

A MAN IS AS GOOD AS HIS WORD

by Zachary Burks

I

He doesn't own a cellular phone, doesn't dine in sit-down restaurants; he drives a twelve-year-old Geo Metro, high-mileage, low freon, no insurance. Alan Polk is an adjunct, a part-time professor, teaching six total courses at three different colleges this term. Two thousand dollars a section, if that. No medical, no dental, no retirement portfolio. Nights, Saturdays, eight o'clocks. No office of his own. Adjunct. The very sound of the word disgusts. Adjunct, defunct, skunked. He's sick of it.

Monday morning, the snooze control makes him late for class, as does a speeding ticket, and his commute from a southwestern Dade suburb to the nearest community college seems worse than usual, accidents and lane closures choking the Turnpike. He surfs the radio-dial, scanning for something soothing, something with a clear-conscience, some Mozart maybe, or Vivaldi, music that sings in the voice of a charitable God. Nothing. Nothing but shock-jocks, hip-hop, salsa, the local news and weather. His car's tape-player stopped working last July.

Exiting the Don Shula Expressway at SW 104th, Alan whips around a stalled delivery van, and an equally assertive Ford F-250 cuts him off, forcing him on to the shoulder. An obscene gesture, the honking of an angry horn, these reactions might suffice for most of us—not Alan Polk. Not for the adjunct. He's had it, all he'll take of it. Any insult, any indignity can trigger him. Thus, he pursues the offending truck, tailgates, jockeys, overtakes, cuts sharply in front . . . almost gets himself rear-ended. At the subsequent red light, the F-250 crowds the adjunct, inches ever closer, flashes headlights. Putting his Geo in neutral, yanking up the parking-brake, Alan now reaches into the back seat, into the equipment bag for the Little League team he coaches, his son's team, and he slides out a wooden bat, a Louisville Slugger, 32 ounces, which he uses it for infield practice before a game, because he likes the sound of maple on horsehide far more than the shrill pings of aluminum. Wood feels better in his hands, seems more authentic.

With the bat on his lap, Alan eyes his rear-view. *Get out the truck, man. Come on out and play!* But the truck-door never opens, and when the light turns green and the little Geo stays put, the F-250 negotiates around, the driver shouting nothing in the adjunct's direction, not even the obligatory "fuck you, asshole!" Sure, he's a burly man, the truck's driver, blue-collar and buff, but his intuition whispers to him to steer clear, to lay off this guy. Good thing. Alan merely lifts the bat up as the driver passes, lifts it as a salute, as if he were touching the brim of a hat with a riding crop. The adjunct smiles, and grumbles: "Goddamned coward." *I'd have freaking done it, by God! To bash in that man's skull, would it be so unthinkable, so incomprehensible? Maybe . . . but I might've done it.*

At 8:08, Alan parks his rusty sedan in the faculty lot. His head aches; his eyes itch; he's congested and all in a sweat.

II

"Good morning, dear ones," says the adjunct to his first class, an AMH 2012 section, History of the United States, pre-Columbus through Reconstruction. His students have waited for him. They know to. They know his car doesn't always start up right away; they know he's at the mercy of morning gridlock, that he's divorced, that his ex-wife has the kids, that he's dissatisfied adjuncting. Maybe they're not privy to all the relevant details, that he was denied tenure at the local state university, that his ex-wife and her new husband have a restraining order against him, that he's recently lost joint custody—but they do know more about his personal life than they should. Adjunct. Wears his heart on his threadbare sleeve. Gypsy, nomad, circuit-rider. "What're we talking about today, class? Oh, yes. Appomattox Court House. The War's end and its aftermath, right? How far we get Friday?"

Adjuncts often wing it, with only mildest preparation. Americana according to Alan Polk. *Well, you get what you pay for*, Alan might say, *and sometimes not even that*. How much prep does two thousand buy you?

His students don't seem to mind. Here they're a classic blend of teenagers and non-traditionals, multi-ethnic, mildly capable, mildly motivated; a few don't speak English so good. They're not a very vocal group, so Dr. Polk lectures, mainly—although there is this one inquisitive young woman, Nicole Newman, who's comparatively outspoken. She's twenty, assertive-contentious, reminds him of Leisel, his ex-wife . . . same size, build, mouth; same cat's eyes, muscular legs, playful sexuality, but Miss Newman has a larger nose, bigger teeth, visible tattoos. Dr. Polk had a 7:45 appointment with her, missed it. *Damn*. He's been setting her up, softening her up, not so subtle in his lust. *Damn*. Dr. Polk makes eye-contact, and to Miss Newman says simply: "Apologies." This raises a few eyebrows. She's suitably charmed.

In the back row, by the window, sits Dr. Carlos Blanco, the department chair; he arrived precisely at 8:00 for the scheduled classroom visitation and performance evaluation. *Goddamn, I forgot about him, too*. Alan doesn't panic. After acknowledging Blanco and admonishing his students to behave themselves, the adjunct opens the textbook (which Blanco co-authored) to Chapter 31, begins reading from some it, editorializing here and there.

"Because of Grant and Lee's good behavior at the surrender, there 'arose from the ashes the phoenix of reconstruction and reconciliation, the potential for a lasting peace . . . a peace not completely realized for many years, yet the possibility of peace which would ultimately help North and South become one nation again.' Pretty words, aren't they? The 'phoenix' of a reunited nation arising 'from the ashes.' Pretty words." He pauses, then snarls: "Who writes this stuff?" Alan won't look over at Dr. Blanco now.

“Reconstruction . . . reconciliation . . . one nation, under God, indivisible . . . yet, ‘the pain of war cannot exceed the woe of aftermath.’” His students don’t recognize the Led Zeppelin reference, and it disappoints him, but he’s not surprised. “You watched all of the Ken Burns documentary—it was assigned, remember, is on reserve at the library media center—you watched it, and what you should’ve taken from it, if anything, is that these men during this time in our history, these soldiers, whether Rebel or Yank, they were utterly courageous; they were brave; and they fought with such resolve; ergo, there was greatness and purpose in what they did, right? If you missed that, friends, then you missed everything. Courage . . . above all else, perhaps even above compassion . . . courage is an admirable quality, and it should be encouraged, shouldn’t it? If you don’t get this, if you don’t see it, then you don’t understand anything. If a nine-year-old kid is at the plate, playing baseball, and he gets hit on the elbow with a sixty-mile-per-hour fastball, then it hurts him, it hurts him like nothing else he’s ever felt, but if that kid gets up, and dusts himself off, and refuses to cry a single tear, and trots on to first base . . . what courage! Maybe someday he’ll be a man. ‘We know a great many coats and breeches,’ wrote Thoreau, ‘but *few men*.’ You young males sitting in class today, are you *men*? Are you? If it were July, eighteen-hundred-sixty-three, would you be at Gettysburg? Would you?” Alan eyeballs his male students, each one of them; many seem unaware. “My wife used to be fond of reminding me that *men* make the wars, men are the war-hawks, are the warmongers . . . that we are inherently destructive, combative, whereas women are productive, making the babies, cleaning up men’s messes, right? Maybe, just maybe, there’s some truth to it . . . is this not our history? But to say that men are by nature ruinous, while women are naturally creative, that men are violent, testosterone-spiked, glory-seeking pigs, this is ridiculous. It’s not that simple, darlings; nothing ever is. Men fight wars because it affords them the opportunity to behave courageously, because they have no choice but to behave courageously if they’re going to survive the war, if they’re gonna save their buddies’ hides, if they’re gonna defend their way-of-life . . . that’s the nature of war, yes? Before the War, Grant was a failure, he was selling shoes in his daddy’s store, and then the War came, and the opportunity for greatness presented itself, and he rose to the occasion. Is that what you want to do with your one chance at a life . . . sell shoes? Is it? That’s what most of you will do, isn’t it?” Again, he long-pauses. “Are any of you *hearing* me! Reconstruction was not a ‘phoenix’ arising ‘from the ashes’ . . . Reconstruction wasn’t reconciliation . . . Reconstruction in the South was brutish, nasty, and not-so-short . . . and the scars it left are deep.” He pauses yet again, glares out the window. “Segregation, systematic oppression, the KKK. ‘Some of those that work forces are the same that burn crosses.’ If you don’t remember Zeppelin, certainly you know Rage Against the Machine?”

Many in the class seem lost, uninterested. But Nicole Newman is entranced; she tells herself she’s more in love with this shabby, furious manic-depressive than any man she’s ever loved in her whole entire life. Dr. Blanco yawns.

“Who can explain to me what sharecropping is?” asks the adjunct. “What is a sharecropper?”

Miss Newman and Shequita Davis combine in separate answers to offer a satisfactory definition.

“Good,” says the adjunct, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief. “Let’s talk about sharecropping—I’d intended to show you a short film this week, an adaption of Faulkner’s *Barn Burning*, Tommy Lee Jones as Abner Snopes—but there’s no time for it; sorry. Anyway, sharecroppers . . . they replaced slave labor, right? Sharecroppers were mostly blacks, yes, but every immigrant minority and the poor white trash were exploited, too; indeed, the vulnerable are always exploited, aren’t they? Most of us will be, at some time or another, at some point in our lives . . . *you* will be . . . and the question is: what to do about it?” Alan leaves the lectern now, paces the room. “Allow me an analogy. The adjuncts, the part-timers, half the teachers on this campus, *we* are sharecroppers, nothing more. Let’s say a school, this fine college, for instance, let’s say it’s a farming community, growing cotton; no, producing a different commodity, the college degree . . . you students, you’re the crop, if we can harvest you. The faculty are the farmers. And who profits from our labor? No, not us, not the adjuncts, not the part-timers—because we don’t own the land, aren’t vested, aren’t tenured. They give us a small piece of dirt to work, a class here, a class there, and they say ‘produce,’ and we do, yet we adjuncts reap not what we sew . . . it’s not even subsistence farming. The administrators, they own the farm . . . all those deans and vice-presidents and department heads, they own it, and the tenured faculty, too, yet at a place like this, adjuncts teach more actual classes, probably sixty percent, while he-who-administrates and they-who-are-tenured hoard all the profit for themselves; the adjunct doesn’t even make minimum wage, not if you were to take all his classes, a year’s worth, ten or twelve, and call it a salary, while Professor Blanco back there brings home eighty thousand, eighty-five, owns a boat, spends a month in Europe every summer. And we adjuncts, we don’t get the best piece of dirt either—we get the rocky plots, the freshman classes, the blue-jeans courses. Same with sharecroppers: they’d toil from sun-up to sundown, sweat and bleed, work their hands to the bone, and then they wouldn’t have enough to feed or clothe or shod their own children, who’d work in fields, too, the children, out in the fields, out in the rain and the blistering sun, cutting their small fingers to the bone . . . and all to feed the landowner’s greed. There weren’t any fat sharecroppers, I promise you that. Now, look at me—why don’t you?—and then take a gawk at good Professor Blanco.” Yes, there is a decided disparity of girth, and some students do laugh; Blanco seems as bloated as Brando in his dotage. “‘Where’re all the nice people, the good people, Rhett?’ asked Scarlett O’Hara of post-War New Orleans. ‘They’re all dead,’ Rhett Butler answered, ‘or starving.’ The sharecropper starved; a lot of people after the War starved, or died of disease, or were strung up from cypress trees by the neck . . . and that, dear friends, was Reconstruction.” Another dramatic pause. “Maybe we should talk more about the politics of it, or the socioeconomic context of it, or the technological gains and advancements that were also a part of it, but sometimes you need to *feel* it to understand it, to feel and taste the suffering of a time and place before you can come to know that time and place, right? Why did the sharecropper submit to it, to use and abuse? Why put himself and his family through it? Are any of you *hearing* me! Well, what else was he gonna do? A man’s gotta do what he knows how to do, correct? A sharecropper’s got to sharecrop, even if it starves him,

because he's got nothing else, because working the soil is what he is, yes? . . . have I convinced you? . . . any questions?"

There are none, so Alan moves on—hurrying through Lincoln's plan, Andrew Johnson's plan, the black codes, the 14th Amendment. Dismissing the class three minutes early, he thanks Dr. Blanco for coming and reminds the students to start studying for next week's Final.

"Poor guy, I feel like I should give him a tip," whispers one student to another as they gather their books. "No wonder his shirts are never ironed—can't afford no dry-cleaning."

"Or an ironing-board."

Nicole Newman comes up to Alan's desk, asks to reschedule their appointment, hints that she'd be available for and amenable to a lunch-date. *A picnic in the park with pretty Miss Newman, smiles the adjunct, some finger food, some wine, a song of seduction, and sex for dessert. Sounds like a plan.* Two years ago, such conduct would have been unimaginable for him, but five semesters adjuncting can change a man's outlook. He agrees to meet with her after her last class.

Two other students, both male, both wearing red New York Yankees hats turned backwards, approach Dr. Polk to make sure he counts them as present, not absent; both came in thirty minutes late. "I never take attendance," answers the adjunct, "on days I'm late myself. Call me what you will, gentlemen, but I'm no hypocrite." They agree.

"Alan, I think I take exception to your sharecropping analogy," says Dr. Blanco, once the classroom has emptied out. "Higher education in America is much more analogous to . . . to the guild system of medieval Europe, don't you think? GTAs are the apprentices, adjuncts or visiting professors are the journeymen, and tenured faculty are the master craftsmen. You're not a sharecropper, trapped in an oppressive system, with no means of escaping it. You're a journeymen, Alan, going from town to town, college to college, working for a daily wage at the pleasure of the guild. Don't be so histrionic, so self-indulgent—you browbeat these kids."

Alan has no reply to this, although his strongest impulse is to slap the prescription glasses right off the department chair's fat face. Blanco now explains that he won't be able to offer Alan the full-time temporary teaching position for the upcoming fall term after all, that the written evaluation of Alan's performance would be ready to read and sign some time this afternoon, if that's convenient. Fine, answers the adjunct. Fine. *Eat shit and die.*

III

Fate. The toss of a coin, the color of a child's eyes, the track of a hurricane. So often

we're guided by fate, saved or destroyed by it. Whom should Alan Polk choose for today, Nicole Newman or Brigitte Chaisson? A home-cooked meal with Brigitte, and soft sex afterwards, it would be soothing; preying on, feasting on, devouring Miss Newman might be more satisfying. What to do? Alan fishes for a quarter in his pocket, willing to give himself over to a ceremonial coin-flip, but he nets no coin, no two-bits, no nickel or dime, not even a copper-coated penny. Well, that's fate, too, isn't it? Maybe Miss Newman should have a say in this, shouldn't she? If she meets Alan beneath the red poinciana by the library parking lot five minutes earlier than she's said she would, then she's eager, and she'll be the catch-of-the day. If not, he'll get in his little car and drive the few short miles to Brigitte's. At 10:55 Polk leaves campus, without the Leisel surrogate.

"You're not eating, honey," says Brigitte to him, as he sits at her kitchen table. "You liked my gumbo before; you ate three bowls of it. If you're not feeling well, why don't you go lay down? Take a nap before your night class."

"Maybe I will . . . if you'll come lie down with me."

She smiles, a rather wicked smile, suggesting that she's only tempted, not persuaded. Alan likes to work fast, doesn't he? And she's often receptive. The first time he'd come to her house, for instance, a year ago, to her tiny treeless house, her sun-scorched house, white as bleached bones, and so small inside, painfully small—low ceiling, slim walkways, cramped bedrooms, clutter everywhere, a piano, and the antique furniture, unpolished, and the lace curtains, yellowed, and so little light filtering in that Alan's first impression of the place then had been that he'd entered a tomb, a living monument to a dead life; and Brigitte herself, the slightest woman he's ever known, seemed like a phantom, a literal ghost, and so his initial instinct when he'd first set foot into her private little world, invited, was to reach for her, make sure she was real, corporeal, his right hand finding her face, his thumb grazing her mouth, and she'd kissed it, and led him to her bed, and hastened him in to her, on top of her frayed quilt, her grandmother's quilt, on her four-poster bed, where her poodle watched them, panting. Brigitte's bed, and her piano, are the only large things in her small house.

"You want a beer or something, Allie? I bought you some Coronas." She'd made the purchase yesterday, even though she can't really afford them, given her fixed income, the constraints of her budget. Brigitte, too, is an adjunct, and has been for years, many years, never having been hired full-time permanent anywhere, only twice getting a coveted one-year replacement position—it's been difficult, but it's made her tough, resilient. No, she can't survive on her adjunct pay, or the piano lessons she gives, so lives pretty much off her ex-husband's diminishing alimony installments (they had no children), but she doesn't complain; Brigitte makes do. When things get tight, and they always do, well, she tightens up, survives, subsisting off canned beans, vegetables from her little garden, the kindness of friends. She clips a lot of coupons. "Alan, lemme get you a beer."

"Wine would be better."

“It would?”

“Yeah,” he laughs, thinking about how wine affects her, and where. “That merlot, from last weekend, any of that left?”

She checks her kitchen cabinet; there is.

“You know, while I was coming over here,” he says, “I heard this song on the radio, this reggae tune, a love song to a bottle of red wine. ‘Red, red wine . . . come stay with me . . . don’t let me be . . . alone.’ You know the song?”

She doesn’t.

“Drink two glasses of wine with me,” he says, “and then we’ll take that nap together. Whatcha say?”

She brings the green jug and blotched glasses over to him, and when she feels his forehead for fever with the inside of her wrist, he seizes the moment, grabs her by both arms, pulls her to him. Her hair smells clean. He likes the way it’s always so clean, her hair so long and straight, always brushed a hundred strokes. He tells her he likes her dress, that she’s looks real good in it; the dress is vintage, a simple brown print, and he starts to unbutton it . . . but Brigitte pulls away.

“Allie, you’re warm, honey. Lemme get you some aspirin or something. And a cool rag.”

“No thanks.”

“You’re not feeling well, I can tell. What’s wrong with you?”

“Adjunctivitis.”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I’ll get some pills.”

He doesn’t follow her into the bedroom, although he could have. No, Alan just sits there, and sips at the wine, and wonders about her, about what he’s going to do about Brigitte Chaisson. She wants him to move into this house with her—that’s clear; she mentioned it, twice. And why shouldn’t he move in? She’s an odd woman, yes, guileless and quirky, and she’s got the wild eyes, adjunct eyes, blistered and blistering, like those you’d see in Confederate-era portraits, yet she’s pretty enough, in her way, and often he dreams about her. What more needs a man?

Bringing him a handful of tablets, both aspirin and acetaminophen, Brigitte isn't particularly amused when Alan quips that he'd prefer Valium, OxyContin, liquid Demerol.

"That isn't funny," she says.

"I wasn't trying to be."

"No?" She slurps down some stew; Alan still isn't eating. "Honey, what is bothering you today? What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing? Something happened today, something at school. You don't wanna tell me?"

"It's nothing."

"Alan?"

He holds up the wine-jug, offers it to her. "Girl, why aren't you drinking this stuff? 'Red, red wine.'"

"Allie, what happened today?"

*Sometimes, girl, you sound just like Leisel. Truly. You reek of her, you know that? Why is it that with women all problems must be talked out? Sometimes the body should do the telling; let the arms and legs and groins do the verbalizing. Don't you get it? Well, if Alan has to talk her clothes off her, then he'll talk them off . . . although he soon finds he actually has very little to say to this woman. That's discouraging. No matter . . . he'll talk to her, or get her to talk. He shares his sharecropping analogy with her, to see if she concurs—and she instead gives him her own, likening adjuncts to mistresses, the tenured faculty to wives; the college has a love affair with the adjunct, Brigitte explains, but refuses to marry her, stringing her along, making her wait for a marriage proposal that often never comes, until the adjunct realizes she was nothing more to him than a cheap whore. Brigitte asks Alan if he likes her comparison: he does, very much. A woman's perspective, so unlike his own. So unfamiliar. *Why am I here?* he wonders, almost aloud. *Oh, yes, that's why I'm here.**

"I saw this show on the Discovery Channel," she remarks, "where this lioness, in Kenya, I think it was, this lioness would adopt and nurture baby antelopes, instead of eating them. It was the most amazing thing. She'd even try to protect them, the antelopes, from other lions."

"Damn it, I'm not getting the full-time temp job," Alan confesses, at last. "That's what's wrong! Charlie Blanco won't give it to me. He has it to give, he held it under my nose,

and now he won't give it to me . . . because I won't lick his goddamned spittle. It's freaking infuriating."

"You thought the job was yours," she says, gently, "because you're the most qualified, the most popular with the students, because he said he would."

"Blanco should give it to me because I asked him for it . . . no other reason than that."

"You talked to him today? What'd he say?"

"He said, 'I think I've changed my mind; it'll go to someone else.'"

"Did he say why? You talked to him?"

"Talk to him? Honey, what good is talk?" The lava-streams, the fissures, flow red-orange on Alan's face; a total eruption seems imminent. "You mean, did I go beg him, humiliate myself, debase myself by asking for an explanation? No! Blanco teased me with it, and then took it away! What else should be said?"

"Nothing."

"No, *you* think I should go *chat* with him, go reason and negotiate with that pompous bastard, right?"

"I didn't say—"

"*We* can't talk to *those* people, Brigitte!" Alan says this calmly, almost whispering, a rustle of leaf before the blast of hot wind. "Does it ever help for any adjunct to talk to any administrator? Does it? No! Because *they* don't give a goddamn about *us*, okay? They've got theirs, and they don't give a shit about anyone or anything else, all right? Tenured professors, deans and provosts, idiot department chairs, they've got theirs. They've got theirs. They don't care."

"Allie, not all of them are—"

"Good God, girl, what planet you been livin' on! It's *us* against *them*, okay? They aren't with us; they use us; they yank us around on monkey-chains and expect us to dance for peanuts, okay? And it's wrong, so very wrong . . . something's gotta be done about it!"

"I don't know what you expect to—"

"This use and abuse of adjuncts, honey, it's gotta stop—that's what I expect. It's gonna stop! And we could stop it, yes. Today. There's enough of us to stop it, to start a revolution, if we'd just do it! We adjuncts could shut these schools down, if we had a mind and a will to, if we really decide to."

She sighs, unconvinced. “Most adjuncts don’t think that way, Alan. I don’t.”

“Don’t you?” His fierce eyes cut through her, his pinched brow, and smoke bellows from his nostrils . . . but Alan won’t not avenge himself on his fellow adjunct, not with her sitting there smiling at him, sweetly, that coquette’s grin, that you’re-sexy-when-you’re-angry simper, the tip of her tongue wetting her lower lip. He checks himself, inhales deeply. “Well, you’re right. You’re right that nobody thinks like me.”

“You are an original.”

“Thanks.” He isn’t so sure he appreciates the tone and spirit of her assessment. “But I will tell you one thing more, girl. There’s a Turkish proverb, and it goes like this: I don’t own a mill; I don’t have a house beneath a willow tree; I have a camel and a tent. I’ll kill you and go hide in the mountains.”

She laughs. “Please don’t kill me, Allie.”

“I’m serious, Brigitte. These people best stop freaking with me . . . ‘cause I got nothing left to lose anymore. Nothing left. Nothing left.” He scowls now, and he smooths his hair back, and growls: “I could do violence.”

“No, you couldn’t.”

“Violence,” he repeats.

“You’re not feeling well, honey, that’s all.”

He shakes his head. “I could do serious violence.”

IV

From Brigitte’s white-washed neighborhood, it’s only twenty minutes, on a good day, to the state university in western Dade County where Alan’s night class begins at 7:15. He’s slept away the afternoon, waking in Brigitte’s bed, disoriented, bathed in sweat, eyes crusty, a headache worse than a tightened vise. She hadn’t napped with him, nor had she let him ease the hammering in his brain by pounding her loins, by taking a man’s best medicine, the sexual decongestant. They hadn’t fought, he hadn’t been cruel, but their talk did degenerate into vague and aimless bickering, and his unfortunate poodle-kicking incident hadn’t helped matters either—so she’s mad at him now, mostly because he never said he loved her, wouldn’t say it, that he was in love with her, when she’d asked him point-blank . . . why hadn’t he? As Alan drives north on the Turnpike, stuck again in another bottleneck log-jam, he considers this, recreating some of the dialogue, mouthing aloud a few of the words.

Brigitte, he recalls, had compared him to Ishmael in *Moby Dick*, which is perturbing in itself because Alan fancies himself more of an Ahab. “What you need,” she’d told him,

“is more than a change of scenery or a serious vacation; you need an adventure. An *adventure*, Allie. It might heal you.” Really she hadn’t said “heal”—her word had been “help.” She then told Alan about another adjunct she knows, Doug Horger, who’d get this same way sometimes, all agitated, all out-of-tune, and so what Doug would do would be to go off somewhere for the summer and do something adventuresome: work on an offshore oil-rig, sail the Bering Sea on a floating fish-processing factory, try his hand as a Texas ranch-hand. *Well, honey*, thought Alan, *I’ve heard worse advice*. Yet he’d politely dismissed her suggestion as foolish, and in part out of jealousy—who is this Horger, and how well had she known him, and where is he now? She’d spoken of Horger so favorably, and Alan’s envy prickled and burned, like hives on the skin. Does jealousy denote love? Maybe . . . maybe not.

And so he’d reconsidered, and he’d asked her if she’d go adventuring with him, to Texas or to Alaska, anywhere far away, but she’d hesitated, and she protested that she was happy enough here, in Florida, contented, or untroubled, or something to that effect, and so he’d blurted out: “How? How can you be? Be honest with yourself, girl! You live hand-to-mouth, semester-to-semester, with no certainty, with no future, no guarantees, and for what? You eat their table-scrap and thank them for it, but how is it worth it to you? How? How do you do it?”

His tone, his indictment, had hurt her. “I don’t know, honey,” she’d answered. “I don’t know that being an adjunct is worth anything to me. It certainly doesn’t disturb me, the way it does you. Alan, I’m not ashamed of who I am and what I am, if that’s what you’re implying. To struggle, to live day-to-day, hand-to-mouth, paycheck-to-paycheck, isn’t this how most people the world over are compelled to live? Isn’t this how it’s meant to be? No, I could not, in good conscience, live any other way.”

Couldn’t you? Her point-of-view seemed to him less than an insight, little more than a grim justification for her allowing herself to be used. She couldn’t persuade him otherwise, not after he’d drunk three glass-fulls of her red wine, and he couldn’t persuade her to kiss-and-make-up when he saw that he’d upset her; no, not after three glass-fulls of wine. And so she got right to it, to the heart of it, the core of it, and she asked him: do you love me? Are you in love with me, or not? She needs to know. He needs to say. Why hasn’t he brought his things over to her house, his books, his clothes and toiletries, all packed up in liquor-store boxes? If you love me, why wouldn’t you want to be with me? What would money, and stability, and pride-in-one’s-work, what would they matter? We’ll pool our resources; you’ll save yourself some rent. We’ll make a home, you and I, and it’ll be good for you, healthy for you, a place where your kids can come see you, be with you, maybe even live with you. What’s to stop you, honey, if you love me?

“What’s to stop me?” Alan hears himself mutter, as he takes the Tamiami Trail exit. “What indeed? Well, at the moment, a night class. Another pointless, profitless, meaningless night class.”

And now it occurs to the adjunct: why should I even go there, to class? Or, since I’m

practically there already, why should I even teach it? Why not cancel, and then go patch things up with Brigitte? Or, if not Brigitte, then Nicole Newman—maybe she's still agreeable. Oh, yes, and what about Jeff's Little League game? Alan had forgotten about it, forgotten that his son's team has a rain-out make-up tonight. *Damn it, I told Jefferson I'd take him to the batting cages after school today, make adjustments to his batting stance, to how high he's been holding the bat. Fuck!* It's too late to call Jeff, from either a payphone or a campus phone; the game starts at 7:30, and players get there by 7:00—the boy will be on his way to the ballfields, in Leisel's car. *Fuck!*

By the time Alan parks in the student lot closest to his classroom, he's made up his mind: he's canceling; he'll put a note on the classroom door. *No, no, no; I'm not skipping any ballgames, not when I'm the coach—it's a question of priorities!* No need for a ceremonial coin-toss, not between baseball and night class, nor between baseball and Brigitte. No. His love for his son is neither debatable nor negotiable, and he'll not miss Jeff's make-up game to teach a damned adjunct class, at adjunct pay. Priorities! So what if his students are submitting their big paper tonight, the research project which counts 30% of their grade . . . so what? Let them hold on to it another week, maybe even revise it, bring it with them to the Final. If they never get it back, graded, then "oh, well." *What do they freaking want from me?*

The rains start suddenly, symbolically, just as Alan steps out of his clunky Geo. The adjunct has no umbrella. In Miami, there can be a downpour, bright sunshine, and a rainbow all in the same sky, and the effect of such a natural triumvirate is always quite astonishing, inspirational, almost like beholding a small miracle. Alan, though, isn't uplifted. This is the same university where he was denied tenure, where essentially he was fired, and without (to him) just cause; just being on this campus, seeing the same trees, the same buildings, that same god-awful po-mo sculpture, it tightens his chest; it constricts his throat. Getting drenched while he quick-steps it to the Humanities Pavilion, well, this adds insult to festering injury. His gall rises.

The adjunct office is a converted storage closet beneath the stairs of the Little Theatre, windowless, claustrophobic, the ceiling descending in the outline of the above tiered seating. All Alan wants is some tape, a piece of paper and some Scotch tape, so he can write a message to his students and post it on the upstairs classroom door. But nighttime adjuncts don't have access to the division's supply cabinet, so he'll have to use chewing gum as an adhesive. Oh, well. If he's not smoking those cheap imported cigarettes (a habit he'd only picked up within the last few months), then he's chewing on Doublemint or blowing Double-Bubbles, or gnawing off the tips of toothpicks; something has to be in his mouth, always, even when he teaches.

"HST 1101, No Class, 5/1," he writes on the back of a goldenrod-yellow memo. "Research Essay due 5/8, Comprehensive Final 5/8, Study Guide available on my website." True, the adjunct rarely updates his personal webpage, but if he gets the chance to upload an old exam from his files, he'll do it.

Avoiding the elevators, Alan heads for the back staircase, the fire exit. On the way, he

ducks into the men's restroom, combs back his wet hair DeNiro-style, unzips, and urinates all over the wall. This is a regular ritual of his, the piss on painted cinder-block, although the only one to suffer his small revenge is most often the Guatemalan cleaning-lady.

He checks his five-dollar watch, 7:06. *Damn.* And the nasty weather will make the nasty traffic even worse. Better hurry.

But, as he hustles down the hallway, he stops abruptly, pauses before an office, his old office, which now houses a visiting Communications professor. Next office down, the lights are on, the door ajar, and Ed Scherer, no doubt, sits in there, probably reading a newspaper or surfing the net. Though the departmental tenure vote went against Alan Polk 3-2, the adjunct doesn't view the three dissenters equally, with equal loathing; no, he blames Scherer more than the others, feels so much more betrayed by Ed Scherer, since Scherer was his mentor, his close friend, and, thus, his Robespierre. How had it happened? Well, there's no simple answer, and a diversity of opinion endures on the subject, but Alan traces its origin to some ugly departmental politics, petty power plays between the liberals and the radicals, and he himself had refused to take sides, and so became an unintended enemy of all. Then came the vote . . . and if a determined trio of naysayers want to conspire and sabotage your tenure, they can, they will; it happens everyday, everywhere, and is perfectly acceptable. Admittedly, Dr. Polk's teaching record was spotless (two awards, a competitive grant, a citation for excellence-in-the-classroom), and he did have both a book-in-print and a book-in-contract, but this wasn't enough. In order for Saboteur Scherer to reject the tenure application and justify doing so in compliance with the university's tenure-and-promotion policies, Scherer had to establish at the end of Dr. Polk's seven-year probationary period that the junior professor lacked an acceptable publication record, that Polk was insufficient in research, and in order to do that, Scherer had to discount both of Polk's books. In essence, Dr. Polk was adjudicated as if he'd written and published absolutely nothing. Two days after the Twin Towers collapse, those heartless bastards voted Alan out; two days afterwards. The terror hadn't touched them at all.

Why are you here, asshole? It's Monday night. Monday nights are mine! Since the adjunct frequented this building but once per week, and since he hadn't seen or spoken to Ed Scherer in well over a year, Alan presumed his old friend was avoiding him, a wise thing. *Professor Scherer, why're you freaking here?*

Resisting the urge to throw open Ed's door, to fly at Ed's throat, Alan merely stands outside, silent, positioning himself where his shadow crosses the portal, his silhouette darkening Ed's wall above the computer screen. For sixty seconds, he'll stand there, for precisely sixty seconds, and if Ed doesn't come out or speak out, the adjunct will walk away, will go on down to his car and drive on off. He wants to go, *needs* to go . . . yet he's compelled to count to sixty.

"Alan," says Ed, amicably, having seen the shadow, wheeled in his chair, opened wide the door. "Alan?"

The adjunct says nothing, only grins . . . eyes twinkling, left eyelid twitching.

“Alan, how long have you been out there?”

“Two-and-a-half years, muthafucka.” His grin widening, the adjunct’s light laughter comes out more as a cough. “Been waiting on your ass two-and-a-half years, man. You oughta know that.”

Ed Scherer perceives the threat yet dares not flinch . . . still, seeing Alan Polk again, seeing him like this, grizzled, hollow-cheeked, sunken-eyed, the man having aged ten years in two, God, it’s distressing, unsettling. To Alan, Ed hasn’t changed at all—those same kind eyes, those same laugh lines, the well-trimmed beard; no, Professor Scherer’s life is stable, comfortable. Vain of his intelligence, physically inadequate, Ed is as affable as a ferret.

“So, Edwin, you’re here on a Monday,” grins the adjunct. “Why? I thought the troll only comes out from under his bridge on Tuesdays and Thursdays. The ole two-day workweek, right?”

“So, Alan, how’ve you been—”

“Don’t speak!” snaps the adjunct, taking hold of the door with one hand. “So, you come here on a Monday night, knowing I’ll be here—right?—and you’re surprised that *I don’t like it.*” Alan blows a bubble, bursts it. “You’re a pernicious sniveler, Ed, a troll. A Tolkien orc. Your father, if you had one, was an orc. Was your momma an orc, too?” The adjunct scratches his forehead. “What I gotta do to pick a fight with you, man?”

“Alan, I’m closing the door, if you don’t mind.”

“Why would I mind?” He keeps both hands on the door, however, and it moves not an inch. “I’m standing here, sir, and I’m calling you out, hoping to pick a fight . . . and you think you can close me out? Just can’t bring yourself to Burr/Hamilton it with me, can you? No pistols at dawn? No broken beer bottles in an alleyway? How ‘bout bare hands, right here and now? No?”

Ed gazes down at the adjuncts shoes, notices that one of Alan’s shoelaces is untied.

“My offer still stands, Professor Scherer. Anyplace, anytime. Your choice of weapons. I made it two-and-a-half-years-ago, and I stand by it today. Your manhood is challenged. Refuse me, and be a troll!” Alan says all this very calmly, quite pleasantly. “No? You’d rather close the door, lock it, and call security, eh? Fine. You’re not a man.”

“I am closing the door now. Have a nice night, okay?”

But the adjunct holds it fast, and with whitened knuckles.

“Alan, what’s the matter with you?”

“The matter?” He pauses. “Maybe the matter is that I didn’t shag my girlfriend today.”

“What?”

“You know, if you’d have let me hit you, man, hit you as hard as I could, just once, then I might’ve been satisfied. That would’ve been it. But men won’t behave like men anymore, will we?”

“Let go the door, and be careful how far you take this.”

Alan folds both arms and puts a foot inside the doorframe. “How far *am* I willing to go, Edwin? Well, now, it’s farther than you might think, since, obviously, I haven’t yet gone nearly far enough.”

“Oh, you’ve gone plenty far.”

“Not so. Not so. See, the problem now is that this thing has festered . . . it’s fermented and festered for far too long, and I can see now how much damage you’ve done, how much hurt you’ve caused . . . not to me, that doesn’t matter, what you’ve done to me, but you’ve hurt my kids. See, if it were just me you’d hurt, I’d let it go . . . but you’ve harmed my children, hurt ‘em badly.”

Again, Ed lets fall his chin, stares down at the untied shoe.

“Word up, Edwin. Lemme remind you of a basic lesson in life: there are consequences for every action. There *are* consequences. Why would you think there wouldn’t be repercussions?”

Ed doesn’t answer.

“If you’re gonna mess with people, man, if you’re gonna fuck up their lives, and fail students and cost ‘em their scholarships, and shoot down a man’s tenure and cost him his livelihood, his marriage, his children, there’s got to be a response, a reaction, doesn’t there? Don’t you understand that? You shouldn’t have fucked with my kids!” Alan never raises his voice, never lifts a belligerent finger. “Your actions, Professor Scherer, have had a direct and profound effect on my children. You’ve hurt them. And that, my friend, I cannot abide. Let me speak plainly: I mean to kill you.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I know you to be a God-fearing atheist, and I swear to you, sir, I swear to Allah above that I *will* kill you. Not here, not now . . . maybe never. Here’s how it’ll be: If I ever see you off this campus, out there, out in the world, then you die. That’s fair, isn’t it? If our

paths cross *out there*, I'll take it as a sign from God, a sign that I should do this thing, that I should act, that I should squash you like a cockroach."

"You're such a bully, Alan."

"So long as you're here, protected up in your ivory tower, you're completely safe from me. But if, by pure chance, by divine intervention, or by the trembling hand of fate, *whatever*, if I see you *out there*, out in the world, in a grocery store, at a concert, changing a flat tire by the side of the freaking road—and what are the odds of that, seeing that not once in my nine years here have our paths, yours and mine, intersected out in a public place?—but if our paths do cross, Professor Scherer, then you're dead. I'll chain you to a stake out in the Everglades, I'll slit your belly open, and I'll leave you to the alligators. Don't think I won't."

Ed doesn't wince, but there's the whisper of a flinch. "What does this bullying accomplish? What do you hope to achieve?"

Alan pauses to deliberate this, his left eye twitching. "Well, the way I see it, since you won't call my bluff, I'm wondering if God will." This answer satisfies the adjunct, so he picks up his briefcase. "Well, you shouldn't fret, Edwin. Why take me seriously? Maybe I'm just funning you, ole pal."

"Some fun."

"I think it is!" laughs the adjunct, and he heads for the stairwell, calling back over his shoulder. "You may close your door now, sir. Good night."

Hurrying down the stairs, out the building, out into a thunderstorm, Alan Polk is strangely exhilarated. Inside his car, he pulls off his soaked seven-dollar grey polo, towels off, and puts on his red Phillies coaching shirt. To the south, the clouds don't seem so dark, so maybe the rain-out make-up isn't rained out itself. There's the handle of the wooden bat, exposed, sticking out the baseball bag. He reaches again for it, grips it, looks up to the third floor of Scherer's building, to the one office with a light on. The urge is enormous.

Back at his computer, Professor Scherer is already composing an email to the academic dean, even before the adjunct can put key in ignition: "My credible complaints to the chair continue to fall on deaf ears, so I again turn to you for assistance regarding Alan Polk, since new circumstances have now arisen which make Dr. Polk's continued affiliation with this university all the more intolerable, all the more outrageous, and it's high time you step in and get involved and act like a dean and do the right thing"

V

Leisel and Eric, lawyers in the same firm, have a beautiful new home, custom-built, state-of-the-consumable-art, a Spanish-style villa on an manmade lake within a gated

community called Country Walk, upscale, opulent, wearing no visible scars that a decade ago Hurricane Andrew ravaged this Disney World landscape; like her neighborhood, Leisel seems unscathed by old storms. Alan lives nearby, across from the zoo, in a one-room efficiency he's furnished with a pull-out couch for the kids to sleep on when they spend the night; his ex-wife has never been inside. No, he hasn't looked Leisel directly in the eye since their split-up. He talks to her out the side of his mouth. And the first thing he does, when he gets to the ballfields tonight, is scan for her BMW—where is it? As he strides for the dugout, Coach Alan checks the team's cheering section, bracing himself for Leisel and Eric; they'll rub their married bliss right in his scruffy face. But they're not there . . . nor is Abigail, his seven-year-old. The Peruvian nanny brought Jeff to the game. Good. Alan tips his cap to Immaculata.

As usual, it feels nice to be at a baseball field, soothing; the smell of wet grass and musty gloves, the feel of scuffed horsehide in his hands, sacred. The world's aglitter, the outfield sparkling like a lake of gems. Alan loves the game, and hates it, having played college ball, then two years in the minors, two disappointing seasons, until they'd finally concluded he just wasn't professional caliber. *Not Quite Good Enough, the perfect epitaph. Carve it on my headstone.* "What a day," whispers the adjunct. "What a fucked-up day."

On a ground-out, the little Phillies end the second inning and leave the field. Alan hugs Jeff, too hard, embarrasses the boy, and now Coach high-fives each one of his son's overprivileged teammates, and exhorts them: "Awright, guys, let's hit the ball! Score some runs!"

Before the new inning begins, Leisel and Eric make their inevitable appearance, with towheaded Abigail in tow. Alan nods to them, blows a kiss up to his little girl. Abby smiles brightly, takes a seat beside Eric, holds Eric's hand. *That bastard best keep his mouth off Jefferson tonight, goddamnit.*

High-scoring, the ballgame goes long, and Coach Alan gets rather nasty with the teenage umps—he never used to get like this. When Jeff takes a called third strike for the second time in as many at-bats, the adjunct gives the homeplate umpire an earful, climaxing in a wisecrack: "Why the hell would anybody want to be an ump? Blue, you'll probably grow up someday and be a ticket-writing policeman, by God."

In the top of the sixth, two outs, bases loaded, the Phillies down 13-11, Jeff comes to the plate. After walking four consecutive batters, the Mets' new pitcher has settled down, striking out two-in-a-row. "Be feisty up there," father encourages son. "Take your cuts!" Aggressive, Jeff fouls off a pitch, and now he swings at high fastball, nose high, and Alan applauds . . . but Eric shouts out: "Jefferson, buddy, lay off the tall ones!"

Shut up, asshole! Alan doesn't shout it at the new husband, opting instead for a menacing glower. *Eric, you're a bimbo, a bonehead. When you tell a kid to "lay off," then he'll never take a good cut at the next pitch, regardless how fat it is. Fool!*

Sure enough, Jeff doesn't swing, and strike three is called, and the game ends. "Oh, buddy, no!" moans Eric. "No-o-o! You gotta swing at that; always go down swinging. Swing the bat!"

"Shut the fuck up, Eric!" The words bounce off the concession stand, seem to echo for miles. "You lay off, goddamnit, or I'll teach *you* something 'bout going down swinging."

"Oh, really?" Eric laughs.

"Try me!"

"Talk it up, pal. Keep talking. But you won't *do* shit."

Clang! The baseball Alan had in his pocket chinks against the chain-link fence separating the two men; it would've struck Eric's head. Now Alan flings himself on the barrier, as if he'd climb it, and he has to be forcibly restrained by his assistant coaches, dragging them to the dugout door. Never one to shirk from a scrap, Eric confronts Alan there, and soon their hands on each other, Alan ripping the buttons off Eric's replica Mark McGwire jersey, scratching the larger man's neck up pretty badly. Never able to wrest himself free of his coaches, the adjunct doesn't get to take that good swing, to land that right-cross, but damage is done.

"You're both idiots!" scolds Leisel, shielding Abigail from the fray.

"Dad, stop," sobs Jeff, from the dugout. "Daddy, stop it, please!"

VI

Having fled the ballfields, Alan sits in his car at a Shell station off Bird Road, not really sure how he got there; in his hand, a beer, a tall can of Budweiser, cold, comforting, paid for with plastic. He's parked by the outdoor payphones, at the darkest spot on the property, beneath a cluster of cabbage palms, and he lights a cigarette. *I've done it now, haven't I? Goddamn. I've really freaking done it.* At this very instant, Leisel undoubtedly makes a statement to the police—she'll have surrounded herself with sympathetic witnesses; she'll take photographs of Eric's injuries; she'll use it against Alan in court at their upcoming custody review. *I shouldn't have run. Damn! I should've stayed and defended myself, argued that it was mutual combat.* Maybe he should drive back there. Better still, call the police himself, ask them if he can come in and give his own statement.

Combing the Geo's floorboard, Alan retrieves only one quarter; the phone requires fifty cents. Soon, he's in the throes of a tantrum, scattering books, pennies, scraps of paper, ball-point pens—a concerned onlooker worries that he may be having a seizure. But Alan eventually stops, holds his breath, sits up and runs both hands through his hair, now reclining his seat, closing tight his eyes.

For two full minutes, he sits motionless, hearing his heart thump, listening, the gradual decrescendo from double-time snare-drum to a slow steady hand on sheepskin. He controls his breathing, in through the nose, out through the mouth, breathe in, breathe out. Opening his eyes, he sees black spots. *Control yourself! Do nothing. Say nothing. Feel nothing. Sit here, all night if necessary, until the rancid fever breaks.*

He calms himself, a clumsy calm. He loosens the screws of the vice, dulls the migraine. That's better. What now? Maybe a drive east to the beach, the ocean . . . go for a night-swim, tempt the sharks. That's worked before. That's helped.

On the radio, Alan locates a grainy classical station on the AM band playing the Overture to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*—gorgeous music, perfect music, melodious and dark, lush tone colors—but the adjunct has no tears, even if his sore eyes sting with the salts of dried sweat. The sublime does affect him, however, and he shudders, and the old anger rises again, and an irrepressible longing, and a righteous indignation, and a joy and a sadness; his attempt to feel nothing has failed . . . he feels everything. Everything. But mostly rage and outrage, that old faithful anger. Why aren't there people out in the streets! Where are they? Why aren't they out banging drums, starting fires, causing alarm? Where are they! Jesus, how can these fools sleep at night, so quiet and contented, pretending to be satisfied, presuming that all is right in the world? Hypocrites! Would it be so great a sin for Alan Polk to disrupt the domestic tranquility, to cry out at the top of his lungs: "Enough! Enough fraud and greed! Enough sickness, poverty, ignorance! Enough idleness, gluttony, depravity, deceit! This is not how things are supposed to be! Enough! This isn't how it's meant to be!" Yet, were he to do this, to shout it, to howl it, wouldn't he only be saying to the world: *I am not happy; I am not happy with myself!*

No, walking the streets as the living embodiment of Munch's *The Scream* isn't the answer. While he's yet young, and strong, and sane, while he has energy and enthusiasm what Alan must do is overcome himself, his outrage, his rage; overcome them. How? Abandon the infectious notion that life has everything to do with personal happiness, or personal justice; no, regain a purpose larger and more rational than yourself—Alan knows this. It's so obvious, so simple. What to do when all is lost? Start anew. Do good deeds. Be a better man. It's so simple, and he sees it so clearly now, remembers it, as he sips piss-water beer and smokes mulched tobacco. Overcome and become. Become a better man.

A cool breeze is punctuated by sheet lightning. He rolls down his window, and it's thirst-quenching, heartening. First, he'll set his own house in order: bury the hatchet with Leisel, beg Carlos Blanco for that damned job, or find real work that pays real money, yes, then go out and marry Brigitte Chaisson, yes, and make a home for his kids. Fight for the kids, for Abby and Jefferson; they need him now, more than ever; they need him not only as a daddy, but as a counterbalance to Leisel and Eric, to that environment of material excess and giddy self-gratification. He can show his kids another way to live, other things important, that life is adversity, and from adversity comes strength, character, other intangibles. Compassion can be learned, can be taught. Yes.

First things first—settle tonight’s business with Eric. Call him up and apologize and make things right. Eat crow, a gamey slice of magpie.

Scrounging again for another quarter, scraping beneath his seat, Alan brings up a handful of car-interior debris: paper clips, pop tops, cigarette butts, a golden token for the batting cages. He opens his hand, sifts through the sandy contents, uncovers the precious two-bits, Washington’s cold profile reflected in the flickering 5-watt light. Gripping the coin between thumb and forefinger, he brings it up to his face and rotates it to its tail by pushing the round edge with the ringless ring-finger of his left hand—it’s a Delaware, the first and rarest of the state-series quarters; Caesar Rodney, a lone horseman, rides upside down on a sheet of silver, galloping from nowhere to nowhere. Delaware, Alan’s home state; maybe this is a portent, a good omen . . . if one believes in such things.

Outside it drizzles, so the adjunct puts on his baseball cap as he steps up to the payphone. Feeling better now, roused, slaked, he doesn’t dread the task at hand. He’ll contact Eric, through Leisel’s cell-phone, to see if the issuance of an arrest warrant can be averted, and then he’ll drive back over to Brigitte’s, and if she’s home, he’ll talk with her, settle things with her, see if they can come to an understanding (they should) . . . and if not, well, the luscious image of Nicole Newman’s nubility flashes across his mind, but he quickly suppresses it, consigns it to shadow; no, no, no, stay focused and concentrate on what lies ahead. He breathes in through his nose, holds it. Exhales.

Just as the first quarter jingles down the coin-slot, Alan catches something out of the corner of his eye, a vehicle, a familiar red convertible pulling up to the Shell pumps. He turns his head to be sure. Yes, Alan knows the car, a Mazda Miata, Coca-Cola red—it’s Ed Scherer’s.

The driver exits the Mazda, and Alan studies him—the floodlights of the service island, shining straight down, make it difficult for the adjunct to well-discern the driver’s features, yet the silhouette of the man’s physique, decidedly boyish, and the size of the man’s head, excessively cranial, they’re unmistakable: Edwin Scherer!

“It would be you, wouldn’t it?” whispers Alan, his upper lip a-snarl. “God, what a day!”

Having evaded the fresh rains, Ed now closes and locks down the convertible’s leather top before buying some gas. Forty feet away, the adjunct stands with arms folded, and watches, and waits; in Alan’s clenched fist is the second quarter, the Delaware, and he’ll not flip it. Why should he? Why toss the coin, and see it spin and fall, and hear it clank against the concrete, and roll round and round, like water down a sink-drain, until it comes to rest, and so there’s the verdict, the confirmation? What would be the point, when Alan knows what he must do? If nothing else, with all else gone, the adjunct resolves to be a man as good as his word.

“Did you really think there’d be no consequences, Edwin?” Alan murmurs, his eyes now

slits.

A flash of lightning, distant, illuminates Ed's face, the heavy eyebrows, the down-turned mouth, if only for a split-second.

"Did you think there wouldn't be consequences?"

VII

From the street, Ed Scherer's house stands unassuming, unimpressive; it's a split-level three-bedroom, waterfront, with little to distinguish it from any other modest suburban home in the area, nothing conspicuous, except perhaps that the grass needs cutting and the hedge needs trimming. Who'd have thought this real estate would've doubled in resale value within the dozen years he's lived there? His salary certainly hasn't doubled, hasn't kept up with cost-of-living increases, and the union (of which Ed is an active member) continues to be none too happy about that.

The tenured professor had earlier returned home at about nine o'clock, only to discover his live-in lover asleep, so he'd gone back out for a recreational drive in his drop-top. Now, though, Ed's ready for bed, and that ugly business with Alan Polk a few hours previous is a faded annoyance. Opening the garage door by remote, Ed's convertible cruises in, its driver unaware that he's being hunted.

Alan kills his Geo's headlights, negotiates into Ed's driveway, parks quickly, and throws open the car-door. Nimble, the adjunct slips in under the garage door as it lowers, and he's within striking distance of Ed in an instant. "Consequences, Edwin," Alan snarls to the man's back. "Didn't you understand the consequences?"

When Ed pivots and turns, instinctively lifting his hands to protect his face, Alan swings hard and low, the barrel of the bat cracking against and dislocating the man's left knee-cap, the sound of the blow crisp, clean, something like a woodsman's ax biting into a tree. Ed spins, reels, but doesn't fall, so Alan swings low again, chopping down in a compact stroke, shattering Ed's ankle . . . now, with the man down, Alan rains blows to Ed's head and shoulders, the wood on flesh making thud-sounds mostly, not so crisp anymore, several nauseating thumps.

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