Trace

Patricia Cornwell

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Yellow bulldozers and excavators hack earth and stone in an old city block that has seen more death than most modern wars, and Kay Scarpetta slows her rental SUV almost to a stop. Shaken by the destruction ahead, she stares at the mustard-colored machines savaging her past.

“Someone should have told me,” she says.

Her intention this gray December morning was innocent enough. All she wanted was to indulge in a little nostalgia and drive past her old building, not having a clue that it was being torn down. Someone could have told her. The polite and kind thing would have been to mention it, at least say, Oh, by the way, that building where you used to work when you were young and full of hopes and dreams and believed in love, well, that old building you still miss and feel deeply about is being torn down.

A bulldozer lurches, its blade raised for the attack, and the noisy mechanical violence seems a warning, a dangerous alert. I should have listened, she thinks as she looks at the cracked and gouged concrete. The front of her old building is missing half of its face. When she was asked to come back to Richmond she should have paid attention to her feelings.

“I’ve got a case I’m hoping you might help me with,” explained Dr. Joel Marcus, the current chief medical examiner of Virginia, the man who took her place. It was just yesterday afternoon when he called her on the phone and she ignored her feelings.

“Of course, Dr. Marcus,” she said to him over the phone as she moved around in the kitchen of her South Florida home. “What can I do for you?”

“A fourteen-year-old girl was found dead in bed. This was two weeks ago, about noon. She’d been sick with the flu.”

Scarpetta should have asked Dr. Marcus why he was calling her. Why her? But she wasn’t paying attention to her feelings. “She was home from school?” she said.

“Yes.”

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"Alone?" She stirred a concoction of bourbon, honey, and olive oil, the phone tucked under her chin.

"Yes."

"Who found her and what's the cause of death?" She poured the marinade over a lean sirloin steak inside a plastic freezer bag.

"Her mother found her. There's no obvious cause of death," he said. "Nothing suspicious except that her findings, or lack of them, indicate she shouldn't be dead."

Scarpetta tucked the plastic bag of meat and marinade inside the refrigerator and opened the drawer of potatoes, then shut it, changing her mind. She'd make whole-grain bread instead of potatoes. She couldn't stand still, much less sit, and she was unnerved and trying very hard not to sound unnerved. Why was he calling her? She should have asked him.

"Who lived in the house with her?" Scarpetta asked.

"I'd rather go over the details with you in person," Dr. Marcus replied. "This is a very sensitive situation."

At first Scarpetta almost said that she was leaving for a two-week trip to Aspen, but those words never came out and they are no longer true. She isn't going to Aspen. She'd been planning on going, for months she had, but she wasn't going and she isn't going. She couldn't bring herself to lie about it, and instead used the professional excuse that she couldn't come to Richmond because she is in the midst of reviewing a difficult case, a very difficult death by hanging that the family refuses to accept as a suicide.

"What's the problem with the hanging?" asked Dr. Marcus, and the more he talked, the less she heard him. "Racial?"

"He climbed a tree, put a rope around his neck, and handcuffed himself behind his back so he couldn't change his mind," she replied, opening a cabinet door in her bright, cheerful kitchen. "When he stepped off the branch and dropped, his C-2 fractured and the rope pushed up his scalp in back, distorting his face, so it looked like he was frowning, as if he were in pain. Try explaining that and the handcuffs to his family in Mississippi, deep down there in Mississippi, where camouflage is normal and gay men are not."

"I've never been to Mississippi," Dr. Marcus said blandly, and maybe what he really meant was he didn't care about the hanging or any tragedy that had no direct impact on his life, but that wasn't what she heard, because she wasn't listening.

"I'd like to help you," she told him as she opened a new bottle of unfiltered olive oil, even though it wasn't necessary to open it right that minute. "But it's probably not a good idea for me to get involved in any case of yours."

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She was angry but denied it as she moved about her large, well-equipped kitchen of stainless-steel appliances and polished granite countertops and big bright views of the Intracoastal Waterway. She was angry about Aspen but denied it. She was just angry, and she didn't want to bluntly remind Dr. Marcus that she was fired from the same job he now enjoys, which is why she left Virginia with no plans for ever coming back. But a long silence from him forced her to go on and say that she didn't leave Richmond under amicable conditions and certainly he must know it.

"Kay, that was a long time ago," he replied, and she was professional and respectful enough to call him Dr. Marcus, and here he was calling her Kay. She was startled by how offended she was by his calling her Kay, but she told herself he was friendly and personal while she was touchy and overly sensitive, and maybe she was jealous of him and wished him failure, accusing herself of the worst pettiness of all. It was understandable that he would call her Kay instead of Dr. Scarpetta, she told herself, refusing to pay attention to her feelings.

"We have a different governor," he went on. "It's likely she doesn't even know who you are."

Now he was implying that Scarpetta is so unimportant and unsuccessful that the governor has never heard of her. Dr. Marcus was insulting her. Nonsense, she countered herself.

"Our new governor is rather much consumed with the Commonwealth's enormous budget deficit and all the potential terrorist targets we've got here in Virginia ..."

Scarpetta scolded herself for her negative reaction to the man who succeeded her. All he wanted was help with a difficult case, and why shouldn't he track her down? It's not unusual for CEOs fired from major corporations to be called upon later for advice and consultation. And she's not going to Aspen, she reminded herself.

" ... nuclear power plants, numerous military bases, the FBI Academy, a not-so-secret CIA training camp, the Federal Reserve. You won't have any problem with the governor, Kay. She's too ambitious, actually, too focused on her Washington aspirations, the truth be told, to care about what's going on in my office." Dr. Marcus went on in his smooth southern accent, trying to disabuse Scarpetta of the idea that her riding back into town after being ridden out of it five years earlier would cause controversy or even be noticed. She wasn't really convinced, but she was thinking about Aspen. She was thinking about Benton, about his being in Aspen without her. She has time on her hands, she was thinking, so she could take on another case because she suddenly has more time.

Scarpetta drives slowly around the block where she was headquartered in an early stage of her life that now seems as finished as something can be. Puffs of dust drift up as machines assault the carcass of her old building like giant yellow insects. Metal blades and buckets clank and thud against concrete and dirt. Trucks and earth-moving machines roll and jerk. Tires crush and steel belts rip.

"Well," Scarpetta says, "I'm glad I'm seeing this. But someone should have told me."

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Pete Marino, her passenger, silently stares at the razing of the squat, dingy building at the outer limits of the banking district.

"I'm glad you're seeing it, too, Captain," she adds, although he isn't a captain anymore, but when she calls him Captain, which isn't often, she is being gentle with him.

"Just what the doctor ordered," he mutters in a sarcastic tone that is his most common one, like middle C on a piano. "And you're right. Someone should have told you, that someone being the prickless wonder who took your place. He begs you to fly here when you haven't set foot in Richmond for five years and can't bother to tell you the old joint's being torn down."

"I'm sure it didn't cross his mind," she says.

"The little prick," Marino replies. "I hate him already."

This morning Marino is a deliberate, menacing mixture of messages in black cargo pants, black police boots, a black vinyl jacket, and an LAPD baseball cap. Obvious to Scarpetta is his determination to look like a tough big-city outsider because he still resents the people in this stubborn small city who mistreated him or dissed him or bossed him around when he was a detective here. Rarely does it occur to him that when he was written up, suspended, transferred, or demoted, usually he deserved it, that when people are rude to him, usually he provokes them.

Slouched in the seat with sunglasses on, Marino looks a bit silly to Scarpetta, who knows, for example, that he hates all things celebrity, that he especially hates the entertainment industry and the people, including cops, who are desperate to be part of it. The cap was a wise-guy gift from her niece, Lucy, who recently opened an office in Los Angeles, or Lost Angeles, as Marino calls it. So here is Marino, returning to his own lost city, Richmond, and he has choreographed his guest appearance by looking exactly like what he's not.

"Huh," he muses in a lower pitch of voice. "Well, so much for Aspen. I guess Benton's pretty pissed."

"Actually, he's working a case," she says. "So a few days' delay is probably a good thing."

"A few days my ass. Nothing ever takes a few days. Bet you never get to Aspen. What case is he working?"

"He didn't say and I didn't ask," she replies, and that's all she intends to say because she doesn't want to talk about Benton.

Marino looks out the window and is silent for a moment, and she can almost hear him thinking about her relationship with Benton Wesley, and she knows Marino wonders about them, probably constantly and in ways that are unseemly. Somehow he knows that she has been distant from Benton, physically distant, since they got

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back together, and it angers and humiliates her that Marino would detect such a thing. If anyone would figure it out, he would.

"Well, that's a damn shame about Aspen," Marino says. "If it was me, it would really piss me off."

"Take a good look," she says, referring to the building being knocked down right before their eyes. "Look now while we're here," she says, because she does not want to talk about Aspen or Benton or why she isn't there with him or what it might be like or what it might not be like. When Benton was gone all those years, a part of her left. When he came back, not all of her did, and she doesn't know why.

"Well, I guess it's about time they tore the place down," Marino says, looking out his window. "I guess because of Amtrak. Seems I heard something about it, about needing another parking deck down here because of them opening Main Street Station. I forget who told me. It was a while ago."

"It would have been nice if you had told me," she says.

"It was a while ago. I don't even remember who I heard it from."

"Information like that is a good thing for me to know."

He looks at her. "I don't blame you for being in a mood. I warned you about coming here. Now look what we find right off. We haven't even been here an hour, and look at this. Our old joint's being smashed up with a wrecking ball. It's a bad sign, you ask me. You're going maybe two miles an hour. Maybe you ought to speed up."

"I'm not in a mood," she replies. "But I like to be told things." She drives slowly, staring at her old building.

"I'm telling you, it's a bad sign," he says, staring at her, then out his window.

Scarpetta doesn't speed up as she watches the destruction, and the truth sinks in slowly, as slowly as her progress around the block. The former Office of the Chief Medical Examiner and Division of Forensic Science Laboratories is well on its way to becoming a parking deck for the restored Main Street railway station, which never saw a train during the decade she and Marino worked and lived here. The hulking Gothic station is built of stone the hue of old blood and was dormant for long years until, with but a few agonal twitches, it was transformed into shops, which soon failed, and then state offices, which soon closed. Its tall clock tower was a constant on the horizon, watching over sweeping bends of I-95 and train overpasses, a ghostly white face with filigree hands frozen in time.

Richmond has moved on without her. Main Street Station has been resurrected and is a hub for Amtrak. The clock works. The time is sixteen minutes past eight. The clock never worked all those years it followed Scarpetta in her mirrors as she drove back and forth to take care of the dead. Life in Virginia has moved on and no one bothered to tell her.

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"I don't know what I expected," she says, glancing out her side window. "Maybe they would gut it, use it for storage, archives, state surplus. Not tear it down."

"Truth is, they ought to tear it down," Marino decides.

"I don't know why, but I never thought they would."

"It ain't exactly one of the architectural wonders of the world," he says, suddenly sounding hostile toward the old building. "A 1970s piece of concrete shit. Think of all the murdered people who been through that joint. People with AIDS, street people with gangrene. Raped, strangled, and stabbed women and kids. Wackos who jumped off buildings and in front of trains. There ain't a single kind of case that joint ain't seen. Not to mention all those pink rubbery bodies in the floor vats of the Anatomical Division. Now that creeped me out worse than anything. 'Member how they'd lift 'em out of those vats with chains and hooks in their ears? All naked and pink as the Three Little Pigs, their legs hitched up." He lifts his knees to demonstrate, black-cargo-pants-covered knees rising toward the visor.

"Not so long ago, you couldn't lift your legs like that," she says. "You could hardly even bend your legs not even three months ago."

"Huh."

"I'm serious. I've been meaning to say something about how fit you're getting."

"Even a dog can lift its leg, Doc," he jokes, his mood obviously improved by the compliment, and she feels bad that she hasn't complimented him before now. "Assuming the dog in question's male."

"I'm serious. I'm impressed." She has worried for years that his atrocious health habits were going to drop him dead, and when he finally makes an effort, she doesn't praise him for months. It requires her old building to be torn down for her to say something nice to him. "I'm sorry I haven't mentioned it," she adds. "But I hope you're not just eating protein and fat."

"I'm a Florida boy now," he says cheerfully. "On the South Beach Diet but I sure as hell don't hang out in South Beach. Nothing but fags down there."

"That's an awful thing to say," she replies, and she hates it when he talks like that, which is why he does it.

"Remember the oven down there?" Marino continues his reminiscing. "You always knew when they was burning up bodies down there, because smoke would be coming out the chimney." He points to a black crematorium smokestack on top of the battered old building. "When I used to see ol' smoky going, I didn't particularly want to be driving around down here breathing the air."

Scarpetta glides past the rear of the building, and it is still intact and looks exactly the way it did last time she saw it. The parking lot is empty except for a big yellow

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tractor that is parked almost exactly where she used to park when she was chief, just to the right of the massive closed bay door. For an instant, she hears the screeching and complaining of that door cranking up or down when the big green and red buttons inside were pressed. She hears voices, hearses and ambulances rumbling, doors opening and slamming shut, and the clack and clatter of stretcher legs and wheels as shrouded bodies were rolled up and down the ramp, the dead in and out, day and night, night and day, coming and going.

"Take a good look," she says to Marino.

"I did the first time you went around the block," he replies. "You plan on us driving around in circles all day?"

"We'll circle it twice. Take a good look."

Turning left on Main Street, she drives a little faster around the demolition site, thinking that pretty soon it will look like an amputee's raw stump. When the back parking lot comes into view again, she notices a man in olive-green pants and a black jacket standing close to the big yellow tractor, doing something to the engine. She can tell he is having a problem with his tractor, and she wishes he wouldn't stand in front of the huge back tire, doing whatever he's doing to the engine.

"I think you might want to leave the cap in the car," she says to Marino.

"Huh?" Marino asks, and his big weathered face looks at her.

"You heard me. A little friendly advice for your own good," she says as the tractor and the man recede behind her and are gone.

"You always say something's friendly and for my own good," he answers. "And it never is." He takes off the LAPD cap and looks at it thoughtfully, his bald head glistening with sweat. The scant quota of gray hair nature is kind enough to allot him is gone by his design.

"You never did tell me why you started shaving your head," she says.

"You never asked."

"I'm asking." She turns north, heading away from the building toward Broad Street and going the speed limit now.

"It's the in thing," he replies. "Point is, if you ain't got hair, may as well get rid of it."

"I suppose that makes sense," she says. "As much sense as anything."

2

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Edgar Allan Pogue stares at his bare toes as he relaxes in the lawn chair. He smiles and contemplates the reactions of people should they find out he now has a home in Hollywood. A second home, he reminds himself. He, Edgar Allan Pogue, has a second home where he can come for sun and fun and privacy.

No one is going to ask which Hollywood. At the mention of Hollywood, what immediately comes to mind is the big white Hollywood sign on the hill, mansions protected by walls, convertible sports cars, and the blessed beautiful ones, the gods. It would never enter anyone's mind that Edgar Allan Pogue's Hollywood is in Broward County, about an hour's drive north of Miami, and does not attract the rich and famous. He will tell his doctor, he thinks with a trace of pain. That's right, his doctor will be the first to know, and next time he won't run out of the flu shot, Pogue thinks with a trace of fear. No doctor would ever deprive his Hollywood patient of a flu shot, no matter the shortage, Pogue decides with a trace of rage.

"See, Mother Dear, we're here. We really are here. It's not a dream," Pogue says in the slurred voice of someone who has an object in his mouth that interferes with the movement of his lips and tongue.

His even, bleached teeth clamp down harder on a wooden pencil.

"And you thought the day would never come," he talks around the pencil as a bead of saliva drips from his lower lip and slides down his chin.

You won't amount to anything, Edgar Allan. Failure, failure, failure. He talks around the pencil, mimicking his mother's mean-spirited, slurred, drunken voice. You're a thin soup, Edgar Allan, that's what you are. Loser, loser, loser.

His lawn chair is exactly in the middle of the airless, stinking living room, and his one-bedroom apartment is not quite exactly in the middle of the second level of units that face Garfield Street, named after the U.S. president and running east-west between Hollywood Boulevard and Sheridan. The pale yellow stucco two-level complex is called Garfield Court for reasons unknown, beyond the obvious one of false advertising. There is no courtyard, not even a blade of grass, just a parking lot and three spindly palm trees with ragged fronds that remind Pogue of the tattered wings of the butterflies he pinned to cardboard as a boy.

Not enough sap in the tree. That's your problem.

"Stop it, Mother. Stop it right now. It's unkind to talk like that."

When he rented his second home two weeks ago, Pogue didn't argue about the price, although nine hundred and fifty dollars a month is outrageous compared to what that amount of money would get him in Richmond, assuming he paid rent in Richmond. But proper accommodations aren't easy to find around here, and he didn't know where to start when he finally arrived in Broward County after a sixteen-hour drive, and in an exhausted but exhilarated mood began cruising, getting himself oriented, looking for a place and unwilling to rest in a motel room, not even for one night. His old white Buick was packed with his belongings, and he didn't

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want to take the chance that some juvenile delinquent might smash out the car windows and steal his VCR and TV, not to mention his clothing, toiletries, laptop computer and wig, the lawn chair, a lamp, linens, books, paper, pencils, and bottles of red, white, and blue touch-up paint for his cherished tee-ball bat, and a few other vitally important personal possessions, including several old friends.

"It was terrifying, Mother," he retells the tale in an effort to distract her from her drunken nagging. "Mitigating circumstances dictated that I leave our lovely little southern city immediately, although not permanently, certainly not. Now that I have a second home, of course I'll be back and forth between Hollywood and Richmond. You and I have always dreamed about Hollywood, and like settlers on a wagon train, we set out to find our fortunes, didn't we?"

His ploy works. He has redirected her attention along a scenic route that avoids thin soup and not enough sap.

"Only I didn't feel too fortunate at first when I somehow got off North Twenty-fourth Street and ended up in a godforsaken slum called Liberia where there was an ice cream truck."

He talks around the pencil as if it is a bit in his mouth. The pencil substitutes for a smoke, not that tobacco is a health concern or a bad habit, but rather an expense. Pogue indulges in cigars. He indulges in very little else, but he has to have his Indios and Cubitas and A Fuentes, and most of all, Cohibas, the magic contraband of Cuba. He is smitten with Cohibas and he knows how to get them, and it makes all the difference when Cuban smoke touches his stricken lungs. Impurities are what kill the lungs, but the pure tobacco of Cuba is healing.

"Can you possibly believe it? An ice cream truck with its sweet, innocent jingle playing and these little Negro children coming forward with coins to buy treats, and here we are in the middle of a ghetto, a war zone, and the sun has gone down. I'll just bet there are lots of gunshots fired at night in Liberia. Of course I got out of there and miraculously ended up in a better part of town. I got you to Hollywood safe and sound, didn't I, Mother?"

Somehow he found himself on Garfield Street, driving slowly past tiny one-story stucco houses with wrought-iron railings, jalousie windows, carports, and patches of lawn that couldn't possibly accommodate a swimming pool, sweet little abodes probably built in the fifties and sixties that spoke to him because they have survived decades of horrendous hurricanes and jolting demographic changes and relentless increases in property taxes that drive out old-timers and replace them with new-timers who probably don't speak English or try. And yet, the neighborhood has survived. And then, just as he was thinking all this, the apartment complex filled his front windshield like a vision.

The building has a sign posted out front that reads GARFIELD COURT and lists the telephone number, and Pogue responded to the vision by pulling into the parking lot and writing down the number, then he went to a gas station and used the pay phone.

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Yes, there was one vacancy, and within the hour he had his first and hopefully only encounter with Benjamin P. Shupe, the landlord.

Can't do it, can't do it. Shupe wouldn't stop saying that as he sat across the desk from Pogue downstairs in the office, which was warm and stuffy and poisoned by the offensive scent of Shupe's overpowering cologne. If you want air conditioning, you gotta buy your own window unit. That's up to you. But this is the primo time of year, what they call the season. Who needs air conditioning?

Benjamin P. Shupe brandished white dentures that reminded Pogue of bathroom tiles. The gold-encrusted slum sovereign tap-tap-tapped the desktop with a fat index finger and flashed a diamond cluster ring. And you're lucky. Everybody wants to be here this time a year. I got ten people waiting in line to take this apartment. Shupe the slum king gestured in a way that was to his gold Rolex watch's best advantage, unaware that Pogue's dark tinted glasses were nonprescription and his shaggy long black curly hair was a wig. Two days from now, it will be twenty people. In fact, I really shouldn't let you have this apartment at this price.

Pogue paid cash. No deposits or other sorts of security were required, no questions or proof of identification were requested or desired. In three weeks, he has to pay cash again for the month of January should he decide to maintain his second home during Hollywood's primo season. But it is a bit early for him to know what he'll do come the New Year.

"Work to do, work to do," he mumbles, thumbing through the magazine for funeral directors that falls open to a collection of urns and keepsakes, and he rests the magazine on his thighs and studies colorful pictures he knows by heart. His favorite urn is still the pewter box shaped like a stack of fine books with a pewter quill on top, and he fantasizes that the books are old volumes by Edgar Allan Poe, for whom he was named, and he wonders how many hundreds of dollars that elegant pewter box would cost were he of a mind to call the toll-free number.

"I should just call it and place the order," he says playfully. "I should just do it, shouldn't I, Mother?" He teases her as if he has a phone and can call right this minute. "Oh, you'd like it, would you?" He touches the picture of the urn. "You'd like Edgar Allan's urn, would you? Well, tell you what, not until there's something to celebrate, and right now my work isn't going as planned, Mother. Oh yes, you heard me. A little setback, I'm afraid."

Thin soup, that's what you are.

"No, Mother Dear. It's not about thin soup." He shakes his head, flipping through the magazine. "Now let's not start that again. We're in Hollywood. Isn't it pleasant?"

He thinks of the salmon-colored stucco mansion on the water not too far north of here and is overwhelmed by a confusion of emotions. He found the mansion as planned. He was inside the mansion as planned. And everything went wrong and now there is nothing to celebrate.

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"Faulty thinking, faulty thinking." He flicks his forehead with two fingers, the way his mother used to flick him. "It wasn't supposed to happen like that. What to do, what to do. The little fish that got away." He swims his fingers through the air. "Leaving the big fish." He swims both arms through the air. "The little fish went somewhere, I don't know where, but I don't care, no I do not. Because the Big Fish is still there, and I ran off the little fish and the Big Fish can't be happy about that. Can not. Soon there will be something to celebrate."

Got away? How stupid was that? You didn't catch the little fish and think you'll catch the big one? You're such thin soup. How can you be my son?

"Don't talk that way, Mother. It's so impolite," he says with his head bent over the magazine for funeral directors.

She gives him a stare that could nail a sign to a tree, and his father had a label for her infamous stare. The hairy eyeball, that was what he called it. Edgar Allan Pogue has never figured out why a stare as scary as his mother's is called a hairy eyeball. Eyeballs do not have hair. He has never seen or heard of one that does, and he would know. There isn't much he doesn't know. He drops the magazine to the floor and gets up from the yellow and white lawn chair and fetches his tee-ball bat from the corner where he keeps it propped. Closed venetian blinds blot out sunlight from the living room's one window, casting him into a comfortable gloom barely pushed back by a lonely lamp on the floor.

"Let's see. What should we do today?" he continues, mumbling around the pencil, talking out loud to a cookie tin beneath the lawn chair and gripping the bat, checking its red, white, and blue stars and stripes that he has touched up, let's see, exactly one hundred and eleven times. He lovingly polishes the bat with a white handkerchief, and rubs his hands with the handkerchief, rubs and rubs them. "We should do something special today. I believe an outing is in order."

Drifting to a wall, he removes the pencil from his mouth and holds it in one hand, the bat in the other, cocking his head, squinting at the early stages of a large sketch on the dingy, beige-painted sheetrock. Gently, he touches the blunt lead tip to a large staring eye and thickens the lashes. The pencil is wet and pitted between the tips of his index finger and thumb as he draws.

"There." He steps back, cocking his head again, admiring the big, staring eye and the curve of a cheek, the tee-ball bat twitching in his other hand.

"Did I happen to mention how especially pretty you look today? Such a nice color you'll soon have in your cheeks, very flushed and rosy, as if you've been out in the sun."

He tucks the pencil behind an ear and holds his hand in front of his face, splaying his fingers, tilting and turning, looking at every joint, crease, scar, and line, and at the delicate ridges in his small, rounded nails. He massages the air, watching fine muscles roll as he imagines rubbing cold skin, working cold, sluggish blood out of subcutaneous tissue, kneading flesh as he flushes out death and pumps in a nice rosy

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glow. The bat twitches in his other hand and he imagines swinging the bat. He misses rubbing chalky dust in his palms and swinging the bat, and he twitches with a desire to smash the bat through the eye on the wall, but he doesn't, he can't, he mustn't, and he walks around, his heart flying inside his chest, and he is frustrated. So frustrated by the mess.

The apartment is bare but a mess, the countertop in the kitchenette scattered with paper napkins and plastic plates and utensils, and canned foods and bags of macaroni and pasta that Pogue hasn't bothered to store inside the kitchenette's one cupboard. A pot and a frying pan soak in a sink full of cold, greasy water. Strewn about on the stained blue carpet are duffel bags, clothing and books, pencils, and cheap white paper. Pogue's living quarters are beginning to take on the stale aroma of his cooking and cigars, and his own musky, sweaty scent. It is very warm in here and he is naked.

"I believe we should check on Mrs. Arnette. She's not been well, after all," he says to his mother without looking at her. "Would you like to have a visitor today? I suppose I should ask you that first. But it might make both of us feel better. I'm a bit out of sorts, I must confess." He thinks of the little fish that got away and he looks around at the mess. "A visit might be just the thing, what do you think?"

That would be nice.

"Oh, it would, would it?" His baritone voice rises and falls, as if he is addressing a child or a pet. "You would like to have a visitor? Well, then! How splendid."

His bare feet pad across the carpet and he squats by a cardboard box filled with videotapes and cigar boxes and envelopes of photographs, all of them labeled in his own small, neat handwriting. Near the bottom of the box, he finds Mrs. Arnette's cigar box and the envelope of Polaroid photographs.

"Mother, Mrs. Arnette is here to see you," he says with a contented sigh as he opens the cigar box and sets it on the lawn chair. He looks through the photographs and picks out his favorite. "You remember her, don't you? You've met before. A true-blue old woman. See her hair? It really is blue."

Why, it sure enough is.

"Whyyyit-shorrre-nuffffis," he echoes his mother's deep drawl and the slow, thick way she swims through her words when she's in the vodka bottle, way deep inside the vodka bottle.

"Do you like her new box?" he asks, dipping his finger inside the cigar box and blowing a puff of white dust into the air. "Now don't be jealous, but she's lost weight since you saw her last. I wonder what her secret is," he teases, and he dips in his finger again and blows more white dust into the air for his enormously fat mother's benefit, to make his disgustingly fat mother jealous, and he wipes his hands on the white handkerchief. "I think our dear friend Mrs. Arnette looks wonderful, divine really."

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He peers closely at the photograph of Mrs. Arnette, her hair a blue-tinted aura around her pink dead face. The only reason he knows her mouth is sutured shut is because he remembers doing it. Otherwise, his expert surgery is impossible to discern, and the uninitiated would never detect that the round contour of her eyes is due to the caps beneath the lids, and he remembers gently setting the caps in place over the sunken eyeballs and overlapping the lids and sticking them together with dabs of Vaseline.

“Now be sweet and ask Mrs. Arnette how she’s feeling,” he says to the cookie tin beneath the lawn chair. “She had cancer. So many of them did.”in the background.

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