



5-2012

# The Naked Afterward: A Novel

Adam Blair Prince  
aprince4@utk.edu

---

## Recommended Citation

Prince, Adam Blair, "The Naked Afterward: A Novel." PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2012.  
[http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk\\_graddiss/1339](http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/1339)

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Trace: Tennessee Research and Creative Exchange. For more information, please contact [trace@utk.edu](mailto:trace@utk.edu).

To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Adam Blair Prince entitled "The Naked Afterward: A Novel." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in English.

Michael D. Knight, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Rachelle Scott, Allen Wier, Margaret Dean

Accepted for the Council:

Dixie L. Thompson

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

---

**THE NAKED AFTERWARD:  
A NOVEL**

A Dissertation  
Presented for the  
Doctor of Philosophy Degree  
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Adam B. Prince  
May 2012

Copyright © 2012 by Adam B. Prince  
All rights reserved.

“Righteousness is good character, and sin is that which revolves in your heart and which you do not want people to know.”

*-The Quran*

Q: “What do you pay a prostitute for?”

A: “To leave.”

-joke, origins unknown

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee Michale Knight, Allen Wier, Margaret Lazarus Dean, and Rachelle Scott. I'd also like to thank Marilyn Kallet and Arthur Smith. And, of course, I want to thank my wife, Charlotte Pence.

Parts of my Critical Introduction have appeared in *Chapter16.org* as the essay "On Happiness and the Thematic Resonance of Pigeon Racing."

## **ABSTRACT**

A novel taking place in Jakarta, Indonesia that explores the tension between ideal and actual, between spiritual and carnal, between who we are and who we would like to be. An American named John Dawke takes a job operating surveillance equipment for an independent security company based in Jakarta that is supposedly involved in counter-terrorism. Dawke's wife has recently died, and he suspects suicide. Thus, he is trying to get away, to recreate himself in a place where each action reverberates with consequences unintended and unknown.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

<b>I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>II. THE NIGHT THEIR WOMEN DIED.....</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>III. THEORETICAL MEN.....</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>IV. SCREW CAMERAS.....</b>	<b>47</b>
<b>V. AT WORK ON THE SELF-DESTRUCT.....</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>VI. MEN IN THE FIELD.....</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>VII. THE GAME OF SORRY.....</b>	<b>90</b>
<b>VIII. EVASIVE MANUEVERS.....</b>	<b>102</b>
<b>WORKS CITED.....</b>	<b>116</b>
<b>VITA.....</b>	<b>117</b>

## I. CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

*In the four feet between the train tracks and the wall that separates those tracks from the rest of Jakarta, people are living. North and southbound tracks with lean-tos on either side. In between the two sets of tracks, kids play soccer. A trash fire burns where a goal might be.*

*I stand at the open end of one of the lean-tos looking in on what used to be a man. Knees and ribcage and stillness.*

*He's dead, I think, and almost laugh. Shame follows next. Then disbelief. I tell myself that the near-laugh has something to do with my inability to process what I'm seeing. Then I wonder whether the fact that the right emotion rarely surfaces in me is somehow a condition of the modern world.*

*A twitch. The man rolls over from side to back and puts his eyes on me: a tall, well-fed American witnessing what may be his last hours as part of a tour. A writer doing research.*

The project began when my then-girlfriend-now-wife and I were traveling through Singapore. We met a couple of American men in their fifties who'd been living in Jakarta for the past two decades. They were men in business suits, men with bloodshot eyes that followed every passing woman from fifteen to sixty. They had no families, kept calling Jakarta "the dark city," making general insinuations about the nightlife, but avoiding all our questions on the specifics. The two guys took us out, bought us drinks,

talked to us about literature and world economics, and got their arms around Charlotte, who didn't take them seriously enough to feel threatened by it.

I have an interest in men like that: drunks who only want to be drunks and meth-heads who only want to be meth-heads. People who live almost exclusively in service of their own pleasures. And I continue to believe that though it takes an enormous amount of bravery for a man to face intimacy, it takes another kind of bravery to continue living without it.

Three years before meeting Charlotte, I broke up with a long-time girlfriend, and she got the apartment we'd been sharing. So I had to return to my parents' house. There, I spent two months straight playing a computer role-playing game. And later, looking back, I came to conclude that this was one of the best periods of my life. There was misery, sure, but I'd never felt so *entitled* to it. And I'd often thought that if writing didn't work out for me, then I'd just give up—get a job I didn't care about and devote myself to video games entirely. But the writing *was* working out for me, after all. I was finishing up my short story collection, *The Beautiful Wishes of Ugly Men*, a darkly comic book in which men attempt to negotiate between their baroque imaginations and the realities of their actual lives, a book about lust, male bravado, and the complex glories of love. The stories were getting published. And intimacy was working out, too. I hadn't asked Charlotte to marry me yet, but I could sense that—despite my best efforts on the contrary—I wanted to. So I pitied these two men, and I envied them, too.

“But suffering is equally divided among all men,” thinks Port from *The Sheltering Sky* as he wanders among the starving people of North Africa after a fight with

his wife (Bowles 15). He's already looking for a woman to pay, though he hasn't admitted it to himself. And, yes, he questions the truth of his own thought about suffering, but he needs it, too, not only to justify what he's about to do, but to justify his whole self, his preoccupations that might—from the point of view of the starving Africans he walks among—be seen as petty. As for my own perspective, I'm not sure that anything ever actually equals anything else except in math. But I do believe that human beings are at our most brilliant in the ways we find to suffer.

So I became interested in these two men, and I started to take notes on a novel. Soon after the trip, I asked Charlotte to marry me, and we went to “the dark city” on our honeymoon. Or, well, we went to Indonesia, and spent a few weeks in the capital. We took a tour of the enormous Istiqlaql Mosque with a man who kept telling Charlotte about how not being able to have sex with his wife during Ramadan made it that much better afterward when they could. We got stuck in Jakarta's notorious traffic with a cab driver who kept falling asleep. We ate street food for less than a dollar a meal and dinners for eighty dollars a plate, and we watched World Cup Soccer on a giant screen in a dance club surrounded by prostitutes and college kids and businessmen doing ecstasy. I put those experiences down in my journal, along with thoughts about marriage and what it meant—and I experienced the deepening realization that I didn't at all understand either one.

*Ronnie, one of the Indonesians who runs the slum tours<sup>1</sup>, has been called over here by the dying man's wife, a dusty, knobby, old woman squatting so close to her husband that their toes are touching. The wife and Ronnie are speaking in Indonesian, so all I pick up on is tone. Calm. Serious. They seem to be debating about the best course of action. Ronnie pays the medical bills for the people who live here with the money he makes from the tours, but the woman doesn't want to trouble him. He has to talk her into it.*

*Now we're going to see the doctor, but it keeps getting delayed. First off, there are all the kids, a parade of kids who have paused their soccer game and are hopping up and down, greeting me by grabbing my hand and pressing it to their foreheads. A naked boy performs a show of balancing a paper cup on his forehead. A thin-armed girl who's stolen the soccer ball is looking for somewhere to hide it. And Ronnie is giving me statistics. How the Indonesian government says there are only nine million people in Jakarta, but the World Bank says it's closer to twenty-five. "So many uncounted," he says. "Dis-counted."*

*And I say, "Okay, but what about the doctor?"*

*"We are going to the doctor. Don't worry about the doctor."*

*I try not to. I decide to change the subject. "Don't you do three or four of these tours a week?"*

*"Yes."*

*"But the kids are so excited. Are they always like this?"*

---

*“They’re always like this,” he says. And then invites me into the house of a woman who’s been hit by the train.*

I had been imagining my novel *The Naked Afterward* as a way to continue investigating the themes of my short story collection, but the transition into the longer form would enable me to expand the field of action and range of implications from personal to global. Jakarta is heavily Muslim, and, in one sense, deeply devout. At the same time, it is infamous for corruption, drug use and prostitution. It is a city full of secrets and contradictions. This tension—between ideal and actual, between spiritual and carnal, between who we are and who we’d like to be—would serve as the focal point of the novel.

The novel would be a literary international thriller, pulling in the reader and then deepening the experience, investigating not just the “who-dunnit” but the why “why-they-dunnit,” too. I was less interested in all of the political implications of terror and counter-terrorism than in the human motivation behind the people attached to these actions. As Major Calloway says in Greene’s film *The Third Man*, “The world doesn’t make any heroes anymore.” And yet the world does seem to continue making people who need to see themselves that way.

The hero, of course, is a solitary figure. And maybe the more heroic he is, the more solitary. The hero is someone who can’t afford intimacy because it puts lives at stake. Most of the women James Bond sleeps with eventually get murdered. And, as, Mila Bongco points out in *Reading Comics: Language, Culture, and the Concept of the*

*Superhero in Comic Books*, if Lois Lane knows who Superman really is, then not only is her life in danger, but she may want him to spend a little more time with her and a little less time hanging out with his buddies in the Hall of Justice (111-113). The hero's responsibilities keep him from intimacy—and how convenient. I think this all points to a human, or at least an American, sickness. We want to be seen as perfect and yet intimacy involves admitting to our own weaknesses and imperfections. I think, in many ways, it was this quality that made John Dawke's marriage unworkable and this truth that lingers behind the "joke" that serves as one of the epigrams for the novel.

*Houses, I keep wanting to call them, because they're built with such integrity. This one has a wooden bureau cut down to size and half a bookshelf, too.*

*The woman who's been hit by the train is tiny, shrunken from age and hard living. A bandage covers half her head and one of her eyes. But there is kindness enough in the other one. I say hello in my limited Indonesian. And she gives me a smile of such warmth it's as though she's been expecting me all day. Then the train comes.*

*"Ka-chonk, ka-tink, ka-chonk, ka-tink, ka-chonk, ka-tink." Six inches from the open airway that is her front door. The woman still smiles, but there's something behind it. There has to be something behind it.*

*Ronnie says this state of affairs can't last, that these poor people can't continue to live like this, that the rich at the top can't keep expecting them too. "Poverty," he tells me, "is more dangerous than terrorism."*

Undoubtedly, the straightest line to heroism involves settling on a villain. So, of course, the novel would have to have terrorism—or at least, the specter of terrorism.

Still, I didn't know a lot about terrorism or international thrillers or Islam or Indonesia, for that matter. So I started reading novels by Pramaedy Ananta Toer, histories such as *Jakarta*, by Susan Abeyasekera, and various other nonfiction pieces like V.S. Naipul's *Among the Believers* and *Beyond Belief*, Sadanand Dhume's *My Friend the Fanatic: Travels with a Radical Islamist*, Daniel Ziv's cultural study *Jakarta Inside Out*, and Moammar Emka's controversial book on the sex lives of Indonesians called *Jakarta Undercover*.

I also read a lot of John LeCarré and Graham Green. My specialized comprehensive exam "The Other Abroad" focused on the tradition of travel narratives and the problems inherent in portraying one culture through the lens of another. The exam included books like *A Passage to India*, *The Year of Living Dangerously*, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and *Heart of Darkness*.

In the meantime, I was putting together a rough draft. In the rough draft, there was a real terrorist threat at one of Jakarta's sex clubs, and John's job was to maintain surveillance as a way of preventing it. The idea was to position John right between the two, so that he was drawn to the sex clubs, but the closer he got to real experience, the more exposed he was to the mistreatment of the women. Not that he would entirely sympathize with the people who wanted to blow the sex clubs up, but that he would be increasingly drawn toward elements of their perspective. There was a long section in the

rough draft of terrorists meeting to discuss the bombing of the clubs, which sounded generally menacing and unbelievable.

Clearly, I needed to go back to Jakarta. So I managed to secure funding from the W.K. McClure Grant for Study of World Affairs for a research trip. This time I met with terrorism and security experts, visited archives of Indonesian literature, took an intensive Indonesian language class, attended a weekly Q'uran study group with the Rahmania Foundation, and went on the slum tour. And one of the things I found was that there wasn't really much of a problem with terrorism in Jakarta at all. There was a *perceived* problem. And there were a whole lot of Americans, Australians, and Brits making good money running independent security firms to prevent this perceived problem. These men were ex-cops and ex-spies who hung out in bars with their twenty-year-old Indonesian girlfriends and talked about the Bali bombings with something a little too close to nostalgia.

The Front Pembela Islam or Islamic Defender's Front as we know them in the U.S. might get a lot of the press but are, I was told, essentially a gang that threatens businesses to get protection money and more or less uses the label of religious extremist because it looks a little better than mobster. Apparently, they had their beginnings in police operations in the late 90's and are still often used as a police instrument. Often, for instance, when FPI riots, it is in service of some police agenda, winning turf from the military or scaring people who may, conceivably, have communist tendencies. Jamaah Ansharut Tauhid (JAT) and Jemaah Islamiah (JI) are legitimately dangerous but have shied away from major bombings in recent years. Yes, this is partially because security

has become so tight at major targets, but I was assured by various experts in the field that it really has more to do with the fact that it's hard to control who dies in a bombing and some of the victims were often Muslim. Also, terrorism is bad for tourism and thus unpopular among the vast majority of Indonesians. What we could see in the near future for terrorism, I was told, might be more targeting killings, more assassinations than bombings: not what I had in mind for my book.

Jakarta's Blok M is an area seedy, run-down bars where foreign men go to pay Indonesian woman to come back to their hotel rooms. So, determined to make my original concept for the novel work, I suggested to some of the security experts I was interviewing that it would be a terrific target for a bombing. The security isn't tight. The buildings are practically falling down already. And the only people who go there at night are either foreign men or women wanting to sell their bodies. *No way anyone would target Blok M, I was told. Absolutely no way. That place is police protected. Police owned.*

*What about JAT? I asked. What about JI? The dangerous guys.*

*No way. The police would find the bomber's family. Their hometown. Would kill everyone at all connected to him. Everyone knows that. No one touches Blok M.*

So, on the one hand, the police are connected to the Islamic Defender's Front, an organization that riots in the streets when people drink during Ramadan, and on the other hand, the police run one of the primary areas for prostitution and drinking in the city. Again and again, the answers were like this. Wandering around the city, talking to people, I increasingly had the notion that nothing whatsoever could quite be established

as true. Yes, prostitution is illegal in Indonesia, as are drugs, but someone from the military or the police owns such-and-such club where these things take place. And yes the government counted nine million people in Jakarta, but it might also be twenty-five.

*“Okay,” Ronnie says once the train passes, “time to go”—not, as it turns out, because of a rush for the doctor, but because he wants to show me the pigeon races. I’d read about them before coming to Jakarta. The males speed along four kilometers to get to their lifelong mates. And boys in the crowd hold out other female pigeons to try to get the males to stray.*

*The pigeon races are going to be a scene in the novel. Thematic resonance is what I’ve told Ronnie. It took me half an hour to explain. His English isn’t perfect, but I don’t think that was really the problem. It was more that he just didn’t see the point.*

*“Your book is about the poor in Jakarta?” he finally asked.*

*“No.”*

*“What is it about?”*

*“Americans. Two Americans in Indonesia.”*

*“There are a lot of books about Americans.”*

*“Yes,” I had to admit. “Yes, there are.”*

*Still, like many Indonesians, he’s immensely accommodating. Determined to give me a good tour, even if it means taking longer to get the doctor for a dying man.*

*The races take place between the two sets of tracks only a few hundred yards north of where the boys play soccer. But there is no race today. And as we talk to the*

*men, it becomes clear that this isn't quite the style of pigeon racing I'd read about anyway.*

Increasingly, I had to shift the whole novel in my head. And what is submitted here is a massive revision of that earlier draft. The thriller element continued to collapse in on itself, because not only were there no heroes to find but no villains either. And thus, I started to think about the project less a thriller than as a novel whose two main characters want it to be a thriller. It is increasingly influenced by Kevin Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* and Kurt Vonnegut's *Mother Night*. In these novels, there are no barbarians, no villains, not even anything that could be considered a conspiracy. It's just a very tangled mess.

Another similarity with the aforementioned that I discovered as I continued to write was that the piece started to get so quirky at moments that it didn't always feel quite like strict realism. I think my favorite scene so far is the game of Sorry. And I think one of the reasons that it works is because it's just sort of off kilter from what one might expect. Writing in such a way seems to have a tonal and thematic fit with what I'm doing, because a sense of unbalance or uncertainty about what is real and what is not pervades the foreigner's experience in Jakarta. And writing like this had the additional benefit of relieving me somewhat from the responsibility of having to be spot-on with all the details about the city—a hopeless project, after all. As I sometimes tell my fiction students, what in early drafts is often a liability can later be developed into an asset. The thriller doesn't completely work, so I'm trying to make the book about the characters' desire to live

within a thriller. Jakarta is a place in which truth is impossible to establish, and so John becomes increasingly enmeshed in the attempt to find it.

Here, I think, is where surveillance and identity fit in. Surveillance, like novel writing, is an attempt to find the truth about people when they are—or think they are—not being observed. And yet, we live in a world in which any notion of truth is increasingly slippery and identity is a matter of performance. Not that I'm writing about the world anyway, or about Jakarta. I'm writing about a guy. John Dawke. Someone who wants to be someone else. And spies on himself to see if it's working.

*The men who race the pigeons and live next to the train tracks ask where I'm from and nod deeply when I tell them the U.S., as if I'd just said something highly philosophical. One man is shaking Ronnie's hand and slapping his own belly in a joke I don't understand. The kids are still hopping up and down. The wife looks on waiting for the doctor but patient in a way I can't at all relate to. And then it occurs to me all at once that somehow these people living next to the train tracks are happier than all my friends at home, happier than anyone I know.*

*I'm not very comfortable with this thought. I don't know what to do with it. It seems to delegitimize the work of someone like Ronnie, someone committed to help. And then, you sometimes hear similar sentiments expressed by rich people who want to maintain the status quo.*

*Ronnie gets a teenager to take the wife to the doctor, and we continue along on our tour. We get in a cab and go to a place where refugees have built a village out of driftwood, a village that floats over the water like some miracle, a minor Venice.*

*I leave that tour touched and jittery. Something deeply mysterious about human nature and perseverance has gotten to me. I call my wife, who is pregnant with our first child and on the other side of the world and tell her all about it—tearing up and frustrated I can't do a better job. I tell people in Indonesia about it, too, though I don't do any better with them.*

*One guy, an Indonesian businessman I know from the bars, he says it's bullshit. "Conscience tours," he calls them. What happens, he reasons, if you own a piece of land and people come in there and decide to live on it? And you've been planning to develop that land, so now you look like you're some kind of villain because you have to get the people out? What happens when no one wants to take the train, because it goes by these places? Or if it hits someone and they blame the train company? And if these people couldn't get by in Jakarta, if they needed charity, why were they here? Why did they come?*

*I'd never thought about it this way. And I don't want to act like I know who's right. I don't know a whole lot about history or business or politics or Indonesia. I just study fiction, which means, I guess, that at the very best, I know a few things about character. So all I can say for sure is this: that guy talking to me, that businessman on the diatribe, he is one of the loneliest, most unhappy people I've ever known.*

## II. THE NIGHT THEIR WOMEN DIED

Another Woman, the bar was called. A block of bricks slathered in gray paint down the hill from Mercy Hospital, where John Dawke had been sitting for a week next to the new thing his wife had become. Near sunset now, and the windows too dark to see through, but each neon beer sign yelped its own little promise.

John had gone home to replace the gladiolas and mums, get some clothes and stand in the shower. Then three and a half hours of uncomfortable dreaming before he drove back, parked here. It was a practical decision, or seemed it, five dollars a day versus free. But if he was going to be honest with himself, completely honest, he had to admit that over the past week he'd been thinking about this bar a lot more than he probably should have.

John had never been much of a drinker, but over the past five or six years, he'd developed the habit of coming into a bar for just one or two. He'd engage in a little light exchange with the bartender and pretend awhile to be someone else. *Fifteen minutes*, he reasoned, first with himself, and then with a mental image of his father-in-law. *Phone on all the time*. He tried out a smile, opened the door.

It was the kind of bar he liked. Dirty and dim enough to hide it. He ordered a double whiskey and soda from a bartender who'd aged past real beauty but had lips still full enough to let him imagine. He sipped through the sting of metal and oil down into that bump of accomplishment just on the other end of a wince.

He looked down at his duffel bag, daydreamed himself into a man on his way out of Knoxville, a man whose present concerns were limited to flight schedules and the killing of time. He raised his eyes to the reflection behind the mirror in the bar, hoping, he guessed, to see that man. He saw instead the puffy, flushed face of a forty-year-old with the bowl haircut of a high-schooler. Its lower half was hidden behind a row of bottles, and eyes looming above gave no indication of the smile he tried at. It was one of the major premises of John Dawke's work in the lab that to be convincing, a smile must involve the whole face, eyes in particular, and that a smile that didn't involve the eyes tended to betray someone embarrassed, haunted, perverted, avoidant.

He looked away from his own reflection and to that of the only other man in the bar, four stools down. This man was about John's age with a shaved head and a black, cowboy moustache. Grey suit, white shirt. Angular where he himself was rounded. He'd grab a fistful of peanuts and shake them like dice before popping them into his mouth and chewing down with such vigor that the temporalis muscles in his head were hard at work and gave him the look of someone comfortably animal-like. Now this man, thought John, this man was convincing, this man was passing through. He seemed just a little out of place but content to be so. Drank his own whiskey straight. And how did he get those peanuts? Did you have to ask for the peanuts?

When the man spoke it was without turning his head. He met John's through their mutual reflection. "You following me?" he asked.

"No. I. No," said John.

"I saw you in intensive care."

“Oh,” said John and grabbed for his whiskey, as much to drink as to hide behind.

A red, sunset glare shot from the door coming open. Two college girls stepped through wearing tight shorts and cowboy boots, all innocence and cheerleading and carrying their beauty like war medals. The man with the shaved head grabbed the hand of the nearest as she passed, grabbed it as though it were his to begin with. “Quick,” he said to her, “without even thinking. What’s your favorite word and it can’t be love.”

“Disgusto,” she said. “Galaxy,” said the other.

“How about ‘authentic?’” the man said back.

The girl snapped back her hand and the two of them scooted further down the bar.

“My mother died today,” the man in the suit announced to the girls at a distance. A flinch of pity passed through the one whose hand had been grabbed, disappearing, no doubt, the moment she became conscious of it. “Shorts and cowboy boots,” he continued at them and raised his glass as if in a toast. “Good look. I like that part behind the knee. That H.”

Now, the girls ignored him, but he didn’t seem to mind. Lit a cigarette.

The sunset came through the dark window nearly drained of color, and John resisted the urge to check how close he’d come to the end of his fifteen minutes.

“Hadn’t seen her for years,” the man said, now only to John. “Plus, she was a bitch. Doesn’t mean I don’t miss her, though. It’s weird to be the only one left. Feels sort of . . . sort of loose, sort of dangling. Now, who are you again?”

John introduced himself and the other said, “Manning. First name Craig.” The two shook hands across the distance of the four stools between them. John expected the

other to ask what he'd been doing in intensive care, but he asked about work instead. And they talked awhile about robot eyes.

“It’s just like a camera, though, right?” said Manning.

“Kind of,” said John, “But a camera is passive. It only takes images in. I work with the rest of the face team on the expression the eyes give off.” Then they talked a little about uncanny valley. John didn’t tend to be a very extraverted person, but he was good at explaining the essence of his work to people outside the field and grateful now to spend some time in such comfortable territory. “And how about yourself?” he asked.

“Oh, that’s a big secret,” said Manning, which may or may not have been a joke. His own face was stiff and everything he said seemed to come off at the same level of seriousness, which may not have been serious at all. “Who’s dying?” he asked.

“Um,” said John and looked at his phone. A half hour had passed, and the phone had no signal in here. “I gotta go.” He put a twenty on the bar and grabbed his duffel bag.

“Chin up!” Manning called after him.

Night now, and John charged, panting up the hill while the cell phone buzzed in his pocket.

The hospital doors slid into hard, clean, light. It glared off the floors. John ran down the hall, then left and two flights up. He saw himself as if at a distance. In a movie. Man running through a hospital. Such a dramatic scene. So that surrounding the edges of his panic there pulsed something else. Something like satisfaction.

Caroline's father stood outside her door close to one of the nurses. This thin, old-world man in a derby hat, with his head lowered and his mouth close to her ear.

"You missed it, boy," he said at seeing John. "Body's in there. Sharon wanted to take it away, but I said no. Said give the boy some time to be where he needs to be."

"Sharon?" asked John, less because he genuinely wondered who Sharon was, than because he was trying to scale down the questions at hand to something more manageable.

"Sharon," said her father, "Sharon the nurse who's been here all week." One of the gardener's hands gripped Sharon the nurse by the shoulder. She turned to regard John, too, with some kind of look on her face. Hurt or condemnation or pity—he didn't know what, because now he was inside the room. Door shut behind him. And quiet now. Since all the machines for breathing and monitoring had since been shut off.

The wallpaper was that photographic kind, a nature scene. Pine trees around a lake. Little boat, white sail.

Caroline's body lay under the sheet. John had always been squeamish. Didn't watch horror movies, would close his eyes at even a preview, make quick a flip past any of those surgery TV shows, and even the half-second image of an unidentifiable gash in yellow skin, a needle skipping through, was hard to shake from his head at night. And of all the many things John had recently become ashamed of, this was one: that more than pity, more than loss, it was a stomach-churning squeamishness he felt when they brought his wife in after the accident, head bandaged, nose exploded, lips gone jagged from impact and stitches. It was John Dawke's experience with emotions was that they were

largely unreliable. That the wrong ones came at all the wrong times and disappeared again once he was used to them. Somehow, then, the squeamishness had gone. And it still hadn't slid into tragedy, loss. He knew he needed to take a look, uncover the thing that used to be his wife. But a stubborn, childishness took him, as if he were six at a wedding, and his mother was telling him he had to say hello to the bride. A matter of decorum and growing up. But he didn't *care* about decorum and wasn't so sure about all this business of growing up.

“You were right about my haircut,” he said to the body under the sheet. “It makes me look too young and too old all at once. I don't know why I kept insisting. Probably just because you were insisting the other way around.”

He wondered if there were cameras in the room to help monitor the patients or allow for some kind of study involving the various responses to mourning, and he had the impulse to give some kind of speech to his imagined audience, an account of the marriage, brief but honest. But there were no cameras. It couldn't possibly be legal. It was just something that Manning guy had said that got him thinking in that direction, another way to put off what he needed to do.

John pinched the sheet, yanked it.

Over the twenty years they'd been together, he'd seen nearly every emotion in her, from unmixed joy to quiet disappointment, and yet the emotion on her face now was one he'd never seen. A look of disdain. As if she'd held out so long against that one thing in life, it couldn't help but come out now. Her eyes were open, but the power was off. They looked right past him, past their marriage, a simple solution to a complex problem.

“Aren’t they supposed to shut your eyes?” he asked the body. “I thought they did that. Maybe your dad thought I should do it.” He reached expecting cold, but it wasn’t nearly as cold as he thought. There was some awful shock to that. Like thinking you were about to drink water and getting gin instead. Her lids, though, had gone stiff. He had to sort of shove and talked his way through it. “Your dad’s not very happy with me, but I don’t know when he has been. I’m sorry I missed it. I needed a break. It was bad timing. God, that sounds awful. Bad timing. I think you would probably understand, though, even if your dad doesn’t. The nurses love him. He knows all their names. I’m sorry, Caroline. I’m sorry. I need to get out of here.”

Outside the room, there was paperwork and a dignified father-in-law. “Excuse me,” said John and pushed past. He was unused to skirting responsibilities and felt a flush of surprise, almost pleasure, at the ease with which it was done. A bad kind of good like revenge. He was already in the stairwell. Metal door swung shut on the voices behind. Running in reverse of his earlier path, but down. Down the stairs. Down the hill. An easier route because it was giving in. Hurt his heart to pump so hard, but it felt good, too. Working this underused thing, and god, he should exercise more. Swung the bar door open and there was Manning, right where John had left him. “My wife died tonight,” said the widower to his new companion. It came out between heavy breaths and didn’t sound right. He tried it again and that wasn’t right, either, but Manning ordered him a double scotch neat, and the two clinked glasses.

Manning had the drink to his lips. Stopped. “What did we toast to just then?”

“To . . .” said John. “To the memory of two good women.”

“Whatever you say.” He pointed his face at John. Didn’t change it, just sort of pointed it. As if he were a member of some audience, and it was John’s job to provide the entertainment, the tone, the drama, the melody, and now he was embarrassed.

“I guess I’m just relieved you’re here,” John said. “Honestly. Otherwise I’d be stuck with my father-in-law. Or alone.” He almost cried then, while Manning looked on. A patient member of the audience, who expected that tonight’s entertainment not necessarily be one thing or another, but whatever it was. Still, John would not cry. He dug through it. Held on to his drink. And considered later, as he tried to put the night together for clues that this was the closest he’d come to crying all week.

And now it was mostly Manning who did the talking, which, John appreciated. Still, he was hard to get a hold of. Would start going in one direction, then zig off in another. A high school girlfriend shifted midsentence into a foreign movie star, and bare facts would sometimes change. He had lived in Jakarta for three years or twenty. He’d never met his father, or else each meeting had ended in a fistfight, the last of which Manning had won. John asked questions, but none were answered directly. “So, wait, this was an Indonesian movie star you dated?” he asked, and Manning said, “You know my mom slept with one of my friends back in high school? She asked me if it was okay first. I told her it absolutely wasn’t, but then she did it anyway and tried to get credit for asking. I mean, what kind of a mom? What kind of a bitch . . . ?”

They ordered more drinks.

“On me,” Manning kept saying. “On me, John. God, it’s the least I could do. What you’ve been through today I can’t even imagine and look at your bravery. Look

how you're holding up." The bar was filling up. Ball-capped boys whooping. Girls flushed and smooth.

"For most of my marriage, I never even looked at other women," said John. "Never even really noticed. And then when I was in the hospital with Caroline, with her dad. He was sitting on other side of her body. Like, some, I don't know, some week-long staring contest. Like every time I got up to go to the bathroom or got a little lost in a reality show, I had somehow failed. Anyway, there was this nurse, not the usual nurse, but another nurse, a young nurse, maybe an intern, who came in one time. And you know how they dress now in those loose blue scrubs, so they all look like, I don't know, factory workers or something and you can't see their bodies at all. I remember her hair was all one length and that color, that sort of brass color I think they call strawberry blond. And I had this sense she was innocent, one of these people who was trying to, you know, save the world or something. But even these things were sort of vague impressions, somewhere on the edge of my awareness. Anyway, I guess she reached to get something out of a high cupboard and the shirt rode up, so I could see some skin, that little curve from hip to back. I didn't even really know I was looking until Caroline's dad caught me. And I swear to god, right at first, the look was almost conspiratorial. Just like two men silently agreeing on a nice-looking girl. But then, of course, it shifted to disdain. Just absolute disdain. Like the old man had been waiting all these twenty years of the marriage for just that piece of evidence to confirm what he already knew." John sipped the whiskey burn. "I don't know," he said. "Ever since then I keep thinking about girls.

Looking at girls. Even tonight. Even after what just happened.” Then he took a breath. A very long breath and said, “My wife died, and I’m relieved.”

It had just come out of him. Needed saying. He didn’t even know if it was true.

Manning lit a cigarette. “Not to worry, there, John,” he said. “Talking’s good. You need to talk. I want you to tell me whatever you need to, okay? Let’s make that pact right now.” They toasted to that. And then Manning told John about a club in Jakarta where the party started on Thursday night and carried on until Monday morning, a club full of college kids and hookers and businesspeople all of them doing ecstasy. He said that in Jakarta, there was a hotel with trees growing inside and bubbling pools like Eden, and girls from all over the world, and when you were ready, you could have them line up. A line of Indonesian girls or Colombian girl or Japanese girls in kimonos, and you would examine them, then pick the one you wanted. She would meet you at the bubbling pools in a white bikini. She would straddle you, massage you, then up and towel you off before taking you down into one of the private rooms for a lay. She would be billed on your credit card as a bottle of wine. White wine if she was Indonesian and red if she was foreign, and how much did John know about wireless cameras?

“You mean, like, for surveillance?”

“For instance. Yeah.”

“A little,” said John, though even that was probably a stretch.

“Okay,” said Manning. “Okay, okay, let me ask you this. Let’s say someone wanted to set up a hidden camera. But they wanted to make sure that on the one hand, no one else could pick up the signal and on the other that, if someone found the camera, they

couldn't figure out where the signal was going. How, in your opinion, might someone do that?"

"I guess that's the tricky part," said John. "If the camera isn't encoded, then it's pretty much untraceable, right? But then someone else might just pick up the signal. I mean, if they're looking for a signal and good at their job or if they just get really lucky. But if you encode the camera and some one finds it, then they can work back from there and maybe find you on the other end." He was working more from logic than expertise, while trying, at the same time, to make it seem otherwise. "So what about a self-destruct on the camera? It shorts out if anyone finds it?"

"Yeah, see, that's what I think," said Manning, as if he had settled a bet. "I gotta take a piss."

At seeing the other stand for the first time, John was surprised to discover him just a little shorter than average.

Then John sat staring at all the girls. The two who had first come in were still there, milling around some boys at the opposite end. The bartender came by and asked if he was doing all right, compassion in her voice. "Yeah," he said, and realized he *was* doing all right. That for now, at least, he might even be called happy. "Yeah, but how about another round?"

He didn't know how many that made it. The night was unspooling before them. Or they were unspooling before it. The two of them sharing a cigarette. John kept saying something about his hair, how much he hated his hair. And then, somehow, Manning was

over him with an electric razor, shaving it all off while the college kids cheered. “We’re twins,” said Manning. “Orphan twins, raised by wolves.”

And next the college girl was back, the one John was sure Manning scared off. Squeezed between them, half their age. “You’ve got to have more faith in yourself, John,” Manning said, while the girl flexed a bicep for him to squeeze. And “Wait,” said John, “where did you come from, anyway?” And, “Johnsonville,” she said. “I told you I came from Johnsonville.” There was a shot in her cleavage, and John was dipping down to pick it up with his mouth. The cool/warm skin of her breasts on his lips and gravity or sadness compelled him to stay. Still, he managed to lift his head, take the shot, and this he was proud of. So that, for awhile, mourning for Caroline seemed a simple thing. He would go out. He would drink. He would take a few more risks than usual. There would be a period of wildness. A period he had always wanted anyway. Needed probably. Because the two of them, Caroline and he, had edged into something treacherous, and for a long time, he couldn’t look at her when she took off her clothes.

John Dawke was in the bathroom now, thinking it all over. He found himself in the mirror over the sink. His round, bald head like a pumpkin gone soft, and when had he put on all that weight? *John Dawke, he tried, is the kind of man who is always falling short of his ideals. John Dawke is a smart man with some naïve blind spots. He is the kind of man who talks to himself in a bathroom mirror. Who can lose a wife of twenty years and spend the time afterward worrying about how he looks. John Dawke is a theoretical man.* He got lost in that term awhile before emerging into the now crowded bar ready to tell Manning about plans to renew a long-lapsed gym membership.

But Manning was gone. Some ragged boy in tight clothes sat in his stool. Girl gone, too. John thought they might be leaving together, was hit with equal parts rage and desperation, budged his way outside ready to yell the two of them down, ask if he could please come along, just for a little bit more.

Manning was arguing with a bouncer on an otherwise empty sidewalk. The bouncer himself was very calm. "Can't go hitting girls, man," is what he said.

"Cunt deserved it," yelled Manning, on tiptoes, close as he could get to that other man's face. "My mom died today."

"Did that girl kill her?"

"No."

"You guys gotta get out of here."

The two of them were back at John's house when the night coalesced into something like sense. He didn't know how they'd gotten here. Opened the front door to discover his Ford Focus straddling the curb, while Manning went on about how girly the house was. "Lace, flowers, lace, flowers. It looks like you live with your grandma."

"Caroline owned a nursery."

"Makes me feel like I'm nine."

"I always feel that way around women," said John.

"Jesus Christ, you should come to Asia. What happened to the girl?"

"What girl?"

"I don't know. Whatsername."

“College girl? You punched her.”

“Oh. I don’t remember that.” And if Manning was bothered by it, remorseful, John couldn’t tell. He didn’t seem to second-guess anything, but only to do and to do and to do. John went to the refrigerator and found a single beer, which had been there for months. The two men sat together on the landing toward the bottom of the stairs, looking out into the dining and living rooms. The flower patterned walls, the flower patterned tablecloth, the fresh gladiolas and mums that John himself had picked up that afternoon. And for a moment, it seemed that he was looking at the set for a TV show he had never seen, and trying to deduce what sort of show it might be, what sort of people lived here. All those flowers and knickknacks. The systematic blotting out of empty space.

“I tried to be a good husband,” said John. “I mean, I think I committed to it. Offered what I had. Kindness. Common courtesy.”

“Courtesy is always common.”

“I’ve never sat here before. Twenty years and I’ve never sat here.”

“I don’t like this house, man. I don’t like the feel of it. Infantilizing. That’s what it is, it’s infantilizing.”

“I think I should go to bed. You can stay if you want. We’ve got a guest room.”

“Yeah, okay.” But Manning didn’t move.

John got up, told him that he appreciated the drinks, the companionship, that he didn’t know what he would have done without it. He wanted to say more. Wanted to correct or qualify that earlier statement he’d made—his relief about Caroline’s death. Instead he said that the guest room was just there, around the corner. That he himself was

going upstairs. “I’ll just leave the lights on down here, in case you need anything. Or, y’know, so you can go to bed. When you’re ready. Good night.”

“Yeah, okay,” Manning repeated, again without moving.

Of course, the bedroom smelled like her. That honeyed, too sweet smell he hadn’t quite liked when they were first getting to know each other, but then grown, first to appreciate and then not to notice. He took in a long inhale from the pillow, told himself to enjoy the smell now, since it wouldn’t linger long. But the smell just took him places he didn’t want to go, a nervous, heart-fluttering shame.

He told himself to stay calm, that he was tired and would probably sleep a long time if he could just dodge all the treacherous thoughts long enough to get there. He tried to relax the tension in his back and eyes, get his heart-rate down, and must have succeeded, too, because it wasn’t long before he was calm enough to hear the breathing on the other side of the bedroom door.

Manning. It was Manning. John hadn’t heard him come up the stairs. At first, John just lay there, listening and trying not to make any noise himself, and then it occurred to him that such a response was completely idiotic. Passive. He had to do something. Think it through. Making noise is okay. He’ll expect you to make noise. So grab the what, the what? The hand weights. Up out of bed and he had them now. Five pounds each. Just weighing him down. Imagine how long just to throw a punch. It would come in slow motion. Underwater. And why had he let this man into his house? This weird, tough guy who was into hidden cameras and had hit a girl. Where had he hit her?

In the face? It couldn't have been in the face. Why hadn't he asked? How had it not occurred to him to ask?

One weight. Just one. Behind the back so he won't see if coming. Open the door casually. Feel vulnerable in my underwear. Get something on? A robe? He could come charging through at any time.

Now he opened the door.

"Oh. Hey," said Manning. Casual. It was casual. He stood in the doorway, hands at his sides as if waiting for a light to change—or waiting, John guessed, for the next id command to come through. "You didn't hear me come up, did you?" he said.

"No."

"Yeah, I can be good like that."

"Manning, what's up? What's going on?"

He turned his head, looked into the doorframe or into nothing at all. "I don't know. It's been a hard day. It's been a really hard day." The voice cracked. The tough man reached out. Grabbed hard. Manning was crying now. The tears crawled down the back of John's neck and down the bare skin under his robe. They were rocking now, back and forth, the way a mother rocks a baby, though it was hard to know who was which. Only that it felt very intimate. Felt the way John Dawke had once imagined marriage might feel. They stayed that way a long time. And no matter what came later, John Dawke would always keep this memory as among his best and most sacred.

When it was over, Manning put his face close to John's, maybe two inches between them. Manning's eyes were red, but the sadness was gone. It had just come out,

like the engine from a car. “John Dawke,” he said, “I want to offer you a job,” he said.

“In Jakarta. Doing surveillance. I work for The Agency.”

The Agency. John had never heard the term and didn't know what it meant.

### III. THEORETICAL MEN

In the giant, white marble lobby of the Grand Deslaw Hotel, John Dawke waited his turn, while lust and guilt and nerves jabbed him from the inside, and the crisp, impossible air-conditioning blew his sweat dry. The place was just so white. So clean. So unlike the city outside it. As if it were one of those oxygen chambers that Michael Jackson slept in to keep him young and pure, to stow his hidden life and purge his messy desires.

“Reservations?” asked the receptionist. She was one of five in a white, stewardess-type uniform that covered her up, but covered her tight. And she the smallest. A bare five feet, but all posture as if to insist on herself even against the fact of gravity.

“I hope so,” said John, trying for an easygoing composure he didn’t feel. Manning was supposed to have made the reservation, but he was supposed to have been at the airport, too.

She took his passport and typed in some information, squinting into the computer screen, wrinkling her face in such a way that it just set off how smooth it was to begin with. Her skin a light mahogany humming over the white of her uniform.

“Yes,” she said. “Room one thousand and one. This is a special room. You are a VIP.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I absolutely am,” relieved for the reservation and having decided that John Dawke the spy was someone more confident, more flirtatious than the person he used to be.

She asked him a series of questions from an on-screen form. And he went through the answers as Manning had advised. “Business,” he said. “Consulting,” since, as Manning told him, no one ever knew what that really meant.

“Married?” she asked.

“A widower.”

“Widow-er?” She sounded out the word. “I’m sorry. This is some kind of dangerous spider?”

“No. My wife. She died.”

“Oh.” The girl winced as if in physical pain.

“It’s okay,” he told her.

“Religion?” she asked.

“What?”

“You have a religion?”

“No. None. I’m sorry. Does it ask that on the form?”

She assured him it did. Told him about the free breakfast buffet and the pool on the 21<sup>st</sup> floor. A bellboy would carry his luggage.

He took his passport back, his room key, and turned to go, placing a briefcase over his erection. And then she said, “Excuse me, but if you have no religion, where does your wife go?”

“Um, nowhere.”

Her smooth face wrinkled again. Eyes went glassy.

“It’s okay,” he said again.

“No. Not okay. It’s very sad.”

“Thank you,” is what he said, though he didn’t know quite what he was thanking her for. Then he backed off into the elevator. Took his lust and new persona upstairs.

For a while, John had gotten lost in pornography. The curves and sneers of a slim-hipped woman falling back into bed, spreading her legs to the camera would pull his brain into clean blank for fifteen or twenty minutes at a time. And he wouldn’t have to think about Caroline or her flowers or the fact that over the past several years, he had often fantasized about this very thing.

The man at the trial had claimed that Caroline stepped out in front of his van on purpose. “We sort of, I don’t know, locked eyes,” he said. A handyman in a borrowed sports coat. “I got this sense that she felt sorry for me. And then she was smashing into my windshield.”

They gave John three weeks off of work. He spent most of it masturbating and telling himself he ought to go to the gym. After awhile, when his mind started to drift from the woman on the bed in lace, or the woman in the back of a pick up truck with the cheerleading outfit, or the woman handcuffed to a pipe in a bathroom, he bought a book about the hidden nightlife in Jakarta, describing secret orgies in the basements of clubs without any lights and a newly invented fetish that had to do with a woman being lowered onto the man from some kind of pulley system attached to the ceiling.

Then he read *The Year of Living Dangerously* and the scene with the mob of whores in the cemetery, who poured out from behind the tombstones to rub themselves

against the windowpanes of the car. John knew he was supposed to be disgusted, but the scene aroused him. The disgust he had was for himself, though often he felt a proud defiance, too, a sort of negative satisfaction, like being stuck in traffic with Caroline because they had left the house too late and it was her fault because she'd spend so long getting ready. He'd been warning her and now here it was. *See?* he told her in his mind. *See?*

And sometimes when he thought of those whores rubbing up against the car, it reminded him of Caroline locking eyes with the man who'd hit her. They didn't charge him with manslaughter. Didn't send him to jail or even fine him. Among the people who knew Caroline, the suicide charge was dismissed as trickery, legal strategy. And for several weeks after the trial, John had imagined going over to the man's house to talk to him. It was like him to imagine bold steps without taking them, he realized one night after a lot of masturbation. So he decided to try out not being like himself. And he went to the house after all.

"I'm not here to press charges," he said when the man came to the door. "I'm not here to make trouble." The man invited him into the small living room with a big TV they'd look at during the silences. "I understand the motive of self-preservation," said John, "but man, to man, what's the truth?" The man's wife brought in two cans of beer on a tray. A big, tired woman in a muumuu with glassy eyes like she'd been crying.

"I'd like to tell you differently," the man said. "I really would." He had a job installing 24-hour remodels on bathrooms. "They're shit, tell you the truth," he said. "Just a big layer of plastic on top of everything else. Leaks everywhere. Goddamn mess. But

someone else sells them. People want them. I need a job. What am I gonna do?" Still, he offered John one of the remodels for free in lieu of the version of events he needed to hear.

John declined. Thanked the man, went home. And called Craig Manning, who offered him six thousand dollars a month. Said they'd work it all out when he got there.

That was it. No paperwork. No background check, at least that John could see.

Even quitting his job was easy. His boss of ten years, the frazzled, red-eyed man so dedicated to the project that he slept only four hours a night and had no visible interest in other human beings just stuck a bony hand for a shake and said he understood. The house he didn't bother with. It was all paid off, and he didn't need the money. To sell it or rent it, he'd first have to go through Caroline's things first. He cleaned the refrigerator was all. He locked the door and left.

In the airport bathroom just before getting on the flight, John noticed a portly gray-haired Asian businessman pull off his own wedding ring, magician-quick, while washing his hands. John soon imitated him, but went into a stall to make the change. An hour later, the plane powered along the runway, and, John Dawke, who understood the physics behind it perfectly, marveled nonetheless at how a thing so heavy, could go so suddenly light.

The pressure at landing did something to John's eardrums, so that sounds came through muffled and sponged. Still, the sensation seemed just one more interesting quality of travel, and John went through immigration with something like amusement, facing a camera that looked like a space-age periscope. He wheeled his luggage through

customs out into a mass of husbands and wives and children and grandmothers and friends who hadn't seen each other in years all coming together in a thick humidity that seemed to slow it all down. And John stood alone. Manning wasn't there.

It wasn't until this point that John began to have his doubts, and the whole expedition seemed suspiciously too good, too easy to be true. Where was Manning? Why no background check? The questions came at him in Caroline's voice. But in a tone he wasn't quite sure she had in life. A disdainful tone that matched the look she had at death. *See?* she said to him. *See?*

He argued back that it didn't matter. His old life was used up in any case, and he had done the brave thing. He was starting another.

Now, jerking off on the plush bed of his black and white, hypermodern hotel room, he shut himself against that voice like closing the curtains against his view of a city made of traffic, where wreckage and new construction were almost indistinguishable. He thought of the front desk girl instead. Remembered how she had her hair in a bun like the others, but a couple locks had escaped down the back, running down her neck. He imagined getting to know her gradually, through morning after morning of questions on how he'd slept, through a mix-up or two about misplaced keys, until one night he'd ask for room service, a slice of cheesecake, and there she'd be. Didn't want him to wait, she'd say . . .

A few hours later, John woke up in darkness, got dressed. Slacks, a collared shirt. He thought he would ask the front desk girl if there were any messages on his way out, but he didn't see her.

The street called Jalan Hayam Wuruk was five lanes in each direction, with a wide canal of stew running down its middle and set off by concrete barriers. There was no real sidewalk, only a narrow, mucky undefined area between the street and buildings where there were parked cars and men sitting on plastic crates and old women selling soup from dented pots, and once in a while some kind of starving, knotted up tree. It was as though to live in this city meant living in cracks and scurrying in between traffic.

Still, Jakarta at night was a much different city. It had something to do with the lights. Neon lights shooting off the buildings, little bulbs lighting up the woks full of noodles and steam. It was so directed that you couldn't see the filth under you. Even the cars and motorcycles were reduced to circles of light, though no less dangerous.

John stood at a corner trying to cross the street for several minutes while motorcycles and taxis and orange, square golf cart-looking things growled and squeaked by as though the honked and buzzed by as though their horns were stuck. Finally, instead of crossing, he turned, moving away from the main street and down a lesser, darker one. Trying to keep alert for pickpockets, while also trying to make it seem as though he wasn't keeping alert for pickpockets

This street was a little less crammed with traffic and had more room for walking. Down a few blocks, it opened into a calmish glow, and a clutter of food tents, one after another, fish and chicken grilling on rusted, makeshift metal boxes and bowls of whole sardines and something in red sauce or green beans with orange flecks, and smell of curry and exhaust fumes while everyone called to him, "Mistah! Mistah!"

He'd read about this area, Kota, with its bars and brothels and spas, but he'd yet to see a single one. Most of the women wore headscarves, though some of them had on tight jeans, too. There was a group of three ahead of him, weaving through the tents and the cooking, the crumble and grime, until they disappeared into a taxi. He walked on for what felt like a long time, but might not have been. He crouched under the tent strings. Tried to ignore the beggars and the sweat that was making his shirt wet. He came to a place called Surprise Spa somewhere he was sure he'd read about, though he couldn't remember the details. The building a cheap approximation of ancient Greece, with decorative pillars around the door, and a neon blue sign in the triangular lettering you might see on a can of olives. Double glass doors, but no light behind them. He pulled. They were locked.

"Mistah?" he heard someone say, but quiet, more a question than demand. And he turned to see a woman with a model's high, dramatic cheekbones. "You need help?" she asked and held out her hand for him to kiss, as if they were at a garden party. "Susanne," she told him. She was really quite striking. Taller than John and all kind stretched out in a way that made him think of the way they made salt water taffy, the way it spun glistening on those reels.

Help. Yes. That was a good way to put what he needed. "Beautiful," he said, and tried the Indonesian word, too, one of the few he'd studied before coming here.

Then she made a deep curtsy, continuing the garden party illusion. There was humor in it, he thought, a reference to the garden party allusion, the divide between what

was and wasn't real, so that the two of them were on the inside of a joke. She seemed so composed, on this battered, filthy street.

He told her again how lovely she was, couldn't help it, and again she curtsyed, the two of them going through this several times, he saying beautiful in Indonesian, she making a curtsy, both of them laughing, until he said in Indonesian that other term he knew: "How much?"

What he didn't know was costs themselves, big numbers, and this they had to sort out with finger gestures. He didn't haggle with her though he knew he was supposed to. It just seemed ungentlemanly somehow. She proposed 500,000 rupiah, which he thought was about fifty dollars, and then he said yes. This done, she insisted they get a taxi. He couldn't figure out why since the hotel was not that far and the traffic so slow, but thought it must have to do with manners, with her expectations of how to be treated, and it warmed him that these expectations should be so easily met.

He didn't seem able to wave down a taxi, though, and she had to step ahead of him to do it. Still, he opened the car door for her when it was there. Her hand in his felt big. Far bigger than Caroline's.

The taxi driver was an older man who kept his eyes on them in the rearview mirror even as he accelerated into the gap. The man's eyes were amused, which was indicated by increased wideness of the lids toward the center and a slight closing at the outer edges, actually a result of a muscle group under the mouth. John knew that kind of amusement, or thought he did. It was the condescending amusement that made up a thin coating spread over jealousy, rage. On his own honeymoon twenty years ago in Palm

Springs, he remembered a couple of sixty-year-old men with twenty-year-old girlfriends, floated stomach down, ass up on those inflated rafts in the pool. Floated toward their old men who sat at the edge feet dangling in, ran a hand up the inside a thigh and then away, sunlight winking in the pool, while he himself rubbed lotion into the white, stocky body of a new wife. He'd brought it up at dinner. Dessert. Drinks on the terrace. Brought it up in what seemed to him a whispered amusement, until Caroline had asked him if they could please talk about something else.

The woman, this woman, he thought she might get perverse in the taxi, but didn't. Only leaned her head on his shoulder, as if they'd been together a long time and were coming home from a very amusing dinner party. He wanted to get another look at her face, the moon face, the model face, those high, impossible cheekbones, he wanted to confirm his luck, but the angles were all wrong and he would have to patient.

It wasn't until after he paid that the taxi driver spoke. "Married?" he asked, his face betraying none of the viciousness that was obviously intended. A face that seemed, from all that John knew about them, to indicate genuine kindness. But, of course, it couldn't be that.

"No," he said, took the girl's hand, and led her into to the lobby.

Behind his other thoughts, consistent but nearly unnoticed like the a car engine or the air conditioning, or the wind outside an airplane going west to get east, was the worry that the front desk girl would be there, would see him. She hadn't been there on the way out, so he was pretty sure he was safe, but then again she might have been on a break. But the real point, the real concern was that he needn't notice. Needn't care. That she was just

some cute receptionist, and part of the reason he'd come to Jakarta was to get out from under such obligations. He was staying at this hotel. He didn't know for how long. He would bring girls back, probably a lot of them, and so he would need to live with it.

Still, the lobby was quiet. Lighting dimmed down from white. And only a young, pockmarked man behind the front desk, and yes, he was relieved.

In the elevator, he turned her toward him, ran a thumb down the side of her cheek and along her neck and kept saying that word for beautiful. He tugged her along the hallway toward the end and his room, ignoring the size of her hand, telling himself to ignore it, that he'd always thought too much, gotten too hung up on thinking to live any moment as it was. In the hotel room, after he put on the Leonard Cohen song that shared her name (he'd been listening to a lot of Leonard Cohen lately), Susanne told him he was her first.

“First to pay?”

“First man.”

He didn't believe it. Couldn't believe it, but then she seemed so nervous, embarrassed, and far too turned on for any kind of professional. She caught her breath when he kissed her neck, when he pressed her against the wall. She kissed back hard, clamped her body onto his, then pulled away, said, “Light off?”

“No,” he said.

“Why?”

“Because I want to see.” It came out first as an expression of desire. But the exchange repeated, once, twice, yet again, as he maneuvered her toward the bed, scrambled on top. His desire draining first to irritation, then suspicion.

He’d read about men who dressed up as women, but had understood it was something that happened far more in Thailand, than here. He unbuttoned her top, though her bra was still on. Those were women’s hipbones, the powerful flair rounding back on itself. Her stomach smooth. But were those tiny black flecks on her chest stubble? He couldn’t confirm, brain blinking between cursing himself for being too suspicious and then for being too gullible, and in the meantime, his hard-on was dying.

More wrangling over the light and he got her bra off. Tissue paper fluttered out under it, and she had no real breasts, though the nipples were large like a woman’s.

“I small,” she said. “Light off.”

“Light off?” she asked again.

“No.”

“Why no? Why, why no?”

“Because,” he said, trying to think of a way to be both direct and polite, to speak in a version of English she might understand. “Because. Because I think maybe . . . you no woman. Maybe you man.”

“I girl,” she insisted, suddenly near tears. “I girl.”

“Okay,” said John. “Show.” He felt like a bastard. He was a bastard. Both righteous and wrong.

She had rolled away from him now, was standing by the bed, shirtless, in jeans. “I no ladyboy. Go to hospital. You understand?” He thought she must have been telling him she got a sex change, but then she said, “I no H.I.V.”

“I don’t care about that,” he told her, only realizing the way it sounded after it had already come out. “I mean,” he said, “very good. Good news.”

“I no ladyboy,” she repeated.

He turned his back, went for his wallet, counted out double what he owed. “It’s okay,” he said. “Ladyboy is okay. Just not for me.” Caveman. They were speaking caveman. He wanted a drink from the mini-bar, but couldn’t think how to do it without offering her . . . offering him one, too. John stood holding the money, while Suzanne got dressed.

“Let me walk you down,” he said, thinking that would be the polite thing to do, thinking he could get her out that way.

“Polite boy,” she said. And took the money.

She kept her face away from his gaze, in the elevator, in the hotel lobby. He thought she was crying, but outside, she asked if *he* was okay.

“Yes,” he assured her. “Yes, yes. Are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said. “Just I think you are not okay.”

Then gave him the long, concerned hug of an old friend, pulled up her purse over her shoulder and moved off.

On the way back, he saw the receptionist. The lovely little receptionist standing behind the desk, too far away and neutral-faced to read, but she gave him a little wave, and he gave one back.

He returned to the room, returned to the bed, smoothed out its white comforter. He looked at the time, looked at the phone. Midnight. No calls. He wondered if the girl at the front desk had seen him with the ladyboy. Decided she had. He wanted to go out again, find someone else, rework his night to more closely resemble what he'd imagined, but it was late. And Sunday.

He opened a 22-ounce bottle of Bintang and took it into the shower with him and tried to sort through what had happened. He wasn't angry, he decided. And not even disgusted, really. Disgust would come from defensiveness, worry over his sexual orientation, and that had never troubled him much. It was embarrassment. Disappointment. High expectations on a steep decline.

Now he remembered the one time Caroline had opened her eyes. It was early on, several days before the incident with the nurse. The eyebrows torn, but the lids had survived, little delicate folds like crepe paper. A panicked flutter, disorientation indicated by wandering iris, dilated pupil. The looping, twitchy, unpredictable movements of a mosquito bumping against a window and settling down a few degrees off from John. He scooted his chair, put himself in the way of her gaze and pulled up a smile, an encouraging smile, absent of tragedy and muddled feeling, the kind smile you give a camera. But the eyes shot uneasy again, lifting off and looping toward the man on the other side of the bed where they calmed and stayed.

*So let's say it was a ladyboy*, thought John in the shower. *What had she wanted? Hoped for?* He had previously assumed that a ladyboy catered to the sort of man who had that particular fetish, that the whole performance was a sort of open illusion like a stage play or a garden party curtsy on the side of the road. Okay, so he'd seen that play with the Japanese man dressed as a geisha and the American diplomat who'd bought it for years, even through a fake pregnancy. But even in the play, that phenomenon had been presented as an exception instead of the rule. The American diplomat had been presented as romantic and willfully naïve. And you sit in the audience thinking, wouldn't all be revealed once her clothes came off, even in the dark? Wouldn't it have to be? At least to any man who knew a thing? But maybe not. To be naked, it was supposed, was to be at ones truest self, ones most revealed. But John's experience had never reflected that.

Now he stepped out of the shower, observed himself in the bathroom mirror, yellowish skin and low-hanging gut. He had not always been this way. Had, in fact, been quite good looking, quite fit as a young man in college—a fact only revealed to him upon looking at old photographs. When he looked at his present self, then, he often saw the old version himself, and the current seemed more of the guise. Sometimes, in the vicious moments that had become more and more frequent over the course of his marriage, he had been convinced that the weight was gained in sympathy to the weight of his wife. That it had been some kind of sacrifice. An attempt to get closer. He was not attracted to his own wife. Never had been. And he hated himself for it. Now, it occurred to him as he examined his own sour skin in the mirror, that what someone like Suzanne really wanted

was to succeed in the illusion. If you can possibly convince your partner that you're someone else, then maybe it's actually true.

On a pad of hotel stationery, John made a list of his own attributes as he understood them: *Cerebral, Inactive, Predictable, Guilt-ridden, Nervous*. And next to that, he wrote in their opposites: *Emotional, Active, Unpredictable, Guilt-free, Calm*. Circled the words in the second list and crossed the first ones out.

#### IV. SCREW CAMERAS

“This could all come down,” Manning said. “Lobby. Maybe the whole building. Wouldn’t even take that much. Cheap bomb. Like Bali. Heavy, sure. You couldn’t get a car in. But a couple guys decide to bum rush that pillar . . .” He put down his fork to make the gesture of an explosion with his hands, spreading out in slow majesty.

The two men sat facing each other at one of the bistro tables that skirted the edge of the lobby. Manning had a great pile of food in front of him. Croissants and miniature doughnuts, bacon and eggs, Chinese noodles, barbeque chicken.

Music echoed through the lobby. Romantic ballads in English. *“I can’t live, if living is without you.”*

John had been sitting here, eating alone, trying to enjoy all the buffet bounty but unable to, because he was sure the staff was discussing him. Sure he’d noticed something malicious and ironic behind their cheerful greetings: “Good morning, sir, enjoy your night?” And what was the right answer to the question? No, and he risked coming off like some impossible-to-please American, “Yes,” and he was confirming their suspicions. He wanted to argue his case. *I’m afraid there’s been some kind of misunderstanding*, he’d say. *She . . . he had only been in my room for ten, fifteen minutes. Just long enough to find out . . .* He didn’t have anything against, he’d say. It was the misrepresentation that bothered him. Being perceived as something he was not.

He knew it would be stupid to try, and, anyway, far beneath the man he wanted to be. Then Manning had walked in. Gray suit, clicking heels, a hello for everyone. Sat right

down at John's table, not in the least surprised to see him right there. Right there. He must have known. *A spy's trick*, John thought.

Then Manning had talked his way into the buffet, insisting he'd done their security and they owed him. John could hear him from twenty yards off—a friendly tone, but something behind it. Of course, he'd gotten through. Piled his plate high and now all he ate was the melon. “Stuff’s shit for you, anyway,” he said. “Makes you fat. I can’t believe this place. I used to help them out, and then they decide they don’t need me anymore. You like your room? I’m sorry I couldn’t meet you at the airport, but something came up.”

“What?”

“What?”

“What came up?”

“Something important is what came up. See you just have to hit that column there, not the central column but the one just to the left of it, that’s really the architectural weak point. You hit that weak point, and it all comes down. I told Bodi all about the pillar. Told him seventeen thousand times and he gives me this nod, this fake professional nod that’s really just a way of dismissing me, says, ‘we take care of it.’ And how are they taking care of it? Anyway, I taught him that nod. That’s my nod.”

“Manning, I was just sitting at the airport. I didn’t know where to go. Barely remembered the name of the hotel. And the first four taxi drivers didn’t know what I was talking about.”

“Yeah and what?”

The two men looked at each other awhile, Manning with that completely neutral expression, the one that said, *you move first*. And John thought, *He's trying to prove his masculinity. Holds it against me that he cried, that I rocked him. Maybe left me at the airport to punish me*. So maybe he was waiting for John to plead, to show his own weakness. He wouldn't. He goddamn wouldn't.

"It's good for you, John," is what Manning finally said, his voice quiet, and maybe even kind. "Being off balance is part of the job." He reached, actually clasped John's hand from across the table. "You've come all the way out here. Not a lot of people would make such a trip. It's good to see you. And I love you. Now tell me about your night alone."

So John told him. Didn't see any reason not to. Or else he suspected that Manning already knew, and that if he had any opportunity for a defense of his behavior, this was it. And though there were many things he didn't know about Manning, including whether he was, in fact, the authentic man he claimed or a complete phony, John was pretty sure that his new boss was someone who enjoyed a story about sexual misadventures.

"What time?" is what Manning wanted to know.

John wasn't sure. Gave him his best approximation.

"And what time is it now?"

John told him.

"Okay, I want you to tell me when it's exactly 10:15."

Then he talked politics awhile, naming people John had never heard of, saying the governors from each province were coming in for some kind of business summit, while

John half-listened, his attention absorbed partially by his shame from the night before and partially at a group of young Americans a few tables away. High school or college aged, he didn't know. Missionaries maybe or some coed athletic team. "My waffle's too soggy," pouted a brunette with giant breasts growing alien out of her. "I'll take it," said a muscular boy with acne so severe it impacted the overall shape of his face. They kept standing up, sitting down at different tables, different seats. Jittery with sex, is what John thought, and maybe not even aware of it. Sex wound them up and set them off. Maybe they visited each other's rooms. Or maybe not. He himself could not think of a moment when he really interacted with a girl at this age, not even in such a limited way as offering to eat a soggy waffle. He might have thought to make the offer, and thought about it some more, and spent a good forty-five minutes thinking about it, another fifteen fantasizing about what she would look like with her clothes off, and then a solid hour of regretting not having asked her to round it all out.

"10:15," said Manning. He'd lit a cigarette, was waving it around. "Jesus 10:15. I asked you to tell me when it was 10:15. Okay, watch the front desk."

There wasn't much there. An Indonesian man in a suit somewhere between khaki and gold was talking to one of the girls in reception. His hair cut short. Medium build. Nothing remarkable from the back, nothing you could use to recognize him.

"Our guy in the field," said Manning.

The man had made some joke, made the girl laugh, and now he was moving off again, through the front door, but face turned away, and it was impossible to tell either whether he was thirty or sixty-five.

“You never talk to him,” said Manning. “You just sometimes need to know he’s around. Just look for the color of the suit. The Javanese are natural liars. And that guy’s the most natural of them all.”

Then it was their turn to leave. On the way out, Manning palmed a bill to the bellboy holding the door. They were in the back of Manning’s SUV looking out into the city from behind tinted glass. The shopping mall complexes and the old hunched woman carrying sacks of unknown fruit on their heads. And they were glugged in traffic. No movement for five, ten minutes, before they made a sudden swarm, like someone had hit a beehive with a broom.

“Let’s say you’re in New York,” Manning said, “and you need to buy a suit. You probably know the quality of the suit by the sign on the door. The buildings are all glass. You can see the suit. You go in and buy it. Everything is well lit. Transparent. But Jakarta, see, isn’t like that at all. In Jakarta, maybe you buy this brand name suit, this Armani suit, pay two thousand for it, and it looks good, you get compliments on it, but for ten years you don’t know the thing’s not what it was sold as. It was put together in Bandung. Or maybe you pay a hundred bucks for a suit and there’s no label, but it turns out it’s a very, very nice suit. And the story of that suit, how it got there, you don’t know.”

They’d been at a stoplight a long time now. Men walked between cars selling miniature versions of the statue of liberty holding a bundle of colorful balloons in some kind of joke or political commentary John didn’t understand. A six or seven-year-old girl with a ukulele approached the car to sing for money. Brave, small-boned, dirt-smearing, she sang into the dark of the tinted window and the unknown behind it. Yowled some

song, some up-tempo Indonesian song that, to John's ear, seemed to speak of braveness and optimism in the face of hopelessness.

"It's a series of caves," Manning said. "A whole cave system. You have to know where certain mushrooms grow and whether or not you can eat them." He rolled down the window and handed through a bill. She put it to her chest and vibrated up and down with excitement. "Pretty girl," Manning said. And they were moving again.

"What was she singing?"

"Her? Oh. God, I don't know. Let me tell you about Asian women. Indonesian women. You might think the Asian woman is compliant. They have that reputation. Come off sweet. But the Asian woman is hard. Ultimately, she's hard. The softness is just on the outside. It's her coating of skin, the thing that draws you in for a touch, but her bones, her soul, those are tough. With Colombian women, say, they're tough on the outside. She's a bitch straight off, throwing fits, telling you you don't know how to fix the tractor, screaming at you for glancing at the girl next door hanging laundry, but that's all defense. Exoskeleton. Inside, she's a softy. What kind of women do you like, John? You like heavy women?"

"Not specifically. Not really. I like small. Thin-framed." He described the receptionist. Suri.

Manning seemed not to be listening. Or, he seemed to be listening to something else. "But your wife," he said, "she was heavy."

"Yeah."

"So what, did she have inner beauty?"

“I’d appreciated it if you didn’t speak of my wife that way.”

“You got it, buddy,” said Manning. And then, “I haven’t been completely forthcoming with you, yet, John. But I plan to be.”

John tried to formulate an adequate response. He wondered what his new self would say. “Okay with me,” is what he came up with. “So you spent some time in Colombia?”

“Yeah,” said Manning. “I did that.” The rest of the drive went by in silence. As if John had said something wrong, or just so hugely boring that Manning could no longer force the interest. He was like that. Always changing in the middle.

The building on the corner jutted ten stories high. The winner of a scrappy, local competition with the seven and eight story buildings nearby. But the competition was long forgotten. Cracks ran through the stucco. A film of grit covered the windows. Inside, the only decorations were a couple of plastic shrubs. There was some kind of guard station or reception counter cut into the wall next to the elevators, but no one there, and nothing much but scattered sections of an old newspaper. “I put that there,” said Manning, turning his head and gesturing toward the newspaper with his eyebrows. “All part of the cover.” Then he slid a key card into the elevator panel with the smooth jab of a killer. A fluid motion, natural, but one that seemed practiced to get that way. John could imagine Manning working in front of a mirror, imagine Manning thinking of himself: *I slide my key card into the elevator panel with the smooth jab of a killer.*

The elevator was dingy, too, as was the hallway on the top floor with thick blue carpet and rows of evenly-spaced doors, identical aside from their numbers. As for the room itself, John found himself hoping that this dingy appearance was all part of the act, and that, once opened, the door would lead into something high-sheen and high-tech, touch-screens and digital imaging. What he got instead was a college dorm-sized room and a handsome Indonesian kid in a black Ramones t-shirt watching what seemed to be poorly produced pornography on eight different monitors.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” said Manning.

“Yeah,” said the kid. He smiled. Reached a long arm out for a shake, all in mild, slow motion. “Don-nee,” he said accenting the second syllable of the American name so that it almost didn’t sound American any more.

John introduced himself and asked the kid if he liked the Ramones.

“Huh?”

“The Ramones. You’re a fan?” John gestured to the shirt. The kid looked down, as if noticing it now for the first time. “Oh. Yeaahhhh,” he said. His good looks really had less to do with his firm, exaggerated facial features than it did with a complete lack of self-consciousness. That is, he was good looking largely because he seemed so unaware of his own good looks. He seemed to have acquired them with as little thought as he’d acquired the t-shirt.

“You’re supposed to be at the meeting,” said Manning.

“Meeting’s cancelled,” said Donny.

“Cancelled because you cancelled it?”

“Yeah,” said Donny. “No. Today, the meeting’s cancelled.” Then to John, about the man on screen, “Look at this guy. Look at this guy. American.” John had the sense the boy was making fun of Americans, saying the way he had sex was typical of an American, stupid in some way, but John couldn’t determine quite what.

“Get out of here,” said Manning. Harsh, but something else, too. Maybe it came less from the tone of voice than from the way Donny responded without hurry. The boy’s calm didn’t match Manning’s anger. There seemed the knowledge of unconditional love, so that for several months afterward, he would suspect that Donny was Manning’s son, though this, as far as John could tell, turned out not to be the case.

And yet, once the door was closed behind the boy, Manning seemed to forget him, to change tones and subjects as if there were no continuity between one moment into the next. “Thirty-two cameras. Eight screens. It’s a lot to cover. But we can’t worry about that. My main concern now is anonymity. So how do we ensure that we’re the only ones picking up our signal? And how do we keep this signal anonymous?”

“And all this goes back to The Agency?”

Manning put his eyes on John, held them there awhile. “The only people you talk to about any of this are Donny and me. You don’t talk to the man in the field. You don’t talk to your ladyboy girlfriend. You don’t take anything out of the office. Surveillance is illegal in the Republic of Indonesia.” Again, John had the sense that the man was just a little too self-conscious. That he sounded more like someone’s idea of how a spy might sound. But then, he supposed it was always like that. Spies in movies imitated spies in real life, who in turn, imitated them. Behavior became a loop and anything like identity

impossible to determine. Everyone had to be like that, in one way or another. Scientists. Husbands.

“Okay, but who’s watching all this stuff?” John tried again.

“I watch a little. You watch a little. Donny watches a little. Various bodies watch a little. Think about us as a cell. They have cells, so we have cells. This is a very, very, very secret cell. I want you to come here from ten to six, five days a week and work on the self-destruct. Sure, keep an eye on the screens. Sure, let me know if you see anything interesting, but your main job is the self-destruct.”

From under the desk, he pulled out a Nike shoebox in which were nestled several other much smaller boxes. In each of these, what looked a screw, painted white on its head, with a tiny pinhole camera and microphone along with a separate device of several wires and a small antennae. “The screw goes into a light switch panel or a power outlet. You tap into the electricity behind it. Well made. And encrypted, they say, but not encrypted enough.”

On each screen was an imagine of a different place. Most of them hotel rooms. The screens would shift every ten seconds or so, and a new series appeared. At the bottom left corner of each screen a combination of letters and numbers followed by the current date and current time down to the second. It was a little after 11:00, and not much was happening. Mostly vacant beds, made or unmade. In few of them, people slept.

“Can you do this thing, this self destruct?”

John had almost no knowledge of this kind of technology. Still, the project seemed fairly simple, given that there was plenty of room in the wall behind the cover

and plenty of electricity to work with. It was odd to him that Manning's operation should be so technically sophisticated as to have these devices and so simple as to not be able to adapt them to their needs. And he was having trouble establishing why he should be flown all this way, paid so much. "Should be no problem," he said.

"Okay, good. Good, good, good. Now let me take us out of live mode now and . . ." The screens went blue then back to the repeated image the boy had been watching. "American," said Manning. "Unusable. But wait . . ." Again, he was typing. Screens back to blue. Then in the corner: GRNDES 1001 10/5/2011 11:35. Then a large man in a suit struggling, wiggling, jerking on top of a half-naked woman. Making some sound, some Gggg sound, some high concentration of violence and will. "Light off," the man was saying. "No," the girl, and then John knew that the man in the video was himself, the girl not a girl at all.

Suzanne's arms and legs were wrapped around him. Her hands seemed big. "Hard to tell it's a guy," said Manning in such a way that John didn't know if he was being honest or making fun of him.

"What are you doing here, Manning? Is this blackmail?" His face was hot in embarrassment or anger.

"John. No, John, this is not blackmail. This is humor. This is to make a point about private life and public perception. Listen, I'll give you a copy right now. You can take it back to the hotel room. You can destroy it. Whatever you want to do, John. And then I'll delete it. I'll walk you through how to delete it. And you'll know because it's the same process you'll use to delete other stuff, too."

He fast-forwarded to the part in which John told Suzanne that ladyboys were not his thing.

“A nice guy. See, look at you being a nice guy. I’m sorry, John. I sometimes get carried away. I have a poor sense of boundaries. You can ask anyone, and they’ll tell you.”

“Okay,” said John. “Okay.” He wanted it off was all. Was embarrassed, not just for what the camera had caught, but because he thought he should take some kind of stand and couldn’t. He wanted this position, this life, this risk-taking friend too badly. It was like that impulse he’d had the night they met and he thought Manning had disappeared. That impulse to run outside, tag along with the couple. A few more hours. A few more minutes. He’d wait in the living room, watch a movie, while they went into the bedroom . . .

At any rate, Manning did exactly as he said he would, and no more was said about it. The two men spent an hour or two going over the controls. Manning explained that as an extra security measure, the codes for the different hotels were not written down, but would have to be memorized. He went through a few. He talked about how important it was that no one follow him here, and went through some security measures. Never take the same route. Mix it up. Taxi to a mall. A church. Then out the other side, cross the street, taxi to a food vendor, anything like that. At least two stops before coming here. Good way to get to know the city anyway. Use the ojek, the guys on motorcycle. They’re better in traffic and harder to follow. Every time you switch modes of transport, take a look to see if anyone else is doing it, too. Remember what they look like. Not just

the extraneous details, either. Not just the metal watch or the moustache. They change that stuff all the time. Check height and manner of walking. Skin tone. Things that are harder to change. Tight corners are good. You go around one then stop, lean against a wall to make a pretend phone call, buy a drink, something like that, and you look around. But never make it *look* like you're looking around.

Then a text caught Manning's attention. "Get to know the system, the cameras," he said. "I'll go ahead and trust you." And left.

Then it was John, alone. He played with the dials, crawled under the desk to trace where each cable in the room came from and went. He experimented with typing in different codes on the keyboard, locating three cameras in the Grand Deslaw hotel, and all in the very best of rooms. He tried out some of the codes Manning had given him and some others he put together on his own based on the few hotels he knew in the area and a lot of trial and error.

He also made a close examination of the cameras themselves. Most of the real hardware would be hidden in the wall, and thus there was a fair amount of it. The screw looked just as standardized, just as generic as any that would go into one of those covers, though it was a bit longer and had a jack at its end. At the head of the screw, in the slit for the screwdriver, was a tiny hole for the camera at one side and microphone for the other. The camera itself was angled in order, John supposed, to make up for the fact that electrical sockets were so often on the floor. By screwing it a little tighter or a little looser, the person installing could point at some particular point of interest—which, in this case seemed always to be the bed.

The work absorbed John, as the work on the robot eyes used to before all of this with Caroline. He forgot everything else, examined the camera without remembering that he had just been one of its targets. Or that he was himself at all. It was only his growling stomach that reminded him.

Just before getting up to leave, he put three of the little cameras in his briefcase, scared on the one hand and, on the other proud of his newly acquired unpredictability.

Then a long stop at the cleanest-looking, most well-lit restaurant he could find, and the most familiar-seeming dish (chicken soup), before a taxi to a movie theater and another back to the hotel. He went through the steps Manning had instructed him, feeling a little foolish all the time and as though it couldn't possibly be necessary.

Back at the hotel, he stared awhile into the electrical socket across from the bed, trying to uncover what had happened. It was tempting to see himself involved in some kind of set up—to see Manning as having paid off the ladyboy. Or maybe Manning had been waiting for him at the bar in Knoxville. Maybe the story about his mother dying was all made up. John could not make sense of why such grand planning could possibly surround him. He possessed no top-secret knowledge or extraordinary skill. There were far more relevant people working on robotics than he. And along with this feeling was another—that if, indeed, there was some grand conspiracy going on, a part of him was drawn to it. He liked the importance of it, the twists and turns, the finding out what happened next.

He thought at first that he would disable the screw camera. And then he thought he would request another room. But in the end he decided to do neither. To leave it.

## V. AT WORK ON THE SELF-DESTRUCT

The job as Manning had defined it was easy. All he really needed was to figure out how to trigger the short circuit if the camera were tampered with. And this he accomplished with a breaker attached to the screw. Once the screw was dislodged, the entire system would short out and melt the digital relay. Yes, anyone who took a close look would notice the jack in bottom of the screw and might then find the camera and microphone. So they might know someone was spying, but they wouldn't know who.

“Not good enough,” said Manning. “Not even close to good enough. I want it to melt the whole thing.”

He'd come to the door of his apartment with a spatula in one hand, his cell phone in the other, and his fly wide open. When John had pointed it out, he'd said, “Yeah, get that for me, would you? Hands full,” in what might have been a joke, a power play, a come on, or all three at once.

The apartment was a place of high ambition and little follow through. A place half started, with glass dividers between the rooms and furniture that looked like modern sculpture. But for all of that, it was filthy, too. Floors so sticky that each step was a peeling away. Dishes and pots on every surface of the kitchen, while Manning went to work on a mushroom omelet.

“I can't melt the whole thing,” said John. “To melt the metal of the screw would require more voltage than what's in the wall. I'd have to use some kind of explosive . . .”

Manning had on his passive, encouraging face, the one that said, *go on*.

“Just look at the practical side,” John said. “People start to wonder where the explosion came from. Or else you burn down the whole hotel.”

Manning cut the greasy omelet while it was still in the pan, slid a couple of plates caked with spaghetti sauce under the faucet to rinse. He brought them out them out to the living room, served them on the clear plastic coffee table with a 22 oz. bottle of Bintang for each of them. Then forget all about his omelet while he made a demonstration of what the living room could do.

It was all about lighting, he said. You could change the mood of the room. With a panel on the wall, he blackened the glass, some kind of smoke wafting into its surface, and now the living room felt close and distant, too, as though the two of them were floating in space. Then some other fussing and the glass walls went neon pink, yellow, green, so that it felt like they were in a club.

“How’d you get this place?” John asked.

“Someone gave it to me.”

“Really?”

“No. Not really. But I got it cheap. The last guy had to leave the country fast. Sorry it’s messy. Had a cleaning lady that cooked, too, but I couldn’t trust her. She was stealing from me and putting everything in the wrong drawer. Unless that was someone else. You careful coming here? Stop at at least two places?”

The omelet was good. Grease bumping up against the mushroom richness in all the right ways. But a few minutes later, he regretted it. His stomach had been bothering

him over the last few weeks. Tight, ropy, and he was trying to stay close to the bathrooms.

“If the screw itself were made of something else,” he tried. “A softer metal. You probably couldn’t tell, and it would melt a lot easier. But then you’ve got to get those made somewhere . . .”

“No,” said Manning. “In house solutions. If you get those made somewhere, you’ve got to order them, and then you’ve got to explain *why* you’re ordering them . . . Listen, you told me you could get this done . . .” He was pacing now, stopping to play with the color in the walls, omelet and beer still on the coffee table. And some part of John could not help but admire him.

Manning gave him a tour of the apartment. Posters of Magnum P.I. and the guys from Hawaii Five-O, women in g-strings bending over sports cars. Game room with the giant TV and several video game systems in a stack, cables crisscrossed and knotted up. Four bedrooms and all of the beds unmade.

John thought Manning might bring up the camera in his hotel room or the three that he had stolen and carried in his briefcase even now. As for the first, John had added a password, so that only he could access it. Sometimes, he would watch himself get dressed or have a drink, or lie in the bed watching sitcoms before falling off to sleep. He assumed Manning must have known about his leaving the camera in and he was curious about his new friend’s estimation of this action. Still, it seemed unprofessional, unspy-like to bring it up. And about those three stolen cameras he was even less sure.

“There’s a recording that might be coming through,” Manning said. “I might need you to fix it a little. Work on the sound, blot out any identifiers of what room its in. Can you do that?”

John said he’d be happy to.

Two days later, the issue with the screw camera was solved. He’d placed a small amount of aluminum down at the tip, where the breaker attached. The short was enough to melt the aluminum covering over that hole and thus dissuading further inspection. Yes, he imagined himself saying to his boss as he rode the train to their meeting place, yes they could still find the camera and microphone if they examined the screw carefully, but they would have less cause to.

“A sex race,” said Manning, under that Jakarta sky, bright but drained of all its blue. Saturday in an open field, people crowding in. Street people and men in business suits and kids in school clothes, and women in hijabs or not. They moved in slow progression.

“The pigeons are trying to get home to their pigeon wives over in the cages,” said Manning. “And they’re all coupled up. The trainers have kept them apart for a few days, so they’re horny. It’s a race home from work, say, to get some.” Men in jumpsuits coddled pigeons on one end of the airfield, each corresponding to another man in another matching jumpsuit way down the line. Crowds at either side as if to view a parade.

It took forever for anything to happen. The jumpsuit men talked, teased each other as though they were the athletes themselves.

John passed Manning the camera out in the open, from one briefcase to the other, casually, as instructed. “Now, I know it’s not quite what you asked for,” John said, “but what you asked for, I don’t think it was possible.” And he started to explain the solution, the aluminum, but Manning cut him off.

“Yeah. I don’t know. Did you do the recording?”

The recording was an Indonesian man having sex in one of the nicer hotels. A man in his fifties or sixties who said nothing to the young woman aside from a few commands. And when she had left, he prayed. Prayed, as it turned out, very close to the hidden camera, which seemed to have been in the direction of Mecca. It was only the skullcap that was visible. John’s work was to blur out any indicators that might make the hotel room identifiable. He ended up blurring most of the room and only keeping the image of the man and woman clear, so that all seemed to take place in some kind of fog or primordial soup.

“Yeah,” said John. “Who is he?”

“Nobody. Somebody. We’ll see.”

The trainers were talking to their pigeons, too. The male pigeons, down at the other end, were painted in bright colors, green and orange and red. “Paint’s so you can recognize them,” Manning said. “And whistles tied to their legs. Maybe for effect. They go fast.”

John bet on green and took a bet for Manning on yellow. Then it was countdown. The men were waving their hands. Pigeons off so fast he could hardly see them at first. Tiny things like seven baseballs coming off seven bats. And high, high whistling sounds

coming toward. Closer now, but fewer. John couldn't tell what had happened. He thought there were seven, but now could only count five. Green was ahead. Manning couldn't see any yellow.

Then it was green buzzing in through the finish. Over so fast. Green near crashing into his waiting female, some flutter that must have been sex.

“What happened to my bird?”

“Got distracted along the way,” said Manning. “Kids come with other female pigeons and stand along the line, so sometimes instead of buzzing home to the wife, the male pigeon decides to make a stop along the way. The kids grab them and hold them captive and sell them back to the owners.”

The place smelled of mixed things. One body on top of another. Shit and sambal. Birdstink and barbequed beef.

When John's mother was alive, she liked to tell the story of her only son at cotillion, where they taught him manners and how to fox trot and waltz. The mothers would watch from the sidelines. Boys in sports coats and ties. Girls in frilly dresses and gloves. Her son who couldn't keep his legs still either sitting or standing. Her son who would do just fine when the partners were random, but when it was his turn to pick, he just stood there. Didn't know what to do. It had been explained by Mr. Martini, who led the cotillion that anyone asked to dance had to say yes. But what neither Mr. Martini nor his mother seemed to understand was that there were *ways* of saying yes. And what she called standing there was actually evaluating his chances. How good looking of a girl

could he ask and get away with so that she didn't say yes in a way that didn't mean, *I'd rather not, but Mr. Martini says I have to*. "Take the initiative," his mother would say. "A girl likes a man who takes the initiative. Aren't there any you like? I don't understand what's wrong. Just go. Find what you can find and don't think so much."

It seemed to John that his mother liked to tell the story best after he had married Caroline. That she had intended a moral, though she never said so and John never asked.

This bar was nothing special. Smoke and darkness, concrete floors and chipped paint, pools of fluid in the bathroom floor that might have been beer, water, urine, a mix. And yet, it was full of women. Curvy ones in glittering gowns and quiet-looking ones in village dresses playing pool and young ones in skinny jeans and thin t-shirts.

Normal girls, said Manning. Not prostitutes. You had to stop thinking of them as prostitutes. That was a western notion, connected with guilt. These are just girls. Maybe they're curious about foreigners and they figure, hell, they can sleep with a foreign guy and get paid for it and that seems like a pretty good deal. Just think of them as normal girls. Except for they all say yes.

And John was remembering cotillion, ashamed of himself for so closely resembling that nervous boy. Then, as now, it was the fact of his desire itself that slowed him up. Confused him, so that he didn't know what to do with his legs.

"So I just pick one and . . ."

Manning laughed. But, John thought, not unkindly.

"Is it a celebration?" John asked.

"We don't know yet," said Manning.

“Are we meeting someone?”

“Why would you say that?”

“You just seem like you’re looking for someone.”

“No. I don’t,” said Manning, though he kept looking around the room.

Soon they were joined by two men. One large-chested and American in a Hawaiian shirt, shorts and sandals. The other was a blonde British guy who seemed young in every feature, from smooth hands to acned face except that his eyes were red, and heavily wrinkled. The American knew Manning. To John, he introduced himself as Steve. The British man took in both their names but offered none himself.

They had a round of beers and John asked what Steve did for work.

“What do I do?” he repeated. “Oh, I’m just a farmer.” And really, he did look like a farmer. His accent didn’t hurt. Texas, thought John, but he wasn’t sure.

He was talking politics with Manning, running through complicated names and more abbreviations than John could keep up with: KPK, KPI, LFSEU.

John tried to talk to the British guy. “Which one would you pick?” he wanted to know. Speaking of the girls.

The British man looked at him, did something with his mouth that was probably clearing food from his teeth with his tongue and said, “Did you notice that your friend, Craig Manning used to be holding the cigarette in his left hand and now it’s the right?”

“No.”

“Well, you should have.”

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“It means he’s nervous. Feels pressed. It means he’s trying to convey a certain version of himself.” The young man looked at him awhile, intently, before his eyes went up and to the right, so that John knew he was thinking, processing something, drawing his own conclusions. “These guys,” said the boy.

“These guys what?”

“These guys have no integrity. Where I come from, someone offers you a bribe, you report him. Here? Here, it’s like the fucking wild west.”

He sounded bitter but was taking pleasure in it, too. His wisdom. His world-weariness. The two others had begun to talk with their heads close and their voices down. At some point, though, Steve raised his voice just a bit to say, “Terror. Terror, terror, terror, terror.” Manning shook his head, put up a hand in front of his face, as if to hear the point and disagree.

A girl walked in with her friend. A small girl, short skirt, white tank top, thick plastic bracelets rattling loose on wrists, and her hair pulled back. She was smiling, coming right at him. Then she was hugging him. Young skin of her shoulder blades on his palms. It was Suri. From the hotel.

“You come here?” he asked.

“I come here tonight.”

“No, I mean. This is a place . . . You are . . . Why are you here?”

“You don’t want me here? Mr. Manning gave me the invitation.” She was flirtatious or hurt or both.

John wasn't sure what to do. He apologized and asked if he could buy some drinks, if she drank at all. Yes, she said, shots. Whiskey or anything shots.

He asked her to come with him and get them. She introduced her friend, who was kind-faced, dimpled, busty.

At the bar, they established that she had never been here before. That Manning had invited her, saying that he, John, wanted her to come. He did, he assured her. He absolutely did.

Some other American said to him, "If you can't be happy in Jakarta, you've got to be a fucking idiot."

Suri helped him bundle the shots and carry them back to the table. A quiet thrill climbed through him.

The men at the table were talking about the Bali Bombings. Nostalgically, it seemed to John. And Suri and her friend were talking to each other, too, leaning close—which left John to the British young man.

"When you hear 'hacker,' what do you think?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"Just what do you think of?"

"I guess I think of codes. I guess I think you break codes using computers."

"Computers." The young man blew out a long exhale to indicate that this was exactly what he had expected and it bored him. "Computers are only a small part of it. Whole game changed in 2003 when the new Windows firewall came out. Now it's more about people. I hack people."

“Wow,” said John.

“This guy,” he said of Steve. “I’m here to audit this guy.”

“Does he know it?”

“Oh, yeah. He knows it.”

“And what about my friend?”

“Craig Manning. He’s not my business. Least, not for now. I think he’s your business Did he tell you he’s with The Agency?”

John drank. Looked away.

“He’s not,” the young British man said.

John looked at him awhile, his smug goddamn face, and then he looked at Suri and discovered to his own surprise that he’d more or less known Manning wasn’t in the C.I.A. all along, and, even more surprisingly, that the man he was on his way to becoming didn’t much care.

“What kind of business is he in, then, do you think?” John asked.

“Pornography. Extortion. You tell me.”

John ordered another round instead.

Suri had taken his arm. John wanted this and did not. Wanted the action without the implications. Hated and loved Manning for having taken a step that he himself would not have.

Manning took on the other girl, Suri’s friend, was copping feels under the table, which disgusted John and pulled him in, too.

Karaoke on the stage. Some German singing a bad version of “The Times They Are A-changin’,” while free throwing ice cubes down some woman’s cleavage.

“Hey Joiner, you got the wrong guy with me,” Steve was saying to the young British man. “I’d talk to Manning here. Manning is the guy holding the bag. Manning’s holding so many bags he doesn’t know what’s in them.”

It was about then that John saw the back of the man in the field. He was over at the bar, talking to one of the many loud, kind, older women who wore too much eye make-up. The next time John looked, the man was gone.

The two other men left soon after. “Back to the witness stand,” said Steve, and the young man told John to be careful.

Manning called the car. Donny was driving. He held the door for them, standing stiff in mock formality and inside joke. “Where to, sir?”

The room was dim, a cozy place that betrayed no filth or sin. Instrumental version of “Wonderful Tonight” coming from who-knew-where. Couldn’t go back to the Grand Deslaw, they agreed. And so they’d come here. The car pulled directly into a garage, and there was a doorway through there.

“Easier for lovers,” said Suri. “Mostly they come in the afternoon. Lunch break or something”

The whole room had that kind of placelessness. It could have been Las Vegas or Cape Town or Singapore. It could have been some pod in space. Mirrors and curtains mostly. The curtains were thick, cover-everything. Stage curtains but dark green. Manning had taken them here and left with her friend. Left presumably to take her back

to his apartment, though his mood had dropped somewhat. He kept asking John if he liked what he had done, liked the favor, and John assure him he did. But then he would look bored, preoccupied, would look at Suri's friend as if she were a white screen, a brick wall.

But then he left, and here was John. He didn't know how this was supposed to go. He kept giggling. Watched the lines at the back of her knees and dreamed what her stomach might look like and tried not to think about paying her. It felt like adolescence. The dense expression of some new element to run your hand under. I want. I want.

His guts were hurting. But the room was small. The bathroom close. And he knew she'd hear. There was a bottle of whiskey on the side table. They hadn't even kissed yet. She didn't seem nervous at all. He wondered why. Wanted to ask her but kept himself from it. Poured them both a drink instead.

"I'm going to take my clothes off now," she said. And began to. Different, he thought, from an American girl, for whom undressing was always a performance. This was only undressing. And so much better. She pulled her white shirt off over her head to fresh skin. Trim stomach. No bra. The bun in her hair loosened but didn't come undone. Legs narrow, long diamond of air between her thighs, when an American girl would just have flesh. Extra. But Suri was a sleek thing, made to cut through water.

Only her bracelets were still on. They clinked plastic as she gestured at him, little circles in the air that said get on with it.

John stepped out of his own clothes. Wormy and white, certain he would shit himself. As if he were a hermit crab. Soft, ugly, and vulnerable outside his suit. And she

was the opposite. Cheap clothes, but good posture. Everything hinged on the flair of her hips. Nudity was her natural state just as clothed was his.

“Shower?” she asked.

“Why are you here?”

“You want me here.”

“Yes. But why are you here?”

“You *want* me here,” she said again. “Shower?”

It was glass, visible from the main room. She washed herself and washed him, too. Kept her hair dry. He was getting away with something, his old body against her young. Stealing fire from heaven. Stupid idea. Stupid old man. But hard.

“Wah!” she said, exclaimed. “So big.” She crooked her finger to demonstrate a tiny manhood then shot it straight to show the change.

Proud now, he picked her up and took her to the bed, the two of them still wet. He had wanted her to suck him off but was too shy to make it happen, and the moment, he thought, had turned romantic. Or else, he was pretty sure. Her eyes dilated, the lids wide but relaxed. “Condom,” he muttered and put one on.

She gasped when he entered her, and the tightness made him want to come and cry and ask forgiveness, too. And yet to watch her wince. To watch her top teeth bite into her plump bottom lip.

Long slow thrusts, taking her deep in the wince, and she was liking it now, he could tell. Her first-gear purr was looking for second. She flipping over, clawed the thing out of her hair, cocking her head back to give him a sneering dare as if looking down on

him from a height. And he thought, *this, this I'm good at this. I can do this*, while the two of them locked eyes, and he tried hard to concentrate on this lived moment that blurred into pornography, while memories of Caroline pulled him elsewhere.

Sometime in those last five years, she had suggested the blindfold, the handcuffs. At first, it was her being tied up, but eventually, it came to be him. She would make him wait. She would tell him how much he wanted her. Tell him he was hers, that she could do whatever she wanted him with him. She would use a different voice. Husky and reassured. It always made him feel lonely.

Focus, he told himself. And started to wonder about hidden cameras. Wishing the two of them were in his hotel room so that he could watch the recorded event. Suri now down on her knees him. Sucking him off. Jacking him onto her face, a thing he had never before experienced and only in memory now.

She showered again, and he watched. A private moment as though he wasn't there. She slung her underwear on. And came to sit next to him on the bed, looking down—kindly, he thought. And that was nice, too. Maybe even better than the sex itself. He reached out to cuddle with her and she said, “Okay,” before giving in.

Then he asked if he had hurt her, but she didn't seem to understand, so he asked if she was good instead, which she assured him, she was.

Which led him into wanting to know if the sex was good. Or maybe that was really what he'd wanted to know in the first place. Often, it was hard to tell pleasure from pain in a woman. The two seemed to maintain a complex relationship. And both, it

seemed to him, resulted in a similar kindness after the fact. Or maybe that was just what a man would tell himself.

She asked how long he was staying in Jakarta.

He told her maybe a year. Maybe forever. He didn't know if she was making small talk or if she was asking for herself.

She patted his chest hair. She pinched a bit of the skin on his chest between her two fingers. "Soft," she said. Teasing him, he thought.

And he wondered how long the cuddling would last. He'd wanted it, he decided, felt good, but only for a little while. He didn't want her to sleep here. Too intimate. Too hard to relax. And there was the diarrhea.

Her phone rang. She yelled into it. Standing in her underwear

He asked who it was, and she said she needed to go. Was in her clothes so fast. And told him she'd get a taxi.

He'd read all about this in one of the books. How a girl would call it taxi money. Even still, he wasn't sure. She was leaning up against the door, had her hand on his elbow. While he tried to determine whether it would be a greater insult to pay her or not. Finally, he emptied his wallet. About three hundred dollars. He passed it without looking into her face and told her he'd see her around.

Not until that point did the diarrhea really come. He ran into the bathroom and let it go with a terrible ripping relief, big body like a tuba. And John laughed at the unexpected adventure of the night, the joy of having done a thing and gotten away with it.

## VI. MEN IN THE FIELD

Thirty-two cameras, eight screens. The set would shift at ten second intervals. John was day shift, ten to six, which meant that not a lot happened. And anyway, Manning kept explaining how it wasn't his job to begin with. His job now was to modify the cameras and help the man in the field install them. The man in the field would check into a hotel room, take out the old camera, and put in a new one. Then John would activate it from back in the office. At some point, he got curious and searched the recordings for when the man came in. He always wore the same color suit, always brought a woman with him. At first, John thought it was a different woman, but after awhile he saw that it was actually the same woman dressed differently. Sometimes in a woman's short-skirted business suit, sometimes in a hijab, a few times in a full burkha. The man in the field would disable the first camera at night and install the new one in the morning. Through all of this, John never saw his face.

Donny came into the office a little after six, usually staying until about four a.m.—or that's what he said. When he first got there, he'd go over tapes from the night before, when too much happened for him to catch it all. Still, John was sure that things were getting through. Fifty percent coverage, he told Manning, seventy-five at the very most. And Manning said, don't worry. Not your job.

The inefficiency bothered John. And he spent several hours a day just spent watching. At first, he told himself he was just trying to take up the slack, but even then he knew his motives were otherwise. He went through phases. At first, it was just the sex.

The dark-eyed young girl crouching in front of the business man who kept his suit and tie on. But soon, it became the conversations around and during sex. For a while, it was the married couples. In bed together, watching TV. And later still, it would be the men who mostly just wanted to talk, hold hands and didn't mind paying for it. John felt as though he were conducting a research project, though he didn't know what he was looking for, had no hypothesis in mind.

In the meantime, he was going to the gym five days a week and practicing his Indonesian. And increasingly, before Donny arrived each day, he would watch the recordings of himself in the hotel room attempting to gauge how the transformation was coming along. A man in a room with nothing to compare to, no one to interact with—it was hard to tell. But John could compare the early recordings with the later ones and see the toning of the man's physique, the way the shaven head seemed at first incongruous, part of a comedy routine, and later, it worked. Sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups before a shower, then in bed he practiced Indonesian out loud:

*Go in peace.*

*Stay in peace.*

*I missed you very much.*

*Where is the bathroom?*

*Where is the pharmacy?*

*I am looking for John.*

Increasingly, he stayed until Donny arrived and lingered several hours after. The kid would translate moments from the night before. He spoke in a mishmash of slang

from different eras and genres. And he had a slow California accent that John eventually came to suspect tricked the listener into assuming that Donny's comprehension was better than it was. He would translate near-simultaneously, though it seemed to John he might be making some of it up.

"Fifty thou'. What can I get for fifty thou'?"

"A fuck?"

"But I need love."

"Oh yeah? Baby, love is more."

Or

"I can't go home. My wife is making the shitty soup. I think she puts shit in the soup. She's trying to poison my liver. I tell her I don't want that crap-ass soup, and she says it's her mother's recipe."

Or

"Now I can cuddle."

"But now I don't want to."

"Come on, darling, let's cuddle . . ."

"You talk about cuddling like a debt you owe me. Like that credit card I told you not to get because they're cursed by God."

Or

"We need to get the fuck out of here. To Sulawesi. With my parents, god willing."

"They know you have a wife."

"They never met my wife. I'll tell them its you."

“But Ita will come after you? Call you?”

“I’ll make sure she doesn’t.”

“How will you make sure? Tell me, please. It’s best I know.”

Often the men would complain about their family lives. Often, they would make proclamations of love, promises about marriage, trips around the world—as if this were part of the fantasy they paid for. That somehow it felt good for them to say it, “I love you,” and then be excused. Pay. Close to the door. Walk out into the street alone.

Most of the cameras were in hotel rooms, but there were a few in brothels, too. One that was popular with foreigners had theme rooms: classroom, subway, Christmas. Manning had cameras in subway and in one called brain scan, too. It was a hospital room with a fake plastic machine that supposedly checked for brain tumors. The woman, the prostitute was dressed as a nurse—short-skirted, high stockinged. The foreplay usually involved a man learning he was dying. She would put him in the brain scan tube, tell him yes he was. Giant tumor. Enormous tumor. She was surprised he was still alive and gave him only a few days. A few hours. The man would play at worry. How would he spend his last few hours? Surely a man in his situation was entitled to some amount of pleasure. A man who’d been good all his life. Devoted to his family. Generous in his giving of zakat. Surely she could understand that?

John watched this one often, until he made the connection to the hospital room Caroline had died in. Then he tried not to watch it anymore.

Donny had a file he called “Best of.” He was always at work on it, editing out, adding in. It featured more talking than sex. And often, Donny would play it through

when John was there, translating all as if it were some religious chant, some kind of Nicene Creed.

This was how John came to know Donny, not so much through conversation as through reporting the loses and yearnings and bland desires of other people. Their own conversation was something else, usually heavy on pop culture or how much something cost. The kid would ask if he knew The Clash or Celine Dion, John would make some qualified answer, and the kid would sing a few lines from “I Will Always Love You” or “Guns of Brixton.” Or else Donny would become very serious. The near-constant smirk would leave him and he would say, “John, I need to ask you something. That shirt, how much did it cost?”

John’s clothes were invariably cheap—or at least cheap by American standards. “Not much,” Donny would say. And though there was disapproval or disappointment on Donny’s face, he didn’t say anything about it. He only seemed to be accumulating data. Or maybe it was that though he liked very much to mock Americans, he was too faithful to mock someone he considered a friend.

But most of the time, they didn’t talk. Donny just translated. And this, John liked best. It was like making coffee in the morning while Caroline was still asleep. Before she would come into the kitchen and bring with her a different kind silence. But in those moments, making coffee, listening to the news on the radio, he felt protective, secure, accompanied and alone.

He found himself lingering longer and longer at the office before stepping out into the night. Particularly as time went on and he didn't see Suri. She wasn't at the front desk of the hotel anymore. He didn't want to ask.

A week after he and Manning had gone out together, Donny played John a newscast about an assistant to the governor of Aceh being caught on camera with a prostitute during the summit. Aceh, Manning was told, was a stronghold of Islamic Fundamentalism. The governor condemned his assistant and denied any knowledge of the affair. Unknown hotel room. Unknown source. They didn't show the tape, but a photo of the man instead, and John recognized it.

On Thursday, his day off, John sat alone having dinner in a large, clean restaurant with menus that had pictures. Back to the wall, as Manning had taught him. John liked to be alone, but was uneasy with it, too. Especially in a country that didn't much believe in it, saw it as indication of sickness. Mental or otherwise.

And so he sat, smiling to himself the way a man alone must. A prop, thought the smiling man, a little something to do. To keep himself smiling, he thought of the three cameras there in his briefcase, little doors to potential action. And he imagined Suri on top of him. The smallness of her. The little teeth like a cat's. He sat awhile in the warm glow of his dirty thoughts. He passed over some stray thought about Caroline and then considered going to a brothel. He'd tried to get Manning to come with him, but Manning had been in a sour mood.

He was disappointed with the whole operation. Kept calling the man a mid-level nothing and saying maybe sex was the wrong angle altogether. That what they needed,

what they really needed to get these people out of office was terror. John couldn't get him off the topic.

So not tonight, thought John, since Manning was unavailable, and he was nervous to go alone.

They brought his soup and the bowl was small. Noodle soup, but there weren't very many noodles. Maybe twenty in all and a single piece of chicken on the bone. Not even an identifiable piece. Not a leg or thigh. Not a piece of chicken but a piece of a chicken. He wanted to tell that to someone. Thought of Suri. Wondered how long it would take to explain it to her or if the thing were even possible. Remembered that he didn't know where she was. "You're weird," Caroline used to say. But he could hear love in it. Then, at some point, he didn't anymore.

John tried to locate the moment it happened and thought it must have been about twelve years ago. Soon after they found out he was infertile.

"Just the two of us, then," he said, all cheer, and maybe a little relieved.

"You're weird," she told him. Same statement, different temperature. Think of a potato steaming with butter. Then think of that same potato gone cold. Think of a piece of a chicken. Gradually, after that point, he started to keep his little chicken thoughts to himself.

A beggar boy with a white t-shirt splattered in mud or chocolate milk stood at the table with his hand out. With his eyes out. Staring John in the face and not blinking. Accusing and wholly innocent. It was a look they had never been able to reproduce in the lab, never quite been able to break down into its component parts. He thought about Suri.

Where she might be. He thought of the kid, Donny. Wondered if he was one of these boys once and almost knew he was. One of these boys that Manning met at a restaurant saw him day after day. One of these kids who followed Manning around. Must have been.

John had heard a radio story about a man in jail who'd adopted another man as his son. The man, the father, was in his fifties and white. The son was black and nineteen. Called each other father and son. Tried to help each other get by, repent. Both of them rapists. Recovering rapists.

This boys' expression was so shameless. John put some coins into his hand, but the boy kept looking. John thought maybe he hadn't given enough, so tried some more and still the boy was looking. He gave the boy a bill this time, and decided that nervousness wouldn't bother him. Tonight, he'd go to the brothel after all.

It was the place Manning talked about. The place that shouldn't exist but did. On the seventh floor of a hotel, the elevator opened onto an indoor, modernized Eden. No dirt. Trees that grew up to the high glass ceiling, and three round bubbling pools, each glowing red, yellow, blue in turn from lights under the water. Women in bikinis leading men into the pools and surrounding cabanas. Then the lounge. A long rectangular room, soft-lit in red, with a single bar running down the middle and various booths next to that. All along the edges of the rooms were girls grouped by region. Directly in front of John were the Indonesians, thirty girls in identical black dresses, long and high-cut. A little

down from them, the Chinese. To John's back, the Japanese, just six of them, all wearing Kimonos, hair done up in chopsticks. Some Russians, Colombians after that.

There was a soccer game on mute and he pretended to watch, though in truth he didn't much like or understand it. Still, it was always nice to be around beauty. He thought he should go with an Indonesian girl, and chose a dark, short one who seemed nervous.

It was disappointing. She was pudgy when she got the clothes off, belly sagging around a cesarean scar. A TV was on in the room showing some kind of goofy game show. He'd made to turn it off, but she slapped down his hand. And so they'd watched TV during sex. Both of them had. Afterward, while she was showering, John had the sense that if she were prettier, he wouldn't feel quite so lonely.

"What are you doing now?" she asked.

He didn't know if she was asking him because she wanted him to take her somewhere or out of genuine concern. "I'll probably go to a restaurant. Have dinner."

"Oh," she said. And maybe she was waiting for him to invite her along or maybe she was just feeling sorry for him, coming there alone.

He wandered out into the night and got into a cab. And he was looking back not out of suspicion, but out of habit and avoidance of other thoughts. Some obscure guilt or loneliness or both. There was a black chrome jeep. New. Dealer's plates. This knowledge slid into other thoughts like a business card used as a bookmark. But two lights later, it was still behind them. Give it another light, he told himself. And don't turn around. Use the mirrors.

Again, it was there.

John pretended to see a text on his phone and then asked the cab driver if he could make the next right. The jeep came with him. They were now at one of the major intersections in midtown, a long light favored by the guys who sold trinkets. This afternoon, it was ape masks. They were wearing the masks too, as they wove between cars.

One of the ape-men was talking now to the person in the car behind him, handing through a mask. Now the ape-man who'd just sold mask was walking forward. Coming at John. He knocked on the window with two knuckles, almost daintily.

"Back there," he said in slow, careful English, "That man. He says you are in big trouble. He says it is . . . his job to hurt you."

"What does he want me to do?"

"He wants that you should pull over."

"Okay. Thank you." John rolled up his window. Even now, he was less afraid than excited. Instead of thinking he would get caught, beaten up, killed, he looked forward to the moment he could tell the story to Manning. It was the same sort of imaginative loop that he'd often begun to experience during sex with the prostitutes. He'd be feeling it, loving it, and then want to think about other women, other prostitutes. Or else imagine watching this same act on one of the screens. It was like going out to dinner and taking photos, then looking at the photos immediately on the camera, as if the nostalgia were so close to the act itself, it might lap it. All of this, even as he was being chased.

He handed the taxi driver 500,000 rupiah said he needed to get away from the car behind them.

“American?” asked the driver.

“Yes.”

“I love your country. I love your president.”

He seemed so calm that John wasn't sure he'd been understood, though the driver had taken the bill. Maybe asking a taxi driver to lose the car behind him was a particularly American thing to do. Maybe Americans were doing it all the time.

The light was about to turn green. The digital countdown to ten, nine, eight . . .

Green and the taxi driver nudged up, signaled a left, but changed lines into the right. Ten seconds later at the next light, the jeep was still behind them.

“I am a good driver,” the taxi man said. “He is a good driver, too.”

It was a slow chase. Most of it stillness. Sudden breaks, swerves, near collisions, then stillness.

“And what are you doing that you have such a man after you?” asked the taxi driver.

“I don't know.”

The taxi man laughed, waved a hand through the air. “Everybody does something, but no one knows what they're doing.”

John gave the man another 500,000.

Then a long wait. Too many cars in front of them to see the actual light, to know when it would change.

The taxi driver hadn't said anything in a minute or two. He was sleeping.

"Um," said John. "Wake up." The man didn't wake up. The light must have changed. The other cars were moving now. All except John's taxi and the car behind it. John shook the man by the shoulder. The man would not wake up.

John saw the door of the jeep open. Saw a man step out, wearing an ape mask.

John opened his own door and ran, dodging a burst of motorcycles. Thigh slammed against the back of a moving car. Crowd of people buying something. Pushing through bodies. Grit and sweat and grind of cheap cotton shirts. Excitement all through. Excitement he used to make sad attempts to try to get with expensive dinners and a wife with an unconvincing smile. Narrow alley. One side houses, the other a gutter and wall. But he'd been working out on the elliptical walker, so his lungs felt strong, legs felt strong. He would have laughed with joy if he could only have caught his breath. Even now. Knowing the man was behind him, though he hadn't looked back. Kids running, too. Running with him: "Mister! Mister!"

This exhaustion reminding him of another. Sixteen, hiking up a hill to catch the sunrise with a girl who always kept her feet bare. He asked if she would kiss him at sunrise, and she had agreed. More out of kindness, he soon found out, than attraction. And though her motive bothered him when he was young, by the time he got married, the memory was a good one.

The alley just kept going. No break in the wall. No chance to turn right or left. Roosters in a wooden cage crowing at night. Old woman leaning on a motorcycle. Kids

behind him now. Couldn't keep up, he thought. Ahead, there was streetlight. Alley opened up. A break in a cave system.

Remember what Manning said. Turn. Stop. Up against the wall to see who's following.

Later, it would be hard to remember. The turn just a little broader than it could have been. The stop harder to execute. Still, he'd looked back. Or thought he did. Because melding with the car ramming into him, there was the sensation of relief. So that what he felt was something other than pain. The shock of jumping into a lake. A woman, a wife, stands on a curb. She is stable, but prone to erratic decisions. She has been unhappy a long time and unable to admit it. Has indulged in a brief affair. She sees a man in a work truck. Catches his eye. A thing like flirting. Up on a mountain, the sun finally rises. The girl's mouth is cold.

## VII. THE GAME OF SORRY

A man wearing a kufi was looking into John's face as if it would tell him everything he needed to know. John made a quick review of his secrets. Hidden cameras in his briefcase, new career as a spy, but others, too, and he worried this man would find them all. Even the ones he kept from himself. The little, big ones hiding out in the wrinkles of his own skin.

This kufi man had him by the armpits. The other, holding his feet, was a policeman. He was saying in Indonesian, "This is my second American to carry. That other one also was fat." And it was amazing to John that he could understand the Indonesian so well. Maybe the accident had done something to his brain. "They get fat and then we have to carry them," the policeman said. John didn't mind the insult about his weight. Really he found it funny. Poignant. He would have liked to tell the man so, and he would have liked to say that as far as the weight went, he was working on it.

Instead, he said, "My briefcase. My wallet."

"Always the wallet," the policeman said. "That's what the other American wanted, too. The wallet is the motor of their hearts."

He was inside now, lying down somewhere hard. A light glowed above him. Hospital, he thought. Brain scan. "I'm looking for John," he said in Indonesian.

He was cradling his briefcase. His shoes were off. He had an erection. The other men commented on it favorably.

The man in the kufi was talking to him, a whole bunch of words that might have been English or Indonesian, starting with “street” ending in “God” and in the middle maybe something about noodles.

John tried English. “Where am I?” he asked.

“Rec room,” answered the man wearing the kufi in English.

John heard “wreck room” which slipped away from sense.

Then “Would you like some tea?” the kufi man asked. His face was soft around the mouth. A mushy sort of smile. He brought the tea in with a straw, so that John only had to turn his head to sip. He felt enormous gratitude. He wanted to say something to express this feeling, but only came up with “thank you” in both languages.

The religious man, he was soft. Soft in his hands and his neck. Something spongy about him as though he were not made of bone.

“Holland?” he asked.

“America.”

He said something in Indonesian to the policeman and the policeman nodded too, gravely.

“What are you doing here in Jakarta?”

It was the same question people asked him all over the city. But now John was making connections. Now he was on the alert. “I’m here for work,” he said.

“And what do you do for work?”

“I’m a consultant.”

“What do you consult? I’m sorry to be so curious, sir, but you’re my first American. Are you hurt? I should have asked that first. I’m sorry. Are you hurt?”

“My head is mixed up. I don’t believe it’s permanent.”

And now the policeman spoke. “Tea?” he asked. “Tea,” he said. And poured the John some more.

“We are very happy to have you here among us,” said the religious man. “I need you to do the honor of staying. A little while. Are you uncomfortable on top of that table? Excuse my friend, he speaks very little English. I learned in school, but my friend learned other things. I’m not sure what. Let me ask.”

He asked. The man said something back that sounded serious, almost aggressive. The religious man laughed. “I will tell you something. This man is not really my friend. He is the new policeman in the area, and so I am obliged to do what he asks of me, though secretly I find him somewhat heinous. But I am a Muslim. A holy man. And all are welcome to holy men. Even the heinous. Tell me please. What happens in your country when a person dies and he has no family? Who pays for the funeral?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s very common, though, yes? People with no family.”

“Yes,” said John.

He was sure of it now. These men had something to do with the one who’d followed him. They were interrogating him without quite letting on. And the man with the ape mask must be waiting outside, pacing in heavy-soled boots.

“Is it okay that I ask you about your system of beliefs?”

“Sure.”

“You are a Christian man?”

“No.”

“Jewish?”

“No.”

“It is okay if you are Jewish. I don’t mind this at all. The aggression there is largely the result of very poor publicity and rampant misinformation.”

“I’m not Jewish. I’m not anything.”

“Maybe you believe in romance, then. Or ice cream. I have heard of Americans who worship ice cream. Do you like Indonesian food?”

“Yes.”

“It makes me glad to hear that. I need your opinion on an important subject. I think you are a good man.” He laughed. Something triumphant. “Ha-HA! I think so,” he said. “My friend here, he did not agree with me. He said you were nothing but trouble. I said not so. I said to him, young sir, you cannot go around judging people who are unable to speak for themselves. This is what leads to crisis. You are a good man, yes?”

“I try to be.”

“See, that is what a good man says. A bad man says, yes, of course I am good.”

It was around this time that John fell asleep. And somewhere in sleep it occurred to him that he couldn’t possibly have understood the policeman’s Indonesian so well. Then he thought of kids running. How they run to get to the next thing, but once you get old, you don’t run anymore. Because maybe the next thing doesn’t seem as worth getting

to. You put off coming home. Linger alone in bars. Sit in your parked car pretending to listen to a story on the radio about dying pelicans because you see the light in the dining room, and you know she's in there. Making dinner. Doing her best to be a good wife. Which has, for some reason you don't understand, become the most terrifying, treacherous thing she could do.

When he woke up again, it was morning, and he alone in the room. He seemed to be lying on a game table. A deck of cards. Green, yellow, blue pawns close to his nose. A terrible soreness ran through him, as though his body wasn't big enough to hold all the pain. Still he did it. Rolled off the table. Crouched on the floor, dialed in the combination and opened his briefcase. Camera in hand, screwdriver in teeth. Five minutes, Manning would say. Don't allow yourself any more. Plug in the breaker, pocket the old screw, don't leave them anything to work with. Adjust the camera. A door opened. Someone was coming. *Adjust the camera!* The suitcase was still open. He hadn't adjusted the camera. John grabbed another camera, stuffed it into his suit pocket along with the tiny screwdriver.

"I was looking for the bathroom," John said to the man in kufi.

"You are feeling okay?"

"Yes, thank you, I only need to use the bathroom."

The man pointed to a door. "You are going to bring your briefcase in there?" He seemed so innocent, so helpful. Even in his eyes.

John put the briefcase down, leaned it against one of the folding chairs surrounding the table. Tried to memorize the angle. Went into the bathroom. Here there

was an outlet right under the mirror. He went right to work, reasoning that if the man wanted to look into his briefcase, he'd have to pick the lock. That if he'd wanted to just take the thing and force it open, John wouldn't have much of a choice. He told himself not to worry and he worried all the same. But soon the camera was in. He flushed the toilet. Washed his hands, his face. *John Dawke*, he thought, *is the kind of man who takes action despite the risks*. It didn't sound the least convincing. Not even after what he'd just done. Not even in his head.

The man with the kufi was standing two feet from the doorway smiling at him in a way that seemed genuine. He introduced himself as Mr. Bahar and invited John to sit. John took the chair against which his briefcase had been leaning. The angle looked the same. The game on the table was Sorry. Bahar left the room and came back holding white porridge with soy sauce, peanuts, shredded chicken and green onion on top. He gave John more tea and sat smiling at him while he ate and drank. Just smiling and saying, "Eat. Yes, eat," so that John soon began to question his interpretation of events from the night before.

"My friend the policeman," Bahar said when John had finished. "He has stopped by to inquire after your health. But I think in reality, he just wants a game. Can you sit up? Maybe you would like to join us? I would like it extraordinarily if you would."

And there was the policeman standing at the door of the shabby yellow room. A dark man with skin like beef jerky and a purposefulness of gaze that had last night seemed intimidating and now seemed only a compensation for shyness. He edged into the room, doffed his policeman's hat and sat down in a folding chair.

Bahar set up the game of Sorry.

The policeman was the shrewdest of players, though often vindictive, choosing to land on one of the other players and send him back to the beginning when, at times, it was of greater advantage to move one of his own pawns up. Before moving, he would revel a moment in the dramatic pause, like an umpire taking just a small moment to let the tension build before he called a strike. Then, in two singsong syllables: “Sor-ree!”

Bahar seemed most intent on keeping all four of his pawns together, making sure they progressed in a group toward the collective goal, which was really a poor strategy. Still, he was upbeat about it, seeming maybe not to have fully understood the object of game, or else, to have decided on an object of his own. When either John or the policeman hit one of his pawns, Bahar was always surprised. And his own sorry, when at occasional moments, he had to hit one of the other players, was companionable, sincere. He was really the only one who talked during the game, posing a series of philosophical inquiries about its nature. After a “sorry” once, he wondered aloud at its being inevitable. “Interesting that it should be so,” he said. “I want to avoid such a thing as to punish you and yet I must. I say sorry and try to mean it. I try to convey to you when I say sorry, that I mean it.” And a little later, he asked John whether it was his considered opinion that the pawns were statues.

John said he didn’t think so.

“Yes,” said Bahar, “but is size what makes a statue as such?”

“Well, I guess small statues are called figurines.”

“Yes,” he said. “And figurines are still statues?”

“I guess so.”

“American women often collect figurines, is that right?”

“Yes.”

“Of cats? And angels—is this correct?”

“Yes.”

“I wonder why? Do you think they are trying to recreate the world and make it go their way? I have also heard that something called a body pillow is very popular. It is meant to fill the role of a man. But it can’t do that completely, can it?” He arched his eyebrows, even leaned over and tagged John’s stomach with his hand, indicating, John was sure, that a dirty joke.

John smiled. He decided he liked the man and wanted to make him happy.

“In my religion,” continued Bahar, “we have no statues. Because they are seen as a distraction. They are attempts to pretend at being God.” He picked up one his pawns, at which point the policeman put a finger down to mark where the pawn had been.

“It doesn’t look like anything,” said John, trying to be helpful. “I mean, it doesn’t imitate anything in nature.”

“Go,” the policeman interrupted. The first word he’d said in English.

Bahar ignored him. “It is abstract,” he said. “It represents a man going home.”

“Go,” said the policeman.

John’s own playing style was practical. He played to win, but also to land his pawn on another, just to say it: sorry. It came out with the satisfaction of popping open a bottle. “Sorry!” he’d sing out. “Sorry, Sorry, Sorry.” Thinking of Carolyn, thinking of

Suri. "Sorry. Sorry." Thinking of his own mother and how he hadn't visited her often enough before she died. Thinking of these kind, trusting men who had saved his life and given him tea, while he installed hidden cameras in the rec room of their mosque.

They played three games of Sorry and had five rounds of tea. The policeman won every game, and that was fine with John, mostly because the policeman seemed to take such joy in the victory. A little smirk would inch into his mouth, though you could see him trying to keep it down. And then he would pour them all tea.

The tea might as well have been beer. The way another round in a group of men often has less to do with getting drunk than with the general camaraderie, a deepening of commitment, a group agreement that, yes, this was how they wanted to be spending their time. John had the feeling of being a boy again, tossing pennies against a wall. He liked the physical comfort of these men. Bahar put his hand out and rubbed John on the back.

Touching had never been so simple. For John it was always something to be negotiated beforehand. He'd liked to know its terms. The expectations of a girlfriend or a one-night stand. A part of the marriage contract. Or just paid for with money. And yet, he was aware on one level or another, that for some people, touch was not so complicated. For men, it seemed to him particularly tricky. Among men. At least in his culture. Men grew older and away from one another. He didn't know why. As a boy, he'd made friends easily. As a man, he had none. Friendly men made him suspicious. And the ones he'd known were just husbands of women Caroline was close too.

There was a time when John was going on a Boy Scout camping trip with his father. John had wanted to share a tent with his friend and suggested that instead of

sleeping in a tent with him, his father could share a tent with the father of the other boy, since the two fathers were friends as well. John's own father would not agree to this, though. "No reason, I just don't want to," John's father had said. "You'll grow up and understand." John thought that very sad, then, and when his parents divorced, that memory came back to him as somehow part of the reason why. Then he did grow up and he did understand.

These men at least, seemed to have no such difficulties. John didn't want the games to end, but, eventually the policeman was standing up, bowing, shaking his hand goodbye.

John, too, stood to go, but Bahar didn't want him to. "I would like to show you the mosque, please." He had John by the elbow, was leading him down a hallway, so that John understood that what this man called the rec room was really just the family room of his own house.

Then out to a courtyard, a concrete, red-painted area under an overhang and then a step down into sunlight, hung laundry, water crawling in from the street and down a drain in the middle. Bahar explained that water used to collect there and he'd had to build that drain, which was very complicated.

A woman walked though the courtyard with what must have been her daughter, both of them wearing the hijab, though the mother had on a loose dress and the daughter skinny jeans. Fifteen, sixteen was all, but something dramatic about the curve from cheekbone to chin and some kind of trick in her eyes. They lay down cool on the concrete and then flashed up at him hard half a second before dimming back down.

John wanted to know who they were, but felt it would give away something for him to ask.

The mosque itself, the prayer room, was made of plywood and corrugated metal. It creaked as they walked, as if it were held together by God alone. Thin, red, damp carpet, wetting his socks more with every step. The plywood painted white with green lines that imitated architecture that wasn't there. Pillars, a dome. The place was small and without windows. The sour smell of mildew competed with the harsh smell of bleach, and neither won.

"The rule," said Bahar, "is that a non-Muslim must not be in this room, but I have decided that this is okay. Bend the rules." He made two claws out of his hands and pretended to bend something very stiff. Even made an expression of effort as he was doing it. John noticed for the first time that he was missing the pinky and ring finger of his right hand.

"Thank you," he said.

"I think you are worth it," said Bahar. "I am a judge of character. Look at my mosque. Look at the holy place I have made. You see? You see?" Bahar kept asking.

But John wasn't so sure what he was seeing. It was like meeting a wife that a man has talked about so much that you have imagined someone stunning. A wife you had imagined when in bed with your own, long legs, and a snarled smile she pulled back like the cocking of a gun. But then you meet her. She's lopsided and frizzy. And so you wonder what is real and what is delusion. And you decide that what the man is really

showing you isn't so much his wife but his love of her. And part of you wishes you could call that man a fool and the other part that you could be him.

John left there touched. Ashamed. Thanking Bahar again and again for his kindness, while the man told him to please come back anytime. To please, to please come back.

## VIII. EVASIVE MANUEVERS

John hailed a cab, asked to be dropped off at the nearest movie theater. Then around the block and he took an ojek to the Jakarta History Museum, paid the admission, did a quick loop while he called Manning, left a message: “Listen, I have some urgent concerns about the, uh, client. One of the clients has come to me with some concerns. I’ve been approached with these concerns. I’ve tried to evade these concerns, and I believe I’ve achieved . . . success. Moderate success, but I think he still has some . . . concerns, so if you could call me back.” Exited the museum and got another ojek back to the hotel, arriving a little after noon and sick with the pain of impact.

He asked for messages at the front desk, and the pock-marked boy with the long bangs told him, “No sir, but someone is here for you.”

“Who? A Mr. Manning? Is it a Mr. Manning?”

“A young lady, sir. She is still waiting for you.” He said it knowingly, conspiratorially. Or it seemed to John he did. Maybe it was just friendliness. Often, with Indonesians, it was hard to know the difference. “There sir,” he said. “She is standing there.”

A woman in a hajib and cheap, baggy silk that gave nothing away stood facing a blank wall. He circled to try to get a look at her face before going to meet her. He wondered if it was at all possible that the man in the ape mask was a woman. Or maybe this was just who they would send next. Lure him in like those women in the James Bond movies. Closer, he saw thick black glasses. But could not determine much about her face.

Closer still, and he was fairly sure he recognized her posture. He had the impulse to run to her, but kept it under control.

It was Suri.

“Hello,” he said from five feet away.

A smile rippled through her and passed. He thought he was standing too far off and stepped forward to correct the error. She, in turn, stepped back. Startled maybe. He took a stop back and then she stepped forward.

“Like dancing,” he joked.

“You want to dance?”

“No. I mean. This. Here. It seems like we’re dancing.”

“Seem. Seeming. Seemly,” she said. “Maybe not so seemly.”

He laughed. An amused laugh, he thought, until it came out. Loud in the room. Echoing against the walls and the receptionists were watching.

“I don’t need to wear glasses,” she said. “This is my disguise. Like superman.”

“You don’t work here anymore?” said John. He tried to keep his voice down. Had to step closer to be heard.

“I have another job,” she said and giggled. “John, I’ve been feeling blue.”

“Did you lose your job here?”

“Not exactly.”

“What do you mean not exactly?”

“The hotel manager. He didn’t like what happened, so . . .”

“Did you tell him?”

“He found out. I don’t know how. Maybe he just asked around. He crushed on me.”

“Jesus Christ. I’m sorry.”

She tuned into lobby music then, passing from herself into some romantic vision as she closed her eyes to sing out along with it, “and I will always love you.” Then she was back. Giggled again. But there was sadness in it. “My new job is a better one. Different hotel.”

“Listen, can we . . . can I, will you come upstairs?” It might have been lust. Or guilt. Or a crush of his own. He couldn’t distinguish.

She made a quick nod with closed eyes. A gracious, “of course” kind of nod, as if he were at someone’s house asking to use the bathroom. “You go up first. I come up later. Back way.”

It was stupid, of course. People from the hotel were looking on. They clearly knew who she was. And yet they were all pretending not to. Out of kindness, maybe.

In the hotel room, she undressed her spindly little body, her unnatural natural body, spilled her clothes to the floor, and he knelt into her, kissed her hips and stomach and down. He thought he’d make it all up to her with pleasure, though he knew pleasure wasn’t nearly enough. Pleasure and money and kindness. She still standing and he going down on her. She made some noise, but not a lot. Seemed to be staring out over him toward a blank spot on the wall. Time went on. His tongue felt stiff, and he was having trouble getting it up.

“I’m sorry,” he told her.

“No problem.”

He tried to cuddle with her on the bed. She sat up, but at least held onto his hand. He thought of the men he'd watched on the video monitors. The men confessing what they'd done, what had been done to them.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

“I'm okay.”

“If you need anything . . .”

She sat above him. Her mouth twitched as though he'd told a joke she wasn't quite sure she understood or not. “What do I need?”

“Money or something.”

“Of course I need money. The rent. My cell phone bill. My son.”

“You have a son?”

“Jaya. My son.”

“How could you have a son?” He ran a hand along her stomach. “Impossible.”

“True.” She laughed. Seemed to like the compliment.

“Who is his dad?”

“Gone.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Thank you.”

“Who takes care of him when you're working?”

“My mother. Sometimes he calls my mother his mother. It makes me sad.”

This, at least, resembled real conversation. He wanted it to continue. Wanted for her to stay long enough that he could perform. He wanted to get it on camera. But she was up out of the bed, pulling her clothes on.

He grabbed his wallet, gave her everything in it.

“Too much,” she told him.

“I want you to have it. Because of me you lost your job.”

She seemed to be thinking. She said, “Americans have a rule that no one should be sad. Its in your declaration.”

“Declaration?”

“For independence.” She held up two fingers like a boy scout might and said, “Life, Liberty, pursuit of happiness. And even when you’re not guilty, you’re guilty.”

“That’s probably true.”

“I don’t want to talk about my son anymore.” Though they hadn’t been talking about her son.

He asked for her phone number, said he’d like to see her again.

“I like you, John. I have no phone.”

He gave her his number instead. Kissed her goodbye at the door. It was the first kiss they’d ever had. A light kiss. A brushing of mouths. A moment like the one just before sleep that you try to catch but can’t.

Several days passed without John’s hearing from Manning. He left a few more messages and then decided maybe that was a bad idea. That if something were going on,

something really going on, he needed to keep quiet. He thought maybe he could contact Manning through Donny, but he lingered late in the office and didn't see him either. Often, he would spy on the rec room of the mosque. The angle of the camera was sideways and only caught one end of the room. Still, there was plenty to see. Often, there were meetings there, men in a circle leaning over the Quran, arguing. They spoke quickly and it was hard to determine what they were talking about. Once they seemed to be arguing about the right way to wash their heads. But in one way or another, the conversation seemed always to do with how to be better men. What John liked most was to watch Bahar interact with his wife. A woman with chubby cheeks like a baby's. The two would sit together for an hour or two at night. Often not speaking, sometimes saying a thing or two. Discussing people he didn't know. "Satya is a snoop," his wife would say, "She got into my lotions today."

"Which lotions are these?"

"My skin lotion. To make my skin soft."

"Your skin is soft."

His wife's face twitched up into a smile.

Without Donny to help, it took John three hours to translate that one conversation. And when he did, it brought him to tears.

And then it was midnight and he was ready to go. No cameras in the hallway, though. John would have to open the door and hope. Soft carpet. Easily tiptoed. And who was behind all those doors? He'd never seen anyone here. He scooted past, toward the

elevator thinking how, at any moment, a door could slam open, a man in an ape mask behind it.

He was at the elevator now, head looking down one end of the hall then the next and planning his strategy back to the hotel. No ojek. Not for the first leg. They were just guys on motorcycles was all and they could be anybody. Get a taxi first, a Blue Bird. Go somewhere you've never been. Then an ojek from there. The elevator door slid open. And there was the young British man from the club. He didn't even seem to register that John was there. John would think about this later, conclude that something in the other man's manner simply didn't allow for the possibility that he, John, wouldn't step onto the elevator, that he had any choice.

The doors closed. John hit the button for the ground floor and saw the fourth was lit up, too. He waited for the man to speak first.

"I'm with The Agency," is what he said. Asked John to follow and John did.

The fourth floor was just like the tenth. The door they went into had no number on it, though John deduced from the doors on either side that it was 415. A bare room with a twin mattress on the floor. A ratty couch with a laptop computer plugged into six different cables. A mini-fridge full of yoghurt drinks. The British man offered John one and he took it. They sat together on the couch. The British man showed him his ID from the CIA. Graham Joiner, it said his name was.

"But you're British," John said.

Graham Joiner gave him a look of pity. A look that told him that if he couldn't untangle a mystery as simple as that, then maybe there was no hope for him.

Manning's apartment was clean. All glass and clean reflections, carpet streaked with tracks from the vacuum cleaner, beer cans all thrown out.

"You get a new maid?"

"Why would I get a new maid?"

"You told me she was stealing from you."

"I did? No I didn't. Why would I say that?"

"Manning, where have you been?"

"Busy. Official business. What's up?"

"I've been leaving messages. Tons of messages."

"No one leaves messages in Indonesia. Jesus, how long have you been in this country?"

He sat down with John. Was drinking a whiskey, but offered him none. "You have something to tell me," he said.

John told him about being chased by the man in the ape mask, but Manning was more interested in the mosque.

"What kind of mosque was it?"

"I don't know. A run-down mosque."

"Would you call it an extremist mosque?"

"No."

"Do you know the tale tell signs of an extremist mosque?"

"No, I guess not."

He finished his drink and poured another only for himself. “Tell me about the guy following you.”

“I couldn’t see him. He had on the mask.”

“How tall was he? What was he wearing?”

“I don’t know. Wait, I think he had gloves on.”

“Why would have gloves on?”

“I don’t know.”

“Well, do you think he was going to strangle you or . . . ”

“Maybe he wasn’t Indonesian.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Well, if he wasn’t Indonesian but he didn’t want me to know, then maybe he’d wear gloves.”

“That’s one possibility, sure, but why would your brain go to that one before any other?”

The truth, of course, was that John was thinking of Graham Joiner. It was the first time it occurred to him that Joiner might have been the person chasing him. He felt so terrible at all this spy stuff. So far behind. “I don’t know,” is what he said. “It just occurred to me.”

“Okay,” said Manning. “Okay. And what else do you have to tell me?”

“Nothing.”

“Nothing else?” Again, he thought about Joiner. He thought the young man would interrogate him, force him into collusion, but hadn’t at all. It was the soft sell. He asked if

John would wear a wire for them, John said he wouldn't, and that was all. Joiner gave him his card, told him to be in touch.

"No," he said now, after a minute.

"Not that you installed cameras in the mosque? Two cameras?"

"Craig. I'm sorry. I thought one thing and it turned out to be another. They're just a mosque. A bunch of poor people. That's all."

Manning picked up his whiskey. "I'm going to tell you something now, and I don't want you to freak out."

"Okay."

"I need you to promise me you won't."

"How can I promise you what my reaction is going to be? How am I supposed to know that?"

Manning seemed to be loving it. Playing up his own calm. One the coffee table, a pile of books: Ian Fleming, John LeCarre. One called *The C.I.A Good Book of Espionage*.

"I want you to promise me that whatever I tell you will be taken with a certain degree of moderation, caution, and professionalism. I want you to make me feel like hiring you was a good idea and not just sentimentality."

"Okay."

"Our man in the field is missing."

"Dead?"

"We don't know yet. Just missing."

"But you think he's probably dead."

“Probably, yeah.”

“And you think that guy who was following me had some connection to it?”

“Yeah.”

“You think he was going to kill me?”

He seemed to be thinking. “Probably not,” he finally said. “Americans are more complicated to kill. Advantage us. Anyway, I’m putting Donny in the field. Limited basis.”

“You don’t have anyone better for the job?”

“Kid’s it. Listen, this is good stuff right now’s the thing. Doesn’t this feel good? A little danger? Makes you appreciate your food.”

“Will you tell me if they find anything? I mean, like a body, or . . .”

“Maybe,” said Manning. “Maybe I will.”

“Okay, but listen, this mosque. There’s nothing there.”

“If you say so, John.”

John stood to leave, shook the man’s hand. And it occurred to John now for the first time that Manning reminded him of Connor, the artist with whom Caroline had had her affair. Not that he looked like Connor, a cocky man in tight pants, who was always shifting his smile from one side of his face to the other. It was more this sense he had of always needing to be in charge. Call the game. It was that handshake, so warm, so dismissive, so certain that he would win, because he was the only one who knew the rules.

The next day John and Bahar sat together in the concrete courtyard of the mosque, Bahar crouched and comfortable, though he had offered John a plastic chair. The two of them talked while watching the water run down the drain. It was shining with oil and whatever pollutants came off the street, the roofs and sky. Bahar's wife was putting up laundry with the help of that pretty young girl. John had been introduced to neither. And Bahar was trying to convince John that pornography was first invented by Jews in ancient Egypt. "It was a way to bring the Egyptians down," he said. "To put corruption into their minds and distract them from governing the country."

John had never heard of such a thing and could not find a way to believe it. But at the very least, the discussion provided a welcome distraction from recent events in his life. "Where did you get this idea?" he asked.

"This is widely known. Widely discussed in the Muslim world. Please don't think I am blaming the Jews. Maybe they were in a tight spot. I'm just telling you America didn't make pornography. America is a sort of, a sort of machine that makes small things big. What's that called? A megaphone. It gets the pornography from Jews and makes that very big. Or the fear of Muslims. It gets the drinking of beer or wine from Europe and makes it bigger. Or eating, so then your people are very fat. Still you keep the fat people off the television because they are ugly. And they interfere with your other pornographies."

"You make it sound like it's some sort of conspiracy to take over the world."

"No, not conspiracy. Illness. Pornography is an illness that comes through America. It breeds there and it grows there because America is the place where

everything is big. I understand you have events in your country to display giant fruits. A giant watermelon, for instance.”

John wanted to disagree. He basically did. And yet, in the meantime, he was thinking of Suri. Thinking of Suri and of that young girl right in front of him. Thinking shameful, pornographic things. “You’re talking about fairs?” he asked. “The county fair?”

“I do not know the name. I know they have these events of bigness and sometimes there are beauty pageants there and other such things, that young people go to dates at these places. They wear very short clothes and go into some kind of place called Tunnel of Love.”

“I think you’re talking about the county fair.”

“Okay, then. This is an example of your country. And how it invents bigness. So then this comes to Indonesia and we have giant clubs with many rooms and loud music, our children rubbing up against one another because of this disease.”

“But your country has always had drinking. Always had prostitution.”

“Yes, but it was a very small problem. This is my point. The people could then be led, but now all of this is so big that it is much more difficult to control.”

The man spoke without malice, too. Just crouching, smiling. John liked him. Couldn’t help it. Liked his humanness. The wisdom and idiocy all mashed up together. He thought Bahar’s idea of desire was just plain oversimplified. Even in a complete burkha, you still saw the eyes. The sway of hips bumping out through the cloth.

The call to prayer buzzed, and an announcement all bass and scrawl and echo, some like the announcement for a next stop in a subway or a basketball player in a gym. The men were already appearing, serious men with small, easy smiles settled onto their faces, set down there like small tea cups and saucers. Among them, almost unrecognizable for his kufi and pious face, was Donny.

The next day John called Graham Joiner, who set him up with a wire.

**WORKS CITED**

Bongco, Mila. *Reading Comics: Language, Culture and the Concept of the Superhero in*

*Comic Books*. New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 2000. 85-123. Print.

Bowles, Paul. *The Sheltering Sky*. New York: Vintage International, 1990. Print.

Greene, Graham, writ. *The Third Man*. Dir. Carol Reed. British Lion Film Corporation, 1949. Film.

**VITA**

Born and raised in Southern California, Adam Prince has since lived in New York, South Korea, Arkansas, Nicaragua, and Knoxville, Tennessee. His award-winning fiction has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *The Southern Review*, and *Narrative Magazine*, among others. His first book, a story collection called *The Beautiful Wishes of Ugly Men* comes out in May of 2012 with Black Lawrence Press, an imprint of Dzanc Books. In the 2012-2013 school year, he will serve as the Tickner Fellow at the Gilman School in Baltimore. He is married to the poet Charlotte Pence.