

Fall Line

by

Michael G. Ryan

Somebody saw him jump, yeah, but nobody saw him slip

I guess he lost a lot of hope and then he lost a grip

But now he's lying on the freeway in the middle of all this mess

Guess we lost another one, just like the other one...

—Jack Johnson, "Fall Line"

I

Buildup

1: Fat Charlie

The headlines in the days before what happened were almost prophetic.

Oklahoma City Prepares to Mourn on Anniversary of Bombing

Poll Shows Americans Expect Another 9/11

Homeland Security: “Greatest Threats Now Grow on American Soil”

They chose Grant mostly because he showed his vulnerability as clearly as a name tag at a convention: *Hi, My Name Is Skyler Grant. I’m Suicidal!*

Fat Charlie sat outside Giorgio’s, the pizza place around the corner from the Jung Tower where Skyler Grant worked, watching the lunchtime crowds with the attentiveness of a lion preparing to thin a herd. It wasn’t sunny enough to merit his Ray-Bans, but he felt protected by them nonetheless, anonymous, secretive, and unnoticed while he waited. He wore a Robert Talbott dress shirt, blue herringbone with a straight collar, and a yellow tie to accentuate it and hide his throat completely—he was a perfect chameleon among the downtown business executives except for his unavoidable weight. No one called him “obese” unless as part of a network news program, defining him in as part of a national health epidemic. His three hundred pounds never seemed an issue with restaurateurs, so long as his Visa Platinum was accepted at meal’s end. Of course, his doctor would have had conniptions to learn that Fat Charlie had become *Fatter* Charlie since his last physical—twenty-six pounds of depression

gain in four months—but Fat Charlie wasn't planning on going back to see his doctor anytime soon. First his plan had been to kill himself. When that plan had faded and was replaced by a more viable one that actually included some backbone, his new plan had circled like an impatient vulture until it had finally zeroed in on Skyler Grant.

Oh, he's in bad shape, Fat Charlie thought as Grant came across the parking lot toward Giorgio's "terrace" of colorful card tables; they were set up on the asphalt with a cheap velvet rope forming a rectangle around them to keep cars from trying to nose in too close. Dino, the single degree of separation between the two men, preceded Grant, chattering away, gesturing wildly with his hands like an illiterate trying to use sign language, but Grant's eyes were shadows, his gaze far and away from the conversation. *He's very, very bad,* Fat Charlie amended. *Worse than Dino told me, even.*

Gratified, he smiled and waited.

"You're tall," he said when Grant and Dino reached the table. It was the most innocuous observation he could make—everything else about Skyler Grant spoke of self-destruction. His skin was pale, more befitting an eighteenth-century Englishman in a powdered wig. His eyes were buggy, straight out of a Tex Avery cartoon. Amongst the suits and dress skirts of the downtown populace, his Dave Matthews Band T-shirt said one of two things: *I don't give a shit how I look* or *I don't give a shit what you think of how I look*. His hair, at least, was combed, he was shaved, and unlike Dino, his knuckles didn't appear to scrape

the pavement when he walked. Yet he still looked like an emotional train wreck with no survivors.

“Six-five,” Grant said.

Six-oh-five, Fat Charlie thought, seeing a digital clock with his mind’s eye, then dismissed that as too late in the day to achieve his aims. He skipped over to the mental calendar, but June fifth was more than six weeks away; that was far, far later than he expected his planned act of terrorism to come to fruition. Next Tuesday was the day, five days to go. Tuesday, a day for celebration. So, he reluctantly let go of the forced coincidence of numbers.

“Mile-High Sky,” he said instead.

Skyler Grant frowned as he took a green plastic seat across the table from Fat Charlie. “I sort of go by ‘Skyler.’”

“I go by Fat Charlie.” He stuck out his hand as Dino said he’d pick up lunch and disappeared into Giorgio’s to get pizza slices for all three of them. “I think everybody has a nickname. My mother went by ‘Mom,’ for some reason her children could never grasp.”

A slight smile, as if Grant hadn’t had much cause to smile in a while, which Fat Charlie knew was the helpless truth. The younger man’s last reason to smile had been named Teresa, Dino had told Fat Charlie. Teresa Beaumont, Beaufort, Bellemont, something along those lines. Or maybe that was the last name of the doctor she’d run off with.

“You think I nicknamed myself ‘Fat Charlie’? I was twelve and all glands when Mom first called me that.” He watched for a glimpse of pity before adding,

“My older brother took the cue and starting calling me M.O.C.—Morbidly Obese Charlie.”

There it was, the pity chalked onto Grant’s white face, so Fat Charlie stopped making up stories like the non-existent brother and said, “But I can see where ‘Mile-High’ might bother you if you’re sensitive about your height. So, I won’t call you that anymore. My mistake. I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s okay,” Grant said. “It’s not that big a deal.”

“Hell, man, *everything’s* a big deal when you’re heartbroken.” As Grant’s features shifted from pity to creeping suspicion, Fat Charlie said, “Yes, I know about you. Dino got you here under false pretenses. My fault, and I’m sorry. He was telling me about this fellow he knew who was going through something serious that I might know a little something about. Because truth is, I consider it pure serendipity that I haven’t blown my own brains out since my girlfriend left me just after Christmas.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“Probably not half as sorry as I was. I’d rather she killed me than leave me, if you want to know the truth.”

Dino emerged from Giorgio’s with pepperoni slices and sodas, napkins pinned beneath his pointed chin. The greasy paper plates threatened to slip out of his fingers, but neither Fat Charlie nor Skyler Grant moved to intercept them. Instead, Fat Charlie sensed that he and Grant had somehow come to a meeting of the minds, allied against Dino like the oldest and youngest children against the middle child. The jilted duo.

“Pizza must be a welcome change after kimchi and soju every day,” Fat Charlie said to Grant. “You work in the Saxon Tower, right? I saw them changing the sign on the top of your building, and I used to eat in the Sunrise Café downstairs once in a while. You know, my ex was Korean. Well, more Twinkie than Korean, truth be told—she had disposed of most of her Korean habits by the time she disposed of me. Except for the shoe thing. Always had to take our shoes off in the house.”

Grant said, “I’ve never dated an Asian before. And yes, we’re the Jung Tower now. But we still have burgers and hot dogs in the café. Breakfast, too. It’s not half-bad. I eat there a lot.”

Fat Charlie said, “Since your girl left you, anyway. Dino told me you’d stopped showing up for your pinball club or whatever you call it. I guess he thought I’d understand, because of my whole implosion with Young-Soon. Let me tell you, I weighed a hundred pounds soaking wet before she left. Now look at me. If you can’t be with the one you love, love the lunch you’re with, huh?”

Traffic moved around them, on Giorgio’s parking lot, out on California Street, across the street at the bank and the Burger King and the Barnes and Noble Booksellers and Stairway to Heaven, the new-and-used CD place. There were people on the bright sidewalks, carrying Starbucks cups and Styrofoam containers from the soup place or the bakery on the corner. Midday downtown bustled, loud and alive. To Fat Charlie, Skyler Grant looked like he was the only dead thing not being eaten for lunch at this hour. He seemed utterly indifferent

to the noises and disconnected from the color of the world. To Fat Charlie, Skyler Grant was living in black and white. Thus, he was perfect.

“Well, then,” Grant said, “I should say I *go* to the Sunrise Café a lot. I’m your opposite. I don’t really eat much, I guess.”

“Laurel, meet Hardy,” Dino said, gesturing and grinning. Fat Charlie’s stomach turned. He didn’t like it when Dino smiled—Dino’s mouth looked like his animated namesake’s, a collection of jagged dinosaur-dog teeth. Traces of pepperoni hung in them like decorations. Fat Charlie himself had spent serious money on adult braces and porcelain crowns and bleaching and all manner of dental cosmetics.

“So, she hurt you badly,” Fat Charlie said to Grant, who picked at his pizza. The starving zombie.

“Yeah.”

“Me, too. Like I was desperate in the dark at night, thinking there was nothing left in the world that I wanted.”

Grant finally took a bite, chewed pepperoni, eyes down now. “Yeah, it’s like that, except it doesn’t have to be dark. You can feel it in broad daylight, too.”

“Bachelor Abbott, meet loner Costello,” Dino said, still grinning, his own best audience. Fat Charlie turned on him then. His voice was low and melodic, as if he’d practiced sounding villainous to compensate for an appearance that was more comedic. Still, he was careful—he knew who his audience was and how

close that audience was to being within his folds. Despite the fact that Dino was like a pet to him, he could see the necessity of kicking that pet right now.

“You have nothing to contribute to this conversation, Dino,” he said. “You’ve never even lost a dog, let alone someone you needed. Why do you have to try to talk about things you don’t understand? Do I ridicule you about your mess in Montana?”

Dino deflated, and Fat Charlie watched a spark of curiosity light up on Grant’s side of the table.

“What happened in Montana?” Grant asked Dino.

“Trouble with the Montana Freeman,” Fat Charlie answered, calculatedly cryptic, while Dino looked horrified to have his secret revealed. “And let’s be honest—if you can’t get along with a bunch of racist, sexist anarchists because you’re too low even for *them*, shouldn’t you be grateful for the few friends you still have?”

“Christ, why do you gotta be that way?” Dino said.

“Because you keep comparing me to fat comedians. I don’t like it.”

“It’s not as if it’s not part of your goddamned name,” Dino said, but he buttoned up and picked pepperonis off his pizza slice as Fat Charlie turned back to Grant.

“Young-Soon left me for a dancer at the Moore,” he said, his face involuntarily tightening as he reviewed it in his head. Four months later, and the rage still looked for ways out through the pores of his skin, as if it might puncture the soft spot at the base of his neck to escape. “A graceful little bag

of muscles with a face like a Japanese cartoon. Understudy for Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, but not a CC of faggot in those twice-a-week erections. Well, the ones he had with Young-Soon anyway, until she decided to go for appearances nightly, two shows on Saturday.”

“Teresa went with a doctor,” Grant said. “She was never into the arts.”

“Neither was Young-Soon, until the arts were in *her*.”

“Did you ever meet him?” The way Grant asked it, Fat Charlie knew his newfound friend had, in fact, met his own homewrecker.

“Our encounters were limited to my unsuspecting applause from truly excellent seats,” Fat Charlie said. “One of the few perks of being cuckolded—front row at the Moore for twelve performances.”

“I didn’t even meet Teresa’s doctor until after she had moved out. Well, I take that back—I actually met him *while* she was moving out.” Grant leaned forward over his soda, wound up to talk, Fat Charlie could tell. He gestured at Dino, *Not a sound. Let the boy talk*. And Skyler Grant did. “I was just home from work with Chinese food and the two of them were bringing U-Haul boxes down the front steps to Dr. Bennett’s Mercedes. So, I met that fucker, right there in the parking lot. He put a box of her CDs down at his feet so he could shake my hand, for crying out loud, with Teresa talking to him from up the stairs about what they’d do for dinner tonight because she didn’t know yet that I was standing there with takeout for her, my about-to-be-ex-girlfriend.”

Grant paused, and Dino took a breath to editorialize, Fat Charlie was sure, but he was able to catch Dino's eye first. *If you interrupt him now*, he said silently, *we'll go back to YOU carrying the bomb.*

"She was just chattering away at him like a little girl going on summer vacation," Grant said, and in that instant, Fat Charlie felt real empathy for young man. He knew the shame of being abandoned. Knew the blackness, both helpless and furious, that followed the shame. He felt he understood this young man he intended to kill. "Then she threw her armload of clothes on the hangers over her other shoulder and saw me standing there, slack-jawed and... *done*. Just done. Christ, was it only two weeks ago?"

Grant's eyes came alive as he relived it. "Man, does it feel like years."

"Well, as unbelievable as it sounds, I have the cure for the broken heart," Fat Charlie said. "I'm no doctor—"

"Thank God for small favors," Grant said, and all three of them chuckled.

"—but I know camaraderie is the first step to recovery." Fat Charlie handed Grant a business card across the table. Grant looked down at it.

CHARLES HOFFMAN, PHOTOGRAPHER.

"You're the Hoffman of Hoffman Photography?" Grant asked.

"In the morbidly obese flesh." Fat Charlie liked how the pity came to Grant's eyes faster than it had before.

"We have some of your pieces hanging in our building's lobby—mostly landscapes, I think, but a few pictures of old men. Did you photograph Arthur Saxon?"

“Yes, long before your building’s ancient and decrepit owner elected to sell it to the Koreans.”

Skyler Grant was silent for a moment in the presence of celebrity, albeit local and small-time, but Fat Charlie recognized it as advantageous silence just the same. Grant was trying to remember the incident that had put Fat Charlie in the headlines, he could tell—it had been in both Seattle papers, his near-death experience.

“Didn’t you get mugged outside your studio last year? I thought I read about you being in the hospital.”

“Yes. For a little while. But like they say, I got me fine. Physically, anyway. The telling part of that whole story is that Young-Soon left me the day after they sent me home.” He waited the obligatory beat for Grant to look up at him with new perspective before he spoke again.

“If you want to play some Texas Hold-’Em and drink my imported beer until you can at least forget your ex long enough to lose twenty dollars, you’re welcome to join us. I know you’re one of those pinball wizard types, but the video arcade isn’t exactly a cozy support network now, is it? I have some slightly more grown-up friends in every Friday night at the studio on Hubbard Street. Do you know where it is?”

Grant said he did, and he turned over the card to scribble Fat Charlie’s cell phone number on it; Fat Charlie began telling him how he could be reached after five o’clock, if Grant wanted to join. Dino cleared the paper plates and soda

cans, and as he did so, Fat Charlie murmured an apology to him. He made sure it was just loud enough that Grant could hear it with minimal effort.

“S’alright,” Dino said, clearly relieved, obviously eager to get the fight behind them. “But those Freemen were a bunch of right-wing assholes, I hope you understand.”

“We can talk about it later,” Fat Charlie said, glancing at Grant, who tipped his head knowingly. “Mile-High needs to go back to work, and so do I.” To Grant, he said, “I hope we see you one of these Fridays. Maybe this week, if you like. Don’t be a stranger.”

“You will. And I won’t.”

As they shook hands, Skyler Grant’s slender palm in Fat Charlie’s thick one, Fat Charlie said, in a low voice, “If you hear the wind blow through you at night, you remember that ol’ Fat Charlie is lying in bed hearing the same goddamned wind at the same goddamned time, and try not to feel so alone, okay?”

“That might be harder than it sounds,” Grant said.

“Everything is. You’ll survive. I’ll help you.”

Grant nodded one more time—maybe acceptance, maybe just bemusement—said he’d see Dino “hanging ’round the arcade,” and then he headed back for the newly christened Jung Tower. Fat Charlie watched him cross Giorgio’s parking lot to the sidewalk, pausing to let a pair of Asian women go ahead of him back toward the Tower. The sight of the Asian women made Fat Charlie’s heart hammer a little harder, his focus swim. For those few

heartbeats, he forgot his plans, and he could hear Young-Soon's voice as if she had taken Skyler Grant's seat. But Dino brought him back to it all.

"You think he's in?" Dino asked.

Fat Charlie shook off the fading image of Young-Soon's face and, with greater difficulty, the sound of his own begging as she pulled her luggage out of his hands and made her escape. "He'll play poker, yes. Are you comfortable killing him?"

Dino showed his empty palms. "No matching wedding rings here. We're just Bally Pals. Do you think he'll carry the bomb?"

Fat Charlie swallowed. The plan. As he'd said just two months ago to Dino, Chipper Dill, Kakua, and Josh, *Forget about Osama Bin-Laden. Foreign faces cannot terrorize U.S. citizens the way homegrown faces can.* He didn't explain his true motives—how a thousand deaths could lead to just one—and if things went the way he expected, his reasons would only become clear when he was dead, too. He looked at Dino, his original bagboy for the bomb that would set Fat Charlie's heart free. "Yes, I think he will. And if not of his own free will, he'll carry that bomb anyway. He just doesn't know it yet."

2: Spoons

Skyler Grant's biggest problem wasn't that he had the metabolism of a bumblebee; it was that he now had the attention span of one as well.

At two weeks out from the official moment of breakup, like being adrift without food amongst islands that the currents were unwilling to touch, his relationship with Teresa Beaumont was still not yet officially *over*. Instead, it continued to drag itself through dark and choppy waters, one more riptide forcing him underwater for the third and maybe final time, a victim those waves that avoided the shore for their own mysterious reasons. Grant had no idea when this force of nature would end. He only knew that he bled and bled (and *bled*) inside every time she called, every time even the slightest reminder of her crossed his path. Her diet sodas in the refrigerator, and he bled. The mail that still came addressed to her, and he bled. The small little office complex he had to pass every day on Nevada Street where a Doctor Peter Bennett worked so his newly acquired love, Ms. Beaumont, could continue to fart through hand-woven silk. Lots of bleeding there. (He secretly wished that Bennett performed abortions—it would increase the possibility of a right-wing bomber, some Montana Freeman, blowing Bennett and his practice to kingdom come. Unfortunately, the good doctor's psychiatry office seemed safe from fanatical right-to-lifers.) And that was pretty much Skyler Grant's life: when you've put five years in with someone and lost it with the suddenness and finality of a shark attack, the reminders are ubiquitous and, generally, vindictive.

At the offices in the Jung Tower, he experienced temporary reprieve from the onslaught of memories, thanks in large part to the Koreans. When they had begun to move in after the first of the year, he'd naturally been part of the low rumble of dissent. After all, the changes were swift and unflinching. Within days, the best parking spaces in the underground parking garage had been marked "RESERVED FOR THE JUNG CORPORATION." Grant parked so many levels underground in search of any open space that he thought he could smell the earth's core.

"Daewoos, Hyundais, and Kias," Bernie Bliss, the contractor Erstwhile brought in four times a year to work on the catalog, said to Grant during a conference call in mid-January. On the speakerphone, he sounded like a radio shock-jock. "Your garage is gonna look like a Korean used car lot. Bicycle racks in the lobby and Communist literature in the cafeteria are next, I'm telling you."

"Korea's not a Communist country," Grant reminded him.

Bernie Bliss snorted. "Hell, man, that's just what they want us to *think*. They're surrounded by Communists on every border, aren't they? When in Rome, do as the Commies do."

"I think they only border North Korea. And Japan is just across the water from them," Grant said, but Bernie was long past being refuted.

"Communists on every *border*, then," he said. "Don't debate semantics with me on this one."

The shift in the Sunrise Café's menu came after less than a month—no one else at Erstwhile, Inc., had ever tasted kimchi before either (and with good

reason, they all agreed after sampling it), and Grant was among the first to suggest that the hot dogs on the menu might have been fetching sticks last week.

“Now they’re playing dead,” he said, “but with ketchup.”

When he would periodically find himself head-and-shoulders over a sea of black-haired heads in the elevator on their way up to the new Heart and Seoul restaurant on the twenty-fifth floor, it was initially a source of amusement to him. Conversations in a language that sounded like water, all vowels, flowed around him. There was even an email that worked its way around the office with specialized phrases and pronunciations for the café. *An maep-gae hae-juseyo*, he’d learned. *Don’t make it too spicy.*

In February, a sizable banner went up in the lobby near the revolving doors, where renovations had been underway for a month: *The Jung Tower welcomes its newest tenants— the Jung Corporation and the Jung Childcare Center.*

“When did we become the Jung Tower?” Grant asked Bernie Bliss as they passed under the sign on their way out of the building to lunch. A stoic middle-aged and uniformed security guard, an Asian man with a permanent curl in his lip, stood at attention near the revolving doors, as if daring them to approach the service doors meant for deliveries. He was a new presence; like the addition of an armed guard to enforce the parking passes into the underground garage, the security guard in the lobby made Grant wonder if the Jung Corporation was actually from *North* Korea. He avoided the guard’s gaze as they passed in front of him. *Do you even greet a guard? Do you bow? Or just duck by like a fugitive?* he

wondered. (He'd never had this problem with cops—he knew all the protocol for not attracting their attention, thanks to his dad.) Instead of any of these, he looked up to be sure the colossal black-and-white portrait of the octogenarian Arthur Saxon still hung high on one wall near the lobby's vaulted ceiling. To Bernie, he said, "*My* business cards still have us in the Saxon Tower."

"Get ready to pack your bags and get relocated, bud," Bernie said. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt that seemed to draw the guard's unblinking stare. The two of them headed for the revolving doors. "That sign's just what I would expect from foreigners. 'We welcome us.' Idiots. And a daycare? This place's going to smell like tapioca and diapers every day. Korean tapioca."

"Bernie, you know what xenophobia is?" Grant asked.

"Yeah," Bernie said. "Fear of tapioca. You only need one broken condom to put you off of tapioca for life."

Grant laughed. Just a little laugh, something like a chortle or a prolonged chuckle to acknowledge Bernie's questionable humor. Bernie worked with both of the local newspapers, and he often said that working too closely with journalists seemed to imbue him with a "negative but mighty realistic perspective of the world and all the doofuses in it.." He also insisted that newspaper people were more jaded than TV journalists because "they don't get the spotlight. The last newspaper reporter anybody can remember is either Woodward or Bernstein, and that's only because of Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman made a movie about them."

Grant's laugh drifted off as they walked across the lobby, a small laugh, something utterly insignificant in the scope of his life as a whole to that point, just another grain of sand on the beach of his life. But at the instant he laughed, he was glancing from the august Arthur Saxon to a photograph on the welcome banner—three children, all Asians, an Asian woman smiling over her charges with a maternal air, the comfort and security of the daycare on the bright horizon. Combined with the cool air coming through the revolving doors and the smell of Bernie Bliss's cologne—so much sandalwood that he smelled like an East Indian import store—the moment became a snapshot in his mind. It would become the last time he could remember laughing. It was just four weeks before Teresa gutted him in the parking lot of their rented apartment in Bluebrook Hills, the odor of sweet-and-sour chicken gagging him while she loaded her clothes into Doctor Bennett's Mercedes.

("It's over, Skyler," she'd said. "I really hope you won't be a drama queen about this.")

Hell, no, woman. You want me to help you find the vein again so you can finish killing me, or can the good doctor find it for us lickety-split? he thought now, just back from lunch with Dino and Fat Charlie, standing in the lobby of the Jung Tower, looking through the glass walls into the Jung Daycare Center. Not that he and Teresa had ever settled on kids, but he felt magnetized to the daycare these last two weeks. The people passing it by on the street hardly spared the daycare and its preschool occupants a second glance. They went on to the bus stop or came around to the heavy glass door to the Sunrise Café, or they crossed the street

from the Jung Tower to get to the Subway sandwich shop. Every once in a while, Grant noticed someone else noticing him, that other someone looking through the daycare's streetside windows and on through the glass wall inside the lobby—like looking at a fish in a fishbowl inside another fishbowl. Were they feeling something empty and mournful when they saw the kids playing in the daycare? Grant couldn't tell to look at them. But he suspected they could see it smeared all over him.

The daycare's bright walls with juggling Day-Glo clowns and dancing bears did nothing to overshadow the pain that stayed two weeks later. *I really hope you won't be a drama queen about this.*

“You want to see drama,” he said out loud, “you should ride home with me tonight.”

Empty threat, he thought. She took your guts when she gutted you, Skyler. She was the only person who ever could.

In the daycare, none of the children seemed to know he was there, as always. Lots of little Korean kids (well, he assumed they were Koreans—they could have been Chinese or Japanese or any other Asian group, for all Grant could tell), a smattering of white kids, two black children, both boys, and not a one of them knew he was alive. For two weeks, Grant had felt a powerful urge to bang on the glass and watch them turn as one to face him. Fish in a fishbowl. And proof-positive that he wasn't a ghost of what he'd been before Teresa and Dr. Bennett had packed all of her belongings and, in the process, had stolen an oddball assortment of Grant's. He had no doubt that if he did just that, banged

on the glass, the dour-faced security Korean security guard would make kimchi of Grant's ass in short order. It was tempting.

Yet he caught the elevator up to the twentieth floor without testing his theory. Even under the best of circumstances, he felt leery of authority figures. (His father had been a police officer, and though he'd been an affectionate man, he always seemed to be waiting to be somewhere else.) The security guard in the lobby made him fall silent when they passed each other as Grant came from or went to work. And the armed security guard at the gate to the underground parking garage made him flat-out shiver. Armed! A gun in their building! To protect who—the valet parkers on C level? Grant's outrage was easily surpassed by the seasick feeling he got just thinking about that gun. It was right there, and the man wearing it had no idea that he could easily be called upon to use it for more than just defending himself. As depressed as Grant felt, he certainly didn't subscribe to the idea of "suicide by cop." And certainly not "suicide by couldn't-make-it-as-a-cop," as his dad had dismissively called security guards.

In the elevator, he felt his bumblebee attention shift, *buzz*, again. Fat Charlie had been usurped by the daycare kids, and the kids now melted beneath the blazing new thought that Teresa had probably called or emailed him while he was at lunch. Some antagonistic barb or condescending request, something to make his blood boil or his soul scream.

While he couldn't comprehend the aspiration to die at the hands of police officers, Skyler Grant had a firm handle on the idea of suicide by ex-girlfriend. She was the sun—safe and warm from a distance, but scorching death the

closer you got. And like a bubble rising to the surface ahead of him, he thought, with some small degree of comfort, *Fat Charlie gets it, too. His ex must have been just as bad as mine.*

Oh, yes, she had written. Multiple times.

“Because nobody ever died from a single stab wound, I’m betting,” Grant said to Caroline. (She was the mousy marketing manager for the upcoming catalog, straight out of college, and she had popped up like a gopher from her cubicle the minute she had spotted Grant stalking through Erstwhile’s lobby.) She clutched printouts of PDFs for unapproved layouts to show him. Now she stood in his office doorway, clearly having a heated internal debate: *bolt like a deer or stay like a deer in the headlights.* Entranced by the subject lines of Teresa’s emails, Grant didn’t have the presence of mind to tell poor, hapless Caroline to duck and run for cover, if she knew what was good for her. Those waves he’d been praying would carry him bobbing to shore were coming in like an Indonesian tsunami.

FROM: Teresa Beaumont SUBJECT: I NEED MY GRANDMOTHER’S WWII
GLASS IN THE STORAGE UNIT

FROM: Teresa Beaumont SUBJECT: TAKE MY NAME OFF THE CABLE BILL

FROM: Teresa Beaumont SUBJECT: FW: FW: WHAT’S THE MOST
IMPORTANT QUESTION TO ASK IF YOU WANT TO HAVE SAFE SEX?

FROM: Teresa Beaumont SUBJECT: DID YOU CHANGE THE APT LOCKS?

Why had she written four times? The red light blinking on his phone suggested he had at least one voicemail from her, too. Ironically, when they'd first started dating, he would have panicked to see *only* four emails from her. It had started with a personal ad, *her* personal ad, that he had answered, an ad with her inviting headline: ONCE UPON A TIME... NOW YOU FINISH MY STORY.

Then it had been twenty emails a day, a dozen phone calls, Instant Messenger (he had blocked everyone but her—who else was worth talking to?), sneaking out for long lunches... it was pure intoxication, getting drunk on someone else and then yearning—painfully so—for something he already had. That yearning was legitimate now; it pierced him with such vicious finality that he might as well have longed for someone dead. Except her ghost was never far away; she was right there in his email. A momentary lapse of judgment—which, he conceded later, had been going on for two weeks now—led him to click on the forwarded joke first. The first time it had been forwarded had been to Teresa from PETER BENNETT, MD (*pretentious ball-licker!* Grant raged silently at the title; psychiatrists shouldn't be allowed to call themselves "doctors" since most of their work was talk, he decided) before she'd generously forwarded it on to Grant for what she callously must have thought would be a good laugh, considering his circumstances.

What's the most important question to ask if you want to have safe sex? WHEN WILL YOUR BOYFRIEND BE HOME? was the answer. Beneath it, Dr. Bennett had written, *Clearly, we weren't practicing safe sex on Moving Day, eh?* Then the smarmy bastard had added a smiley face with its tongue stuck out as if an homage to

oral sex. Grant suspected that he was never the intended audience for Dr. Bennett's witticisms about their one and only meeting, but Teresa, ever the poster child for dumb-blonde jokes, hadn't bothered to delete his banter before forwarding his email. Somehow, too, he expected more from a psychiatrist.

He was dialing the phone while Caroline was asking him if everything was okay. (She actually said, "Hunky-dory," which made Grant want to strangle her with her training bra.) He glanced up at her and saw her holding the two-page spread the designers had laid out for the new President-in-a-Box toys. A bright red spot appeared dead-center in his vision. He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, but it remained. Clinton, the Bushes, Reagan, they were all fine targets for mockery, but the Abraham Lincoln jack-in-the-box had struck him all along as wrong. Unwholesome, even unpatriotic. He'd urged switching Lincoln out, but he'd been overridden by marketing, of course—Caroline's group—with a dismissive Post-It Note stuck to the catalog printout: "the project management team is clearly not in touch with consumer perceptions of the presidents." Read: *Skyler Grant knows less about the world than the marketing team.* The irony, he thought, was that even dead presidents knew more about the world than Erstwhile's insulated, self-important marketing team did.

That red dot in his vision, as clear and bright as the message light on his phone, orbited everything he looked at. He closed one eye, but the bull's-eye swam into the other.

The phone only rang once before she answered.

"You took all the spoons," he said before she could speak.

“Who is this?” Teresa asked.

He said, “And you can bet your ass I changed the locks. I’m worried now about your sticky fingers and my fucking forks.”

“*Our* fucking forks.” She lowered her voice on the vulgarism; she was either trying to avoid being overheard at work or she was trying to sound sexy. (Grant guessed the former.)

“Mine. It’s all mine now. Have Dr. Bent-It buy his own. The guy has a Mercedes but no spoons? He needs to check out Maslow’s hierarchy of needs.”

“*Bennett*. You know better than that. Don’t you bring him into this. This is between you and me.”

If Caroline hadn’t flinched at his first expletive (and Grant was pretty sure he’d seen out of the corner of his eye that she had, red dot notwithstanding), the next volley made her openly hiccup with surprise. He was immediately sorry that she’d been caught in the crossfire; while he didn’t like the marketing team in general, Caroline was tolerable, in a vanilla pudding sort of way. She edged backward out of his office as he felt the snarl jump to his face like a sudden fever spiking.

“If he hadn’t been practicing safe sex with you, maybe it *would* just be between you and me. But it turns out that this is a little ménage a trois we have here, and the only one getting properly fucked in the whole deal is me. Me and my spoons.”

“Oh Lord, spotlight on the drama queen,” Teresa said; she made it sound like the punchline of a joke, Grant thought. And he knew then that she’d deliberately left Bennett’s comment in the forwarded email.

“And my Christmas ornaments,” he said. “The ones from when I was a kid. The Lincoln’s cabin I made out of toothpicks in fifth grade. I want all those ornaments back.”

“Well, I want blah blah blah,” she said. Her voice was taking on the timber and rhythm of a frog belching in the night, he determined. He thought he could hear scattered words in English amongst her amphibian croaks. “And I need to pick up blah blah this and blah blah that.”

“Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a flying fuck at the dark side of the moon what you want.” He could imagine that the snarl still controlling his face would back down a wolf pack; Caroline squealed like a rubber mouse. He’d give money if Teresa made that same sound, but he knew that wasn’t likely. She was an emotional brickhouse. “Do you know what I want? I want you to get a heretofore unknown venereal disease. I want them to name it for you—Beaumontitis. And then I want Doctor Bent-It to break his dick *off* inside of you like a test-tube when he catches it. Oh, and did I mention that I want my spoons back?”

“You’ll get your spoons,” Teresa said with insufferable dignity, “when I get my grandmother’s glass from World War II. I’m willing to trade, even though I shouldn’t have to. I’ve hardly earned this vitriol.”

Grant struggled for a witty reply. Something he could share conspiratorially with Bernie Bliss over Korean barbeque downstairs tomorrow. Something to underscore the twenty-five-cent word that he knew she'd never even heard before the good doctor began educating her on his psychiatry couch. *Spell 'vitriol,' Teresa*, he wanted to challenge her (he wasn't sure *he* could, so he *knew* she couldn't). But what came out was, "Fuck you, fuck you, *FUCK YOU TO DEATH!*"

Predictably, Teresa hung up. Less so, Caroline hung around for another five seconds, just enough time for Grant to say to her, "And nobody fucks with Abraham Lincoln, either, Caroline. Tell those Neanderthals on your team I said so. Whores know more about marketing than you dipshits do."

He tuned the office out and turned in his chair to look out the window, twenty floors above downtown. Gray day, cloudy, the kind of weather that depressives enjoyed—the kind that drags normally cheery people down to the depressives' level. A helicopter hovered over the freeway a mile away, the traffic chopper for one of the AM news radio channels. Grant closed his eyes (and the red dot, after a moment's hesitation, blinked out). *Zoom over here*, he urged the helicopter. *Right smack into this building. A poor man's 9-11. I'll even wave you in so you hit the right floor.*

The phone rang, and as he picked it up, he could detect Caroline's sobs in stereo—once on the phone and once from the office next door, Tim Stanton's office. His boss's office.

Over Caroline's crying, Tim said, "Skyler, we need to talk."

Tim was shorter than Grant by six inches, but he outweighed him by about fifty pounds. It was mostly fat—Tim was even more of a desk jockey than Grant, who at least went running two or three times a week—but it felt like all fifty pounds were muscle when he punched Grant in the left temple. Grant went down as surely as a paraplegic in a boxing match, spilling backward out of the chair where he'd been sitting in Tim's office. He didn't make a sound, but Tim let out a bellow. It was a side-arm punch (the kind only a desk jockey would throw), and it promptly dislocated Tim's right shoulder from its socket with an audible pop. Shaking his head—there was that red dot again, albeit blurry and unstable—Grant stayed down on the carpet, out of Tim's sight and, more important, out of his reach.

This was how he found out that Tim and Caroline were dating.

"I didn't call her a whore!" he shouted over Tim's persistent braying.

Later, someone would tell him that the two had been going out for just a couple of weeks, and Grant would pinpoint the beginning of their secretive office romance to within days of his breakup with Teresa. Cosmic reincarnation, the cycle of death and rebirth, transmigration of the romantic soul. Frankly, he didn't think what he and Teresa had shared was being reborn at a *higher* level in Tim and Caroline.

("Our karma must have sucked," he would confide in Fat Charlie.

"In romance, it usually does," Fat Charlie would agree.)

Just outside the office, Caroline was making that rubber mouse noise again, squealing for help. *Help for who?* Grant wondered. His eye was swelling shut; he could hear the ocean roaring in his left ear.

“You broke my arm!” Tim wailed.

“Forget your arm,” Grant said; his own voice was thunderous yet distant in his head, shouted into an empty coffee can. “You broke my *head*.”

“You’re downsized. You’re so downsized, you can’t imagine how downsized you are.” Tim looked out past Grant on his office floor to where Caroline hovered frantically. “He broke my arm, baby.”

“The word is ‘fired,’ Tim,” Grant said. He felt exhausted, as if the day had gone on way beyond the borders of common sense. He’d read about the midnight sun in Alaska and how it could lead to insomnia and utter disorientation among the people who had to live with sunlight twenty-four hours a day. Teresa’s sun refused to set today, it seemed. “You’re such a corporate dink.”

“Fine,” Tim said. “You’re ‘fired’ then. Clear enough?”

“Dink you,” said Grant.

People were drifting in from all directions—from design, from production, from marketing. Erstwhile only employed fifty-eight full-timers, yet it was as if the VP had called an all-hands meeting outside Tim Stanton’s office.

“Your dislocated your shoulder when you hit me,” Grant said.

Tim groaned. “Thank you, Doctor Grant. You’re still fired.”

Grant sighed and looked over at Scott Webster and Vic Turnow and Erna Wahid and the other curious faces gathering in the open doorway behind Caroline. *I really hope you won't be a drama queen about this.* The red spot in his line of vision faded to pink. *Hell, it's not me—Tim should get a People's Choice Award for this.*

“They all heard you, Tim.” He said it quietly, non-threateningly, in the same tone they'd talked this morning about how the new baseball season was shaping up. Before his life took yet another turn for the weird. “So, that's assault. Or battery. I can't remember which one is which. Call me a sonuvabitch and we have assault *and* battery. Anyway, there were two hits—you hitting me, and me hitting the floor. Now, as long as I keep my voice like this, no one else has to know about you and Caroline.” He gave it a moment to sink in, watching Tim look at Caroline (who Grant was pretty sure could hear everything), before he said, “And hell, Tim, I don't even *know* your wife well enough to rat you out. So, how about instead of ‘fired,’ we compromise with ‘Skyler, why don't you take the rest of the day off?’”

To Grant's astonishment, Tim seemed to actually have to think about it.

Christ, he thought. What a day.

It was just flat-out bizarre, how he had turned a corner in life and found himself thinking about something as genuinely alien as suicide. How the story Teresa had asked for was going to finish without him. When the idea first descended on

him with all the grace of a brick dropped from his office twenty stories up in the Jung (née Saxon) Tower, he quickly determined that it was less a desire for death and more a desire for pity. Cops were often homisucidal—a term his father, a deputy sheriff, had coined and, in fact, the means by which he had left the world. Whatever happened in his job, he took out on himself with a department-approved, ammo-issued 9 mm Glock. Earl Grant had told his son numerous times that it was a catch-22, giving guns to people who, by virtue of being forced to wield those weapons, were more disposed to conveniently turn them on themselves.

“When a cop attempts suicide,” Earl Grant had said with a throat full of gravel (he’d been a heavy smoker, right up to the end), “it’s not a ‘cry for help.’ See, you swallow a fistful of pills, they’ve got an hour to find you. You pull a trigger, they’ve got an hour to find the rest of your brains. You got that, son?”

Grant had been eleven years old. He had no idea why in the world they were having this conversation. At eleven, “suicide” was picking a fight with Leroy Mendelson in the schoolyard. The idea that Burly Earl Grant—full of swagger and lip, a man who used his lights and siren to cruise through red lights because he found them tedious, a man with a confrontational nickname—might be a *little* disturbed wouldn’t cross Skyler Grant’s mind for another four years, until neighbors heard the single gunshot coming from the Grant house’s driveway.

Nevertheless, he remembered that conversation from a billion years earlier on the first night Teresa was gone and the apartment in Bluebrook Hills

was all “his.” It rained buckets. The skylight in the kitchen leaked, like always, but this time it was Grant finding and putting the green plastic mop bucket under the drip. (If he didn’t catch it, it would eventually drip through the floor and down into the empty apartment below.) He could remember leaving for work that morning, telling Teresa he’d stop for Chinese (“because Lord knows I see enough Korean every day”), but that last happy breakfast was all something he’d read in the newspaper now. It happened to somebody else—winning lottery numbers, a perfectly correct upbeat horoscope. So, standing in the kitchen that night with the *blip-blip...blip* of raindrops falling irregularly from the ceiling, he thought about killing himself for the first time. That first night she was gone. When she might still come back, hope springing eternal (until it died, too).

But I’ll take pills, he had thought. Maybe it’ll be Teresa who finds me.

Well, where did that idea go? he wondered now, headed home from work in the early afternoon, his left eye still a throbbing landscape on the side of his head. At least he was “unfired,” he reminded himself. There was that mumbled concession from Tim Stanton. And, of course, there was the hill—or, as he capitalized it in his head, The Hill.

Bluebrook Hills was a misnomer; his apartment complex would be more accurately described as Bluebrook *Gulley*. Surrounded by hills on three sides, the entire complex sat among the cheaper homes built in the shadows below the better houses that dotted the horizon around them in an almost medieval village construct. On the nearest hill was a strip mall with all the suburban necessities—a McDonald’s, Lucky Teriyaki, a unisex hair salon, a computer store,

a Rite-Aid drugstore. And the sole arterial street that descended to those below was a two-lane hill that, in Grant's opinion, would be a grade-schooler's dream of a sledding site, if not for the penchant of most automobile drivers to roar down it at highway speeds. Sidewalks and picket fences on one side, driveways and semi-rural suburbia on the other, and the hill was frequently sprinkled with roadkill—squirrels, raccoons, the occasional cat. (Teresa told him with bubbly enthusiasm one day shortly after they'd moved into the apartment that she'd heard from a neighbor about an old VW Bug hitting a horse at dusk the summer before, right at the bottom of the hill. The absence of an engine in the front had assured that VW compacted like a loaf of bread. And the horse shook off the crash like a particularly troublesome insect, enough so that the two idiot teenagers riding it at night rode it away from the scene before the police arrived. The sound of the impact apparently echoed more than three blocks—neighbors thought it was a garbage truck doing an unheard-of nighttime pickup.)

Once Teresa was gone, Grant began to find this part of his commute unusually intoxicating. From the top of the hill, he could easily see straight across to the opposite hill that descended to the same neighborhood valley below. On most days, his odds were decent that a car would just be reaching that parallel peak, engine racing, the driver full of exhilaration at the moment of descent. Bluebrook High School was just a few blocks beyond—and on days like today, if Grant left (or was forced from) the office early enough, he was likely to encounter students in their muscle cars or kids testing the limits of the cars

they'd borrowed for the day from their parents. High school wasn't so far behind him that he couldn't recall and sense their frustration from afar if they had to take the hill behind some law-abiding minivan or SUV; when he passed them, he could see teenage scowls and the burning desire in the teenage driver's face to blast that horn, get that soccer mom in front of them to pull her head out of her ass and *get up to speed, lady—it's the other pedal*.

As Grant came down one hill and the car came down the other, he would involuntarily begin to gauge precisely where they would pass. He'd guess how fast it was coming. He would micromanage his own speed. And then, as the two vehicles closed on one another—Grant's battered old Dodge Ram pickup and the overhauled Chevy Nova with all eight cylinders roaring—he would imagine blasting his own horn in pretend panic. *Look out, watch where you're going!* he'd mouth (no need to really scream; after all, he more or less knew what was coming). Then he would whip his wheel at that tangential point of passing and plow head-on into fiery death.

Like a junkie, he had begun in the last fourteen days—and far more strongly in the last seven—to anticipate, even *need*, the terrorizing thrill of these approaching cars on Bluebrook Hill. He had begun to think that, unlike so many people who moved heedlessly and ignorantly through their every day, he had a unique perspective on his existence. He could foretell the precise time, place, and circumstances under which his life would end. So, what was on the radio at that moment? A shame—a weather report seemed like anticlimactic incidental

music to accompany crunching metal and shattering glass and the release of a soul.

No more pills, though. That thought was as gone as Teresa.

Today, he watched a red Honda descend the hill opposite him. *Doesn't Tim Stanton drive a Honda? Didn't Bruce Springsteen sing, "My love is bigger than a Honda"?* *Honda—that's not a Korean car, right?*

The Honda began to pick up speed down the hill—there were no soccer moms running blockade today. Its driver's window was down, and Grant could see an elbow jutting out, swathed in purple. (The colors of Bluebrook High, despite the hue in its name, were purple and white.) And blonde hair—the specter of Teresa Beaumont, propelled back ten years to her high school days in order to end Grant's life in the most ironic of ways. A terrible car crash with the man she would mercilessly dump a decade later. Of course, Teresa hadn't attended Bluebrook; she'd gone to private high school in Vale, Colorado, Grant knew. Yet even as he accelerated down the hill, he tried to figure out the paradox of time travel, if he elected to die in a two-car head-on accident with a younger version of the woman who'd pushed him to it. *If she was magically transported back in time so I could plow into her while she was still in high school, he considered, she'd never grow up to shatter my heart and send me into the car crash if the first place, right?*

The Honda closed in.

In that moment, he thought—not for the first time—how selfish such a decision was, no matter how the paradox befuddled him. Why do it? He'd been happy once, like the kids in the car barreling down on him.

Coming down The Hill the first time with Teresa, a lifetime ago when they were going to see the apartment before moving in, she had said, "Go faster. Make my stomach flop."

He'd accelerated, the front of the pickup rising slightly as they shot down the hill as if on water, and Teresa had said simply, "It feels like falling in love."

He'd been happy once.

That would come back, wouldn't it?

Wouldn't it?

The red Honda zipped by him, its passengers blissfully ignorant of mortal disaster's proximity. Grant could see four high school students in the car, three good-looking cheerleaders—one, the blonde, was driving—and a teenage boy undoubtedly on the verge of panic or asphyxiation while flying solo with a carload of hotties. He bobbed up and down in the backseat, leaning over the front seats open-mouthed to share something clearly important in his limited world with the cute girl driving. Then the Honda was past Grant and headed up the hill behind him. He glanced up in the rearview mirror at them, glad they were gone. He might have been a candidate for suicide (a concession he would make to Fat Charlie Hoffman under the most dangerous of circumstances in less than a week), but he was preoccupied with *self*-destruction. Taking others with him wasn't on his agenda.

He could not help but wonder how easily he might change his platform if Teresa and Doctor Homewrecker came down the hill toward him.

When he turned into Bluebrook Hills Apartments at the bottom of the hill and around the corner, his hands were shaking, just a quiver, just enough to tell him that it had come up like an earthquake to the surface. The real tremors were still moving around far below, out of sight, tectonic plates shifting.

I better figure something out pretty soon, he thought, or bad things are going to start happening to me. And nobody's coming in an hour.

Inside the apartment, he left the lights off—combined with the overcast day outside, it made the three rooms feel rightly abandoned, as if someone had already died here instead of just *feeling* dead. On one of her trips to gather her things, she'd taken down most of the pictures and painting in the living room, leaving it hollow and barren, with hooks and wires on the walls. A shrine to what had been.

He dug the business card out of his wallet, went to the phone in the kitchen, and called the cell phone number on the back first. It only rang twice before he got an answer; now he wouldn't have to call the photo studio, which would feel like bothering Fat Charlie at work.

"I was hoping you'd call," Fat Charlie said when Grant said hello. "I've been thinking about you ever since lunch. Let me tell you, Mile-High, as God is my witness, I believe we can help each other. Tell me what you drive so I don't have your truck towed by mistake, and let's plan on seeing you Friday night."

Much, much later, Grant would remember this conversation and wonder why he didn't question why Fat Charlie already knew he had a truck instead of a car.