

Homage to the Furies

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They were putting in pipes for sewerage. The street was opened down the middle, and pipes big enough for small children to run through were scattered across the neighborhood lawns. Feathers of dust swirled in the sunlight. The road was shut down – no access to travelers unless an emergency – and the dust rose and settled, delicately coating the late summer leaves, as the backhoe moved back and forth, bouncing along with the rhythm of a toddler. The neighborhood was the last one in town to put cesspools behind them and gain access to the service. The McAlarys were having a cookout.

Brian McAlary carried the charcoal around the side of the house coming from the garage. A crew-cut gray and eyes clear blue, his chest and jaw were square, and he had the beginnings of a paunch. Brian worked as an accountant but spent much of his time absorbed in the classics. The Roman and the Greek. There was a solace to be found in the tragedy of others.

Mostly gin. Most of them had wanted gin. There was a barrel with beer and ice, almost untouched. Gin and tonics were much better for summer, and summer was fading. Brian could see Elaine Howard, legs crossed and the cut of her skirt exposing a beautiful thigh nearly to the curve of her panties. Drink in one hand and the other fluttering through the air to brush aside something Carter Phelps had just uttered with a smile. Elaine was the youngest, and the prettiest, in the neighborhood, and she had seduced Brian once.

Propositioned him while he was working in the garden. Showed up with her hair pulled up and a suggestive red tank top, no bra, and cut off shorts. Out of the blue. She ran a finger across the back of his hand as he was tying up a tomato branch tumbling beneath the weight of its fruit, and she made a remark about his forearms. His eyes. And the emptiness of her home next door.

It didn't always seem empty. Brian had often watched her undressing before her bedroom window. She liked to undress before her window. Warm, soft lights behind her. Her movements were always slow – seemingly staged, her fingers moving down her flesh, lightly yet attentively – and he wondered if she knew he was watching.

In the garden that day, Brian had felt his blood turn to fire. Her house did look very empty, and somehow very distant, growing smaller by the minute. Fading soon and not to be caught. Brian looked up to see the whereabouts of his son, Craig. Craig had just been out to request the keys for the car. Brian could still see him now, his lips in a vaudevillian pout, and eyes sparkling. Broad shouldered, and hair in short, dark curls.

Brian had consented with the usual lecture about conduct and curfew. Brief but to the point. Craig had nodded. He took the keys and stopped to play with the dog, an elderly Basset tied by the porch, but he was no longer there when Brian looked up. It was just he and Elaine, in the warm stillness of the summer afternoon. Brian could hear a humming. The air vibrating, rippling in the heat. He gazed at Elaine, his hand now in hers, and his heart began to speed, the sweat breaking from his temples. She moved his hand to caress the swell of her breast, soft but firm, and loose beneath the cotton of her shirt.

And then the top was slipping from her shoulders. And she pulled Brian's head down into her chest.

The corn was already high on the far side of the garden, and it was only that and three trees that possibly kept them hidden from the houses. He had lain her back with her legs up over his shoulders, keeping his eyes shut tight to the hot August sun. Elaine had cried out, and pleaded with him to let her get on top. Brian got off her and watched her roll over, now on all fours, smooth legs and a perfect ass. She stayed like that for a moment, and turned around and smiled just before she straddled him.

The rest was fairly gray, lost in the haze, but that was for the better. A car door had slammed somewhere close by, and reality shattered with Elaine's fingers still digging into his shoulders. Brian had panicked but Elaine had only laughed, possibly nervously. She had suggested they sneak over to her house. Her husband, Cecil, was at a convention – but Brian had barely heard her. He scurried off to his still empty house, cooling in the damp sweat of safety and deceit, before Lori had returned. And he had been home later when they received the call. That much he was thankful for. If he hadn't been home, if he had stayed with Elaine, things would be much worse now. He was certain of that.

Now, he heard she was sleeping with Carter Phelps.

Elaine's husband was standing over by the horseshoe pit. Brian wondered if it all phased him. Or if he even knew. Probably not. Cecil was a dentist.

"Brian," said Cecil. He wore a black and white striped shirt and steel rimmed eyeglasses. Pointed nose, and small black eyes, fading

blonde hair parted off to the side; he looked like an escapee from Nuremberg. Either that or a referee. “How about a beer?” he asked. “Do you have any beer? I’ve never been much a gin man. Gin makes drunks, they say. All the great drunks drank it. Hemingway, Faulkner, Fitzgerald. Gin took them before they were quite finished. They all had at least one great work in them. Fitzgerald probably had several. Don’t you think?”

Brian dumped the charcoal into the grill. “I didn’t know you were a literary man.”

“I’m not,” said Cecil. “But I like to know what they drank. Hemingway even had a name for it – he called it ‘the giant killer.’” Cecil paused. “I like to know what everybody drinks. Especially my patients. It can tell you a lot about a person.”

Brian smiled. “Do you ask them?”

“Sometimes. If the mood is right. Conversation relaxed, I mean.”

Brian could see Cecil, all in white, a shine to the lens of his spectacles, carefully choosing a thin metal pick. *So Mr. Timball, what do you drink? Are you a Scotch man? A straight shooter? Do you beat your wife, Mr. Timball? Leave the little Mrs. a sobbing, bloody pulp on the floor?* Brian wiped his forehead with the tips of his fingers. “And what should beer tell you about a person?”

“Easy going. Fun to be around. You know, all that. If taken in moderation, of course. Too much beer is as bad as too much of anything.” Cecil adjusted his snug white shorts further up over his belly.

Brian nodded. “Beers are in the barrel over the beneath the birch tree.”

Cecil walked over, scrutinized the barrel, pushing the glasses back

up his nose, and wiped the handle of the lid off before lifting it in a manner as if expecting a bomb. He pulled out a can of Molson, brushed off the ice, and then returned to the horseshoe pit. He wasn't playing. Merely observing. Carter Phelps and Tommy O'Connor held the shoes. Carter had a cigar tucked in the side of his mouth. Cigars were in now. Carter never would have been seen with one a few years back. Carter would have been disgusted by them.

Brian doused the charcoal with fluid. He struck a match. The flames shot up, a rip through the air, but then settled almost immediately. Brian liked to watch the way they crept after they settled. Climbing beneath and between. Small pockets of flame, hiding but hazardous. The grill wasn't big. Brian wondered how many would be eating. He sipped at his drink and gazed up at the sky. Thick, gray clouds moving over the sun. There could be a shower, and the air felt active enough for a thunderstorm – humidity thick and clashing with pockets of cool. Brian liked thunderstorms this time of year. You were supposed to have thunderstorms this time of year, and after the noise and the flare, the steady power of the rain could often be soothing. He wiped again at his forehead and looked over at Cecil. Cecil wasn't sweating. Cecil probably didn't sweat. The notion more than likely perplexed him.

It hadn't been Brian's idea to have the cookout. It had been his wife's; Lori enjoyed cookouts as long as she could view them from a distance. It was as good a time as any, she had said, and with the neighborhood nearly being stranded with the construction, maybe even better. Brian had just shrugged and gone along with it. No reason not to. It was still summer.

Lori brought out a tray of appetizers, cajun shrimp on small toothpicks, and was now kneeling to talk to Elaine. Elaine was smiling, waving her hands, tips of her fingers to her collarbone, and then out into the air in some sort of exclamation. And she was looking Lori in the eye. Amazing how women could do that. Treachery was nothing to them. You saw it throughout history. Even after Troy, Helen returned to the bed of Menelaus. Men could screw you but would seldom look you in the eye after doing so. Most wouldn't bother looking at you at all.

Lori had a C.D. player in the window of the porch. Seventies music. Brian hated seventies music, or most of it anyway. Tommy O'Connor's large and heavily freckled wife, Caroline, had her shoulders going, and her ass wiggling in her lawn chair, singing along with Leo Sayer's "You Make Me Feel Like Dancing."

Lori approached Brian at the grill, her gait steady and eyes fairly clear; it was good to see.

"How long before you can begin cooking?" she asked.

Brian grinned. "How long before you can change the crap on the stereo?"

"People like it."

"Caroline likes it, that's about it," he mumbled, "and she's on the verge of breaking our chair."

"Shh...Be nice."

"I am nice."

Lori was silent.

Brian glanced over at Stephanie and Melanie. The Dyers hadn't moved much. He was surprised that they came at all; he had expected

them to decline, and wished they had. Stephen was now little more than a fogged mirror of misery, making Brian obscurely aware of how he himself must often look. The image was there, but it wasn't quite something he could pull together. He could empathize, and yet he could not; the pain they shared seemed a separate thing for both of them. It had now been nearly two years since he had even spoken to Stephen. They had once been close, nearly as close as their sons.

Stephen was looking inside his drink, racing to finish it, before requesting another. His face washed white and eyes black and vacant, he seemed oblivious to the day; his wife sat beside him, their knees just touching. Melanie Dyers' hair was dark, cut above the ears, and her eyes wide and brown. Fair skin, and a small nose. A hesitant fragile smile.

"Well, you can't please everyone," Lori said to Brian.

"As long as you can please Caroline?"

"At least she's lively." Lori headed back towards the house. She took each step hesitantly, shoulders squared, as if moving for a camera. The footsteps of drunks and ghosts, Brian thought – the shades of the blessed passing sedately through the Elysian Fields. The things Lori had kept were her shape and her skin; she had just a few traces of wrinkles. Brian watched her move inside the gray darkness of the porch. He couldn't see inside. The birch tree cast the shadow of its leaves upon the screens, rising and falling beneath the quiet breath of the breeze.

A horseshoe clanked out. Tommy O'Connor yelled "Hey!" Still somewhat of a jolly adolescent, it seemed that drinking beer and yelling "Hey!" was what he liked best. But remarkably, despite his

good nature and easygoing behavior, Tommy was a Boston cop who had recently made detective. Brian liked Tommy.

Brian felt a speck of wet. Just brushing the tip of his nose. He could hear the backhoe, beeping in reverse out in front of the house. He could picture the dust rising. He looked up. The sky was darker, and swirling. Waiting and ready. He felt the rain again, and watched the others beginning to stir. Looks of disappointment and some of discomfort. Cecil Howard looked particularly pained, his lips scrunched to meet his nose, and he was brushing his arms as if he had discovered a stain upon his clothing. He brushed, scrutinized, and then brushed again. The drops were coming more frequently now. Carter and Tommy had taken shelter beneath a tree. The women headed for the house. All except Melanie Dyers. She had her hand on her husband Stephen's knee. Whispering something. Stephen didn't seem to notice. A look of passive determination, he stared into his drink. Brian put up an umbrella and a lid over the coals.

Inside the porch, Lori passed around a tray of mushroom caps. Her words came careful, drunken and prepared. "It should let up. I didn't even hear anything about it in the forecast. I'd move us all the way inside, but the house is a mess." She paused, polishing the lie. The house wasn't a mess. She just didn't want people inside. She seemed to believe that grief was like dust, visible upon everything, anything from the past.

"We've been painting upstairs," Lori said. "We want to paint the whole house. God knows it needs it."

"Out here is fine," said Tommy, his cheeks high and his eyes

almost sparkling. Tommy enjoyed it everywhere.

The porch was small – now verging on claustrophobic with seven people inside – and screened in. A map of Ireland, and a circa 1939 “No Parking – Nantasket Boat Lines” sign, dingy and gray with time, hung next to the door into the house. Brian had found the sign at a yard sale on Nantasket Beach; the boats used to come to the beach, and Paragon Park, from Boston. Now the park was gone, and the last of the old boats, after being grounded and turned into a nightclub for a bit, had closed and rotted away some years back. When Craig was small Brian used to tell him a story about the boat being capsized and thrown to the shore by a renegade whale named Aesop. Three years after the capsizing, he had told him, they had caught and served the whale.

Shadows were always present in the porch, always still, regardless of the status of the sun. A fly stick hung from the light on the ceiling – several dead flies – and cobwebs were in all four corners of the ceilings and in two corners of the floor. Brian hadn’t noticed them earlier. It was funny, how often you didn’t notice things like cobwebs, and grime, until you had company. Then they jumped out at you like bold print amongst fading words on a dull yellow page. People were much more concerned about grime in this century than in centuries gone past. In medieval Europe, even nobility often bathed only yearly. A good layer of grime must have kept them warm and protected them throughout the chillier seasons. The Greeks, though, had been different. Of course they had. In all their savagery they were much more civilized. A guest was always offered a bath and a meal, and an anointing of oil. Even if his host intended on slaughtering him as

soon as he were through.

Tommy, Caroline, and Carter were on the glider on the far side of the room. The others, all in folding chairs. Elaine Howard's was a beach one, worn and blue and close to the floor. As she sat forward, her knees slightly spread, Brian could see up her skirt. She wasn't wearing anything beneath. He had taken a seat just across from her, in the corner by the door. She caught his eyes, and looked at him, her lips barely breaking a timid, sympathetic smile.

Brian shifted in his seat. He almost wanted to step back outside. To enjoy the rain. But then again, it might be unsettling. Looking in at people on a porch could be much like watching the grainy picture of an aging television. Brian didn't watch much television. Not anymore. He sipped his drink.

Lori was buzzing in and out of the room.

"He did," Elaine said to Caroline.

Caroline shook her head, and adjusted the strap of her yellow terrycloth top; she wore shorts to match. "He didn't."

"I swear to God," said Elaine. "The goddamn mailman."

"The young one or the old one?" asked Caroline.

"The young one. Good looking. But those eyes." Elaine shuddered. "Gives me the creeps every time I look at him. He's undressing me. I swear to God, I know he is."

And Brian could picture it. Elaine flat on her back on her kitchen table, the table cloth and fruit bowl tossed to the floor, as the mailman, postal shorts about his ankles, thrustured inside her. Elaine gasping, moaning, oh, please more. More. Brian had seen the man leaving the house once a half an hour after he had stepped inside. A

bounce to his step, and sweat about his temples.

“So what did you do?” asked Caroline. Her face held taut, she looked torn between shock and amusement.

Elaine shrugged. “I told him I was married, and to take his lemonade and get the hell out of my house.”

Carter Phelps twirled his drink on the table, his eyes tight on Elaine. “Why did you have him in there in the first place?”

“It was hot outside,” said Elaine. “He looked hot. I certainly didn’t think he would put a hand on my thigh. And then that line – “Ooh, baby I can make you hotter.”

“Elaine, you should do something,” said Caroline. “Have you done anything? I mean, at least report him. He’ll probably start it with all of us if not reported.”

Brian looked at Caroline, folds of thick flesh beneath her breasts and the sinking remains of a chin. Carter had pulled his lips tight together with his thumb and forefinger.

Elaine put her drink to her lips. She paused. “I don’t want the poor guy to lose his job.”

“Then have Cecil go after him,” said Caroline. She turned to Cecil. “Cecil, go after him. Kill the sonofabitch. Teach him not to terrorize us helpless women.”

Cecil cleared his throat. Looked at his beer can. “I’m really troubled by all this. I don’t know how to approach the man anymore. We used to chat whenever I met him for the mail. Now I never know what to say.”

Tommy laughed, his cheeks flushed with gin. Thin, red branches spreading through his eyes. But no slur in speech, never a slur. “How

about 'stop trying to slip it to my wife?'"

Carter shrugged. "Yeah, but those postal guys. You never know what they're packing. He could come back with an Uzi. Shoot up the whole goddamn house, screaming about the Ho Chi Minh Trail."

"He's a little young for that," said Elaine, looking at Brian. She lit a cigarette.

Brian was watching Melanie Dyers. Melanie Dyers was watching everyone else, her eyes moving from one speaker to the next, detached yet polite. Always a polite listener. Stephen wasn't even present. His expression showed nothing, there was nothing inside.

Stephen used to often talk to Brian about his plans for his son. He would push him, he said. He would get into the best of the schools, maybe pursue medicine. Brian remembered talking to Craig about schools one night on the porch. Candles burning. Brian had been half in the wrapper, giving him the "I'm proud of you" speech – but it was true; he had been. Craig seemed more amused than anything else. Brian wondered if he had respected him. If he were more than just a buddy. He had been too lenient. Craig entertained him too much. A song and a dance and out the door. Often before Brian could ask where he was going.

"I wanted to go to Vietnam," said Cecil. "I honestly did. They wouldn't let me. My eyes have always been much too poor."

"You didn't miss anything," said Carter.

"Still," said Cecil. "One has a sense of duty. Loyalty."

Lori came back out, setting up the mini bar. Close at hand, to freshen up the drinks. Most of them wanted freshening. The rain was still coming down outside, not torrential, but enough to keep them in.

The machines had fallen silent on the street out front. Brian wondered if they had filled in their holes or just run for cover. The town had been discussing the sewerage installation for years. Voting it up and down in town referendums.

Lori leaned over, pouring gin. Brian noticed Carter Phelp's eyes find her ass. Why not, he figured. What did it matter? Someone needed to find it. But Carter looked quickly away.

"Does anyone want lemon instead of lime?" asked Lori. "I think I have a couple of lemons inside, too."

Stephen Dyers looked up and nodded at her, solemn. "Lime is fine, Lori."

Brian gazed out towards the grill beneath the umbrella. It was still smoking. The gray wisps rose up, to disperse in the rain. The coals could go for hours.

The water moved in streams down the back walkway. The rain pattered the trees and beaded the screens of the porch. Slow, jagged drips. The rain had been coming down for more than two hours, the cesspool rising, as soon would be the smell. Always an embarrassment, a source of humiliation, but not one that was ever spoken of directly or personally; it wasn't as if the others in the neighborhood didn't have the same problem. The pipes were necessary. There had to be an outlet, something to carry it all away neatly.

The gin was gone, and the guests were resorting to beer and thin red wine. Cheap and gut twinging. Lori never brought out the good wine for company. No one seemed to mind. Carter Phelps lit a cigar. He passed around a small box. Only Tommy and Brian took one, and

then Carter passed them a clip for the end. Cecil Howard, now a little flushed, still sat straight and stiff. Brittle.

Brian struck a match and dragged on the cigar. It wasn't bad. If Carter were going to conform with the trends, at least he had good taste. He seemed quite consumed with his, puffing away.

"They're Dominican," he said. "If you can't get Cuban, Dominican is the next best thing."

"They must have a few good domestic brands here, down south I mean," said Cecil, struggling hard to make conversation with Carter. "I don't smoke, but I would assume."

"Nothing like that from the islands," said Carter, brushing him aside.

"They do terrible things to your teeth," said Cecil. "You know –" Carter cut him off. "I asked the construction guys about the lawns."

"What about them?" asked Tommy.

"If they're going to fix them," said Carter, sounding surprised. "They tore up my whole front yard. Bushes, flowers, walkway, everything."

Elaine glanced at him, focusing with one eye. "I'm sure they'll replant anything they destroyed," she said. She was beginning to slur. "We wouldn't want anything at your place in a state of disarray."

Brian watched for Carter's reaction. Elaine was throwing a jab. He figured Carter must not be giving it to her anymore.

Carter looked down at his beer. Sighed and sipped. "No, we wouldn't, would we?"

"I was thinking it would all be done by now," said Cecil. "I can't stand the mess. It really...really gets to me. I wish they would just hunker down and get moving."

Tommy O'Connor raised an eyebrow. "Hunker what?"

“Down,” said Cecil. “Hunker down. They have to get moving.”

“Oh,” said Tommy.

“My shocks won’t take much more of the drive down the road,” added Cecil, shaking his head in distress. “I mean, I realize they’re doing they’re best. They work long—”

“You’re right,” said Carter. “There’s no reason to have the street a mess like this for so long. I sometimes worry that I won’t even be able to get to my home.”

Elaine crossed her legs, her skirt rising higher. “You have a 4X4, what do you care? It rides over most anything. And if it can’t, you can just sleep in the damn thing if you have to. I’m sure the seats go back in the nighttime, too.”

Carter looked away.

Cecil twitched a bit, a twitch of recognition, just briefly, and then he appeared to be struggling to compose himself. He turned. “Is there a problem, Elaine?”

Elaine rolled her eyes. “Why would there be a problem, Cecil?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Well, if there were,” said Elaine. “I’m sure you’d be right on top of it. Either that or confounding yourself over it.”

“I’m only confounded by things you don’t tell me,” said Cecil.

“So, how about those Sox?” asked Tommy, sitting forward in his chair. “I predict the division if not the series.”

Caroline lit a cigarette. “I thought they had lost the last three games.”

“They did,” said Carter. “And they’re barely above 500. No way the series. They’re not consistent enough.”

Cecil tightened. The cords of his neck went taut, and he swal-

lowed. "We're not talking about baseball here, Carter. My wife made a comment towards you, and I would like an explanation."

"Oh, Cecil," said Elaine. "Take a breather. I was just joking with him for godsakes."

The porch was silent, but Cecil was focused, his glare hard and proud and fixed upon Elaine. "I don't think you were." He turned to Carter. "Are you sleeping with my wife?"

Brian could still hear the rain. Falling steady, relentless and pure. He sipped his beer, only mildly curious at what would happen next. Carter adjusted himself on the glider. Caroline was still next to him, but she seemed further away. She hadn't so much moved as tilted more to one side, closer to Tommy. Tommy had stopped smiling.

"Come on, Cecil," said Carter. "Give me a break."

"No. No breaks. I asked you a question."

"And I don't know what the hell you're talking about," said Carter.

Cecil pushed his glasses up his nose. "I'm talking about you and my wife. Are you fucking her?" The word from Cecil's lips seemed more obscene than merely just slang. New, and thick with enunciation.

"Don't be ridiculous," said Carter.

Tommy leaned forward on the glider. "Cecil, come on. They were joking around. We're having a nice time. Let's keep it that way."

Cecil put down his beer. "Nice time? Who's having a nice time? Let's not kid ourselves, Tom. We're all here out of a sense of neighborly obligation and nothing better to do because the street is shut down. Nice time? Do you think I like sitting here knowing that my nearly every move will be laughed at later if not right here and now while I'm not listening?"

Elaine was examining her fingernails, one eye still shut. “No one is laughing at you, Cecil. And you’re embarrassing the two of us.”

“Embarrassing?” said Cecil. “Who’s embarrassing who? We all know this afternoon get together is just a big, steaming, late summer crock of shit. How many of us have spent any real time with anyone else in the room this entire summer? Besides spouses, that is. And Carter and Elaine.”

“Cecil, please,” said Elaine.

Lori stepped back upon the porch, her hands clutching her apron, her face perplexed. “What’s going on?”

Cecil raised his glass. “Adultery, Lori. In our own back yards.”

Lori laughed a little, nervous and hesitant. “What?”

“My wife is fucking Carter Phelps,” said Cecil. He started to cry, his words choked in sobs. “And I’m too much of a fairy to stand up and clock him.”

“Oh,” said Lori.

“My God, Cecil,” said Elaine. “Stop crying. This is humiliating.”

“Cecil,” said Tommy, dragging out the second syllable. “Get a hold of yourself. Nobody is fucking anybody.” He laughed a little. “We’re all too old for that. And besides you’re not *that* much of a fairy.”

Cecil looked up. “Fuck you, Tommy. Fuck you and your silly ass, jelly belly laugh. He probably walked over to your house, and you probably high fived him right after he finished screwing her.”

“Tommy and I haven’t high fived in years, Cecil,” said Carter.

“Cecil, you’re drunk,” said Elaine.

“You’re right, Elaine. I am drunk. I’m drunk and I’m fed up.”

Lori, her lips barely parted, seemed to be caught on a word.

"I think we should probably just change the subject," she said.

"Everyone's been drinking, and no one is probably thinking too clearly."

Melanie Dyers looked nervously about the porch. Her husband, Stephen, remained oblivious. Either oblivious or simply removed. Unconcerned. He was still looking down into his drink. As if he expected something to move inside.

Brian looked at the windowsill beside him. The rain puddled, coming through the screen. It moved in a slow drip to the floor. There was another drip, too, in the far corner of the room, coming from the roof.

"Lori," said Cecil. "My apologies to you. You're a wonderful, beautiful woman. But my wife is a whore, my marriage is on the line here, and I've never thought clearer."

Elaine brushed him aside. Lori didn't appear to hear him. She nodded a bit, as if to herself, and began clearing empty cans and glasses from the table. "Maybe Brian can see if he can do a little grilling. Get some food in people's stomachs. The rain has let up a bit."

"Here, here," said Tommy, raising his can. "Fry me a burger."

"This isn't over," said Cecil. "This is not over."

Carter leaned forward on the glider. "Cecil. You're my friend, but Lori is right – we've all been drinking. Maybe too much. I think reason will rise in the morning."

Reason, reason, thought Brian. Reason rising. Rosey fingered dawn.

"Would you be more comfortable if I leave, Cecil?" asked Carter. "Do you want me to leave?"

"I'd be more comfortable if you stepped out to the woods there and strung yourself up from that oak tree," said Cecil.

Carter leaned back. He reached for the bottle of wine. "I can't believe you just said that."

"Well, you haven't answered me truthfully," said Cecil. "Admit it – you're fucking Elaine."

"No!" snapped Carter. He looked away, drunken and frustrated and pulling at his chin. "I'm not," he said quietly.

Brian suppressed a smile. Carter in and out of the Howard's house in the middle of the day wasn't an unusual sight on the street. Rushing out, fumbling his keys. He was surprised Cecil had waited so long to call light to the situation. Brian sipped his beer.

Lori again scurried from the porch. More to do inside. At least the pretense of it. Probably more like tipping the scotch back straight. Mr. Dewars, she called it. She always met Mr. Dewars in private. A private, sorrowful lover. How long would it be until he infiltrated her looks? Blood vessels and belly, skinny little legs. A mockery of the beauty she had once been. He wondered if they should have had more children. Would it have made a difference? Or would they just look at them and only see Craig?

"Cecil," said Elaine. "Enough is enough. I think maybe we should get going." She made to stand.

"Embarrassed, Elaine?" Cecil asked. "What? Do you think we're the only one marred here? You know better than that. How many free meals have you taken this month, Tommy? Free meals and free tickets. The best restaurants and best shows in town. Ball games, too. Caroline tells Elaine you even get a little subsidiary income from a few fine young fellows in the projects of old Roxbury. Leave them

alone money. Isn't that right?"

"I don't know what you're getting at," said Tommy.

"No, of course you don't," said Cecil. "You bought that thirty-eight foot cabin cruiser all on the up and up, didn't you. All on a policeman's salary. With a mortgage to boot."

Tommy swallowed his breath. "I don't know why you're talking this way, Cecil. I've never been anything but a friend to you."

"A friend who laughs at me, ridicules me, Tom. I'm no idiot."

"I don't know where you get your information from," said Tommy.

Cecil scowled, tears now dry. "Who do you think I get it from? I get it from your wife. The same as everybody else in town."

Tommy stood, adjusting his pants as he did. "That's it."

Melanie Dyer's voice rose quietly from the corner. "Oh, please. No fights."

Caroline reached up and took Tommy's hand. "I think it's probably about time we left."

Tommy pointed. "Don't you insult my wife, Cecil. Not again. You can insult me, and I might hold my temper, but don't you insult my wife."

Caroline went to stand, reaching for her purse.

"Caroline," said Elaine, raising her hand to stop her, "if anyone leaves, it's going to be us. I have to apologize. He usually doesn't drink. This is too much."

"Too much," said Cecil. "Always too much." He was quiet for a moment, and then he closed his eyes and finished his beer. He stood then, and fixed his glasses on his nose. He steadied himself and cleared his throat. His face was flushed, his hands slightly trembling.

“My apologies.” He paused. “Especially to you, Brian. My apologies and my gratitude, for the food and drink.”

Brian could see Elaine, flat on her back in his garden. Bare breasts, so white in the sun. Hands reaching up for him. Hungry, red lips. He wasn’t sure how to respond. Or if he could. Cecil was still staring at him, waiting. “Not necessary, Cecil,” he finally said.

Cecil took a breath. “But is it ever?” he asked. He turned then and pushed open the screen door. It creaked and then slammed shut behind him as he bumbled down the steps. Elaine was quick behind him. She mouthed a “sorry” and an “I’ll call you” to Caroline, and then she followed Cecil, a bit unsteady, out into the yard. It was pouring again. Elaine went to grab Cecil’s hand. He turned and shoved her away. She nearly fell, slipping on the wet grass, but then she managed to catch her balance and watch him leave the yard. After a moment, she followed. Brian wondered what propelled her? His money, guilt, a sense of security? Loneliness? They disappeared beneath the goal post off to the side of the property. Brian had erected the post a few years before when Craig had been kicking for the varsity squad. He had set a school record. Eight field goals over thirty yards his senior year; they celebrated the first two together, toasts and cigars. He wondered if he had liked Craig even more than he had loved him. Had that been the problem?

Carter shook his head and blew his breath in exasperation. “Whew...,” he said. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“He’s never done that before,” said Caroline, taking a seat back on the glider. “I wonder what got into him?”

Lori still hadn't resurfaced. Brian wondered how much she had heard, and if she were hiding. Composing herself, she called it. Two jiggers and a chaser of Coke. Lori had spent the last two years composing herself. After Craig, there came composure. Too much of her world had centered around him. Now she seemed unable to find herself around what was left. She had seemed so well grounded before. Stable. Brian could hear her inside, moving about the kitchen. Silverware clanking, and drawers, in and out.

Melanie Dyers looked out upon the yard. "I hope he's all right," she said. "He's always seemed so fragile," she added softly.

"It's nothing that a good twelve hours of sleep won't cure," said Carter, his eyes red and closing. He lay stretched back in his chair. His drink looked about to slip from his fingers.

Melanie Dyers merely stared at him. Neither curious nor condemning. Just staring.

Caroline lit a cigarette. "I think Elaine should leave him."

"He was out of line," said Tommy, sipping his beer. "But he's also very drunk. I don't think it warranted leaving him."

Caroline shrugged. Her tank top had slipped down a bit, exposing a beige bra strap pushing the freckled skin high on either side. Her eyes were bloodshot now. "If you had an episode like that, Tom, I'd leave you."

Tommy looked puzzled. "Over that?"

Caroline hesitated. "Yes," she said. "Over that."

Carter Phelps had begun to snore.

Caroline and Tommy had left. Brian opened another beer, the

top popping through the silence of the early evening. Melanie Dyers had disappeared inside at some point. A trip to the bathroom? An attempt to talk with Lori? It could have been anything. Brian didn't remember her stating where she was going. Stephen Dyers had awoken from his trance, and Brian could feel his eyes now locked upon him. It was the first time he had looked at him all afternoon. Brian couldn't look back. Not directly. Not because he was ashamed, but merely because he didn't know how. He had to remind himself of that – it had nothing to do with being ashamed. They just hadn't locked eyes in such a long time.

Carter Phelps' hand went lax and dropped his beer to the floor. It tipped over, and began to spill. Brian watched the beer slowly pouring from the opening and surrounding the can in a puddle. The dog had come out onto the porch, and sat, eyes watery and head on its paws. A bit of drool formed in the corner of its heavy black gums.

Brian rubbed at his eye. "Not the most successful barbecue I've ever seen."

"What did you expect?" asked Stephen.

The voice took Brian off guard. The silence around him had almost seemed his and his alone – to break, to soil. He turned and hesitated, unsure how to respond. "I don't know," he said. "I guess I didn't really expect anything."

Stephen's eyes were suddenly alive, cold yet alive. His voice low, but still strong and clear. "You didn't, huh?"

"No."

"You're a liar, Brian. A godforsaken liar."

Brian found himself momentarily stunned, short of reply.

“Why did you bring these people together, Brian?” asked Stephen. “To make yourself feel better? Did you figure you could look at their pitiful lives and maybe yours wouldn’t seem so bad anymore? Maybe you could feel like a hero again? Just like the old days?”

“No,” said Brian. “Lori wanted to have a cookout, Stephen. I went along with it only to make her happy.”

“Liar. You’ve been really invested in making her happy, haven’t you? Fucking Elaine Howard in your wife’s back yard. You’re no better than the rest of them, and you know it. You’ve spent your entire life hiding beneath a pretense of morality, doing as you please and never facing a thing. Never taking responsibility.”

“That’s not true.”

“It is true. And what’s worse is that you taught it to your son.” Stephen’s face began to slightly twitch, the tears building in his eyes. “Your boy killed my boy, Brian, and I’ve never got so much as an apology from you. I want an apology.”

“I lost my son, too,” said Brian; he felt a clutch upon his throat, and his lungs now tight. “It was an accident.”

“Your son was drunk. And who taught him that? Who taught him to be a drunk?”

“My son was not a drunk.”

“No, no, of course not. Your son was perfect, just like you. Eddie followed Craig around, worshipping him, from the age of ten on. Craig walked on him, and then he killed him.”

Brian shook his head. “They were friends, Stephen. They both had been drinking. Either one of them could have been driving.”

“But it wasn’t a case of either. Craig was driving, and he killed

my son, Brian. He killed my only son." Stephen's chest convulsed, his shoulders heaving and then going lax. He clutched his forehead in his hand, and the tears flowed over his cheeks.

Brian opened his mouth, but he found no words; there was nothing to say. He wasn't sure he could move. He looked inside the house. He thought he could see Lori. His soul cried out to her in a stifled prayer for support, but she was little more than a shadow. Standing at the counter, lifeless as a prop. Silent and still, and quietly slipping into the dusk of the day.

The afternoon flashed before him along with a fading collage of all the previous days. Other cookouts, friendlier ones. Fishing trips with Stephen, and both of their boys. Triumphs and celebrations, women, vanity, and lies. Now just a blur, one into the other. Passion tainting honor, and neither ever really rising above the other. Why was it some things could be forgotten? And others, never? They all came together in the end, surely. They must. Brian's head felt on the verge of explosion. He shut his eyes and listened to the throbbing in his temples. His blood rumbled like thunder and burned back through his veins, everything within him dropping with an echo. He waited until it was gone, and then he opened his eyes.

The dog was staring at him. The Nantasket sign was hanging at an angle. And Carter Phelps was sliding closer to the floor. Stephen was still crying, the only sound, distant and muffled within the patter of the rain.

Brian stepped outside. The rain was black and cooling. He stopped on the steps and took a shallow breath. The smell had grown stronger

throughout the yard, stagnant yet foul, the puddle now larger, but there was no point in worrying about it. It would be fine, once the pipes were in. Yes, yes, the pipes..., the pipes.

If you will bend and tell me that you love me.

Brian went to the grill, his feet sinking in the saturated earth. The coals were still burning, fading but burning. He took down the umbrella, and reached into the cooler and removed a piece of steak; it was a waste to let it rot. He threw it upon the grill, and listened to it sizzle. The rain came down against the coals, sending up small puffs of smoke. The water beaded upon the meat. Brian felt his shirt, cold and wet and sticking to his back. He sipped his beer.

It was no good thinking about Craig. He knew that. Two years had passed. Had it really been two years? It seemed to have no measure. A silent two years, gripped by paralysis. Paralysis. But how could he move about with so many watching? Not visible, but watching, in sympathy, curiosity, and in blame. There was no blame of course. There was never any blame. Hadn't he learned that over the years? There was nothing he could have done to change things. Guilt was irrational. Yes. Irrational, yet pure. A bitter nectar wrung from our hearts and offered silently to the gods. Malevolent gods, laughing without sound and licking at their fingers, the Furies spread their couches at the threshold of hell. Heads wreathed with serpents and eyes tearing blood. Chasing and punishing.

Things could have been different. Craig didn't need any more friends. Craig had plenty of friends. At the wake, of course, there it had been most apparent. Lines out far into the parking lot, weeping girls and stone faced boys. All children. Children charred to empty

shells. And parents and teachers. Many of his teachers had attended. The large coach with the walrus mustache and the hair just like straw. What had they been thinking? It was impossible to know. Nearly impossible to remember. His Craig, he had been his. People didn't see that. Craig didn't see that. What had Craig seen? What did Brian look like through his eyes? A bum, a father, or just part of the crowd? He could never know, never.

If I had stopped him he wouldn't have gone. If I hadn't encouraged him. If I had kept my eyes, my hands, from the woman next door, not preoccupied. If I didn't laugh when we drank together, having a few beers. If I had been more of a father. Less of a friend. If I hadn't given him wings. Judgement, poor judgement. Daedalus, Daedalus. Daedalus arrived safely in Sicily. And behind him. Feathers upon the water and the blazing sun above.

The car. I couldn't even recognize the goddamn car. And my boy... ▫