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The Demonologist

Written by Andrew Pyper

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The Demonologist

Andrew Pyper



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Last night I had the dream again. Except it's not a dream. I know because when it comes for me, I'm still awake.

There's my desk. The map on the wall. The stuffed animals I don't play with anymore but don't want to hurt Dad's feelings by sticking in the closet. I might be in bed. I might be just standing there, looking for a missing sock. Then I'm gone.

It doesn't just show me something this time. It takes me from here to THERE.

Standing on the bank of a river of fire. A thousand wasps in my head. Fighting and dying inside my skull, their bodies piling up against the backs of my eyes. Stinging and stinging.

Dad's voice. Somewhere across the river. Calling my name.

I've never heard him sound like that before. He's so frightened he can't hide it, even though he tries (he ALWAYS tries).

The dead boy floats by.

Facedown. So I wait for his head to pop up, show the holes where his eyes used to be, say something with his blue lips. One of the terrible things it might make him do. But he just passes like a chunk of wood.

I've never been here before, but I know it's real.

The river is the line between this place and the Other Place. And I'm on the wrong side.

There's a dark forest behind me but that's not what it is.

I try to get to where Dad is. My toes touch the river and it sings with pain.

Then there's arms pulling me back. Dragging me into the trees. They feel like a man's arms but it's not a man that sticks its fingers into my mouth. Nails that scratch the back of my throat. Skin that tastes like dirt.

But just before that, before I'm back in my room with my missing sock in my hand, I realize I've been calling out to Dad just like he's been calling out to me. Telling him the same thing the whole time. Not words from my mouth through the air, but from my heart through the earth, so only the two of us could hear it.

FIND ME



Uncreated Night

1

The rows of faces. Younger and younger each term. Of course, this is only me getting older among the freshmen who come and go, an illusion, like looking out the rear window of a car and seeing the landscape run away from you instead of you running from it.

I've been delivering this lecture long enough to play around with thoughts like these while speaking aloud to two hundred students at the same time. It's time to sum things up. One last attempt to sell at least a few of the laptop ticklers before me on the magnificence of a poem I have more or less devoted my working life to.

"And here we come to the end," I tell them, and pause. Wait for the fingers to lift from the keyboards. Take a full breath of the lecture hall's undercirculated air and feel, as I always do, the devastating sadness that comes at reciting the poem's closing lines.

Some natural tears they dropped, but wiped them soon;
The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and Providence their guide:

They hand in hand with wand'ring steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

With these words I feel my daughter next to me. Since she was born—and even before that, as the mere idea of the child I wished to one day have—it is Tess whom I invariably imagine walking out of the garden with, hand in hand.

"Loneliness," I go on. "That is what this entire work really comes down to. Not good versus evil, not a campaign to 'justify the ways of God to men.' It is the most convincing case we have—more convincing than any in the Bible itself—that hell is real. Not as a fiery pit, not a place above or below but *in* us, a place in the mind. To know ourselves and, in turn, to endure the perpetual reminder of our solitude. To be cast out. To wander alone. What is the real fruit of original sin? Selfhood! *That* is where our poor newlyweds are left, together but in the solitude of self-consciousness. Where can they wander now? 'Anywhere!' the serpent says. 'The whole world is theirs!' And yet they are condemned to choose their own 'solitary way.' It is a fearful, even terrifying, journey. But it is one all of us must face, as much now as then."

Here I take another, even longer, pause. Long enough that there is a risk I will be taken as being finished, and someone might stand, or slap her laptop shut, or bark out a cough. But they never do.

"Ask yourselves," I say, tightening my hold on Tess's imagined hand. "Where will you go now that Eden has been left behind?"

An arm almost instantly shoots up. A kid near the back I've never called on, never even noticed, before now.

"Yes?"

"Is that question going to be on the exam?"

My name is David Ullman. I teach in the English Department at Columbia University in Manhattan, a specialist in mythology and Judeo-Christian religious narrative, though my meal ticket, the text upon which my critical study has justified my tenure in the

Ivy League and invitations to various academic boondoggles around the world, has been Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Fallen angels, the temptations by the serpent, Adam and Eve and original sin. A seventeenth-century epic poem that retells biblical events but with a crafty slant, a perspective that arguably lends sympathy to Satan, the leader of the rebel angels who became fed up with a grumpy, authoritarian God and broke out on his own in a career of making trouble in the lives of humans.

It's been a funny (the devout might even say hypocritical) way to make a living: I have spent my life teaching about things I don't believe in. An atheist biblical scholar. A demon expert who believes evil to be a manmade invention. I have written essays about miracles—healed lepers, water into wine, exorcisms—but have never seen a magician's trick I couldn't figure out. My justification for these apparent contradictions is that there are some things that bear meaning, culturally speaking, without actually existing. The Devil, angels. Heaven. Hell. They are part of our lives even if we never have and never will see them, touch them, prove them to be real. Things that go bump in the brain.

The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a heaven of hell, a hell of heaven.

That is John Milton, speaking through Satan, his most brilliant fiction. And I happen to believe the old fellow—*both* old fellows—have got it right.

The air of Columbia's Morningside campus is damp with exam stress and the only-partial cleansing of a New York rain. I've just finished delivering my final lecture of the spring term, an occasion that always brings a bittersweet relief, the knowledge that another year is done (the class prep and office hours and evaluations almost finished) but also that another year has passed (and with it, another distressing click on the personal odometer). Nevertheless, unlike many

of the coddled grumblers who surround me at faculty functions and fuss over pointless points-of-order at departmental committee meetings, I still like teaching, still like the students who are encountering grown-up literature for the first time. Yes, most of them are only here as pre–Something That Will Make Serious Money—pre-med, pre-law, pre–marrying rich—but most of them are not yet wholly beyond reach. If not my reach, then poetry's.

It's just past three. Time to walk across the tiled quad to my office in Philosophy Hall, drop off the clutch of late term papers guiltily piled on my desk at the front of the lecture hall, then head downtown to Grand Central to meet Elaine O'Brien for our annual end-of-term drink at the Oyster Bar.

Though Elaine teaches in the Psychology Department, I'm closer to her than anyone in English. Indeed, I'm closer to her than anyone I know in New York. She is the same age as me—a trim, squash court and half-marathoned forty-three—though a widow, her husband claimed by an out-of-nowhere stroke four years ago, the same year I arrived at Columbia. I liked her at once. Possessed of what I have come to think of as a serious sense of humor: She tells few jokes, but observes the world's absurdities with a wit that is somehow hopeful and withering at the same time. A quietly beautiful woman too, I would say, though I am a married man—as of today, at any rate—and acknowledging this kind of admiration for a female colleague and occasional drinking buddy may be, as the University Code of Conduct likes to designate virtually all human interaction, "inappropriate."

Yet there has been nothing remotely inappropriate between O'Brien and me. Not a single stolen kiss before she boards her train on the New Haven line, not one flirty speculation over what might happen if we were to scuttle up to a room at some Midtown hotel and see what we'd be like, just once, in the sack. It's not repression that prevents us—I don't think it is, anyway—and it's not entirely our mutual honoring of my marital vows (given that we both know my wife threw hers out the window for that smug prick in Physics, the smirky string theorist, Will Junger, a year ago). I believe O'Brien and I (she is "Elaine" only after a third martini) haven't nudged things in

that direction because we fear it might befoul what we already have. And what do we have? A profound if sexless intimacy of a kind I've never known with either man or woman since childhood, and perhaps not even then.

Still, I suppose O'Brien and I have been carrying on an affair of sorts for the better part of the time we've been friends. When we get together, we talk about things I haven't talked about with Diane for some time. For O'Brien, it is the dilemma of her future: fearing the prospect of single old age while recognizing she's become used to being on her own, indulgent of her habits. A woman "increasingly unmarryable," as she puts it.

For me, it is the dark cloud of depression. Or, I should say, what I reluctantly feel obliged to call depression, just as half the world has diagnosed itself, though it doesn't seem to precisely fit my case. All my life I have been pursued by the black dogs of unaccountable gloom, despite the good luck of my career, the initially promising marriage, and the greatest fortune of all, my only child: a bright and tender-hearted daughter, who was born following a pregnancy all the doctors said would never come to term, the only miracle I am prepared to concede as real. After Tess arrived, the black dogs went away for a little while. But as she graduated from toddlerhood to chattering school age, they returned, hungrier than before. Even my love for Tess, even her whispered bedtime wishes of *Daddy, don't be sad* could not hold them at bay.

There has always been a sense that there's something *not quite right* with me. Nothing you'd notice on the outside—I'm nothing if not "polished," as Diane described me with pride when we first started dating, and now uses the same term in a tone that bears scathing connotations. Even on the inside I am honestly free of self-pity or frustrated ambition, an atypical state for a tenure-track academic. No, my shadows issue from a more elusive source than the textbooks would have it. And as for my symptoms, I can tick few if any checkmarks beside the list of warning signs on the mental health public service announcements plastered above the doors of subway cars. Irritability or aggression? Only when I watch the news. Lost appetite? Nope.

I've been unsuccessfully trying to lose ten pounds since I left college. Trouble concentrating? I read Dead White Guy poems and undergrad papers for a living—concentration is my business.

My malady is more an indefinable presence than pleasure-draining absence. The sense that I have an unseen companion following me through my days, waiting to seize an opportunity, to find a closer relationship than the one it already enjoys. In childhood, I vainly tried to ascribe a personality to it, treat it as an "imaginary friend" of the kind I'd heard other children sometimes conjured. But my follower only followed—it did not play or protect or console. Its sole interest lay—and still lies—in providing dark company, malicious in its silence.

Professorial semantics, maybe, but it feels more like melancholy to me than anything as clinical as the chemical imbalances of depression. What Robert Burton called in his *Anatomy of Melancholy* (published four hundred years ago, back when Milton was first sketching his Satan) a "vexation of spirit." It's as though my very life has been haunted.

O'Brien has almost given up suggesting I should see a shrink. She's grown too used to my reply: "Why should I when I have you?"

I'm allowing myself a smile at this when it is instantly wiped away by the sight of Will Junger coming down the Low Library's stone steps. Waving my way as though we are friends. As though his fucking my wife for the last ten months is a fact that has momentarily escaped his mind.

"David! A word?"

What does this man look like? Something sly and surprisingly carnivorous. Something with claws.

"Another year," he says once he stands in front of me, stagily breathless.

He squints at me, shows his teeth. It's expressions like these, I suppose, that counted as "charming" in his first post–yoga class coffees with Diane. This was the word she used when I asked the always first, always useless, question of the cuckold: *Why him?* She shrugged, as though she didn't require a reason, and was surprised that I might. "He's *charming*," she said finally, landing on the word as a butterfly decides which flower to rest on.

"Listen, I don't want this to be difficult," Will begins. "I'm just sorry for the way things have turned out."

"And how is that?"

"Sorry?"

"How have things turned out?"

He rolls out his lower lip in a gesture of hurt. String theory. That's what he teaches, what he talks to Diane about, presumably, after he's rolled off her. How all matter, if you peel it down to the essentials, is bound by impossibly tiny strings. I don't know about matter, but I could believe that this is all Will Junger is made of. Invisible strands that lift his eyebrows and the corners of his mouth, an expertly rendered puppet.

"I'm just trying to be a grown-up here," he says.

"You have any kids, Will?"

"Kids? No."

"Of course you don't. And you never will, you selfish child," I say, heaving myself full of damp air. "*Trying to be a grown-up here*? Fuck you. You think this is a scene in some indie drama you take my wife to in the Village, some pack of lies the guy at the *Times* said was so naturalistically performed. But in *real life*? We're bad actors. We're slobs who actually hurt. *You* don't feel it, *you* couldn't, but the pain you're causing us—causing my family—it's destroying our lives, what we have together. What we had."

"Listen, David. I—"

"I have a daughter," I go on, steamrolling him. "A little girl who knows something is wrong, and she's slipping into this dark place I don't know how to pull her out of. Do you know what it is to watch your child, your everything, come apart? Of course you don't. You're empty. A *summa cum laude* sociopath who talks about literally nothing for a living. Invisible strings! You're a nothing specialist. A walking, talking vacancy."

I didn't expect to say all this, but I'm glad I have. Later, I'll wish I could hop in a time machine and return to this moment to deliver a better-crafted insult. But for now, it feels pretty good.

"It's funny you say that about me," he says.

"Funny?"

"Ironic. Perhaps that's the better term."

"*Ironic* is never the better term."

"This was Diane's idea, by the way. That we talk."

"You're lying. She knows what I think of you."

"But do you know what *she* thinks of *you*?"

The puppet strings are lifted. Will Junger smiles an unexpected smile of triumph.

"'You're not here,'" he says. "That's what she says. 'David? How would *I* know how David feels? *He's not here*.'"

There's no reply to this. Because it's true. That's been the death sentence of our marriage, and I have been powerless to correct the fault. It's not workaholism, not the distractions of a lover or obsessive hobby, not the distance to which men tend to retreat as they drag their feet into middle age. Part of me—the part Diane needs—simply isn't here anymore. Lately I can be in the same room, the same bed, and she reaches for me, but it is like trying to grasp the moon. What I'd like to know, what I'd pray to be told if I thought praying might work, is where the missing piece is. What did I leave behind? What did I never have to start with? What name is to be given the parasite that has fed on me without me noticing?

The sun comes out and all at once the city is bathed in steam, the library steps glinting. Will Junger wrinkles his nose. He is a cat. I see that now, far too late. A black cat that's crossed my path.

"Gonna be a hot one," he says and starts away into the new light.

I head past the bronze of Rodin's *The Thinker* ("He looks like he has a toothache," Tess once rightly said of him) and into Philosophy Hall. My office is on the third floor, and I take the stairs clinging to the handrail, drained by the sudden heat.

When I reach my floor and make the corner I'm hit by a sensation of vertigo so intense I scramble to the wall and cling to the brick. I've had, now and then, panic attacks of the sort that leave you momentarily breathless, what my mother would call "dizzy spells." But

this is something else altogether. A distinct sensation of falling. Not from a height but *into* a borderless space. An abyss that swallows me, the building, the world in a single, merciless gulp.

Then it's gone. Leaving me glad that nobody witnessed my spontaneous wall hugging.

Nobody but the woman sitting on the chair outside my office door.

Too old to be a student. Too well-dressed to be an academic. I put her in her mid-thirties at first, but as I approach, she seems older, her bones overly pronounced, the premature aging of the eating disordered. She looks to be starving, in fact. A brittleness her tailored suit and long, dyed black hair cannot hide.

"Professor Ullman?"

Her accent is European, but generically so. It could be an American-flavored French, German, or Czech. An accent that hides one's origins rather than reveals them.

"I'm not holding office hours today."

"Of course. I read the card on your door."

"Are you here about a student? Is your child in my class?"

I am used to this scene: the helicopter parent, having taken out a third mortgage to put her kid into a fancy college, making a plea on behalf of her B-student Great Hope. Yet even as I ask this woman if this is the case, I know it isn't. She's here for me.

"No, no," she answers, pulling a stray strand of hair from her lips. "I am here to deliver an invitation."

"My mailbox is downstairs. You can leave anything addressed to me with the porter."

"A *verbal* invitation."

She stands. Taller than I expected. And though she is as worryingly thin as she appeared while seated, there is no apparent weakness in her frame. She holds the balls of her shoulders wide, her sharp chin pointed at the ceiling.

"I have an appointment downtown," I say, though I am already reaching for the handle to open the door. And she is already shuffling close to follow me in.

"Only a moment, professor," she says. "I promise not to make you late."

My office is not large, and the stuffed bookshelves and stacked papers shrink the space even more. I've always felt this lends the room a coziness, a scholarly nest. This afternoon, however, even after I fall into the chair behind my desk and the Thin Woman sits on the antique bench where my students ask for extensions or beg for higher grades, it is suffocating. The air thin, as though we have been transported to a higher altitude.

The woman smoothes her skirt. Her fingers too long. The only jewelry she wears is a gold band on her thumb. So loosely fitting it spins whenever she moves her hand.

"An introduction would be customary at this point," I say, surprised by the crisp aggression of my tone. It doesn't come from a position of strength, I realize, but self-defense. A smaller animal puffing up to create the illusion of ferocity before a predator.

"My real name is information I cannot provide, unfortunately," she says. "Of course I could offer something false—an alias—but lies of any sort make me uncomfortable. Even the harmless lies of social convenience."

"This puts you at an advantage."

"An advantage? But this isn't a *contest,* professor. We are on the same side."

"What side is that?"

She laughs at this. The sickly rattle of a barely controlled cough. Both hands flying up to cover her mouth.

"Your accent. I can't quite place it," I say when she has settled and the thumb ring has stopped spinning.

"I have lived in many places."

"A traveler."

"A wanderer. Perhaps that is the way to put it."

"Wandering implies an absence of purpose."

"Does it? But that cannot be. For it has brought me here."

She slides herself forward so that she is perched on the bench's edge, a movement of perhaps two or three inches. Yet it's as though she has come to sit upon my desk, the space between us impolitely close. I can smell her now. A vaguely barnyard whiff of straw, of close-quartered livestock. There is a second when I feel like I may not be able to take another breath without some visible show of disgust. And then she begins. Her voice not wholly disguising the scent, but somehow quieting its intensity.

"I represent a client who demands discretion above all. And in this particular case, as you will no doubt appreciate, this requirement limits me to only relating the most necessary information to you."

"A need-to-know basis."

"Yes," she says, and cocks her head, as though she's never heard the phrase before. "Only what you need to know."

"Which is what?"

"Your expertise is required to assist my client in understanding an ongoing case of primary interest. Which is why I am here. To invite you, as a consultant, to provide your professional insight, observations, whatever you may feel to be of relevance in clarifying our understanding of the—" She stops here, seeming to choose from a list of possible words in her mind, and finally settling on the best of an inadequate selection. "The phenomenon."

"Phenomenon?"

"If you will forgive my generality."

"It all sounds very mysterious."

"Necessarily so. As I mentioned."

She continues to look at me. As if I have come to *her* with questions. As if it is she who waits for me to move us forward. So I do.

"You refer to a 'case.' What does it involve, precisely?"

"Precisely? That is beyond what I am able to say."

"Because it's a secret? Or because you don't understand it yourself?"

"The question is fair. But to answer it would be a betrayal of what I have been charged to disclose."

"You're not giving me much."

"At the risk of overstepping my instructed limits of conversation,

let me say that there isn't much for me to give. You are the expert, professor, not me. I have come to you seeking answers, your point of view. I have neither."

"Have you yourself seen this phenomenon?"

She swallows. The skin of her neck stretched so tight I can see it move down her throat like a mouse under a bedsheet.

"I have, yes," she says.

"And what is your opinion of it?"

"Opinion?"

"How would you describe it? Not professionally, not as an expert, but you personally. What do you think it is?"

"Oh, that I couldn't say," she says, shaking her head, eyes down, as though I am flirting with her and the attention is cause for embarrassment.

"Why not?"

She raises her eyes to me. "Because there is no name for it I could give," she says.

I should ask her to go. Whatever curiosity I held about her when I first spotted her outside the office door is gone. This exchange can go nowhere now but into some revelation of deeper strangeness, and not of the amusing anecdote variety, not something about a crazy woman's proposal I might later repeat at dinner parties. Because she's not crazy. Because the usual veil of protection one feels while experiencing brief intersections with the harmlessly eccentric has been lifted, and I feel exposed.

"Why do you need me?" I find myself saying instead. "There are a lot of English profs out there."

"But few demonologists."

"That's not how I would describe myself."

"No?" She grins. A show of giddy humor that is meant to distract from how clearly serious she is. "You are a renowned expert on religious narrative, mythology, and the like, are you not? In particular, the recorded occurrences of biblical mention of the Adversary? Apocryphal documentation of demonic activity in the ancient world? Is my research in error?"

"All that you say is true. But I don't know anything about demons or inventions of that kind outside of those texts."

"Of course! We didn't expect you to have firsthand experience."

"Who would?"

"Who would indeed! No, professor, it is only your academic qualifications that we seek."

"I'm not sure you understand. I don't *believe*."

She merely frowns at this in apparent lack of comprehension.

"I'm not a cleric. Not a theologian either, for that matter. I don't accept the existence of demons any more than that of Santa Claus," I go on. "I don't go to church. I don't see the events in the Bible or any other holy document as having actually occurred, particularly not as they pertain to the supernatural. You want a demonologist, I suggest you contact the Vatican. Maybe there are some there who still take that stuff seriously."

"Yes." She grins again. "I assure you there are."

"You work for the Church?"

"I work for an agency that has been endowed with a substantial budget and wide-ranging responsibilities."

"I'll take that as a yes."

She leans forward. Her blunt elbows audibly meeting her knees. "I know you have an appointment. You currently still have time to travel to Grand Central to make it. So may I now deliver you my client's proposal?"

"Wait. I didn't tell you I was going to Grand Central."

"No. You did not."

She doesn't move. Her stillness a point of emphasis.

"May I?" she asks again, after what feels like a full minute.

I lean back, gesturing for her to continue. There is no more pretending I have a choice in the matter. She has, in just the last moments, enlarged her presence in the room so that she now blocks the door as effectively as a nightclub bouncer.

"We will fly you to Venice at your earliest convenience. Tomorrow, preferably. You will be accommodated at one of the old city's finest hotels—my personal favorite, if I may add. Once there, you will attend

at an address to be provided. No written document or report of any kind will be required. In fact, we ask that you *not* acknowledge your observations to anyone other than the individuals attending on-site. That is all. Of course, all expenses will be paid. Business class flight. Along with a consulting fee we hope you will feel is reasonable."

At this she stands. Takes the single step required to reach my desk, picks a pen out of a coffee mug, and scribbles a figure onto the memo pad next to the phone. It is a sum just over a third my annual salary.

"You'll pay me this to go to Venice and visit somebody's house? Turn around and fly back? That's it?"

"In essence."

"It's a hell of a story."

"You doubt my sincerity?"

"I hope you're not hurt."

"Not at all. I sometimes forget that, for some, verification is required."

She reaches into the inside pocket of her jacket. Lays a white business envelope on my desk. Unaddressed.

"What's this?"

"Aircraft voucher. Prepaid hotel reservation. Certified check for a quarter of your payment, the remainder to be paid upon your return. And the address at which you are to be in attendance."

I let my hand hover over the envelope, as though touching it would concede a crucial point.

"Naturally, you are welcome to bring your family with you," she says. "You have a wife? A daughter?"

"A daughter, yes. I'm less certain about the wife."

She looks up at the ceiling, closes her eyes. Then recites:

Hail wedded love, mysterious law, true source
Of human offspring, sole propriety
In Paradise of all things common else.

"You're a Milton scholar, too?" I ask when she's opened her eyes again.

"Not of your rank, professor. I am an admirer only."

"Not many casual admirers have him memorized."

"Learned knowledge. It is a gift of mine. Though I have never experienced what the poet describes. *Human offspring*. I am childless."

This last confession is surprising. After all the elusiveness, she offers this most personal fact freely, almost sadly.

"Milton was right about the joy of offspring," I say. "But trust me, he was way off about marriage as being common with paradise."

She nods, though seemingly not at my remark. Something else has been confirmed for her. Or perhaps she has merely delivered all that she was meant to, and is awaiting my reply. So I give it to her.

"My answer is no. Whatever this is about, it's intriguing, but quite beyond my scope. There's no way I could accept."

"You misunderstand. I am not here to hear your answer, professor. I am here to deliver an invitation, that is all."

"Fine. But I'm afraid your client will be disappointed."

"That is rarely the case."

In a single motion, she turns. Steps out of the room. I expect a cordial acknowledgment of some kind, a *Good day, professor* or wave of her bony hand, but she only starts clipping down the hall toward the stairs.

By the time I lift myself out of my chair and poke my head out the door to look after her, she's already gone.

2

I GATHER SOME WORK THINGS INTO MY SATCHEL AND MAKE MY way back out into the heat to the subway. The air is more wretched down here, vacuum-sealed and sweetened by garbage. This, along with the human scents, each relating a small tragedy of enslavement or frustrated desire as they pass.

On the ride downtown I try to summon the Thin Woman, to recall the physical details of her person, so vividly present only minutes earlier. But whether it is the unsettling events of the day or some corner of my short-term memory gone on the fritz, she returns to me only as an idea, not as a person. And the idea is more unnatural, more frightening, in recollection than she struck me at the time. To think of her now is like the difference between experiencing a nightmare and telling someone in the bright safety of the morning about its meandering, foolish plot.

At Grand Central I rise up the escalator and tunnels that feed into the station's main concourse. Rush hour. It feels more like panic than purposeful travel. And nobody is more lost-looking than the tourists,

who have come to witness the thrill of bustling New York but now stand merely stricken, clinging to their spouses and children.

O'Brien stands by the information kiosk beneath the gold clock at the center of the floor, our traditional meeting place. She looks pale. Possibly irritated, rightly, by my lateness.

She's looking the other way when I sidle up next to her. A tap on her shoulder and she jumps.

"Didn't know it was you," she apologizes. "Though I should have, shouldn't I? This is our place."

I like that more than I perhaps ought to—the notion of "our place"—but write it off as merely an accident of words.

"Sorry I'm late."

"You are forgiven."

"Remind me again," I say. "*Why* is this our place? Is it a Hitchcock thing? *North by Northwest*?"

"And you are my Cary Grant? A self-flattering notion. Not that the casting is so far off, so don't pout. But the truth is I like meeting here precisely for all that makes it so *uncivilized*. The crush. The masks of greed and desperation. The pandemonium. Organized chaos."

"Pandemonium," I repeat absently, though too quietly for O'Brien to hear amid the hubbub.

"What'd you say?"

"It's the name Satan gives the fortress he builds for himself and his followers after being cast out of heaven."

"You're not the only one who's read Milton, David."

"Of course. You were way ahead of me."

O'Brien takes a step to look directly up at me. "What's up? You look all wobbly."

I think of telling her about the Thin Woman, the strange proposal delivered to me at my office. But there is a sense that this would be sharing a secret I was meant to keep—more than a "sense," a physical warning, my chest tightening and a distinct squeezing around my windpipe, as though invisible fingers have passed through my flesh to silence me. I find myself murmuring something about the heat, my need for a stiff drink.

"That's what we're here for, isn't it?" O'Brien replies, taking me by the arm and leading me through the mob on the terminal floor. Her hand on my elbow a patch of cool on my suddenly burning skin.

The Oyster Bar is underground. A windowless cavern beneath the station floor that, for whatever reason, lends itself to the eating of raw seafood and the drinking of cold vodka. O'Brien and I have spent our time here mulling over the state of our careers (mine hitting the top of its game, enjoying "leading world expert" status at almost every mention, and O'Brien's writing on the psychological underpinnings of faith healing lending her recent semi-fame). Mostly, though, we talk about nothing in particular in the way of well-matched, if unlikely, companions.

What makes us unlikely? She's a woman, first of all. A single woman. Dark hair cut short, blue eyes blazing out of a darkly Irish complexion. Unlike me, she comes from money, though of the unshowy, northeastern kind. A tennis-camp Connecticut youth, followed by a seemingly effortless gathering of high-powered degrees, a successful private practice in Boston, and now Columbia, where only last year she stepped down as head of the Psych Department to concentrate more on her own research. A winning résumé, no question. But not exactly the profile for a married guy's drinking buddy.

Diane has never directly complained about our friendship. In fact, it's something she's encouraged. Not that this has stopped her from being jealous of our Oyster Bar celebrations, our midweek sports bar watching of hockey games (O'Brien and I are both now provisional Rangers fans, though born to other teams, she the Bruins, I the Leafs). Diane has no choice but to accept O'Brien, as to deny our friendship would be to concede that there is something Elaine gives me that Diane cannot. That this is true and plainly known to all three of us is what can make coming home after a night out with O'Brien especially chilly.

The thought that I might cut off our friendship as a peace offering to Diane has occurred to me, as it would to any husband in a

floundering marriage who still wants it to work, against all odds and good advice. And I *do* want it to work. I admit to more than my fair share of failings—the undefined pool of shade that lies at the bottom of who I am—but none are intentional, none within grasp of my control. My imperfections haven't prevented me from doing everything I could think of to be a good husband to Diane. But the thing is: I need Elaine O'Brien in my life. Not as a chronic flirtation, not as a sentimental torment of what might have been, but as my counsel, my more articulate, clear-thinking inner self.

This may sound strange—it *is* strange—but she has taken the place of the brother I lost when I was a child. While I could do nothing to prevent his death then, I cannot now let O'Brien go.

What's less clear is what she gets from our association. I've asked her, from time to time, why she wastes so many of her sparse social hours on a melancholic Miltonist like me. Her answer is always the same.

"I'm meant for you," she says.

We find stools at the long bar and order a dozen New Brunswick malpeques and a couple martinis to get us started. The place is jostling and loud as the floor of the Stock Exchange, yet O'Brien and I instantly find ourselves cocooned in our shared thoughts. I begin by relating my encounter with Will Junger, adding some sharper putdowns to the ones I actually delivered earlier that afternoon (and leaving out the raw confessions of worry about Tess). O'Brien smiles, though she detects my embellishments (and likely my omissions, too) as I knew she would.

"Did you really say all that?"

"Almost," I say. "I certainly *wish* I had said all that."

"Then let's say you did. Let the record show that the slippery snake, William Junger of Physics, is right now licking the verbal wounds inflicted by the dangerously underestimated Dave Ullman of Old Books."

"Yes. I like that." I nod, sipping my drink. "It's like a kind of superpower, when you think of it. Having a friend who accepts your version of reality."

"There's no reality but versions of reality."

"Who said that?"

"Me, as far as I know," she says, and takes a long drink herself.

The vodka, the consoling pleasure of being next to her, the confidence that, for now, nothing of any real danger could be visited on us—all of it makes me feel it would be okay to plunge forward and tell O'Brien about my meeting with the Thin Woman. I'm wiping my lips with a napkin in preparation when she begins before I do.

"I have some news," she says, slurping down a malpeque. It is the kind of introduction that suggests top-tier gossip, something startling and necessarily sexual. But then, after swallowing, she announces: "I have cancer."

If there was anything in my throat, I would have choked on it.

"That a joke?" I say. "Tell me that's a fucking joke."

"Do the oncologists at New York Presbyterian joke?"

"Elaine. My God. No. *No*."

"They're not exactly sure where it started, but it's in the bones now. Which would explain my piss-poor squash game of late."

"I'm so sorry."

"What is the bargain-store Zen mantra these days? *It is what it is*."

"Is it serious? I mean—of course it's *serious*—but how far along?"

"Advanced, they say. Like it's a grad course or something. Only cancers having already received their prerequisites need apply."

She's doing an astonishing job at being good humored—it's being with me that helps, I can tell, along with the bracing courage of the martini—but there's a tremble at the corner of her mouth that now I can see is a battle against tears. And then, before I know it, I'm the one who's crying. Throwing my arms around her, knocking a couple empty oyster shells off our ice tray and onto the floor.

"Easy, professor," O'Brien whispers into my ear, though she holds me just as tightly as I hold her. "People might get the wrong idea."

And what would the right idea be? An embrace such as this could never be confused with lust or congratulation. It is a hopeless refusal. A child clinging to a departing loved one at the station, fighting the inevitable to the end, instead of the adult's polite surrender.

"We'll get help," I say. "We'll find the right doctors."

"It's beyond that, David."

"You're not just going to *accept* this, are you?"

"Yes. I'm going to try. And I'd like to ask you to help me."

She pushes me back from her. Not from embarrassment, but so she can show me her eyes.

"I know you're afraid," she says.

"Of course I'm afraid. This is a pretty devastating—"

"I'm not talking about the cancer. I'm talking about you."

She takes a long breath. Whatever she is about to say requires energy she may not have. So I grip her arms to support her. Bend close to listen.

"I've never been able to figure out what you're so scared of, but there's something in you that's got you backed into a corner so tight your eyes are closed against it," she says. "You don't have to tell me what it is. I bet you don't even know yourself. But here's the thing: I probably won't be around for you when you face it down. I wish I could be, but I won't. You're going to need someone. You won't make it if you're alone. I don't know of anyone who could."

"Tess."

"That's right."

"You want me to look out for Tess?"

"I want you to remember that she's as scared as you are. That she thinks she's alone, too."

"Not sure I'm getting—"

"Your *melancholy*. Or depression. Along with nine-tenths of the afflictions I've studied, diagnosed, attempted to treat. Call them whatever you like, but they're just different names for loneliness. That's what lets the darkness in. That's what you have to fight."

Loneliness. As though O'Brien was at my lecture today, taking notes.

"I'm not alone."

"But you *think* you are. You've thought you've been all on your own your whole life—and what do I know? Maybe you have. It nearly took you down. If you didn't have your books, your work, all the shields of your mind, it *would* have. It still wants to. But you can't let it, because there's Tess now. And no matter how far away she'll drift

from you, you can't give up. She's your *child,* David. She is *you*. So you have to prove your love for her every goddamn minute of every goddamn day. Anything less and you fail the Human Being Test. Anything less and you really are just alone."

Even here, in the A/C-challenged Oyster Bar, O'Brien shivers.

"Where is this coming from?" I ask her. "You've never said anything like that about Tess before. That she's . . . like me. By which you mean she has what I have."

"More than eye color and height passes through the bloodline."

"Hold on a second here. Are you speaking as Dr. O'Brien the shrink? Or my pal O'Brien, the friendly kicker of ass?"

This question, intended to return us to lighter ground, only seems to confound her. And in the moment she struggles to find an answer, her illness passes over her features. Her skin pulls close over her face, her color fades. In a transformation that would be invisible to anyone but me, she now looks as though she could be the Thin Woman's sister. A likeness that ought to have been apparent from the time I saw the woman sitting outside my office, but revealed, in a private second of horror, only now.

"It's just something I know," she answers finally.

We carry on for a while. Order another round, share a lobster as we normally do. The whole time O'Brien expertly keeps us from returning to her diagnosis, or her oddly portentous insight into my lifelong affliction. She has said all that she meant to say about it. And there is the unspoken assurance between us that even she isn't sure of its full implications.

When we're done, I walk her back up to the main terminal floor. It's quieter here now, the commuters outnumbered by the gawkers, the picture takers. I'm ready to wait with O'Brien at the entrance to her platform until her train up to Greenwich is ready to go, but she stops me at the gold clock.

"I'll be okay," she says with a weak smile.

"Of course you will. But there's no point waiting alone."

"I'm not alone." She links her hand around my wrist in a show of gratitude. "And there's someone waiting for you."

"I doubt that. These days, Tess just locks herself in her room after dinner, gets on the computer. DO NOT DISTURB in neon on her door."

"Sometimes people close a door because they're trying to figure out a way to get you to knock."

O'Brien releases my wrist and slips away into a pack of German tourists. I would follow, or try, but she doesn't want me to. So I turn and head off in the opposite direction, down the tunnel to the subway entrance, the air getting hotter the farther from the surface I go.