know after your name and address. “Do they ask specially on page one if you deducted for rubber bands?” he fumed. “Do they ask right after your fucking Social Security number whether you deducted for donating your old winter coat to the Salvation Army? No! With that *we-dare-you, just-try-it* tick box, they’re bullying you into omitting the one legitimate deduction that might keep more than the cost of a jelly donut out of their hot, thieving little hands.” Well, if it was intimidation, it worked.

Given the monies flying out of this room the last few months, a few grand more or less on his taxes had hardly mattered: dinners with that Arizona crowd on the nights he hadn’t been able to concoct yet another meal without carbohydrates; astronomical fuel bills, because Glynis got cold easily and during an unusually frosty spring he’d been heating the house to seventy-eight, even higher when she got chills; lab bills for the blood tests whose needles still made her lightheaded; and of course, dwarfing the rest to spare change, the surgery, gouging a meaty chunk from Merrill Lynch as if to fiscally mirror the violence inflicted on his wife’s abdomen, and then chemo, each administration of which was over forty thousand dollars a throw. Once such a niggler about buying store-brand mustard, these days Shep was growing careless about money, almost indifferent to it. Something in him would walk out on the street tomorrow and foist a wad into the hands of the first stranger he encountered. *Take it, take the works. Spare me the agony of parting with it drib by drab.* This was a kind of torture, really, a death by a thousand cuts, and he would rather a dagger in the gut—an overnight worldwide economic collapse that turned his dollars into neat rectangular sheets for wiping his ass.

He’d left the door ajar to keep an ear out for Glynis, and sure enough he could hear her beginning to prowl. It was after 1:00 a.m., but the insomnia that had plagued her in the hospital was also one of Alimta’s

side effects (or what Glynis had taken to calling *special effects*, a term that lent the fallout from chemo an element of the spectacular). Which seemed so unfair, given that another of the drug’s *special effects* was fatigue. Soon he’d go keep her company, but not just yet. He first had to get a hold of himself, to rein in the awful recognition that though it had barely begun, he was already waiting for all this to be over.

One whole shelf over his desk was lined with notebooks, hard-back Black n’ Reds that for years he’d special-ordered from a stationer in London—a rare indulgence. The spines were neatly labeled in fine felt-tip: Goa, Laos, Puerto Escondido, Morocco . . . Each was full of handwritten notes: the price of staples—butter, bread, milk. Average prices for two- and three-bedroom homes. Laws on foreign acquisition of property, and in more restrictive countries the susceptibility of officials to persuasion. Reliability of telephone service, electricity, and the mail. For the reconnaissance missions of the last ten years, Internet access. Target towns and neighborhoods. Crime rates. Weather. Especially meticulous in the older notebooks, detailed checklists on the availability of metalsmithing supplies—silver, solder, rouge, flux—and on how far they’d need to travel to refill Glynis’s acetylene tank for her torch. As her productivity back home had dwindled, these latter notes had grown less thorough, for they serviced an increasingly tenuous myth: that his wife would get only more serious about her craft in a foreign outpost, where her materials had to be imported and prized from the hands of corrupt customs officials, when she would rarely venture upstairs to her attic studio with all that she needed at her fingertips in the Jewelry District of Midtown Manhattan.

The handwriting was his own: the neat, rounded script of a diligent student, the tails of *g*’s and *y*’s looping loyally back to the line, the tops of *a*’s and *o*’s painstakingly closed. His cursive had never lost a schoolboy’s desire to please, a nervous determination to copy correctly from the blackboard. In addition to logistical notes, those pages were pasted with photos: once modestly priced coastline bungalows in Cape Town, Glynis posing before a pile of fiery rambutans in an outdoor market in Vietnam. Cards from guesthouses, restaurant menus. The addresses

of newly made friends, usually members of the small English-speaking communities of British and American expats whose existence they had agreed at the outset was a requirement. He and Glynis were, so the cat-echism had run, adventurous but realistic; they would crave the company of their own kind. Yet no matter how well met the acquaintance, they had lost touch with virtually all these local contacts, who no longer enticed with dinner invites, the shared smugness of having built a world apart, the inevitable shared wistfulness of having lost a world as well. Indeed, once Glynis had put the kibosh on the country, thus dooming the exercise to mere reminiscence, he hadn't opened its Black n' Red again. The tops of the volumes on the left had grown dusty.

Since they had never been there, the final notebook on the right marked "Pemba Island" was nearly blank. Against it leaned a folder of printouts. In the absence of his own notes and snapshots, the Pemba file on his hard drive was full of hyperlinks to travel sites and other people's holiday photos posted online. With little patience for research that wasn't three-dimensional, Shep had mastered just enough background to fill out a third-grade presentation to the class. Pemba was fifty miles north of Zanzibar. The island having been colonized by Portugal, locals still staged a bullfight every year. Plantations grew not only cloves, but rice, palms, coconuts, and mangos. Local wildlife included flying foxes, the marsh mongoose, coconut crabs, and the red colobus monkey. Naturally, the cuisine was heavy on seafood: octopus, kingfish, prawns. He had never eaten kingfish, and would like to try it.

The population was 300,000, though that census was dated. Mostly hoteliers, the number of resident expats numbered only a handful. Yet the longer The Afterlife had stewed in his mind, the fewer of his "own kind" Shep imagined he'd require; perhaps one crusty neighbor up the beach would do to help him remember the English word *carousel* without wracking his brain. Keeping the tourists to a mere smattering at any one time, the fact that the island was hard to get to had suited his purposes. If the island was hard to get to, it was hard to be got at there, and equally hard to leave.

He'd transcribed the names of towns, that he might try out the feel

of them in his mouth: *Kigomasha*, *Kinyasini*, *Kisiwani*. *Chiwali* and *Chapaka*. *Piki*, *Tumbi*, *Wingi*, *Nyali*, *Mtambili*, and *Msuka*. Or *Bagamoyo*, a village whose name meant "keep your heart cool." He loved the notion of living in a place that his spellchecker didn't recognize—that leapt from the screen underscoring by alarmed red squiggles. He loved the merry prospect of flying into an airport in *Chaka Chaka*. He had memorized a few phrases while getting up the nerve to announce his intentions to Glynis, and had already come to relish the bouncy jubilation of Swahili. He'd always been intimidated by foreign languages in the past. Of all the tasks that The Afterlife might present him, he'd been leery of having to learn Bulgarian, or worse, one of those subtle tonal tongues like Thai. Yet Swahili was a toy language, full of silly repetitions of the sort that toddlers invent: *polepole*, *bibi bibi*, *asante kushukuru*. The language didn't frighten him. It seemed like play.

With the surreptitiousness of loading Internet porn, Shep shoved aside his checkbook and narrowed the crack of the study door. He booted his computer and sought out the hyperlinks. The screen blued with water that looked clean. The sand was not only bright and fine but more marvelously deserted. He was not naïve about beaches. He did not idolize beaches, their blaring, unrelenting white. He was well aware of how hot they got, how monotonous; of the unpleasant crinkle of skin once saltwater had dried; of how the sand buried in your scalp, creviced into the spines of paperbacks, and followed you inside. He was aware of the flies. But nothing about living near one obliged you to park on a blanket in stupefaction from morning to night. At sundown the heat would die, the colors deepen. And however injured you might get to the view, the birds, the coconut crabs scuttling at low tide, none of the vistas in these photos could possibly grow as wearing as the strip malls in Elmsford, New York.

"Shepherd?"

Glynis was slumped against the doorframe with a tissue pressed to her face. Blood was running down her arm. In his distress, Shep took a beat too long to minimize the beach. Though her head was tipped back, her yellowed eyes were open. He would indeed have been less embarrassed had she glimpsed bare breasts or an open beaver.

"Another nosebleed," he said, stating the obvious to distract from what she might have seen. With a hand under her elbow, he hustled her to the bathroom down the hall. She had dripped down the beige carpet. He didn't notice the trail in a remonstrative way; it was just that he was responsible for running the household now, and he would need to scrub the stains before they set. "Keep it tipped up."

He grabbed a washcloth, moistened it, and drew it down her arm. Removing the streaks of blood, he revealed the pinprick red dots on her skin that would not rub off, like the halo around spray-painted graffiti. As if she'd been basking along that on-screen beach, her skin was dark for May, almost the color of a good tan but not quite—grayer, yellower, more sullen. The hue put him in mind of those wipe-on artificial tanning products that weren't fooling anybody. And he was sorry to note that, despite the dexamethasone, patches of red, scaly rash had returned. They were inflamed: she'd been scratching again.

"I would have to be wearing this sweater."

He helped her out of the floor-length cardigan of cream cashmere, a wrap of which she was inordinately fond. The luxurious sweater had the warmth and comfort of a bathrobe with none of the depressing I-can't-be-bothered-to-get-dressed connotations, and now it was drizzled with blood down the front. So for now her bathrobe would have to do, and he fetched it while promising to rinse every drop from the cardigan. Anything that roused affection in her, that infinitesimally increased her attachment to the flotsam and jetsam of this earth, would have to take precedence over the carpet.

Bringing a box of tissues, he settled her downstairs on the pillowed love seat he'd moved permanently into the kitchen, that she might bundle there while he prepared their meals. Or meals loosely speaking. He'd had better luck with multiple snacks than imposing spreads. Because she often hadn't the energy to get up and sit at the main table, beside the love seat he'd moved in a small coffee table, from which he also took his dinner, to keep her from feeling exiled. Shep arranged a fleece blanket around her shoulders. At least the nosebleed seemed to be subsiding.

"I'm sorry about the mess," she said as he took the cardigan to the

sink. "I'd have caught it better, but this neurotic antipathy thing"—she meant, of course, peripheral neuropathy—"it's made me a klutz. I can't quite feel the Kleenex, so I think I'm holding it, but I'm not and I drop it. It's so weird. Almost like not having hands. Like being an amputee."

Rinsing and squeezing out and rinsing again, Shep tried both to be vigorous about removing the blood yet also to move casually, routinely, as if the task were no trouble. Of course it was no trouble, but there was an extra art to making it seem that way.

"They'd better be right about these symptoms going away after the course is through," she added. "If I can't feel my hands, I'm hardly going to be hacking away with a jewelry saw."

"As I understand it, the only *special effect* they're worried could be permanent is the hearing loss."

"I'm sorry, what did you say?"

He raised his voice. "That as I understand it—"

"Shepherd. I was joking."

Of course she was joking. He would usually have been able to tell. It took concentration to remember that Glynis was still Glynis—that tau-tology so beloved of Pogatchnik—and he shouldn't treat her too gently or like a child. Yet what he said next was indeed parental, and fostered a familiar discomfort, the same sense of conniving complicity he'd first experienced with Dr. Knox.

"You have to focus on the fact that all this is temporary," he said. "I know it seems like the longest nine months of your life. But out the other side, the rashes, the sores, and the neuropathy will all clear up once you flush the drugs from your system. Try to keep your mind on the finish line."

"All I can say is, if this is tolerating A Lift into Manhattan 'incredibly well,' I'd hate to learn what it felt like to tolerate it badly."

A Lift into Manhattan meant, of course, Alimta and cisplatin. Sedulous rechristening provided his wife not only a running source of entertainment, but ownership, a fragile feeling of control. Pharmaceutical companies would not tyrannize her with their perky nonsense trade names, whose subliminal positivism about the corruptions of the body

she mercilessly mocked: Emend (*Amen*), Ativan (*Attiboy*), Maxidex (*Maxipad*). Yet Glynis herself had a knack for hijacking the heavy, forbiddingly multisyllabic generics into deviations that were harmless or even pleasant: lorazepam sweetened to *marzipan*, domperidone fizzed into *Dom Pérignon*, and lansoprazole lilted into *lamzy divey*, from the chipper gibberish ditty of the 1940s. The abundance of these drugs were to counteract the *special effects* of the chemo; these drugs, too, had *special effects*, counteracted with still more drugs, with perhaps still more *special effects*, so that the number of pills and potions she downed was potentially infinite. Thus none of her lighthearted nicknames compensated for the fact that her body had become, as Glynis would say, "a toxic waste dump."

"At least the nausea in your case doesn't seem to last more than a couple of days," Shep pointed out. "A lot of folks puke their guts out for weeks."

"Yeah, lucky me."

Shep held the cardigan up to the light. There were still pale purple shadows. He would take it to the dry cleaner on his lunch hour tomorrow. He had to get "up" in three hours, although the proposition implied getting to bed first, which looked dubious. "Did you talk to your mother today, or abandon her to voice mail again?"

"No, I didn't talk to her. Why should I? What's there to say? Yes, I took my folic acid and pterodactyl?" (Even for Shep, it was now taking work to remember that the real supplement was called pyridoxine.) "Nothing ever happens to me anymore. I never do anything but watch TV. We can't even talk about the weather. If I never leave the house, there is no weather. We end up talking for half an hour about what I ate."

"I.e., not enough."

"Don't start."

"I never stopped." Shep left to search out a hanger, and draped the sweater carefully so that it wouldn't dry with extrusions poked in the sleeves. While upstairs, he rinsed out the washcloth and went at the drips on the carpet. He managed only to turn the discrete droplets into large pink patches. It was the kind of damage that in times past he would have

tried to ameliorate with obsessive scrubbing and violent cleaning products. He'd have been anxious that their security deposit was at issue, that the landlord might dock them for the cost of the carpet. Now he thought, fuck it, I'll throw a little salt on it later. There was something to be wrested from this mortality business, something more illuminating than mere perspective: apathy. He did not care about his landlord's carpet. He did not care about their security deposit. Ergo, he did not care about the stains in the hallway, and he tossed the wet washcloth in the sink. He could see how this liberating condition could grow progressive. How in the face of an end game there was virtually no limit to what did not matter.

Returned to the kitchen, he resumed the subject they'd left dangling. "I know it's tedious to fill the time on the phone. But your mother just wants to check up on how you're feeling."

"I have cancer! I feel like shit! What's to feel?" Glynis's breathing had gone raspy. The anemia gave her trouble catching her breath.

"She's trying to be a good mother," said Shep.

"She's trying to *seem* like a good mother. It's theater, so she can tell all those biddies she hangs out with how attentive she's being, so they'll feel sorry for her. Not for me! For *her*. She calls every day to make herself feel better."

Shep almost said, well, what is wrong with that, but held his tongue. Glynis didn't want other people to feel better. "Jackson's been a little weird lately," he brought up, propping her feet on some pillows; elevation kept the swelling, if not down, under control.

"How so?"

"Hard to say. Distant?" He massaged her instep. The bloated toes stuck out individually, like tiny tied-off balloons. "Some days he makes himself scarce at lunch, and we've always spent the lunch 'hour' together. He seems distracted. Like when we do walk to Prospect Park, he runs out of stuff to say."

"That's a new one."

"Maybe he's having a hard time knowing how to be consoling, about you." Her ankles had been so slender! He wanted her to gain weight,

but not in her feet. "He seemed to handle the situation okay when you were still in the hospital, but you said mostly with those set-piece diatribes—"

"They were merciful. They got me out of having a conversation—Shepherd, I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I can't feel that."

"He wasn't dealing with what was happening," said Shep, leaving off the foot massage with a pat that tried to disguise that he was hurt. It made no sense to feel hurt. "Emotionally."

"Jackson is the most cut-off person I know. I've no idea how Carol stands it. He's the kind of person who's highly entertaining in groups. One-on-one, with me at least, he can't communicate 'please pass the salt.' But for you two it must be different."

Shep could feel the weariness in her observations. Glynis was an astute analyst of character. No artistic hermit, she had an extensive network of friends, and one of their favorite marital pastimes had long been the luxurious, sometimes cruelly accurate parsing of, say, the way Eileen Vinzano overcompensated for feeling overshadowed by her husband's prominence as a roving foreign correspondent for *ABC News* by praising Paul in company to the skies. "Rings a little hollow, doesn't it?" Glynis would discern slyly once their dinner guests had left. But nowadays Glynis had to put so much energy into expressing any given view that there was little left for the opinion itself. Throughout the average day now she doubtless thought a host of things that she simply couldn't marshal the wherewithal to articulate—to go through the arduous process of selecting words and putting them in the right order; to open her mouth, force air through her throat, and vibrate her vocal cords. Shep was sympathetic, but also felt cheated. Within fearfully short order, his wife's musings might no longer be infinitely on offer, but could instead constitute a finite and rather paltry collection of quotes, like one of those slight, undersized volumes of wit sold at bookstore checkouts around Christmas.

"It used to be different, with Jackson and me," said Shep. "But lately, even the diatribes—"

"He's so angry, but I'm not sure about what."

"I don't know if it's called 'anger' when you're enjoying yourself so much." He poured her a glass of soda water she'd not asked for, spritzing it with a wedge of lime. He could not bear empty time, when he did nothing for her. "But these days there's an edge on him. He's not having fun."

"It's a barrage, a"—the words were hard to find and heavy to lift—"broadcast. A force field, to keep other people at bay."

"I keep going back to when I visited him in New York Methodist, when he had that 'infection' and had to be put on an antibiotic drip. 'An infection'—he never said of what. I thought that was weird. You usually have an 'infected something,' right?"

"I don't know; I've been in the hospital three times now with 'an infection.'"

"But that's because you're susceptible to every passing bug. Besides, don't you spend a lot of time with visitors talking about the details of your treatment? We didn't. I mean, we didn't talk about what was wrong with him *at all*. And he missed a day of work last week, then never explained why."

"I forgot to tell you, Petra came by today," Glynis grumbled. She had finished with Jackson.

"Oh? How'd that go?"

Emptying the dishwasher, Shep braced himself. Now living on the Upper West Side, Petra Carson had been Glynis's classmate at Saguaro Art, and was his wife's oldest friend. The relationship of the two metal-smiths was delicate at the best of times. Like his sister-in-law Ruby, whose sheer industry he had always admired although never to Glynis's face, Petra was a hard worker, and her output was prodigious. Diligence more than gift had probably explained her rise in the ranks: her frequent admission to touring national craft shows, her supportive New York gallery. That the make-or-break attribute in lofty creative fields might be no different than the single most vital ingredient that had lifted his own pedestrian small business off the ground—humdrum perseverance—was a tacitless intuition he had kept to himself.

Glynis disparaged Petra's work as safe and cookie-cutter. Unlike Glynis, Petra did not press against the limits of "craft" and yearn to join

the art world proper. She made jewelry, period, for people to wear. Another tactless observation? Shep liked that. He liked functionality. He was a handyman. He had always cherished the fact that his wife made objects not only attractive but *utile*, which should have made them *more* valuable, not less. Thus he'd no patience for the loopy distinction between *art* and *craft* that put the latter at a commercial disadvantage. If you made a clay pitcher that held water, it was virtually worthless. Bang a hole in the bottom and it was "art"; you could charge an arm and a leg. How fucked up was that?

One would think that life-threatening illness would have finally neutralized this friendship's ongoing tension over which metalsmith was the more talented. (Glynis thought the answer was obvious.) While neither contested who was more successful, they'd been engaged in a tacit running feud for decades over whether a certain someone deserved her acclaim. Surely in the face of cancer Glynis should have called a truce, or even, in a burst of enlightened generosity, at long last given her colleague a little credit. (Okay, Shep caught himself, don't be fanciful.) Yet as far as Glynis was concerned, the rivalry was as ferocious as ever. She was loath to demote her oldest-friend-cum-nemesis to one more bland benevolent who tended the sick.

"Would you please stop fiddling about?"

Mystified, Shep froze with a spatula poised in midair. "I'm only—"

"I spend all day doing nothing. It would comfort me to be with someone else doing nothing, too."

He shrugged, dropped the spatula in the drawer, and pulled a chair up to her love seat. It was strangely difficult to do as she requested. He never stopped these last few months, what with all the errands on top of work, as well as trying and usually failing to find time to look in on Zach, whose withdrawal made it all too easy to ignore him. Simply sitting made Shep restless, claustrophobic. Relentless occupation was a therapy of sorts. Aggressive helpfulness disguised the fact that in any important sense he was helpless.

"Perra did nothing but moan, if you can believe it." Glynis struggled up on the pillows, which sent her into a coughing fit. Obviously her friend

had offended her, since rare was the visitor who didn't. Umbrage was her drug of choice. "Oh gosh," Glynis rasped, "she has to fly to LA this week to go to the opening of her show. Isn't flying just awful these days; she used to look forward to flights, and now she dreads them—the security and the lines. And show openings are so dreary, all the brown-nosing compliments and then nobody buys anything, so it's obviously empty flattery. That was just the beginning, too. No matter what she talked about, everything she had to do, the endless polishing, the shipping and insurance, the dinners with gallery owners—it was all terrible, terrible, one big burden of the put-upon, when I can't even cross the street! I mean, the nerve! By the end of it I could have punched her in the nose."

"But . . . don't you think it's hard for people to tell you about the good things in their lives, when your life is so difficult?"

"She has no idea how lucky she is! Everyone around me seems to be feeling sorry for themselves, over nothing!"

Tempting Glynis to put herself in anyone else's shoes these days was nigh impossible. To be fair, compassion took energy. Then again, so did rage. "She's embarrassed, Gnu," he pressed quietly. "She's going to instinctively cast everything she has to do as disagreeable, so it seems like something you wouldn't want to do, since you can't do it. That's not because she feels sorry for herself, but because she feels sorry for you."

"Oh, fuck you and all your understandingness. You could use a little understandingness on me!"

Glynis cried easily. He stooped by her blanket and wiped the tears with his forefinger. While he was at it, he dabbed a tissue around her nose, to remove the last crusts of blood. "Your friends love you and don't always know how to show it."

"I'm sick of it." She pushed his handkerchief away, and fought again to sit more upright. "This parade of visitors. The cousins, the aunts, the neighbors we hardly know. The friends from fifteen years ago crawling out of the woodwork—as if there weren't a reason we haven't got together in all that time: *we don't like each other much*. But no, they all want their audience. They've all prepared it ahead of time, their little presentation. The things they wanted to *be sure to remember to say*. Honestly, they clasp

Fourth Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 211 - 2016)

In this fourth excerpt, Shep and Glynis meet her new doctor at the prestigious Columbia-Presbyterian Hospital in NYC.

found wanting. But he had importuned that her body was under assault, and its failure to grease the skids was in no way a failure of heart. Indeed, when he slipped the finger between her legs the lips were dry; only the smear from the tube made her feel like his wife.

They could still do this. He kissed her, the taste with that metallic tang like sucking on a coin, as if she were no longer merely allied with metal, but were turning into metal from the inside. He looked into her eyes, saddened by their yellow tinge but still he found her there. The pupils were small and permanently frightened. It wasn't desire he read in them so much as desire for desire, which would have to do. Looking down, he felt sheepishly enormous, spreading and flabby in comparison. She gripped the barrel of his chest, the nails biting. He was sliding in with that diffident tenderness she hated. She took a buttock in each hand and shoved.

So he allowed himself to forget. He allowed himself to fuck her, as hard and as deeply as she had always liked, with that edge of abuse. Coming, he allowed himself to believe that this was the injection that would cure her, for once a mainline that wasn't full of poison but was full of life. The poison was forty thousand dollars. The elixir was free.

That should have been it. But before she drifted off in his arms, Glynis mumbled distinctly, "So. Do you think you'll have enough left?"

Shep felt his face burn. He stroked her hair silently (several strands came off in his hand), on the pretext that he didn't know what she was talking about. But it was nefarious; after you'd lived with a woman for this long, how well she knew you. How she could tell what you were thinking, even if you tried mightily not to think it, to hide the thinking from yourself. Enough of what left? Money, of course. *Only* money, Dad—on what else did the firstborn Knacker so famously dwell?

Should being capable of calculations like the one he'd made earlier this evening mark him as a sinful and selfish man, that was a truth about himself he would have to live with. An Afterlife for one would cost little more than half as much as an Afterlife for two. He would retain the funds for a solo escape, but only if Glynis died soon.

Chapter Eleven

Shepherd Armstrong Knacker
Merrill Lynch Account Number 934-23F917
June 01, 2005 – June 30, 2005
Net Portfolio Value: \$452,198.43

Driving Glynis once more to Columbia-Presbyterian, Shep was hard pressed to contrive an analogy for his emotions that was anything short of ridiculous. Like opening the envelope that contained his SAT scores? He hadn't cared fractionally this much about going to college even in the days when he'd cared about going to college. Like opening the door to Dave's office the April after he'd sold Knack for a million bucks, and was about to find out how much he owed the feds? Sure, he'd felt a bit sick to his stomach then; The Afterlife was at stake. But he'd been familiar with capital gains rates, and had been prepared for the ballpark. For that matter, Shep's reputed concern for money was highly exaggerated. So he had never cared this much about any tax bill, even about the check he wrote to the U.S. Treasury in 1997 for close to three hundred thou.

No, for driving to get the results of Glynis's first CAT scan since beginning chemotherapy there was no parallel. They didn't talk. They had already talked. No amount of talk would affect the shrinking or

expanding shadows on her slides. She was the same, she was better, or she was worse. The verdict was not on their efforts. That was one problem with a frivolous comparison to test results of the educational sort, whose scores rated having performed well or badly; they were outcomes you had ordained. However much Shep's father may have regarded his son as an alien philistine, the man had successfully inculcated in his firstborn a drive to be good, to do good, and to do well. Yet whether Glynis was *doing well* would not issue from either of them having *done well*. Having always strived for excellence even in humble endeavors like installing a new bathroom vanity, Shep was confounded by consequences at once so vital, yet determined solely by the heedless decree of fate. His anxiety was therefore akin to the way Jackson must feel when the greyhounds were off and running and he'd placed a sizeable bet on a dog.

Shep distracted himself by considering Dr. Goldman. Vigorous and aggressive, the internist was a roughly handsome man; at six-feet-who-knows, he was *large*. While you couldn't call him fat, a fleshy midsection did betray him as a man of appetites. Likely no stranger to a rack of ribs or a double Scotch, he displayed the very failure to take his own advice that Shep had missed in Dr. Knox—who, fit, trim, and younger by fifteen years, was by conventional measures far better looking. So why was Philip Goldman the more attractive man? Objectively his handsomeness was very "rough" indeed—which was to say that he wasn't handsome at all. His broad face was smashed flat, and his eyes were set too close together—small and almost piggy. Yet he moved with energy and self-conviction, swallowing hallways in the same hungry lunges with which he doubtless downed a meal. He *moved* like a man who was killing handsomeness, and thus he swept you up in the illusion that he was. His appeal was kinetic, and would never translate to static photographs. A smitten girlfriend would proudly show his snapshot to a confidante, and the friend would privately shake her head, flummoxed by what on earth the poor woman saw in this homely lug.

Frankly, Shep was a little jealous. It wasn't only that the doctor was better educated, more successful, and rich. There was an ini-

macy between the doctor and his patient that Shep couldn't equal with twenty-six years of marriage. He didn't know what you called his wife's unquestioning devotion to her doctor if it wasn't love. She had merely trusted Dr. Knox, which was atypical enough; she *believed* in Dr. Goldman, and with a passion that felt erotic. When her husband admonished her to eat, she dug in her heels. But when toward the end of May Dr. Goldman urged her to eat, Glynis had made a proper project of gaining weight, cheerfully requesting her every favorite dish. Whatever had inspired her fuller cheeks shouldn't matter, but Shep was still bugged.

Shep's absenteeism was already teetering into the danger zone with Pogatchnik; at least Goldman's obliging this early evening appointment had enabled him to put in a full day at work.

In silence, Shep held hands with Glynis from the parking garage to the office on the seventh floor, using his free hand to hit the car's key fob and punch elevator buttons. Before knocking timidly on the door, he paused to lock eyes with his wife. It was the kind of glance that defendants and their spouses might share while the jury files in. Glynis was innocent, but this judiciary was capricious.

The door swept open. "Mr. and Mrs. Knacker, please come in!"

Shep took one look at Goldman's beaming face and thought: *Not guilty*.

"You're looking well!" Goldman cried, shaking Shep's hand and laying a second palm on the forearm for added warmth. (Shep was not looking well. After months of mopping up his wife's high-calorie leftovers, he looked more like Goldman every day, but several inches shorter and absent the poetry-in-motion magic trick.) When he shook hands with Glynis—"And you're looking *very* well!"—her wiry metacarpus was every bit a match for the big doctor's clasp. She may have underserved her talent, but even intermittent filing, sawing, and polishing had produced the fiercest grip of any woman Shep knew.

They sat before the desk. Shep was glad for the chair. He felt shaky. Asterisks were spinning in his visual field, as if the office swarmed with flies. He prayed that Goldman wasn't the round-up type, who would cast a merely middling outcome in glowing terms.

The doctor bombed to his seat, clasped his hands behind his head, and tipped rearward in his spring-backed chair with one cordovan on the edge of the desk. His lab coat was open, his shirt crumpled, his hair in disarray; he was a bit of a slouch. But then, any specialist with patients flying in from New Zealand and Korea could afford to look unkempt. "Well, boys and girls, I have fabulous news!"

Shep dropped his shoulders in relief. The internist was a man of science, not a car salesman, and by code of practice couldn't turn back the odometer on a last-legs clunker.

"The evil shrinketh before the mighty hand of righteousness," Goldman proceeded gleefully. "I know that Alimta is a bastard, Mrs. Knacker, and you've been a real trouper." (This much beloved term *real trouper* was apparently medical shorthand for *does not wake doctor in middle of night when suffering side effects hospital staff have already prepared her for*.) "But it's been worth it. I'll be honest: that one biphasic patch is being stubborn. But it hasn't got any larger either, so we've arrested its progress. The other two are significantly reduced in size. We're not seeing any metastasis, either."

Shep reached around Glynis's neck and kissed her forehead in blessing. They squeezed each other's hands while tumbling over one another to exclaim, "That's wonderful! That's terrific! We're so grateful!"

Goldman loaded a CD into his computer, showing them cross-sections of Glynis's organs, which looked like slices of a fancy game terrine in an upscale restaurant. Shep castigated himself for ever thinking critically about Philip Goldman. Maybe the guy really was handsome. Shep wasn't a female, so who was he to judge? And if Glynis "believed" in her doctor, the faith had been well placed.

By contrast, Shep felt traitorous, cynical, and shallow for having been a doubter, a religious skeptic. His sudden groundswell realignment in relation to his wife's disease was none too subtle, leaving him to wonder if all along he'd suffered from an attitude problem. He didn't buy into this New Age business of sending out "negative energy"—or he didn't think he bought it. Nonetheless, any atmospheric contribution he might have made to his wife's convalescence (might they dare now to call it "recov-

ery"?) had been to her detriment. Since the internist produced more tangible redemption than either Gabe Knacker's traditional Presbyterianism or Deb's barney born-again sect in Tucson, it was time to convert. To become a loyal, tithing parishioner of Philip Goldman's church.

Exercising his newfound faith, Shep regarded the doctor with fresh appreciation. You could tell from the assurance of his gestures that this was a man used to giving speeches to large audiences of rapt medical professionals. To having his articles published in *The Lancet*, and being sent lesser authors' research for review. To having dying people beg him to take their cases, perhaps in tears. Yet he did not seem self-important; that is, he didn't broadcast a compensatory bluster that would camouflage a private sensation of fraudulence. No, Goldman just seemed important.

The doctor pointed out the contrast between Glynis's last CAT scan and the latest. To the naked eye, the differences looked depressingly slight; it would take work, this conversion, spurning a natural agnosticism and getting with the program. Throughout, Goldman employed the inclusive first-person plural: *we've* shrunk this, *we've* shrunk that. But the pronoun was over-generous. *We* had done nothing, as Goldman knew very well.

The doctor's most conspicuous appetite was for accomplishment, and his drive for excellence put in the shade Shep's sorry aim to march roofing patches with original slates. Maybe Goldman liked Glynis; he liked being liked, so it was hard to tell. But his primary relationship was with her cancer. She was therefore a vehicle for his own beatification. In taming her malignancy, he was probably pleased on her behalf; he was unquestionably pleased on his own. More project than person, Glynis was an instrument for the furtherance of this doctor's galloping ambition, and not only to do good but to do *well*.

Her surrogacy was obscurely unsettling. Yet Shep couldn't identify what was wrong with it. He was ordinarily an advocate of healthy self-interest. For Goldman to have conflated his patient's survival and his personal conquest was in Glynis's interest, too. She didn't need another well-wisher, Shep told himself, another friend. She needed a competent,

skillful technician who did the best job he knew how, and why the man made that maximum effort was his business. For that matter, maybe Shep should reverse who was using whom. He and Glynis were hijacking Goldman's ego to serve their own purposes, and looked at this way the scenario seemed perfectly cheerful.

"Since it's working," the doctor wrapped up, "and you seem to tolerate the drugs better than the average bear, for now we should keep hitting the cancer with Alimta and—with 'A Lift into Manhattan.'" As the doctor shot Glynis a conspiratorial smile, Shep tried valiantly not to feel wounded that she'd let Goldman in on their private joke. "I'm a little concerned about your blood count. But we have plenty of other options at our disposal if your tolerance slips, or your progress with Alimta flags." He rattled off a list of alternative drugs, and then asked about the current side effects. Glynis played them down.

It was summer. For the first time that season, it felt like summer, and the luscious weather was not a mockery. In the long light of early July, the sun was only now setting behind Hackensack, flashing tangerine sheets across the Hudson. Driving with thrust, Shep recalibrated the future. Maybe she'd pull through after all. Maybe he wouldn't have to go to Pemba by himself. Maybe there would still be sufficient funds in the Merrill Lynch, if not for the relaxed, luxurious second life he'd planned, enough to get by, to pick up a small house for a song and eat papayas. Maybe he would still have to prevail upon her to go, but maybe this experience will have changed her, given her a glimpse of how little time was left even for people who didn't have cancer. Maybe he would order up that kingfish, by candlelight, for two.

"How'd you like to eat out tonight?" he proposed. "I could give you a real 'Lift into Manhattan.'"

"It's a little risky, with other people's germs . . ." said Glynis. "But what the hell. Let's celebrate. I'd love to go to Japonica, but sushi is probably pushing it."

No matter how many restaurants he sampled, up against it like this

Shep often drew a blank, and they'd end up at some heavily advertised tourist joint like Fiorello's because it was the only name he could dredge up. But this evening was charmed. "City Crab?" "Perfect!"

Bejeweled like a tiara, the George Washington Bridge had just switched on its lights. Undergoing maintenance, the span on the Manhattan side had been unlit for years now, leaving a single lit peak on the New Jersey end to dangle to darkness mid-river; the lopsided effect had been visually vexing. Tonight at long last the whole bridge was lit shore to shore. The renewed symmetry seemed to mean something. A rhythm and balance had been restored.

Being out in public was a novelty now. The evening got off to a rocky start when they noticed a patron coughing nearby, and insisted on being reseated. When the waitress acted miffed, Glynis played her trump card: "My immune system is compromised. I have cancer." After moving them swiftly upstairs, the waitress brought a complimentary amuse-bouche with the establishment's apologies. Once the girl left, Glynis muttered, "At least mesothelioma is good for something."

Glynis hadn't been strictly forbidden alcohol, and Shep scanned the wine list. He didn't much care about champagne, interchangeable with Mountain Dew in his view, and Glynis would likely sip a single flute. Still he chose a pricey *Veuve Cliquot*. He wasn't buying champagne. Like most people, he suspected, he was buying the *idea* of champagne.

"To your health," he toasted, pleased to note that in low lighting his wife's chemo-tinged skin color could pass for a tan. She looked fetching in her cream satin turban, which so suited her long, sharp face that onlookers might easily assume that she'd opted for the swaddling as a style statement.

"I've been meaning to tell you," said Glynis, tucking into her crab cakes. "I've been getting *loads* of ideas for new flatware projects. Like in the car just now. I got an image of a salad serving set, two nested spoons—one larger and thicker, the other thinner and more sinewy, both different but perfectly cupped. Forged, not cast, all on a slight curve . . . It's hard to explain."

Fifth Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 245 - 259)

In this excerpt, Shep and Jackson fall into a conversation about employment-based health insurance with his boss, Randy Pogatchnik, who is unsympathetic to Shep's difficulties in getting his bills covered.

She'd started wearing a nightgown despite the close, thick summer air, but the door was already locked and nightgowns come off. He put a hand on her thigh. She looked at the hand, then in his eyes; her expression was skeptical but not, for once, hostile. It was a little early after the second plastic surgery—the scars were still red and sensitive—but like a job seeker during an economic downturn he would have to apply for the few openings that came along. When he kissed her she was passive, though she did not recoil. Yeah, as he got into the idea the Monkey's-Paw mangle mooded again, but nothing could be more painful than this months-long freeze-out.

As Jackson slid his hand up under the nightgown, they were miles from some breakthrough erotic melee with Suave. He was super gentle and super careful, implicitly asking permission with every caress, as if she were still a virgin and had to be broken in nice and slow, rather than his wife and the mother of his children. Still he did finally coax the boring white cotton sack over her head—heaven forbid she'd wear a negligee—and slipped his hands onto those twin scoops of vanilla ice cream. Carol didn't participate much, but she didn't stop him. There was only one stage to go, tearing off the damned boxers, an unveiling that now filled him with dread; he should have switched off the light on Carol's side of the bed when he'd had the chance. As he hastily dragged them off the elastic smarted; he could see her hating to look and yet having to look and so looking and then looking away. His erection was about as good as it got, meaning not very, and though this was hardly the time to entertain such thoughts he had to concede that if anything after all that snipping and pulling and chopping and patching the mutilated nubbin—which looked like some half-chewed chicken neck that had got stuck in a garbage disposal—was now even smaller than it had been to begin with.

When he eased on top of her, Carol's distorted, twitching face bore superficial resemblance to the expression she'd worn when he caught her slathering her pussy with Suave, but was probably closer to the wobbly grimace of a patient about to submit to a colonoscopy. Since Carol obviously wasn't going to help, he rose up on one hand and with the other tried to position his disabled ward for entry, wondering if you could

organize wheelchair access to a vagina. Pushing at her, he cringed as his dick buckled. He tried one more time by keeping his middle finger underneath the shaft like a makeshift splint, but with one, he had to admit, graceful maneuver Carol was out from under him and standing beside the bed. "I can't." Shaking despite the muggy July, she reached for the nightgown scrunched behind her pillow. "I'm sorry. I tried, but even if you could get it in, Jackson, I can't do it. It's too repulsive."

Carol was not a theatrical person, and he didn't really believe that she rushed to the toilet to throw up. But she did flee to the bathroom and close the door, and she was gone for a long time.

Yes, Mr. Pogatchnik, it's just that—

"You hear me? Not on my time. I've cut you plenty slack because of your wife, Knacker. But I'm not running a hospice here. A business is a business."

Jackson peeked around his partition. Spattered in freckles, Pogatchnik had short legs, a short neck, and short, Vienna-sausage fingers. In that red-and-white striped shirt, big-butt Bermudas, and a backward baseball cap that from this angle looked like a beanie, he needed only a large lollypop to complete the picture of an overgrown toddler. He was the only one in the office with enough natural padding to stay warm in summer togs; by contrast, in mid-August Shep was wearing a down vest, and he'd learned to type in gloves. Pogatchnik clearly took the Alpine gear as admonition, and since June the cycle had only accelerated: Shep arrived in a woolly scarf; Pogatchnik cranked the AC down two more degrees; Shep arrived in ear muffs.

"I'm afraid the phone lines at the World Wellness Group are only open during business hours," Shep was explaining in a calm, inhumanly even tone that sounded like Carol. "While I'm on hold, I do keep fielding calls for Randy Handy—"

"What did you just call my company?"

"I mean, Handy Randy, of course. That was just, you know, a slip of the tongue."

"You're on thin ice, Knacker. Under the circumstances, you figure it's smart to confuse the name of your only employer with jerking off?"

"No, Mr. Pogatchnik. I don't know why that came out of my mouth. You must be making me nervous, sir. On account of your—displeasure."

Fucking hell. It was like listening in on a pipsqueak draftee during basic training, quailing in front of his sergeant back in the days before the volunteer army began coddling the troops with Oreos. It made Jackson mad, and maybe it wasn't fair, but mad at Shep. The groveling in the next cubicle made him feel personally betrayed. What do you want to bet that "Randy Handy" slip really was a mistake, and not the sly, purposive subversion that it should have been? A recently installed office rule, the "Mr. Pogatchnik" routine was at least not Shep's ass-lick innovation. In an era when everyone from restaurant patrons to prime ministers went by first names, the absurd formality had gratifyingly warped to the tongue-in-cheek; though the fat red-haired road was too stupid to notice, all over the office "Mr. Pogatchnik" rang with overt sarcasm. "Personal calls are personal calls," said Pogatchnik. "Which you make at lunch, on your own cell."

While organizing work crews throughout the rest of the morning, Jackson chewed on a mystery that he'd never got his head around. The rest of the staff had always liked Jackson, or at least they put up with him—and tolerance, in such close-quartered, shoulder-to-shoulder work, believe it or not was something. But they'd always *respected* Knacker, even if back when Shep called the shots they hadn't always liked him. He'd run a tight ship. Caught you taking a slug from an open white wine bottle in a customer's fridge, and you were out on your ear. His lofty business principles may have been subject to mockery behind his back, but his workforce was still proud that stand-up practices brought in a host of repeat customers. When a licensed plumber had left behind a gaping hole in a living room ceiling, Shep would opt for a meticulously cut Sheetrock patch, which was cheaper for the customer, even though replacing the whole panel would've taken half the time and made Knack twice the money. He'd put in estimates on the low side when he sensed a homeowner was hard up. He'd stood by his price quotes, too, even when a job turned out more fiddly than they ex-

pected. It was their fault, claimed Shep, that a job took three times longer than it was supposed to; they should have seen the problems coming.

Of course, Jackson himself rarely ran over the allotted time, since he was fast—*slapdash*, Shep sometimes called it, and the word had stung. Jackson was fast but he was good, or good enough—and good enough was good enough. Polished workmanship was wasted on these outer-borough hovels. Most of the dumps they repaired were originally working-class housing stock, built for laundry workers or for that matter for tradesmen like themselves. Unless the place had been gutted and renovated from the ground up, the kind of la-di-da jobs that Shep had specialized in just made the rest of the house look worse. You know, he'd install a new closet door and frame, and it'd be the only door in the place that was parallel to the floor. The effect was to make the rest of the joint look like a funhouse, all out of kilter—as if he'd smeared "Clean me!" on the side of a dusty van.

Back in the Knack days, Jackson had enjoyed an elevated status for having the ear of the boss, almost like being an unofficial VP. But when Shep sold up, and Jackson's managerial job description did become official? His co-workers' deference flew right out the window. By contrast—this was the mystery, and Jackson had to admit that it gripped him a bit—despite all the razzing about that "escape fantasy" and despite all the public groveling before "Mr. Pogatchnik" and despite having become an overnight nobody like a fairy-tale prince who'd turned himself into a frog, Shep still commanded a regard that never sank below a surprisingly high baseline level. Christ, the guy couldn't have humiliated himself more completely. Still, whenever a really sticky job came in—like the one this morning where knocking a hole for a pass-through window between the kitchen and the dining room entailed busting through a solid foot of concrete—to whom did the guys turn for advice? Helpful hint: it wasn't Burdina.

When lunch came around at last, Jackson forced himself to sidle up to Shep's station. He'd begged off lunch to do "errands" so many afternoons that his avoidance of his best friend was becoming too obvious.

The trouble was, he was now committed to omitting from his conversation everything he was going through with Carol; just as in boxing, none of his topics could target below the waist. While he could always resort to Mugs and Mooches, a tirade wasn't as satisfying when its purpose was purely diversionary. "You have to make some call, or can you grab a bite?"

"Forty minutes isn't enough time to get through to a human being at that switchboard," said Shep. "The thing is, I got sent a bill they totally refused. It's for fifty-eight K and change, too. The secretary at Goldman's office said it may have been some number entered wrong. One digit off, anywhere on the form, and they refuse to pay the whole thing."

"You realize what a fair whack of their 'administration costs' are, don't you?" said Jackson. "According to Carol, these companies hire scads of people whose whole job it is to find ways *not* to pay the medical expenses of people they're supposedly insuring. She says these fucks are so good at it that on average they manage to weasel out of thirty percent of the bills they get sent."

"Yeah, well, whenever they 'weasel out of it,' or some middleman transposes a number, the full bill goes straight to yours truly. I've got forty-five days to appeal this thing, and it's already been a month. After the forty-five days are up, I'm stuck with it. And this is just one glitch. These minions at Wellness query everything. Goldman says they even tell him which drugs he can prescribe. He wanted Glynis to use Dermovate along with a course of cetirizine for her skin rashes, but no—Wellness nixed them both. They said use *calamine lotion*. Which is a joke. No explanation, as usual. I guess they're not obliged to provide one. But these people aren't doctors. I don't understand how business graduates of two-year junior colleges are making decisions about what to prescribe my wife."

"Health insurance is health insurance," boomed from behind them. "You got any coverage whatsoever, and you're *complaining*?" It was Mr. Pogatchnik, who regarded eavesdropping as a privilege of high office. "That contract costs me a fortune, Knacker."

"Yes, I realize it's a major line item. In my day—"

"It's not your day. Haven't we got that straight yet? *It's not your day*. Repeat after me?"

"It's not my day."

"So don't imagine you have any idea. When you ran this joint, you were covering a fraction of the workforce I run now. I may have replaced that Cadillac plan you had for Knack with a serviceable little Ford Fiesta. Still, in just eight years, per head? The small-business employer premium has *doubled*."

"Hey, it costs what it costs, right?" said Shep, and Jackson was relieved to detect, for once, a seditious glitter in his friend's expression.

"What it costs is too damn much," said Pogatchnik, who would no more be aware of his reputation for the flabby, faux-profound tautology than he would understand the word itself. "I just renewed, too, and *your wife* was cited as one of the justifications for jacking the price. I sure hope you're sweet on the lady, 'cause she's costing me a mint."

"I am very fond of my wife, thank you."

"Anyway, all the new hires are on contract, no benefits. So count yourself lucky."

"I do count myself lucky," said Shep numbly. "But the new guys. If they get sick, or their kid does. What do they do?"

"Emergency room, or suck it up. Point is, it's not my problem. The way it oughta be, in my book. They want some fancy insurance package, they can buy it themselves."

"Private plans . . ." said Shep. "You don't pay them enough . . ."

"I pay them what I pay them. Pretty decent wages, too, since otherwise most of these wets would be packing pork or picking grapefruit."

"But this medical stuff can be—life and death," Shep submitted with a nauseating tentativeness. "Offering no benefits seems—a little harsh."

"I am what I am, right? I'm not handing out ice cream. I'm a businessman. If I don't turn a profit you're *all* out on the street. Besides, am I responsible for buying my employees groceries? Am I supposed to find them apartments? Aren't food and shelter matters of 'life and death,' too?"

"Fair enough," Shep conceded.

"Next thing you know I'm supposed to spring for their flat-screen TVs and premium cable fees. Which, by the way, would be a hell of a lot

cheaper than fucking health insurance, even if I threw in a new dinette set and a book of all-you-can-eat coupons for Pizza Hut."

"Yeah, I been meaning to ask," said Jackson, "I wanted to swap my sausage for pepperoni."

"I hire people," Pogatchnik bullied on, not the least interested in banter that put his ingrate employees and management on the same side. "I don't adopt them. Least of all do I adopt their whole goddamned families. You two—for now—I'm stuck with. But I'm telling you, this shit, this big communist cradle-to-grave employment shit, is *over*. It doesn't make any earthly sense that just because I take on an employee to clear other people's hairy drains, suddenly I'm supposed to pay for his ingrown toenails. The insulin for his diabetes because he eats too many Krispy Kreme Bavarian custards. His hernia operation after he bangs his squeeze on the side with too much gusto. His ten-year-old's ADD medication, if only because nobody admits to having a kid anymore who's thick as pig shit. The five months his blind, harelippped, one-legged premature baby with the mind of an eggplant spends in intensive care, when it should have been thrown out with the bathwater. Not to mention the billions of dollars his wife's terminal cancer costs before she kicks the bucket anyway, since nobody in this country can die anymore without dragging the entire economy down with them."

Pogatchnik's pause baited Shep to take offense, but ever since "So long, asshole!" his self-demoted employee had been a paragon of restraint.

"Unless I quit being held ransom for health insurance, for this whole crowd?" Pogatchnik carried on. "Handy Randy would go under. Realize that's one of the main reasons American companies are moving overseas, don't you? Health insurance. Hell, I'd move this outfit to China, too, if only my Mexicans could commute to Queens from Beijing. You guys came to me today, you could have a job. That's all. A job is a job. As for cancer, you'd die on your own dime. So you chumps don't like the World Wellness Group, you know where the door is. I'd replace you with a couple of Guatemalans at a fraction of the salary who'd be grateful for the paycheck, who wouldn't give me any lip, who wouldn't *misspeak* the name of the company kind enough to employ their sorry

asses, and who wouldn't have an *attitude problem* because one of them delusional and still thinks he's the boss."

"Just used up fifteen minutes of our lunch break," Jackson mumbled once they'd escaped to Seventh Avenue. "Not enough time for the lift at Brooklyn Bread. Guess we'll just walk. Bastard."

"He is who he is, right?" said Shep, and they launched toward Prospect Park.

"I hate to admit it," Jackson said on Ninth Street, "but Pogatchnik has a point. I don't know what those new-hire sons of bitches are supposed to do when they get run over by a delivery truck. Still, plenty of those guys have big families. How's a little operation like Randy Handy going to cover all their medical expenses? I'm not sure why it should have to."

"Somebody's gotta pay for it."

They'd been so anxious to get away from Pogatchnik that Shep had forgotten to leave behind his down vest, which he now stuffed in his backpack. The sweltering sun had been a relief after the ice cave of the office, but only for a minute or two. Shep rolled up his sleeves; even after forgoing their joint weight-training sessions for months, he still had powerful arms. As for the poor fuck's steady weight gain since January, Jackson batted between an unattractive satisfaction and dismay.

"But the employer thing, it's just a historical fluke," Jackson said authoritatively; what the heck, he could probably fill out this entire walk with factual information. That was what real men traded with each other anyway. Properly edified, Shep would never be able to object that he'd been filibustered. "Until about the 1920s, there was no such thing as health insurance. You got a medical bill, you paid it. Even then, private plans were few and far between, really just meant to cover catastrophe. The employer-sponsored thing developed during World War Two, when labor was scarce. Big companies were making bids for the handful of guys left who weren't in the army, but they were hog-tied by government wage controls, so they couldn't offer higher salaries. To get around the laws, they added health cover as a come-hither. It was a little perk. Didn't

cost much, since everybody in those days keeled over fast and young. You couldn't spend that much on people's medical care, because nobody had invented chemo, or heart transplants, or the MRI. Pogatchnik thinks he's being funny, but throwing in health benefits back then really wasn't so different from tossing the flunkies a coupon for pizza."

"Yeah, well now the pie comes with mushrooms, and anchovies, and extra cheese."

"The problem's not the pizza, it's the insurance companies, man! They're fucking evil, man! They're parasites, parasites on other people's suffering!"

"They're not *evil*, Jacks, they're just companies. Jesus, you sound like my father."

"Do they produce anything? Do they improve anything? Do they do anything for anybody, besides their own employees and shareholders? Even McDonalds makes hamburgers. Those cunts at Wellness, they just shuffle paper. All they accomplish is a little redistribution of wealth, mostly to themselves. They're Mooches pure and simple."

"They're private enterprises. They're supposed to turn a profit."

"That's the whole point, dickhead! That is the whole fucking point!"

They'd hit the park; maybe Jackson had grown a mite vociferous, since a lady nearby side-eyed him with recognizable urban alarm, shimming her stroller rapidly in the opposite direction.

Jackson made an effort to moderate his tone to a level that didn't threaten the safety of small children. "You remember what you told me about gambling? How if most people didn't, on average, lose, there wouldn't be a gambling industry in the first place? For there to be money in it, the big picture has to be fixed."

"Yeah, sure," said Shep. "But you're not, still—?"

"Give me a break, I've sworn off the dogs completely," Jackson said hurriedly. So long as he was keeping his trap shut about everything else in his life, he might as well make it a clean sweep and lie about the works.

"I just mean, health insurance works the same way, right? Any insurance. For these companies to run in the black, the majority of their customers have to lose. On average, you have to pay in more over your lifetime than you draw, or these companies wouldn't exist in the first place."

"Well, I guess the hard cases are subsidized by guys who live on rice milk and pay high premiums for forty years, and then drop dead in the street. You know, guys like that." Shep nodded toward an ostentatiously lean, shirtless runner showing off his gray-haired pecs and carrying a dumbbell in each hand. You didn't stay that taut and skinny past fifty without being a pain in the ass, and at a glance Jackson pitied the man's family. Puffing to overtake a female jogger up ahead in the midday heat, this geezer didn't simply run; he was "a runner." It was obvious that the pill's miserable circuit around Prospect Park was the most important thing in his life. Fucking pathetic.

"On the other hand," Shep went on, "Flicka, Glynis—they've both cost scads more than either of our families have paid in. We're the Mooches here. We've lucked out."

"Here we go, yet another improbably upbeat take on a national disaster. You seriously feeling *lucky*?"

"Good fortune is relative."

Jackson got a little tired of Shep's ceaseless *reasonableness*, his prissy, Sunday school sense of perspective. "My point stands. The very fact that these companies have to turn a profit means most people pay in more than they get out, period. So health insurance is, ipso facto, a scam."

"Ipso facto?" Shep chuckled. "Sounds like a fifties detergent slogan. 'Use Whiz, and, ipso facto! Stains vanish!' I don't know where you pick this stuff up."

"I read a lot. You should try it."

"Yeah, right. After I work all day, hit the A-and-P, make dinner, fetch Glynis her meds, and water, and skin cream . . . Give her a shot in the ass of Neupogen after drugging her out with lorazepam to keep her from getting hysterical about the needle . . . Keep her company because she can't sleep, do the laundry at two in the morning and pay the bills at three . . . Then I can put my feet up with a big, thick, educational tome before the alarm rings at five."

"What's the diff? Flicka, pal, is a full-time job by herself, and I fit in plenty of books."

"You've got Carol."

It was the very subject of recent reflection that indeed Jackson did not "have" Carol, now less than ever. "Yeah, well, this isn't a contest." "A contest over which of us feels more sorry for themselves? Now, that could be vicious."

"I never said I felt sorry for myself," said Jackson.

"Well, I do."

"Why would you feel sorry for me?" Jackson snapped.

Shep shot his friend a look. "I meant I feel sorry for myself, dick-head. Feeling sorry for you, too, would be a tall order."

"Well, skip it then."

They strode on in stiff silence.

Jackson had noticed that whenever he bought a new pair of shoes, he went through a period thereafter when he couldn't stop looking at other people's shoes—wondering why they might have chosen that particular pair, appraising them as handsome or hideous. The same phenom now pertained to other men's dicks. With every jogger and dog walker they passed, he found himself compulsively checking out the mound under the fly, bitterly eying the well-endowed. Cyclists in their tight Lycra attracted his gaze to the groin, where they surely packed smooth, straight, functional equipment that they foolishly took for granted. Now a whole park full of jocks probably thought he was a fag.

"Glynis went in for another blood transfusion yesterday," Shep said after a bit, making a stab at convivial conversation. "Her white blood cell count was knee-high. They had to cancel her chemo. She's not strong enough."

"At least she gets a break," Jackson grunted.

"Yeah, but the cancer gets a break, too. Goldman's decided she can't tolerate the Alimta and cisplatin anymore, and when she does go back to chemo they'll change the cocktail. How do you like that word, huh? *Cocktail*." Jackson had to hand it to him, Shep was really trying—either to pretend everything was fine between them, or to make it fine.

Jackson made a grudging effort in return. "Yeah, I picture this gorgeous Tiffany martini glass, gleaming with sweat and toothpicked with a stuffed olive—only what's shimmering inside isn't Bombay gin and a splash of vermouth, but strychnine."

Yet Jackson had no sooner congratulated himself for being so *sup-portive* than it grew hard to pay attention, because he was tortured by a memory from about ten years before. He'd been replacing the rickety risers of some schmuck's staircase, and though a one-man job it stretched over three or four days; by happenstance, the landing was right outside this loser's study. Jackson had always prided himself on being a lively presence in other people's homes, not just your average tight-lipped hired brawn. So long as a customer seemed obviously glad to lend an ear, he kept up a running patter—sometimes about the job itself, but more often about your basic issues of the day. Sort of like whistling while you work, but less annoying. Given Jackson's status as a well-rounded autodidact—like, he had taught himself the meaning of *autodidact*—edifying narration gave these homeowners a chance to learn something. The soundtrack provided free stimulation, free information, and they should have been grateful that he didn't charge extra for it.

But when Jackson was heading out on the third day of the riser job, Shep had pulled him aside and said, "This guy in Clinton, he wants you to, well . . . He wants you to shut up." Apparently the riser guy was some kind of fiction writer—and Jackson had the measure of the twit, so he was unquestionably some posturing amateur—and couldn't "concentrate" with all the commentary from the staircase. The customer was completely full of shit, since he'd eaten up everything Jackson had said, and was doubtless already planning to use this improbably intelligent, verbally agile, larger-than-life "character" from the world of home repair in one of his otherwise dull, unpublishable short stories.

Yeah, Jackson had dispatched the rest of the job keeping his mouth shut—or when he remembered to keep his mouth shut—but he'd have appreciated a little more solidarity from Shep. Instead, when Jackson had objected that you know what these pompous *writer* types are like: horrified by the blank screen and just dying for any distraction, any excuse to escape the impoverished confines of their pygmy imaginations, and "I'm telling you that customer was rapt, like he was practically taking notes," Shep didn't agree, *Yeah, I bet he was, too*, but interrupted and said, "Look, keep a lid on it, right? Just this once? We got work to do, they got work

to do. You're not a talk show host, you're a handyman." That was really putting the boot in, since Shep knew full well that Jackson detested the word *handyman*, which he'd lobbied hard to replace on their business cards with something more dignified, something less low rent—you know, like *domestic construction consultant*. But no, the cards had to say *handyman*, because that's the word that customers "understood." Worse, Shep had pretty much implied that Jackson's running commentary got on everyone's nerves, and that this was merely the first guy to lodge a formal complaint. Well, Jackson had been supportive as all get-out through the sale of Knack and the deep-sixing of Pemba and now with Glynis, and frankly that support hadn't always worked the other direction.

"These blood transfusions take, like, *five hours*," Shep was explaining. "And Glynis still gets faint when they put in the cannula. Still, this neighbor of ours, Nancy, has been incredible. Comes with Glynis whenever I can't go. Holds her hand and distracts her with recipes and shit—so Glynis comes home yesterday able to recite every ingredient in a complicated cottage-cheese-and-pineapple dip that sounds disgusting. The idea is to keep her from watching the needle. That's not a small job, either. Lately they're having a hard time finding a vein, and have to jab her several times. Nancy's unbelievably boring, but nice. I'm starting to not care about boring. All I care about is nice."

Jackson wasn't sure if this compliment to some broad he'd never met was meant as a veiled reproof. Faithful at first, he hadn't gone to see Glynis for several weeks. Entertaining customers was one thing; keeping up the packaged rant with a friend going through hell had admittedly grown artificial. But he didn't know what to talk to her about otherwise, and he had his own problems.

"Meanwhile, they've moved my father out of Androskoggin Valley," Shep continued, "and into a private nursing home nearby. It's meant to be only temporary, while he recuperates. But he doesn't believe it. He's convinced he's been dumped there for the rest of his life, like a sack of old clothes tossed in a Goodwill drop-off. So he gives Beryl a lot of grief. My sister's solution is just not to visit him."

"Neat," said Jackson, with a guilty recognition that he'd arrived at the same solution to the Glynis problem.

"That means I'll have to keep taking trips to New Hampshire. Which is tricky, since I can't leave Glynis alone for long. I can't take any more vacation or personal days than I absolutely have to. Still, I don't want him to feel abandoned. Oh, and the Medicare people have cut him off, since they've now covered his 'crisis care.' So this Twilight Glens place is all on my dime. Eight grand a month, believe it or not, and a three-month deposit up front. With every aspirin extra."

Ordinarily Jackson would have sympathized, even though after selling Knack Shep had more in the bank than he himself would ever see in one place. But none of his ostensibly *restorative* operations had been covered by either World Wellness or IBM's outfit, since technically they constituted elective plastic surgery. So he'd been forced to charge all his medical bills to credit cards, at 22 percent interest; he was still paying off the original surgery as well, and those were just the debts that Carol knew about. Barely managing the minimums, he wasn't the usual soft touch for Shep's batty benevolence.

"As ever," Shep was droning on, "I've got to pay Zach's tuition, and keep topping up Amelia's rent—"

"*Why* are you such a pushover?" Jackson exploded. "With your dad, just *don't* go up to Berlin, right? You can't. Your wife has cancer. Period. And when the next bill from that nursing home arrives, just *don't pay it*. Fuck, you have the power! What do you think will happen, they'll toss him on the street? It's bad, but it's not that bad. You've told me he's got that house, which disqualifies him from Medicaid. Well, fine, when you don't pay the bill, this private shit hole will just transfer him to a public shit hole, right? I bet there's not much difference, when you're pissed off anyway and flat on your back. Then Medicaid will step in, and maybe they'll commandeering the house. Let 'em have it! Let 'em kick your self-centered, asshole sister out on her butt. Just walk away, bro! And while you're at it, pull Zach out of that overpriced sports club and resign yourself that he's an average fuck-off student who might as well be average and fucking off in a public school that you already pay for! Tell Amelia

she's a grown-up now, and if her salary doesn't cover her rent and her own goddamned health insurance then she gets another job that does, whether or not it fulfills her tender creative urges! Why are you the only one who has to be responsible? Why can't you throw people on their own devices the way you've always been thrown on yours? Why can't you start to treat other people the way, for years, they've been treating *you*?"

"I am who I am." Shep's delivery was so robotic that it was impossible to tell if he was joking.

They about-faced, and marched back in silence. Jackson didn't know if he was supposed to apologize, but he was disinclined to. He realized that he was being irrational, but it kept sneaking back all the same: this conviction that the "whimsical" notion that had vaporized his sex life and still made it hard to take a leak was in some measure Shep Knacker's fault. Hey, that explanation he'd delivered Carol was genuine enough. He had almost walked in on her, and he had found the exhibition simultaneously exciting and disturbing. But there was a little more to it than that, not that he would ever let on to Carol, because, to add insult to injury, the additional explanation was clichéd. If she knew, she'd have contempt for him—that is, even more contempt for him, assuming that was possible. The whole nightmare would never have gone down in the first place if it hadn't been for Shep.

Moreover, despite the guy's earlier assertion that the scale of their respective travails "wasn't a contest," Jackson wondered if, all kidding aside, there wasn't a subtle element of competition in Shep's catalogue of woes after all. Shep always had to cast himself as the hero, the stoic who could bear up under all manner of impositions, the Atlas on whose shoulders the fates of nations rested. Jackson tired of his friend's infeasible virtue—the empathy, the bending over backward to see the other side, that numb-sucker-taking-it thing—and maybe he'd let fly just now to show this patsy how it was done: See? You don't sigh and take out the checkbook again; you get mad.

Besides, Flicka was more of a handful than Shep had any idea, and now Jackson was supposed to bow down and defer to Shep's terrible situation with Glynis's terrible illness. Well, Shep wasn't the only one

dealing with the fact that someone he loved was probably going to die. In fact, Jackson sometimes wanted to grab and shake the guy. *Now* do you understand what's it's been like for me, ever since Flicka was diagnosed in her crib because she couldn't, of all things, cry? Never knowing when the one person you count on to make life seem worth living will suddenly make a rude, unannounced exit and then it turns out, gosh, you were right—actually, now life really isn't worth living? Shep did realize, didn't he, that even though Flicka now set an alarm to pour in her own cans of Compleat, her father still got up at his old shift of 4:00 a.m. most nights, pretending to get a glass of water, but really just to glide by Flicka's room and make sure she was still alive? Because that's how most of these kids disappeared on you: just went to sleep and never woke up. Nuts, according to that last CAT scan, Glynis seemed to have a hope in hell. But no test result was ever going to come in for Flicka that would suddenly open up a future with a career and a family of her own. Busy playing the supportive friend this afternoon, Jackson had yet to mention that Flick had been readmitted to New York Methodist the day before. The chest infections were recurring with greater frequency, and they were getting worse. The antibiotics were growing less effective, and a host of predatory microscopic crud was thriving out there that was immune to the drugs altogether. Simple family hangs like the one this spring, when he gave his kids that eighth-grade test from 1895, well, he couldn't remember having engaged in the same rambunctious after-dinner teasing since. Carol had to piss all over it, but they'd been having a good time.

There was even something showily turn-the-other-cheek about Shep's bringing up graciously as they neared Handy Randy, "I wondered if you'd found a hole in your schedule yet," after having been berated as a moron and a sap.

"Yeah, right," said Jackson. "That celebration, about Glynis's CAT scan. Sure thing, I'll check my diary soon as we get back."

In having repeatedly shied from the invitation, Jackson had no idea whether he was envious of their good news about the upbeat CAT scan, or if he just didn't trust it.

Sixth Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 342 - 345)

In this excerpt, Shep is fired by Pogatchnik because he has fallen behind in some work hours due to caring for Glynis.

Jackson fastened his fly furiously. "Special needs? I have some scar tissue, but I'm not an idiot!"

"Whatever you wanna call it, it's not my bag." When the zipper on her skirt snagged, this hitherto unflappable young woman seemed to panic, and when she finally got the zipper to budge she wore the expression of the sort of resourceful heroine in thrillers who barely manages to pick a lock with a hairpin before the serial killer busts in the window. "Good luck on the book!" she said, remembering her manners at the door. "I—I'll be sure to look out for it!"

The following morning Jackson was already at work when Shep arrived, because Shep was late—and not for the first time. Jackson would have liked to cover for him, but Pogatchnik was standing in his office doorway, lying in wait. Under his employer's scathing eye, Shep settled at his station, removing his sheepskin jacket to reveal a muscle T patterned in Hawaiian flowers; Jackson rued his friend's recent fleshiness, since otherwise the sleeveless T would have shown off a musculature that he himself had always envied. Shep wriggled out of snow pants, underneath which he was wearing the loud Bermuda shorts that Pogatchnik favored in summer, except that it was February. Lastly, he withdrew a miniature battery-powered fan that he propped atop his terminal. All part of the ongoing war over the thermostat (at only 10:00 a.m., it must already have been nearing ninety degrees in here), but if Shep was going to antagonize Pogatchnik with that getup, he should at least have been on time. Something was going on with the guy, something a little reckless and unhinged, but in a peculiarly quiet way; aside from the gear, Shep's demeanor was one, apropos of a certain pending bestseller, of *shit-eating compliance*. Meanwhile, the rest of the staff were silent, their eyes trained studiously on computer screens yet angled in such a way as to keep Shep and Pogatchnik within their peripheral vision.

"Nice of you to join us, Knacker," said Pogatchnik. "I'm, like, over-come by the honor of your presence. To what do we owe the royal visit? This extraordinary sighting of Lord Slacker, slumming among the teeming masses and deigning to come to work?"

"My wife was running a temperature of a hundred and three yesterday," Shep said evenly, booting up his computer and adjusting the fan. "Another infection. I was up all night in the hospital."

"You aware that chronic tardiness and absenteeism are grounds for dismissal—period, in any court you care to drag me into?"

"Yes, sir. And I can see how you might be driven to drastic measures if it were merely a matter of an employee who sleeps late. That being impossible when said employee has never got to bed."

"On top of looking the other way when you waltz in here whenever you please, you expect me to feel sorry for you?"

"No, sir. I expect you to take into consideration the exceptional medical circumstances in my family, as would any reasonable, fair-minded employer like yourself."

"Guess that makes me unreasonable, then. You're fired, Knacker."

Shep froze. His gaze burned straight at the screen. "Sir. Mr. Pogatchnik. I sympathize with your frustration. And I promise to try and arrive on time and put in as many regular workdays as my current difficulties allow. With your permission, I would like to observe that I have continued to keep up with my responsibilities. The many complaints about our substandard service"—here he paused, and Jackson could hear the implicit inference, *our once-exemplary but now-substandard service*—"have not been piling up. As you're well aware, my wife's medical care is dependent on the insurance provided by this company. On her account and not my own I would beg you to reconsider."

"You're shit out of luck. I didn't hire your wife, and I don't run a hospice. You got problems with the system, write your congressman. Now, get your stuff, and get out."

Pogatchnik had made plenty of threats, but this time was different. Never mind the irony that in the olden days at Knack less-than-handy Randy had been a notoriously unpunctual sick-out artist himself; the game was up.

In recognizing that this fat, freckled erstwhile employee was not vulnerable to persuasion, Shep dropped his shoulders. His back straightened, and his body realigned into such a relaxed, symmetrical pose that

he might have passed for a yoga master. His mouth drifted into a fatalistic smile. He looked serene. Jackson thought he understood. When you've been afraid of something for long enough and then it comes to pass, the terrible thing is a release. You embrace it. You're glad of the badness. For in the belly of the badness there is no more fear. You can't dread what has already happened.

As Shep logged off his terminal and crossed the room to retrieve an empty stationery carton, his bearing returned to that of the man whom Jackson used to revere and whom he'd made sometimes embarrassingly obvious efforts to emulate. At last the guy moved with smooth assurance and not like a groveling toady. Cool Hand Luke was back. Jackson hadn't realized how much he'd miss this man: powerful, competent, and stalwart. A man you could count on—who would never let your pets starve or your houseplants die while you were on vacation, who would never misplace the spare keys to your house. Who wouldn't bat an eye at extending a loan to a pal, be that five bucks or five thousand. Who wouldn't keep track. Who wouldn't expect it back. A reliable, generous man of the sort now an endangered species in this country, where everyone had a hand out, and therefore naturally prone to being taken advantage of by all and sundry. A man who pursued one eccentric hobby that most people considered ridiculous, but that it behooved Jackson to regard as endearing, for Shep Knacker's fruitcake fountains burred a few wellsprings of whimsy into a life otherwise austere pragmatic. A man who for all his kindness and hard work had asked for only one thing in the end, really: to be let go. Since, like it or not, he'd now got what he'd wished for, it was a goddamned shame that the timing was so piss-poor.

Glowing from his doorway, Pogatchnik looked strangely unsatisfied, having registered the corollary of a dread fulfilled: when you got a really fun thing over with, you could no longer look forward to it. Meanwhile, Shep strolled through the cubicles making good-humored remarks to his co-workers, shaking hands, gripping the odd shoulder, giving forearms a reassuring pat. Despite the zany beachcomber attire, any stranger scanning this room would immediately assume that the forceful, authoritative character in the Hawaiian print was the boss.

Well, he was. That's what Pogatchnik could never bear, and that's why Shep had been fired. Whatever the law, Shep was still the boss and he always had been, while Pogatchnik had the soul of a peon, and even sacking Knacker would never change that.

Thanks to Pogatchnik's ban on "personal paraphernalia," Shep didn't have to untape a collage of family snapshots, and the clearing off was brief. Coat over one arm, carton under the other, Shep surveyed the office at the door.

The website designer shouted, "Yo, Knacker, left something behind, didn't you?"

Shep raised his eyebrows.

"Your fucking company, man!"

Squelched at first, a seditious laugh rippled through the staff. The accountant cried, "Yeah, take me with you!"

Jackson had taken his exclusion from Shep's round of goodbyes as a compliment; he wouldn't have wanted to be one more co-worker. "Let me give you a hand with that," he said.

Though Shep could handle the single carton on his own, he said, "Thanks," and they left together.

They walked in silence to deposit the box in Shep's car. "I had to sell Glynis's Golf," Shep remarked mildly, closing the trunk. "Fortunately, she hasn't noticed yet."

"She still thinks she's going back to driving it?"

"Probably. Or I don't know what she thinks."

"Living in her own reality the way she's been," said Jackson. "Not facing the music. Must make it, for you—kind of lonely."

"Yeah," Shep said appreciatively. "You could say that. Listen, you'd better get back. Don't want to get sacked, too. You know he'd leap at the chance."

"Let him. You can't imagine that I'm gonna keep working there, with you gone."

"You might surprise yourself. Bills to pay. Don't think you have to do anything dramatic on my account."

Seventh Excerpt - A note on the context (pp. 376 - 384)

In this excerpt, Shep has a final confrontation with Dr. Goldman, who has recommended an "experimental drug" for Glynis.

Bundling Flicka off to New York Methodist, Carol had called Heather, still at school, from the car. She'd insisted the younger girl come straight to the hospital, where they'd all three spent the night. Flicka had stabilized, and by this evening would probably be discharged; Carol was planning to decamp with the girls to a neighbor's. Meanwhile, according to the neighbor, the police had come, an ambulance. It came as no surprise that Carol did not, under any circumstances, wish to re-enter that house. She promised at his first opportunity to go there for her, to retrieve any clothes they might need, Flicka's medications, perhaps Carol's computer. Of the many favors he had offered to do his friends over the years, this one seemed costlier than most.

When she conceded that the neighbor was good-hearted enough but that they were not very close—it was a relationship of pie exchanges and kindly reminders to move your car for alternate-side parking—he begged her to bring the remains of her family to Elmsford instead. There was Amelia's room, and the couch downstairs. He admitted that he had not yet told Glynis. He said they would deal with that, though he was not sure how.

"You will deal with it," said Carol, her voice the color of ash, "by telling her. She's ill, but she's still with us. Being sick isn't the same thing as being stupid or a small child. Ask Flicka. Glynis was Jackson's friend, too, and she deserves to know. If I can tell a twelve-year-old," the pause was heavy, "you can tell your wife."

"I guess telling her," he said, "makes it . . . more real."

"It was real," Carol said wearily. "It was very, very real."

"Jackson and I took a long walk yesterday. I should have noticed something. But I was too wrapped up in my own problems. Actually, all I noticed was he seemed unusually at peace. Philosophical. In fact, it's the only time in recent memory that he *didn't* seem pissed off. Maybe that was the giveaway, if I'd been paying attention."

"This is what people do," said Carol. "Comb back through the past, take it on themselves. But Jackson himself was always going on about 'personal responsibility.' So if it's anyone's fault, it's Jackson's. His, and . . ." She sighed. "I don't want to get into it now, but mine, too."

"Now you're doing the same thing."

"I told you. It's compulsive."

He implored her to come up to Elmsford once more, and she relented. They arranged that she would arrive with the girls around nine o'clock that night. Meanwhile, for later this afternoon Shep had made an appointment with Philip Goldman, to whom it was about time he spoke without the encumbrance of his magnificent but delusional wife.

So what's this," said Shep in Goldman's office, "about an experimental drug?"

The internist usually communicated a rambunctious quality; a small room had trouble containing him, and he was wont to prop his foot on the edge of his desk and spring his chair back, to bounce up to draw illustrations of some medical procedure on scraps of paper, to punctuate his points with generous sweeps of his large hands. But now that boundless energy was more cramped, his restiveness reduced to fidget. In the tinier, more circumscribed tap of a pencil and jiggle of a knee, the doctor was deprived of the grand kinetic theater on which his illusion of attractiveness depended. The fact that his eyes were too close together, or that his middle was paunchy, became more pronounced. Losing, Philip Goldman was not as handsome.

"It's called peritoxamil," said Goldman, "also known as—"

"Cortomalaphrine," Shep said sourly.

"Come again?"

"Never mind. In-joke."

"It's in phase-three trials, and is showing a lot of promise. Not for mesothelioma, but there could be some crossover effect from therapy for colon cancer. Now, I'm afraid that your wife is—isn't qualified right now to participate in the clinical trials themselves, but—"

"You mean she's too sick," Shep interrupted again. "Since she's a goner anyway, she'd drag down the cheerful statistics."

"That's a harsh way of putting it, but—"

"I like a harsh way of putting it. Let's put it that way, then."

Goldman eyed his patient's husband with a nervous side glance. Shep Knacker had always been so docile, so cooperative. But the doctor would have seen all manner of reactions to extreme medical circumstances, and maybe belligerence was a standard variation.

"The point is," said Goldman, "we can appeal for the drug's release for compassionate use. Explain that we've depleted the traditional arsenal at our disposal. I grant it's a long shot, but it's all we've got. Frankly, at this juncture there's not much to lose. One small downside, however."

"It makes your head fall off."

Goldman's half smile was unamused. "Not a side effect—except for you. Since peritoxamil isn't FDA-approved, it's not going to be covered by your insurer."

"Uh-huh. And how much does this new snake oil cost?"

"For a course? In the area of a hundred thousand dollars. Fortunately, it's in capsule form, so Mrs. Knacker wouldn't have to come in for treatments."

"A hundred grand. There's 'not much to lose'? I guess I'm not in your income bracket. Since that strikes me as losing a whole lot."

Goldman seemed taken aback. "We're talking about your wife's life here—"

"Jim!"

The doctor shot him a worried look. "I have to assume that money is a secondary issue at best, if it's an issue at all."

"So if I say it is an issue, I'm an animal, right? But even if I fall in line and say, by all means, doctor, do anything you can, throw the kitchen sink at that cancer—a gold-plated kitchen sink—because I love my wife and *money is no object*. Why do you assume I've got a hundred grand?"

"It's often possible to take out a personal loan in such cases. Mr. Knacker, I know you're under stress, but I'm concerned about your combative tone. You don't seem to appreciate that we're on the same side here. You, Mrs. Knacker, and everyone in this hospital are united in a common cause."

"Are we? So what are you trying to achieve?"

"Obviously, I'm trying to extend your wife's life for as long as possible."

"Then we're not on the same side."

"Oh? What's your objective, then?"

"To end her suffering as soon as possible."

"It's really Mrs. Knacker's decision, when she wants to call off further treatments. But when I spoke to her about peritoxamil, she sounded keen to try it. Obviously, we'll make every effort to keep her comfortable. But to talk about . . . Well, simply planning to 'end her suffering' once and for all is defeatist."

"Fine. I am defeatist," Shep announced. "I have been defeated. I admit it: mesothelioma is too big for me. If this really has been a battle, *with weather*, he thought, "maybe it's time to lay down our arms. As for that being my wife's decision, I realize she'll try anything. But it is not my wife's decision if she's not the one who's going to pay for it."

Goldman was overtly discomfited by this kind of talk. He kept averting his gaze, working his face without concealing his disapproval, and edgily hitting his keyboard's space bar. Shep got the impression that making a medical decision of any magnitude in consideration of how much a treatment *cost*, in mere money—"only money," as his father would say—was crude, foreign, and offensive. "I want to be very clear, Mr. Knacker. This drug is our last hope."

"I was fired yesterday, Dr. Goldman. I just lost my job."

It was interesting, the subtle but discernible change in the internist's demeanor, once he registered the implications. "I'm sorry to hear that."

"I bet you are. But I'd been repeatedly absent and late for work. My wife's illness alone has substantially raised the health insurance premiums for my employer. As the former custodian of that company, I applaud my being dropped from its workforce as an astute business decision."

"That's an awfully understanding spin to put on your own misfortune."

"I am known," said Shep, "for my *understanding*. But as a result of my early retirement, the World Wellness Group will not only neglect to

pay a hundred K for pterodactyl, or whatever it's called, but it won't be paying your bills, either."

"I see," said Goldman. "And I infer that your personal resources are somewhat depleted."

"*Somewhat?* You could say that."

"With what you just informed me, I can see why you might be feeling a little angry."

"No, you do not see. Getting fired was the nicest thing that's happened to me in over a year. But you're right that I'm 'a little' angry. I realize this is just what you people do. It's the way you're programmed. You just keep plowing through the drugs, working down the list, keeping everyone's chin up, looking on the bright side, *never saying die*. My wife, for example, never says die. Honestly, I can't remember the last time I heard her use the *d*-word. Nobody in this biz is ever supposed to throw up their hands and call it quits, so long as there's any last teeny-weensy, teeny-tiny smidgeon of a chance that some new therapy will eke out a few extra days. So you've just been following the script. But can we, for once, with Glynis not here, drop the pretense? This 'experimental drug'—you don't *really* believe it would make any difference, do you?"

"I did say it was a long shot."

"What are the odds? Fifty-to-one? Willing to put any of your own money on that?"

"It's hard to put a number on. Let's just say the chances are *distant*."

"Me, I wouldn't put a hundred grand on 'distant' even if I were a betting man. Would you?"

Goldman declined to answer.

"Secondly, let's skip the 'I don't believe in making prognoses' thing. You've been around the block. You know more about mesothelioma than anyone in the country, you're an expert. So tell me: how long has she got?"

The expression on Goldman's face reminded Shep of wrestling as a boy in Berlin, when sitting on Jeb's chest and pinning each wrist to the ground he finally got his friend to cry *uncle!*

"Maybe a month? Possibly more like three weeks."

Shep crimped forward, as if from a gut punch.

"I realize that's difficult to hear," Goldman continued softly. "And I'm very, very sorry."

Three weeks was within the range that Shep had forecast himself, but it was different hearing the bleak estimate from a doctor. It wasn't possible to keep being pugnacious, aggressive, and hostile, although as the humor slipped he knew he would miss it. This appointment excepted, the amount of his life that Shep Knacker had spent being pugnacious, aggressive, and hostile probably totaled under five minutes.

As Shep recovered himself, the doctor filled the silence. "I think of all the patients I've ever had, your wife may have shown the most tremendous spirit. She's put up a remarkable, a truly admirable struggle."

"That's nice of you to say, and I realize you're trying to pay her a big compliment, but . . . this way of thinking . . ."

Shep stood up, and paced the small patch of carpet before the door. "*Struggle. Surmounting* the odds. Like, the online support group that Glynis joined for a while was always talking up *hanging tough. Refusing to let go. Not giving up. Going the last mile*. You'd think they were organizing a grammar-school sports day. Dr. Goldman, my wife is very competitive! She's a high achiever, a perfectionist—which is why, though it doesn't seem to make sense, she hasn't been as professionally productive as she would have been with lower standards. A striver like that—how's she not going to rise to this stuff? And then you guys jack up the stakes even more. It's not just a potato-sack race, it's a war. The *battle* against cancer. The *arsenal* at our disposal . . . You make her think that there's something she has to do, to be a *good soldier*, a *trooper*. So if she deteriorates anyway, then there's something she didn't do: she didn't show courage under fire. I know you mean well, but after all this military talk she now equates—dying—with dishonor. With failure. With personal failure." It was the first time that Shep had put it together for himself.

"The military language is just a metaphor," said Goldman. "A way of talking about medical issues that laymen understand. It's not meant to hold the patient accountable for a therapy's results."

"But for Glynis, when you 'admire her struggle' she thinks you blame her when it doesn't do any good, don't you see? That's why she won't quit. That's why she and I can't talk about . . . well, anything."

"I see no reason for her to 'quit.' Glynis—Mrs. Knacker takes heart from her tenacity. Since I've come to know her somewhat, I think I'd counsel you to keep my prognosis to yourself."

"What's one more secret?" Shep said morosely, plopping back in his chair. "Though that's a fucking big secret."

"I'm only thinking of preserving the quality of the time she has left. Keeping her upbeat."

"But won't she know? What's going on in her own body?"

"You'd be surprised. Not necessarily. Still, I'd advise you to contact her family and friends. Underscore that we're talking days or weeks but not months, and they musn't delay a last visit. So they can say goodbye."

"What good is saying goodbye when you can't say goodbye?"

"Pardon?"

"If we're not telling Glynis, nobody can say goodbye. Not even I can say goodbye."

"Well, sometimes *hasta la vista* is just as warm, but it's easier to hear, isn't it? And we say, 'See you later,' to all kinds of people whom we'll never meet again, really."

"I guess," Shep said reluctantly. "Maybe you're right, Glynis doesn't want to hear it. She sure hasn't wanted to hear anything else."

"I suppose I can see why you might want to pass on the peritoxamil. But she was very eager to take it. If you want to keep her on an even keel I could prescribe a placebo."

Which really would entail treating Glynis like a twelve-year-old on "cortomalaphrine." His wife's final days being webbed in a skein of deceit depressed Shep more than he could say. "Maybe. I'll let you know."

"Meanwhile, keep me apprised of her condition, and contact me if you need any advice about how to keep her comfortable."

"There is something you can do," said Shep, looking at his lap. "I really don't want her to die in a hospital. But also I don't want her to

experience any more pain than she has to. I'd like something to—ease the end."

"There's nothing easy about the end. It can be very unpleasant. Professionals have a better chance of keeping her comfortable."

Repeated at least three times now, the set phrase jatted. Shep suspected that the medical establishment's usage of *comfortable* strained the definition of the word.

"Are you sure you don't want to reconsider, about the hospital?" the doctor pressed. "You feel strongly about this?"

"I do. And I honestly think that if Glynis ever faces up to what's happening she'll feel the same way, too."

"Painkillers are controlled substances. We're closely watched by the FDA. I can't hand out capsules willy-nilly, because of the danger of addiction."

"The government is afraid that my wife will become a drug addict when she's *dying*?"

Goldman sighed. "I grant it's not all that rational . . ." He bit his lip. "This is a little risky . . . But I suppose I can give you a prescription for liquid morphine. It's not complicated. Just a few drops on her tongue when she seems—"

"Uncomfortable," said Shep, with a trace of his earlier sourness. He stood up. "Thank you. And what I said before, you know, my 'tone'—I didn't mean that I'm not grateful."

"I know you're grateful, Mr. Knacker. And I'm sorry I haven't been able to do more for your wife. We've tried everything we could—as you observed. But mesothelioma is a virulent, deadly disease. It's not for nothing that *asbestos* means 'inextinguishable' in Greek. And you're a repairman, so you understand: there are only so many tools in the toolbox."

After they'd shaken hands and he was leaving, Shep turned back in the doorway. "One last thing. The surgery, all the chemo. The blood transfusions, the chest drains, the MRIs? According to my calculations, Glynis's medical bills for all these treatments already come to over two million dollars. That sound about right to you?"

"It's plausible," the doctor conceded.

If in a moment of idle perversity Shep had worked out that so far they'd paid over \$2,700 per day, he'd also estimated that Glynis would often have paid that much to skip one. Of course, he couldn't vouch for the comparative awfulness of her disease left alone to its evil devices, but as for whether the cure or the cancer had been worse it was at least a contest. "So what exactly did we buy? How much time?"

"Oh, I bet we've probably extended her life a good three months."

"No, I'm sorry, Dr. Goldman," Shep said on the way out. "They were not a good three months."

Back in Elmsford, Zach had left a message from Rick Mystic, leaving the lawyer's home number. Since Carol and the girls would be arriving in an hour or so, Shep returned the call in his study right away, closing the door.

Rick got straight to the point. "They want to settle."

They did not, for once, *sort of* want to settle. "That was quick."

"These kind of cases can drag out for years, but when they move they can change your life in an afternoon. I bet Forge Craft's people were kind of impressed by your wife's deposition. But they were also kind of impressed by her—condition."

"You mean they're afraid she's going to . . ."

"Yeah. In which case, the size of a jury award could sort of skyrocket. You've got them sort of scared."

"So what are they offering?"

"One-point-two million."

Since twelve divided evenly by three, calculating what would remain after the lawyer's one-third contingency fee was elementary arithmetic; Mystic's cut amounted to somewhat more than the U.S. government's *contingency fee* for his sale of Knack. "So what do you advise?"

"Well, if you take them to court, especially once you've suffered—a greater loss, I'm kind of certain you could double that. But I'd be kind of remiss if I didn't warn you what a jury trial would involve. It's kind of bru-

tal. Once liability has been established, the process is all about assessing what your marriage was worth. In dollars. So it's kind of in their interest to prove that your marriage was sort of shitty. A sort of shitty marriage doesn't, legally, merit nearly as high a compensation as a good one."

"What business is it of theirs, what quality of marriage I had?" The past tense made him glad that the study door was closed. "You're telling me they, what, deduct ten grand for every time Glynis and I had a fight?"

"You may find that kind of ludicrous, but you're kind of right. I mean, they'd grill you on how often you had sex. They'd go after your friends and see if they could find anybody who described your marriage as kind of unhappy, or kind of fractious. I had one client who had a sort of iron-clad case on an evidential level; her husband had worked for twenty years in fireproofing with sprayed asbestos. But they dug up that she'd had a, sort of, lesbian affair during the marriage. She hated to let her family know, and withdrew the suit. It was a kind of blackmail, really. And in your case, what you told me about being sort of packed and ready to move to Africa? By yourself if necessary, right before you found out that Glynis had cancer? I promise you they'd find someone who knew that story, and it would look kind of bad."

"If I accept the settlement, how soon could they cut me the check?"

"You'd have to sign a nondisclosure agreement. But after that? They'd cut you a check in a heartbeat. Especially with Glynis in sort of rough shape. They wouldn't want to be, uh, overtaken by events—when you might have, you know, kind of a change of heart. The worst coming to worst could make you decide to sort of go for the jugular."

"I'll have to talk to Glynis. But if you get us that money ASAP—and I mean, like, *Monday*, not weeks from now, because we don't have weeks—then I say take it."

Once he hung up the phone, Shep once more thought mournfully about Jackson. It was criminal that his best friend never lived to witness this conversion: from Mug, to Mooch.