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So Much for That

Written by Lionel Shriver

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Chapter One



Shepherd Armstrong Knacker
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What do you pack for the rest of your life? On research trips – he and Glynis had never called them “vacations” – Shep had always packed too much, covering for every contingency: rain gear, a sweater on the off chance that the weather in Puerto Escondido was unseasonably cold. In the face of infinite contingencies, his impulse was to take nothing.

There was no rational reason to be creeping these halls stealthily like a thief come to burgle his own home – padding heel to toe on the floorboards, flinching when they creaked. He had double-checked that Glynis was out through early evening (for an “appointment”; it bothered him that she did not say with whom or where). Calling on a weak pretense of asking about dinner plans when their son hadn’t eaten a proper meal with his parents for the last year, he had confirmed that Zach was safely installed at a friend’s overnight. Shep was alone

in the house. He needn't keep jumping when the heat came on. He needn't reach tremulously into the top dresser drawer for his boxers as if any time now his wrist would be seized and he'd be read the Miranda.

Except that Shep was a burglar, after a fashion. Perhaps the sort that any American household most feared. He had arrived home from work a little earlier than usual in order to steal himself.

The swag bag of his large black Samsonite was unzipped on the bed, lying agape as it had for less drastic departures year after year. So far it contained: one comb.

He forced himself through the paces of collecting a travel shampoo, his shaving kit, even if he was doubtful that in *The Afterlife* he would continue to shave. But the electric toothbrush presented a quandary. The island had electricity, surely it did, but he'd neglected to discover whether their plugs were flat American two-prongs, bulky British three-prongs, or the slender European kind, wide-set and round. He wasn't dead sure either whether the local current was 220 or 110. Sloppy; these were just the sorts of practical details that on earlier research forays they'd been rigorous about jotting down. But then, they'd lately grown less systematic, especially Glynis, who'd sometimes slipped on more recent journeys abroad and used the word *vacation*. A tell, and there had been several.

Resistant at first to the Oral B's jarring cranial buzz, at length Shep had come to relish the slick of his teeth once the tedium was complete. As with all technological advances, it felt unnatural to go backward, to resume the fitful scrub of splayed nylon on a plastic stick. But what if Glynis went to the bathroom when she came home and noticed that his blue-ringed toothbrush was missing, while hers, with the red ring, still sat on the sink? Best she didn't begin this of all evenings with perplexity or suspicion. He could always take Zach's – he'd never heard the kid use it – but Shep couldn't see swiping his own son's toothbrush. (Shep had paid for the thing, of course, along with pretty much everything here. Yet little or nothing in this house felt like his. That used to bug him but now just made it easier to leave the salad

spinner, the StairMaster, and the sofas behind.) Worse, he and Glynis shared the same recharger. He didn't want to leave her with a toothbrush that would last five or six days (he didn't want to leave her at all, but that was another matter), its weakening, terminal shudder providing a soundtrack for his wife's lapse into another of her periodic depressions.

So having unscrewed the wall mount only a turn or two, he tightened it back down. Restoring his own handle reassuringly to the recharger, he scrounged a manual brush from the medicine cabinet. He would have to grow accustomed to technological regression, which in a manner he couldn't quite put his finger on was surely good for the soul. Something about backtracking to a stage of development that you could understand.

He wasn't planning simply to cut and run, to disappear himself from his family absent announcement or explanation. That would be cruel, or crueler. He wasn't presenting her with a total fait accompli either, a wave goodbye at the door. Officially he would confront her with a choice, one for which, in the service of credibility, he had paid through the nose. Odds were that he had purchased nothing but an illusion, but an illusion could be priceless. So he'd bought not one ticket, but three. They were nonrefundable. If his instincts were all out of whack and Glynis surprised him, Zach still wouldn't like it. But the boy was fifteen years old, and how was this for developmental regression: for once an American teenager would do what he was told.

Anxious about being caught in the act, in the end he had too much time. Glynis wouldn't be home for another couple of hours, and the Samsonite was replete. Given the confusion over plugs and current, he'd thrown in a few manual hand tools and a Swiss Army knife; in the average crisis, you were still better off with a pair of needle-nose Vise-Grips than a BlackBerry. Only a couple of shirts, because he wanted to wear different shirts. Or no shirt. A few bits and pieces that a man with Shep's occupation knew could make the difference

between satisfied self-sufficiency and disaster: duct tape; a selection of screws, bolts, and washers; silicon lubricant; plastic sealant; rubber bands (*elastics*, for N' Hampshire old-timers like his father); and a small roll of binding wire. A flashlight, for power cuts, and a stock of AAs. A novel he should have selected more carefully if he was taking only one. An English – Swahili phrasebook, malaria pills, deet. Prescription cortisone cream for persistent eczema on his ankle, a tube that would soon run out.

Obviating any further inclusions, his Merrill Lynch checkbook. He didn't like to think of himself as calculating, but it turned out to be fortunate that he'd always kept this account in his name alone. He could – he would, of course, offer to leave her half; she hadn't earned a dime of it, but they were married, and that was the law. Yet he would have to warn her that even hundreds of thousands of dollars wouldn't last her long in Westchester, and sooner or later she'd have to do not "her work" but someone else's.

He'd had to stuff the Samsonite with newspaper to keep the paltry chattel from rattling in the British Airways hold. He stashed it in his closet, covering it with a bathrobe for good measure. A packed bag on the bedspread would alarm Glynis far more than a missing toothbrush.

Shep settled in the living room with a bourbon bracer. It wasn't his habit to begin an evening with anything stronger than beer, but habit would have delayed this evening indefinitely. He put his feet up, casting his eyes around the pleasant but cheaply furnished room, unable to mourn leaving behind any aspect of the familiar surround, save the fountain. As for parting with the throw pillows or the nondescript glass coffee table on which it trickled, he felt positively cheerful. By contrast, the fountain had always filled him with that distinctive middle-class covetousness, desire for what you already own. He wondered whimsically if, wrapped in the wadded newspaper that padded his scant booty, it would fit in the Samsonite.

They still referred to it as "the Wedding Fountain." The sterling silver apparatus had substituted for a floral centerpiece at their modest gathering of friends twenty-six years before, twining the bride and

groom's labors, talents, and very natures. To this day, the Wedding Fountain constituted the only project on which he and Glynis had collaborated fifty-fifty. Shep had taken responsibility for the technical aspects of the gizmo. The pump was carefully hidden by a sweep of mirror-finish metal around the basin; since the mechanism ran continually, over the years he'd replaced it several times. Wise in the ways of water, he'd advised on the width and depth of sluices, the length of drops from one level to the next. Glynis had dictated the flow of the metal itself, its artistic line, forging and soldering the parts in her old studio in Brooklyn.

For Shep's tastes, the fountain was austere; for Glynis's, ornate; so that even stylistically the construction embodied a meeting of minds halfway. And it was romantic. Melded together at the top, two undulating silver sluices split and intermingled like swans' necks, one supporting while the other broke to spill its liquid into the waiting pan of its mate. Narrow at their apex, the two central lines of their creation splayed and swooped in wider, ever more playful variations toward the basin. There the contributions of the fountain's two tributaries formed a shallow indoor lake, thus *pooling their resources* in the most literal sense. Glynis's workmanship was top-drawer. However busy, Shep had always honored her virtuosity by keeping the water topped up, and by periodically draining the contraption to polish the silver. Absent his conservation, the sterling's accelerating yellow taint might suggest a tarnish on more than metal. Once he was gone, chances were that she'd turn the thing off, and shove it out of sight.

As allegory, the two streams feeding a common pool represented an ideal they had failed. Nevertheless, the fountain successfully integrated their elements. Glynis not only worked with metal (or used to); she *was* metal. Stiff, uncooperative, and inflexible. Hard, refractive, and shiny with defiance. Her body long, attenuated, and angular like the jewelry and flatware she once crafted, in art school Glynis had not chosen her medium by accident. She naturally identified with any material that so fiercely refused to do what you wanted it to, whose form was resistant to change and responded only to violent manhandling.

Metal was obstreperous. Were it ever mistreated, its dents and scratches caught the light like kept grudges.

Like it or not, Shep's element was water. Adaptive, easily manipulated, and prone to taking the path of least resistance, he *went with the flow*, as they said in his youth. Water was yielding, biddable, and readily trapped. He wasn't proud of these qualities; pliancy didn't seem manly. On the other hand, the apparent passivity of liquid was misleading. Water was resourceful. As any homeowner with an aging roof or corroded plumbing knew well, water was insidious, and in its own quiet way would find its route. Water had a devious willfulness of its own, a sneaky, seeping insistence, an instinct for finding the single seam or joint you've left unsealed. Sooner or later, water will get in if it wants to, or – more vitally, in Shep's case – it will get out.

His first boyhood fountains, knocked together with inappropriate materials like wood, leaked badly, and his frugal father had chastised him for these “bubblers,” as Dad called them, that wasted water. But Shep became more ingenious with found objects: chipped serving bowls, the limbs of his sister's discarded dolls; later creations lost water only to evaporation. The whimsies grew kinetic, using paddle wheels, cups that would fill and flop, jets that kept a suspended object bobbing at bay, sprays that tinkled chimes of seashells or shards of stained glass. He'd kept up the hobby to this day. As a counterweight to the relentless functionality of his vocation, fountains were fabulously frivolous.

This off beat pastime almost certainly hailed not from some highfalutin metaphor for his character, but from the commonplace associations of childhood. Every July, the Knackers had rented a cabin in the White Mountains, beside which ran a wide, rushing stream. Back then, kids were privileged with real summers, expanses of unscheduled time receding to the hazy horizon. Time whose seeming endlessness was a lie, but the lie was still beguiling. Ripe for improvisation, time you could play like a saxophone. So he'd always linked the lilt of running water to peace, lassitude, and a languid lack of urgency – which, between math camps, get-ahead tutoring, fencing classes, and organized playdates, kids these days never seemed to

sample. That's what The Afterlife was all about, he recognized, not for the first time, and poured another finger of bourbon. He wanted his summer back. All year round.

None of the Sunday school classes or Christian youth groups had taken, but the one truly character-forming education that Gabriel Knacker had provided his son was a trip to Kenya when Shep was sixteen. Through the aegis of a Presbyterian exchange program, the Reverend had accepted a temporary teaching position at a small seminary in Limuru, an hour's drive from Nairobi, and had brought his family along. To Gabe Knacker's despair, what made the most intense impression on his son wasn't his seminary students' fervent embrace of the Gospel, but grocery shopping. On their first outing for provisions, Shep and Beryl had trailed their parents to the local market stalls for papayas, onions, potatoes, passion fruit, beans, zucchini, a scrawny chicken, and a great slab of beef of an undifferentiated cut: in all, enough provender to fill five string bags to their maximum capacity. Always fiscally minded – one of his father's objections still was that his son thought too much about money – Shep converted the shillings in his head. The entire haul had cost less than three dollars. Even in 1972 currency, for more than a week's supplies that was chump change.

Shep had expressed dismay at how any of these traders could turn a profit with such miserable prices. His father was keen to emphasize that these people were very poor; swaths of this benighted continent lived on less than a dollar a day. Yet the Reverend did allow that African farmers could charge pennies for their produce because they counted their expenses in pennies as well. Shep had been familiar with economies of scale; this was his first introduction to the scale of economies. So a dollar's value wasn't fixed but relative. Back in New Hampshire, it would buy a box of paper clips; in the Kenyan countryside, an entire secondhand but perfectly serviceable bike.

"So why don't we take our savings and move here?" he'd asked as they lugged their shopping down a farmland path.

In a rare softening, Gabe Knacker had clapped his son's shoulder and gazed across the verdant coffee fields bathed in lambent equatorial sun. "Sometimes I wonder."

Shep wondered, too, and he'd kept wondering. If you could at least survive in places like East Africa on a dollar a day, how well could you live for more like twenty bucks?

In high school, Shep had already been hungry for direction. Much like Zach, alas, in his studies he was competent at every subject, but distinguished at none. In an age that increasingly valued mastery of the abstract – the befuddling world of "information technology" was only a decade away – Shep preferred tasks whose results he could grasp in both his head and his hands: replacing a rickety banister. But his father was an educated man, and didn't expect his son to work construction. With that heart of water, Shep was never a rebellious kid. Given his penchant for making and fixing things, a degree in engineering had seemed apt. As he'd assured his father many times since, he'd really, really intended to go to college.

Yet meanwhile that whimsy first conceived in Limuru had consolidated to firm resolve. Saving may have gone out of fashion, but surely a middle-class American income still allowed for salting something away. Thus with the application of industry, thrift, and self-denial – once the country's moral mainstays – it should be possible to inflate a robin-sized nest egg to the dimensions of an ostrich ovum merely by hopping a plane. The Third World was running a sale: two lives for the price of one. Ever since coming of age, Shep had dedicated himself to the realization of the second. He was not even sure you called it industry, when you were working so hard only that you might stop working.

So with an eye to his true purpose – money – Shep had instinctively gravitated to where America kept most of it, and applied to the City College of Technology in New York. For while Gabe Knacker faulted the character of his son "the philistine" for his worship of the false god Mammon, Shep believed fervently that money – the web of your fiscal relationships to individuals and to the world at large – *was* character; that the surest test of any man's mettle was how he wielded

his wallet. Thus a decent, capable kid didn't tap a father's measly salary as a small-town minister (an injunction to which Beryl would prove oblivious when blithely expecting their dad to pay for her film degree at NYU four years later). Ever since earning his first five dollars from shoveling snow at the age of nine, Shep had always paid up front, be it for an Almond Joy or an education.

Thus determined to work beforehand and finance his own degree, he'd delayed his acceptance at City Tech in downtown Brooklyn and found a one-bedroom nearby in Park Slope, which – hard as it was to remember now – was a dodgy area in those days, and dirt cheap. The area's housing stock was run down, and full of families in need of small repairs but unable to afford the larcenous rates of unionized tradesmen. Having mastered a variety of rudimentary wiring and carpentry skills while helping to maintain his own family's eternally crumbling late-Victorian in New Hampshire, Shep posted flyers in convenience stores, advertising his services as an old-fashioned handyman. Word of mouth spread quickly about a young white kid who could replace washers and rotten floorboards for a modest fee, and in short order he had more work than he could handle. By the time he'd delayed entry into City Tech for a second year he'd incorporated, and "Knack of All Trades" was already contracting out for part-time help. Two years after that, Shep took on his first full-time employee. A harried entrepreneur enjoyed little free time, and besides, Shep had just got married. So in the service of sheer efficiency, Jackson Burdina doubled, then as now, as his best friend.

It was still a sore point with Shep's father that his son never went to college, which was ludicrous; Knack of All Trades had expanded and flourished without any benedictory piece of paper. The real problem was that Gabriel Knacker had little regard for manual labor – unless it involved digging wells for impoverished villagers in Mali with the Peace Corps, or patching a pensioner's shingles out of the kindness of your heart. He had no use for commerce. Any activity that could not trace its lineage directly to virtue was destitute. The fact that if everyone devoted himself solely to goodness for its own

sake the whole world would come to a skidding halt didn't faze the guy a whit.

Up until a little over eight years ago, Life A had had its merits, and Shep hadn't regarded himself as sacrificing his prime for pie in the sky. He'd always liked physical toil, relishing a distinctive kind of tired you got not from the gym but from building bookshelves. He liked running his own show, answering to no one. Glynis may have turned out to be a handful, and might not have described herself as happy in the big picture, but it was probably safe to say that she was happy with him – or as happy as she was going to get with anybody, which wasn't very. He was glad when she got pregnant with Amelia right away. He was in a hurry, anxious to rush through a whole life in half the time, and he'd have far preferred that Zach had been born pronto and not ten years later.

As for The Afterlife, Glynis had seemed onboard when they met. His status as a man with a mission surely attracted her to him in the first place. Without his vision, without the ever more concrete edifice of Life B rising in his head, Shep Knacker was one more small businessman who'd found a niche market: nothing special. As it was, picking a new target country for every summer's research trip had been an invigorating ritual of their marriage. They were, or so he'd thought until this last year's dawning apprehension, a team.

So when he got the offer to sell up in November 1996, it was irresistible. *A million dollars*. Rationally he recognized that a mil wasn't what it once was, and that he'd have to pay capital gains. Still, the sum had never lost the awesome roundness of childhood; no matter how many other ordinary folks also became "millionaires," the word retained a ring. Combined with the fruits of lifelong scrimping, the proceeds from selling Knack would furnish the capital to cash out and never look back. So never mind that the purchaser – an employee so lazy and sloppy that they'd been on the verge of firing the guy before, surprise, he comes into his trust fund – was a callow, loudmouthed, ignorant twit.

Who was now Shep's boss. Oh sure, it had seemed to make sense

at the time to sign on as an employee of what had been his own company – renamed overnight “Handy Randy,” a moniker not only tacky but inaccurate, since Randy Pogatchnik was anything but handy. The initial idea had been to hang on for a month or two while they packed, sold off their motley possessions, and located at least a temporary house in Goa. Meantime, they wouldn’t spend down their capital, which Shep sank into can’t-lose mutual funds to fatten before slaughter; the Dow was effervescent.

“A month or two” had now stretched into over eight years of submission to the sadistic whims of an overweight, freckle-faced brat, who must have got wind of his imminent sacking and had probably bought Knack – you had to give the guy this much – as fiendishly effective revenge. After the sale, standards of workmanship plummeted, so that Shep’s “Customer Relations” position for handling complaints, never a post at all during his own tenure as CEO, had burgeoned into a demanding and decidedly unpleasant full-time job.

In retrospect, of course, it had been imbecilic to sell their place in Carol Gardens a few years earlier – barely out of a recession, and on the heels of a housing crash – then move up to Westchester and rent. Shep would gladly have stayed in Brooklyn, but Glynis had concluded that the only way she could finally focus on “her work” was to remove herself from the “distractions” of the city. (Sure of his weakness, she had made a sly financial case as well: Westchester’s high-quality public schools would save them the pricey tuition of private education in New York. All very well, for Amelia. But later, when Glynis thought that Zach needed help – which he did – finding a “better school” was the easiest way to seem to be doing something, and now they were out \$26,000 a year for private tuition anyway.) Jackson and Carol had stayed put in Windsor Terrace, and even that ramshackle dive of theirs had soared to a value of \$550,000. At least having benefited from the real estate boom himself made Jackson more patient than Shep with Homeowner Smugness; these days, a handyman wasn’t in the door five seconds before the wife was crowing about how much the dump was worth now, so watch the wainscoting with that toolbox. It was

like that in most big cities now: LA, Miami – a communal hysteria, as if the entire citizenry were on *Dialing for Dollars* and had won the car. Shep was probably just envious. Still, there was something unsavory about that gleefulness, a mania he associated with slot machines. A preacher's son, he failed to see the satisfaction in a jackpot that bore no relation to something good or hard that you had done.

Property in Westchester had appreciated by three times over ten years as well, so, yeah, in hindsight they should have bought – thereby making about as much profit from sitting on his ass as he had from selling a whole company, fruit of twenty-two years' sweat. That was the way people made money in this country now, according to Jackson: ass-sitting. You couldn't get rich on earned income, he railed. Taxes on wages made sure of that. Jackson claimed that only inheritance and investment – ass-sitting – paid. Shep wasn't so sure. Certainly he himself had worked hard, but he'd been compensated for his trouble. Limuru lay ever in the back of his mind, and he'd earned far more than a dollar per day.

Shep had opted to rent for the same reason that drove every big decision he'd ever made. He wanted to be able to pick up stakes – easily, quickly, cleanly, without waiting for a house to sell in a market whose climate he couldn't foresee. That's what irked him a bit about Homeowner Smugness: all these schmoes with keys to a front door acted as if they'd seen the boom coming, as if they were financial geniuses and not the beneficiaries of dumb luck. He may have regretted missing out on the property windfall; he didn't regret the reason he'd missed out. He was proud of the reason, proud of planning to leave. He was only ashamed of having stayed.

He tried not to blame Glynis. If that meant blaming himself instead, that seemed fair. The Afterlife was his aspiration – the word he preferred to *fantasy* – and any dream was dilute secondhand. He tried not to be angry at her for a lot of things, and to a great extent succeeded.

When they met, Glynis had been running her own small business from home, making jewelry of a strikingly stark, streamlined nature during an era of clunk, slapdash, and feathers. She had contacted

Knack of All Trades to build a worktable bolted to the floor, and later, because she liked the proprietor – his broad veined forearms, his wide-open face like a field of wheat – a set of racks for hammers, pliers, and files. Shep appreciated her meticulous requirements, as she appreciated his meticulous execution. The second time he showed up to finish the table, she'd left numerous samples of her work lying casually around the studio (deliberately, she confessed with a laugh once they started going out; she'd dangled the glittering baubles before her handsome handyman "like fishing lures"). Though he'd never considered himself the artistic type, Shep was transfixed. Delicate and morbid, a whole series of elongated stickpins looked like assemblages of bird bones; when she modeled the bracelets for him, they wrapped all the way up her arm, slithering like serpents to the elbow. Sinewy, elusive, and severe, Glynis's creations were an uncanny manifestation of the woman who made them. It was touch and go whether he fell in love with Glynis or her metalwork first, because as far as Shep was concerned they were one and the same.

During their courtship, Glynis was teaching at summer camps and doing piecework in the Jewelry District to pay the rent. Meantime, she was placing single necklaces in second-tier galleries, and her silversmithing barely broke even. Yet she fevered long hours, and paid her own phone bill. Surely any man would have assumed that for a self-starter like Glynis – disciplined, ascetic, and fiery – pulling her financial weight in a marriage would be a point of pride. (On reflection, it probably was.) So he'd never expected to have to save for The Afterlife all by himself.

Less compassionate men might have felt they'd been sold a bill of goods. Pregnancy had seemed a reasonable excuse for letting her metal-smithing tools languish, but that accounted for only eighteen months of the last twenty-six years. Motherhood wasn't the real problem, though it took him a long time to figure out what was. She needed resistance, the very quality that metal most demonstrably offered up. Suddenly Glynis had no difficulty to overcome, no hard artisan's life with galleries filching half the too-small price of a mokume brooch

that had taken three weeks to forge. No, her husband made a good living, and if she slept late and dawdled the afternoon away reading *Lustre*, *American Craft Magazine*, and *Lapidary Journal*, the phone bill would still get paid. For that matter, she needed need itself. She could overcome her anguish about embarking on an object that, once completed, might not meet her exacting standards only if she had no choice. In this sense, his helping had hurt her. By providing the financial cushion that should have facilitated making all the metal whathaveyou she liked, he had ruined her life. Wrapped with a slackening bow, ease was a poisonous present.

Yet it wasn't as if she were lazy. Since Glynis still maintained the fiction (even in his head, the word pained him) that she was a professional metalsmith, all other domestic activities therefore qualified as procrastination, and thus were seen to with vigor and dispatch. It wasn't as if she'd made nothing, either – metalwork, that is. Spurning jewelry as intrinsically rinky-dink, she'd moved entirely to flatware, and through the years had crafted a handful of dazzling implements: memorably, the Bakelite inlaid fish slice; that exquisite set of hand-forged, perfectly ergonomic sterling chopsticks, whose heavier ends bent slightly, achingly, as if they were melting. Yet each finished project was the product of so much agony and time that in the end she couldn't bring herself to sell it.

So what she hadn't made was money. Were he ever to have observed aloud once Zach and Amelia both entered school that she was still not bringing in a dime, Glynis would have iced over in cold rage (so he hadn't). But her income of zero dollars wasn't an objection. It was a fact. That when they married Shep hadn't imagined he would carry the whole household in perpetuity was also a fact. But he could carry the household, and he had.

Besides, he understood her. Or he understood how much he couldn't understand, which was a start. Making his own geographical inertia all the more perplexing, by and large Shep decided to do something, and then he did it. For Glynis to get from the deciding to the doing was like leaping the stumps of a washed-out bridge. To put it another

way, she had the engine, but a faulty ignition switch. Glynis could decide to do something and then nothing would happen. It was an interior thing, a design flaw, and probably not one she could fix.

Having kept his mouth shut for decades, he should never have let it slip out tentatively over breakfast a couple of years ago (during a particularly galling week at Handy Randy) that it was a shame they hadn't been socking away the remnants of two incomes all this time, with which they could have left for The Afterlife long ago . . . Before he had finished the sentence, she'd stood from the table without a word and marched out the door. When he came home that night, she had a job. Apparently all this time he'd have had better luck lighting a fire under the woman not by cajoling but by giving offense. Ever since, she'd been fashioning models for Living in Sin, an upmarket chocolatier whose factory was located in nearby Mount Kisco. This month, the company was already gearing up for Easter. So rather than polish off avant-garde flatware of museum-piece quality, his wife was carving wax bunny rabbits to be cast – aptly – in bitter chocolate, and stuffed with orange cream. The work was part time, without benefits. Her salary made a farcical contribution to their coffers. She kept the job out of spite.

In return, he may have let her keep it out of spite. Besides, she couldn't help herself. They were very good bunny rabbits.

It was disconcerting to be systematically punished for what might have engendered a modicum of gratitude. He did not require the gratitude, but he could have skipped the resentment, an emotion distinctive for being disagreeable on both its generating and receiving ends. Glynis resented her dependency; she found it humiliating. She resented not being a celebrated metalsmith, and she resented the fact that her status as professional nonentity appeared to everyone, including Glynis, to be all her fault. She resented her two children for diverting her energies when they were young; once they were no longer young, she resented them for failing to divert her energies. She resented that her husband and now her thoughtlessly undemanding children had thieved her most cherished keepsakes: her excuses. As resentment

produces the psychic equivalent of acid reflux, she resented the resentment itself. Never having had much of substance to complain about was yet one more reason to feel aggrieved.

Shep was temperamentally predisposed to feel fortunate, although he himself had plenty of substance to resent, had he been so inclined. He supported his wife and son. He subsidized his daughter Amelia, though she was three years out of college. He subsidized his elderly father, and made sure that the prideful retired reverend didn't know it. He'd made several "loans" to his sister Beryl that she would never pay back, and had probably not made the last; yet they were officially loans and not gifts, so Beryl would never thank him or feel abashed. He'd picked up the entire tab for his mother's funeral, and since no one else noticed Shep didn't notice either. Every member of a family has a role, and Shep was the one who paid for things. Because every other party took this state of affairs for granted, Shep took it for granted, too.

He rarely bought anything for himself, but he didn't want anything. Or he wanted only one thing. Still, why now? Why, if it had already been over eight years since the sale of Knack, could it not be nine? Why, if it could be this evening, could it not be tomorrow night?

Because it was early January in New York State, and it was cold. Because he was already forty-eight years old, and the closer he got to fifty the more *The Afterlife*, even if he did finally get around to it, looked like routine early retirement. Because his "can't-lose" mutual funds had only last month recovered the value of his original investment. Because in his idiotic innocence he had broadcast for decades to anyone who seemed interested his intentions to leave behind altogether the world of tax planning, car inspections, traffic jams, and telemarketing. (As his audience had aged, other people's youthful admiration had long ago soured to mockery behind his back. Or not always behind his back, for at Handy Randy Shep's "escape fantasy," as Pogatchnik flippantly tagged it, was a regular source of merciless entertainment.) Because he himself had started dangerously to doubt the reality of *The Afterlife*, and without the promise of

reprieve he could not – he could not – continue. Because he'd tied a carrot in front of his own nose like a goddamned donkey's, soothed by the seduction of infinite delay, never sorting out that if he could always leave tomorrow then he could also leave today. Indeed, it was the sheer arbitrariness of this Friday evening that made it so perfect.

When Glynis opened the front door, he started guiltily. He had rehearsed his opening lines so many times, and now the script had fled.

“Bourbon,” she said. “What’s the special occasion?”

Still clinging to his last thought, he wanted to explain that the occasion was not special, which was why it was special. “Habits are made to be broken.”

“Some of them,” she reproached, taking off her coat.

“Would you like one?”

She surprised him. “Yes.”

Glynis was still slender, and no one ever pegged her at fifty, though there was a fatigue in her bearing tonight that made it suddenly possible to envision her at seventy-five. She'd been tired since September at least, claiming to run a low-grade fever that he privately failed to detect. Although she'd lately developed a subtle paunch, the rest of her body was if anything thinner; such reapportionment of weight was normal in middle age, and he was too much of a gentleman to pass comment on it.

Their both indulging in hard liquor at barely past seven fostered a warm collusion that he was reluctant to undermine. Yet his innocuous “Where have you been?” came out like an accusation.

She could be evasive, but it was rare for her not to answer at all. He let it go.

Curling protectively around the highball in her usual armchair, Glynis pulled her knees up and tucked her heels. She always seemed enclosed, balled up in another sense, but tonight she seemed uncommonly so. Maybe she intuited his purpose, so long in coming.

When he reached into his inside pocket and laid three sheaves of e-ticket printouts silently on the glass table beside the Wedding Fountain, she arched her eyebrows. “Show and tell?”

Glynis was an elegant woman, and he was interested in her – in that way that simple people were so often captivated by the fucked-up. He paused to consider whether, without Glynis, as partner or opponent, The Afterlife might prove desolate.

“Three tickets to Pemba,” he said. “Me, you, and Zach.”

“Another ‘research trip’? You might have thought of that before the Christmas holidays. Zach’s back in school.”

Though she never used to couch the term in quotes, the sour twist she now gave to “research trip” recalled Pogatchnik’s sneering pronunciation of “escape fantasy.” He noted how readily she concocted a reason that his caprice was impossible, nimbly dismissing even the brief getaway she mistook it for. In his work, Shep applied his intelligence to solving problems; Glynis applied hers to inventing them, to constructing obstacles to throw in her own path. He wouldn’t mind the eccentricity if her path weren’t his own as well.

“These tickets are one-way.”

He would have expected that when she got it, when she registered the true nature of the gauntlet he’d thrown on the coffee table, her face would cloud, sink into solemnity, or constrict with the wary rigidity of preparing for combat. Instead she looked mildly amused. He was accustomed to ridicule at Handy Randy (“Yeah, sure you’re moving to Africa, any day now, you and Meryl Streep”), and sometimes, though it filled him with self-hatred, he’d joined in the fun himself. But from Glynis any suggestion of the same blithe, pitying cynicism slew him. He knew she wasn’t into it anymore, but he hadn’t thought her attitude had got as bad as that.

“Wasteful,” she said calmly, with a thin smile. “Not like you.”

She’d correctly intuited that the one-ways had cost more than round-trips. “A gesture,” he said. “This isn’t about money.”

“I can’t imagine your doing anything unrelated to money. Your whole life, Shepherd,” she announced, “has been about money.”

“Not for its own sake. I’ve never been greedy like that, as you know – wanting money to be rich. I want to buy something with it.”

“I used to believe that,” she said sadly. “Now I wonder if you’ve any idea what it is that you really want to purchase. You don’t even know what you want out of, much less what you want in on.”

“I do,” he countered. “I want to buy myself. I’m sorry to sound like Jackson, but he’s right, in a way. I’m an indentured servant. This isn’t a free country, in any sense of the word. If you want your own liberty, you have to buy it.”

“But liberty isn’t any different from money, is it? It’s meaningless unless you know what you want to spend it on.” The observation sounded hollow, even bored.

“We’ve talked about what I want to spend it on.”

“Yes,” she said wearily. “Endlessly.”

He swallowed the insult. “Part of going is finding out.”

Shep could not have contrived a conversation that should have riveted his wife more than this one, but he could swear that her attention had wandered.

“Gnu,” he appealed, pronouncing the G; the endearment went back to their very first research trip to Kenya, where she had done cracking impressions of wildebeests, hooking her hands over her head for horns and wrenching her long face into a pleading expression that was sad and dumb. The antic had been girlish and beguiling. He used to call her Gnu all the time, and lately – well, lately, he realized with a shock, he hadn’t been calling her anything at all. “These are real tickets. For a real airplane, that takes off in one week. I would like you to come with me. I would like Zach to come with us, and if we leave as a family I will drag him down the Jetway by the hair. But *I am going*, with or without you.”

Damned if she didn’t seem to find his declaration hilarious. “An ultimatum, then?” She drained her glass, as if to stifle laughter.

“An invitation,” he countered.

“A week from now you’re getting on a plane to fly to an island you’ve never been to, where you’ll spend the rest of your life. Whatever were all those ‘research trips’ for?”

In her use of *you* as opposed to *we* he read her answer, and he wasn't prepared for the sudden falling sensation in his chest. Although he had tried to be realistic with himself, apparently he had held out hope that she and Zack might come with him to Pemba after all. Still, this face-off was young, so he held out further hope that – for the first time in the history of the universe – he might change her mind.

“I picked Pemba precisely because we haven't been there. That means you can't have already come up with a zillion reasons why yet another option is off the table.”

When she said nothing in response, he was able to remember some of what he had recited over the steering wheel earlier this afternoon on the Henry Hudson Parkway. “Goa got the all-clear until you read about that expat Briton who was murdered by a local acquaintance in her house, and then it was too dangerous. One murder. As if people never kill each other in New York. Bulgaria would have been a steal when we first lit on it, and in the Western world, too, if barely, with broadband and a postal service and clean water. But the food was too bland. The *food*. As if we couldn't rustle up a little garlic and rosemary. Meantime, the property prices have already started to escalate, and now it's too late. Ditto Eritrea, which piqued your imagination: proud new country, warm people, espresso on every corner, and the fifties architecture was a kick. Now, lucky for you, the government's gone to hell. You loved Morocco, remember? Cinnamon and terra cotta; neither the food nor the landscape was *bland*. It seemed so promising that I agreed to stay on when my mother had her stroke, and we got back half a day too late to say goodbye.”

“You made up for it.” Ah, the funeral expenses. If Shep did not resent his family's impositions on his finances, Glynis resented them for him.

“But after 9/11,” he plowed on, “suddenly all Muslim countries – including Turkey, to my own disappointment – got knocked off the list. We had a terrific opportunity when the currency collapsed in Argentina. Before that, we could have bought just about anything in Southeast Asia during that financial crisis. But now all those currencies

have recovered, and our resources would never stretch for thirty or forty years in any of those countries today. In Cuba, you couldn't live without shampoo and toilet paper. Croatia's residency requirements entailed too much red tape. The slums in Kenya were too depressing; South Africa made you feel too guilty for being white. Laos, Portugal, Tonga, and Bhutan – I can't even remember what was wrong with all of them anymore, though" – he indulged a bitterness – "I'm sure you do."

Glynis exuded an aggressive mildness, and seemed to be enjoying herself. "You're the one who ruled out France," she said sweetly.

"That's right. The taxes would have killed us."

"Always money, Shepherd," she chided.

It struck him then how people who acted above money – arty types like his sister, or his Old-Testament father – were the same folks who never earned any to speak of. Glynis knew perfectly well that The Afterlife had to add up financially or it would solely constitute a long, ruinous vacation.

"But you've paralyzed us at both ends, haven't you?" he proceeded. "Not only is no destination good enough, but it's never the right time to go. We have to wait until Amelia is out of high school. We have to wait until Amelia is out of college. We have to wait until Zach is out of primary school. Middle school. Now it's high school, and then why not college? We have to wait for our investments to recover from the techstock crash, and then from 9/11. Well, they have."

Shep wasn't used to talking so much, and babbling made him feel foolish. He may have been as dependent on *resistance* as Glynis, which is to say: hers. "You think I'm being selfish. Maybe I am. For once. This isn't about money, it's about" – he paused in embarrassment – "my soul. You'll say, you have said, that it won't be what I expect. I accept that. It's not as if I nurse a misguided idea about parking myself on the beach. I know sun gets boring, that there are flies. Still, I can tell you this much: I plan to get eight hours of sleep. That sounds small, but it's not small. I love sleeping, Glynis, and" – he didn't want to choke up now, not until he got it all out – "I especially love sleeping

with you. But when I say I crave eight hours of sleep, at a Westchester dinner party? They *laugh*. For commuters around here, that's such a preposterous ambition that it's actually funny.

"So I don't care what else I'll do in Pemba or whether the power keeps cutting off. Because if I back down this time? I'd know in my heart of hearts that we're never really going to go. And with no promised land to look forward to, I can't keep it up, Gnu. I can't keep cleaning up the messes that the untrained klutzes at Hardly Handy Randy leave behind. I can't keep sitting in traffic for hours listening to NPR on the West Side Highway. I can't keep running to the A-and-P for milk and getting 'bonus points' on our store card so that after spending several thousand dollars we qualify for a free turkey on Thanksgiving."

"There are worse fates."

"No," he said. "I'm not sure there are. I know we've seen plenty of poverty – raw sewage running in gutters and mothers scavenging for mango peels. But they know what's wrong with their lives, and they have a notion that with a few shillings or pesos or rupees in their pockets things could be better. There's something especially terrible about being told over and over that you have the most wonderful life on earth and it doesn't get any better and it's still shit. This is supposed to be the greatest country in the world, but Jackson is right: it's a sell, Glynis. I must have forty different 'passwords' for banking and telephone and credit card and Internet accounts, and forty different account numbers, and you add them all up and that's our lives. And it's all ugly, physically ugly. The strip malls in Elmsford, the K-Marts and Wal-Marts and Home Depots . . . all plastic and chrome with blaring, clashing colors, and everyone in a hurry, to do what?"

It was not his imagination. She really wasn't paying attention.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You've heard this before. Maybe I'm wrong, and maybe I really will skulk back home a few weeks later all hangdog and sheepish. But I'd rather the humiliation of trying and failing than give it up. Giving it up would be like dying."

"I think you'll find" – her voice was so measured, piped full of

some great new wisdom he did not care for – “that it would not in the least be like dying. There is nothing like dying. We use it as a metaphor for something else. Something smaller and silly and much more bearable.”

“If this is your idea of getting me to change my mind, it’s not working.”

“When is this you’re planning to depart our shores?”

“Next Friday. BA-179 out of JFK, the 22:30 for London. Then on to Nairobi, to Zanzibar, to Pemba. You and Zach can come with me up until the minute the flight closes. In the meantime, I thought I’d clear off and give you a chance to think.” *A chance to miss me* is what he meant. *To miss me while you can still un-miss me*. And in all honesty he was afraid of her. If he remained here, she would be able to talk him out of it. She was that good. “I’ll be staying with Carol and Jackson. They’re expecting me, and you can reach me there at any time before I go.”

“I do wish you wouldn’t,” she said idly. Having picked up her glass from the table, Glynis rose and smoothed her slacks in a gesture that he recognized as marshaling herself to prepare another ordinary dinner. “Randy is for once entirely handy, and I’m afraid I will need your health insurance.”

Later that evening, while Glynis was still tidying the kitchen, Shep slipped upstairs and pulled the bathrobe off his suitcase. He put the two shirts back in the third drawer of his dresser, smoothing them so they’d be in respectable condition for work. He removed the needle-nose Vise-Grips, the screwdrivers, and the hacksaw, then fit them back into the tiers of his battered red metal toolbox. When he was down to the comb, before laying it in its accustomed place beside the cigar box of leftover foreign currency, he ran it through his hair.