

Isis

by Claiborne Barksdale

Robbie starts with rob, as in stole, as in my heart. So I shouldn't have been surprised six months ago when I woke up to see Robbie Mantis, my husband of eleven years, silhouetted in the door, sun at his back, walking down the hall, suitcase in hand. I should have known. But sometimes even yet, first thing in the morning the wind blows through the gaping hole in my chest.

So, no, I'm not as smart as I've always thought. Maybe I was born dumb. Maybe I'm the slow victim of this plastic, polyurethane, benzene New Orleans shit they call water. But none of this, not the memory of his footsteps or the sun on the suitcase, none of it, means I feel sorry for myself. Because I don't.

Most of the words that apply to men like Robbie are old-fashioned, old-fashioned because maybe using women has become less craven and no new words have to be invented? Scoundrel, cad, knave. Cavalier rogue. I prefer thief. Makes me seem less of a stupid dupe, more a victim of the artfully picked lock by the handsome, rich Venetian with his plunkety-plunk banjo, romantic eyes and colorful scarves.

My best friend Suzie—she with the beefy heart of a musk ox—says, “Oh, for certain he was tricky tricky, Janet, he had his moments, but you got your beautiful, sweet boy, don't you? Thomas?” And I say, sure, but still I say Robbie was a highwayman sliding down ribbons of moonlight up to the door of my heart. A dandified usurper of my life.

Mantis: The day the divorce came final I changed my name back to Fontenot. Otherwise no man would come within a hundred miles. “Ain't female mantises the ones, you know, you

fuck 'em, then they eat you?”

My right hand is hurting where I grabbed hold of the red-hot cast-iron skillet tonight. I try and fail to balance my cigarette on the side of the tub and it falls with a hiss into the water. Oh, well. How long do you expect a Merit Ultralight Menthol would float in the water? I'm guessing many millennia. I stare at my chipped toes way down at the other end, have a sip of wine, and listen to the drip drip, turn the radio on.

My hand isn't that bad. Not as bad as my left thumb last night or right hip and buttock last week. I'm falling apart, collapsing, like the proverbial one-hoss shay. Thirty-four years of an iron constitution and then, wham! the fucking rust begins.

For now I will console myself with thoughts of the morrow. First thing when I am healed I will strip this ugly bathroom wallpaper—Robbie liked bright green, it pepped him up—down to the ancient worm-gouged swamp cypress walls, to the previous lives, the vermicular code that if looked at and thought about just right will give me a clue to a form of happiness I didn't even know was possible. Then I'm thinking something in the twilight palette: pouting pink, pale moon rising.

Candles light the bathroom like fireflies. I sing along to the radio. I have a terrible voice but can carry a tune. A little more wine. My fingers are shriveled. They need fresh polish too. I'll tend to them later, during the review of the day's rushes. Need to get out, need to grow up, 'cept I don't want to. Tom Waits for no man.

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Further confirmation of my dimness: It took

me until the second date, late, around two, conjugal bliss spaced among shots of peppermint schnapps, to figure out that Robbie was Venetian as in the southern tip of Louisiana. Not Italy. Not the same. About an hour south of New Orleans on a cloudy day. The self-proclaimed “End of the World.” Like that’s a big tourist draw. Talk about an acquired taste. Like Communist-era Hungary. Like crossing the Carpathians for a dinner date with Vlad the Impaler. Everybody buried above ground and it smells like it.

Next date Robbie took me down there, got me drunk, we went dancing at a fish house to some combination country/blues/Zydeco, then he wooed me the night long playing his banjo and singing his songs inside the echoing, crumbling family vault. We wound up at a Super 8 where we ordered in some crawfish jambalaya, watched *Ellen*, and fucked.

That night he took me to his ancestral home to meet the matriarch, Granmama Tee-Maw. She used to be a beauty, he said, and it pains her now to think what she’s become, bent and gouty. So don’t look.

We stayed up all night listening to J. J. Cale, eating Saltines and sardines and fried pork patties, drinking good bourbon, and me getting my clock cleaned playing match-pot booray with Tee-Maw—who I managed not to look at even when I lit her Winstons—and Robbie’s four sisters. Then at five when the sun was coming up Tee-Maw fixed up a stack of greasy pancakes, scrambled eggs, and more pork patties, and a speed-eating contest busted out. I was trying to fit in. Gobble gobble. No need for details but let’s just say not one minute after I put down my fork something inside me demanded immediate goddamn release. Could’ve been one of those nutrias outside in the ditch. Tee-Maw was just this side of calling in the priest and the neighborhood juju squad. I was in there on and off most of the day.

Then next day Robbie dragged me out at

sunup on a chartered deep-sea fishing boat—*The Master-Baiter*—some folks’d rather fish than fuck down there—and we bounced twelve miles in rough water out to the oil rigs. We used these little bitty stinky squids for bait, like getting a hook into Jell-O, fishing for reds and king mackerel and didn’t catch anything but drum fish bulls with their assholes blown out. Your fishing pole just went limp, bloop! Like catching a top-loading Kelvinator.

Drunk and sunburned as shit by ten, still trying to fit in, adopting the local patois, I asked the captain, “Oh, Cap’n my Cap’n? How you cook a drum fish?”

An he say, “Little Lady, you berl ’em.”

“Berl ’em?”

“Yeah, berl ’em for ’bout a hour, meat just drop off de bone.”

An I say, “Hell, Cap’n, you put a buffalo head in berlin’ water for a hour—” and Robbie swung a mighty drum at me to shut me up.

It rained all twelve miles back. I rode the whole way zipped up in a duffel bag below deck. When we got back to dock Robbie unzipped the bag and asked me to marry him and I said you bet your boots.

Yes, Ladies and Gentlemen. That’s who I am, was. Fuck. I was twenty-one, I didn’t know nothing. That’s who I married. That’s how stupid I was. Am.

Tee-Maw approved. I was a trooper. We had the wedding in a scenic swamp convenient to State Highway 23 near appropriately named Port Sulphur. Very intimate, just Suzie and my mom and Tee-Maw and Robbie’s sisters and Father Boudreaux, the coonass Catholic priest who looked exactly like one you’d stick on your dashboard. Every one of the sisters was bigger than Robbie, a hundred pounds of scarlet taffeta among them, but light on their toes. We had the ceremony on two of those speedy buggies with big fans on the back, festooned with golden Louisiana iris and daisies and reeds. Ibis fat as foot-

balls perched up in the Spanish moss and alligators slapped their tails vying to catch my black-eyed-Susan bouquet. We could barely hear the priest for the frogs. A thousand terrapin sliders sat on cypress knees sunning themselves like bridesmaids. It was a really quite beautiful fall day, the way the sun filtered down through the moss. The mosquitoes weren't that bad. And those buggies did permanent damage to my hearing but it seemed worth it at the time.

A week to the day after the wedding Robbie said he wanted us to charter a Lear to Vegas and get me an all-expenses-paid boob job. I told him take 'em or leave 'em, Bosco. Shoulda thought about that beforehand when you might've had the leverage. He laughed about that. He had a good sense of humor, killer eyes and smile, charming as a snake. And like Ava said about Frank, yeah, he may be short, but he's all boudin. False advertising.

Robbie could sell shit to the circus. You should see our house. Six thousand square feet under roof, long winding drive through magnolia trees, giant veranda and columns, pickled white inside and out, four-car garage with its own French windows, widow's walk up top. Not a ninety-degree angle in the whole place. Built totally out of old Louisiana bald cypress salvaged out of Ninth Ward houses after Katrina. Tee-Maw was our unelected interior decorator. I come in one day and a chandelier made out of raccoon dick bones—to ensure fertility—is hanging over the master bed, and she's turned the attic into some sort of Egyptian shrine with a lot of apses and niches. I had to get used to the chandelier but had no problem with the attic. Who doesn't like a good Egyptian room when you need to get away from everything? I've got it stuffed with those twinkly lights and a bunch of cool shit: tall plaster bird and cat statues, a chaise longue covered with a bona fide tent that belonged to the pirate Lafitte, Coptic icons whose symbols I'm going to decipher one of these days,

and tons of unnecessary plastic objects from Krazy Kats. Except for the Isis Room the house weighs on me. Too many ghosts and goblins, need to give it a good smudge to rid it of Robbie. Many a day while Thomas is at school I either sit out in the Mercedes with the air-conditioner on or head up to the Isis room where I get on the chaise longue with a good book, a refreshing drink, and Blondie turned up full-blast.

Even though Robbie's vamoosed, Tee-Maw and I are still on real good terms. She's as torn up at him as I am, one minute wailing, next minute calls him a little rat-ass capon. But she likes me fine. After all, me aside, Thomas is her great-grandson. Couple weeks ago she FedExed me an ice chest full of redfish and duck gumbo.

I still couldn't pick her out of a line-up.

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End-of-April, a month after the highway robber hightailed it to Chicago without hardly saying boo, with divorce and custody issues picking up steam, I decided for a variety of reasons to video the inside and outside of the house: 360 degrees, 365 days, 24/7. Suzie and I were sitting up late and I told her my plan.

She disapproved. "Sounds fucking creepy."

"Attic-to-basement, Suzie. Magic Isis room, everything. Lights, action, cameras!"

"Tell me not the bathrooms."

"Haven't decided."

"What for?"

"Security."

"What security? Fuckin' Robbie's not coming back, Janet. We hope? This ain't his idea of the good life, okay? Get a gun."

"Can't. Thomas."

"Okay, then, get a dog. You put in cameras and first thing you know Thomas's got me wiping my ass on fucking Facebook or whatever."

"Not that kind of security. The kind where if Robbie tries any funny business, like tries to get custody over slight misstep x, y or z, I pull up

the evidence. Looky here, Your Honor, look what a perfect mom I am, what a ideal household I have provided for my son. Look at him eating his turnip greens, look at him flossing. Plus the un-examined life isn't worth living. Or something like that."

Mom thought it was nuts too.

Jesus it cost a lot but I had the entire house wired inside and out except, per Suzie's demand, the bathrooms. That state-of-the-art new surveillance thing you can talk to: Alfred the Butler. Uses those motion-detector cameras that tell hunters what time the bear crosses the fucking log. I download around midnight in bed every night. They're funny, for the most part. That's inaccurate. Boring for the most part but funny stuff almost every day.

Mom calls them movies. Like: "Don't those movies make you uncomfortable, self-conscious?"

"At first they did. Now, not so much."

"Well, I'm not going to be in your movies. When I visit, I'm cutting off every one of them."

"You can cut them off if you want to, Mom. Individually. Look 'em in the eye and say, 'Alfred, quit it!' But you've gotta mean it."

She shook her head. "When Dad left me, I wanted to stay under the covers. You, you want every square inch on display. Color me baffled."

Now Suzie comes over and flounces all around the place like an old Bourbon Street stripper, and Mom walks around like the Queen of Denmark.

Like I say, I watch the daily rushes at night, last thing before sleep. Fast-forward and delete fourteen to sixteen hours of the sun moving across the floor, of me walking into Thomas's room in the middle of the night to check on him, keep the seven or eight minutes of something worth watching, something worth taking note of. Reading the obituaries in *The Times-Picayune* with Thomas's arm thrown over my shoulder, him jumping up and down on his bed, sliding down the hall in his socks, throwing a tennis ball off

the back of the house and trying to catch it. For better or worse, we're neither one of us the least bit self-conscious anymore although sorry to say I most often have a slightly bilious look on my face.

Does that sound like a normal ratio? Seven minutes a day worth holding onto, flush the rest down the toilet?

In two years, see, when he's eleven, he won't hug me, in seven he won't talk to me except to ask for money for his date. In fifteen he'll check on me every other Sunday from Orlando or San Diego. So I'm putting the best stuff in a highlight reel compilation, footage for a rainy day, a little something in the old hip pocket.

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A worrisome trend of physical mishaps has occurred recently:

Last week I'm up on the so-called Safe-Tee stepstool, reaching on tip-toe in the corner cabinet for the porkchop platter, feel something soft like maybe a goddamn dead mouse—turned out to be one of Thomas's socks—scream and fall backwards and hit my head and almost break my hip that still has the bruise, less purple, more sick dull yellow, still the shape of the Indian subcontinent.

Tonight's family feature: the flying frying pan and the cornbread: When I for some reason grab the hot skillet, I holler "Sonofabitch!" the skillet sails within an inch of Thomas's head like an Olympic discus thrower, he's standing there with his mouth open. Then my hand's in the sink soaking and he's pouring a glass of milk and then the two of us are sitting on the kitchen floor pigging out, blowing the germs off, spreading butter on my hand and the cornbread, pouring on molasses and stuffing it hot in our mouths and laughing and grunting.

Or us walking in last night at 9:47:23 with the huge bandage where I'd slammed the car door on my thumb after picking Thomas up

from fall ball. He was stuck out lonely in right field all day again. I was so pissed. I'm going to call the coach. My thumb was killing me, I thought maybe I'd busted it, so after we went to Popeye's we went to Doc in the Box where we sat in the waiting room for an hour eating chicken and apple turnovers and playing Alphabet Animals. B: barracuda, bullfrog, bonobos, etc. Nurse Wretched wanted to call me a cab, asked me how much I'd had to drink. I told her: a, none of your goddamn business; and, b, not a drop.

Not that discretion has ever been my strong suit but I'm not gonna show those curated clips to anyone, of course not Robbie, not even to Suzie, even though like I say there's some pretty funny stuff there. Like scarfing the cornbread so fast Thomas spit it back up laughing. Like walking in the back door with my thumb the size of a Sylvania lightbulb. Not to anyone.

Here's an extra benefit and now that I really think about it probably the real reason I wired the house: object-lesson quality. Here's how you look after one drink, Janet, here's what you look like after two. See your mouth there, starting to droop a little. Maybe laying it on a wee thick? Three and you're on a trip to the moon. Here's where you almost cut your finger off slicing carrots and holler "Fucking Fuckwad!" That's funny. Here's Thomas walking into his room and slamming the door and licking and lighting an entire box of Diamond Kitchen matches until the room is full of smoke and he disappears. Hilarious.

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Thomas knocks on the door. "Telegram for Fontenot!"

"Just a sec, Sweetie." I turn off the radio, get out of the tub, almost slip but catch the edge of the sink, check my teeth, wrap myself in a towel, open the door. He stands there biting his nails. He's up to something.

"What you got, Bud?"

"I decided to have a Halloween party."

"Really? On Halloween?" It's Tuesday. Halloween is Thursday. He looks at me like I'm an idiot.

He's gotten shorter since Robbie's departure, relatively of course. And fatter. Become completely anti-social even with the few friends he has. Last spring he asked me if I thought he might make it to the Red Sox, and now he wants to quit fall ball. He swears no one is bullying him.

"Who's coming?"

"Everybody in my class."

I give him a big 100-watt smile and a Jolly Green Giant thumbs up. "I think that's a terrific idea, Sweetie! That'll be fun! We better get to work on the invitations. You can hand—"

"I already invited them."

"You did? When?"

"This morning. After the Pledge I said, 'Hey, everybody come over to my house for Halloween.'"

"And what time will the party be starting?"

"Five."

"Alright. Well. Good to know. Thanks for the heads up."

He bounces down the hall. He is a nine-year-old boy susceptible to deep feelings. He looks back out his bedroom door, points up at the camera behind me. "We're gonna have to turn off all of those."

Yessir!

I close the bathroom door, carefully put down the wine and stand on the scales. I've lost a couple more I didn't need to lose although my face, complete with pimples, still remains essentially round, jawbones jutting maybe a little more, the prow of a ship. I'm a jigsaw puzzle where God said fuck it and smushed everything together whether they fit or not. My Orangina hair sticks up like Little Orphan Annie. I'm gonna cut back on the tea and cigs and coffee and Dr. Peppers and get some of those Crest strips, the ones you paste on to give a dazzling smile. I manage to balance on the scales for al-

most three seconds on one foot. You'd think standing on one leg would focus your weight and make you weigh more but nothing changes.

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It's two o'clock, due at Dr. Machulis in forty minutes, party starts at five. I'm at the farmers' market rollin' rollin' rollin' my buggy full of red and yellow mums, Indian corn, Bee-Loud Glade honey, and ten small-to-medium Bastrop pumpkins. I'm thinking twenty kids, a few parents, Mom and Suzie for back-up. Say twenty-five total. Thomas hasn't been exactly precise. We're gonna have jack-o-lantern teams. One pumpkin and one dull knife per carefully-spaced team, adult supervision. *Isn't this fun, kids? Every moment a learning opportunity! No stabbing!*

I roll up to the money-taker under the tent. He's got his green metal box with the dollar bills and coins just so in their little spots. A nice breeze is blowing. He glances up at me: pale, wire-rim glasses, checked, short-sleeve shirt, khaki pants, white socks, sneakers. Here is no rogue. He's trustworthy as an open-face sandwich. The boy you never saw in school, one of the millions. Wonder what he thinks about me. I'll tell you what he thinks about you, Janet: Nothing. He's thinking about what he's going to have for dinner.

I walk up to him and say, "Trick or treat!" and he acts like he hasn't heard me. There's a line behind me. He hands me my change without looking at me.

This is going to sound weird but when I was in high school I'd lie awake writing my obituary. Nothing glorious, no heroics. Just cold, hard if a little mawkish facts about a Life Well-Lived and Good-Bye Everybody. Much-beloved Janet Fontenot died last Thursday evening surrounded by loved ones holding her hands and weeping silently by her bed. No *intimations*, I wasn't planning anything, no suicidal ideation. Just looking into a future that didn't include me in it. Put me

on the lay-away plan Mr. Funeral Man, give me a plot with a nice view. You can be the last one to let me down.

I've always been a big obit reader. Yard sales and obits are the only reason I take the *Picayune*. Thomas and I read one the other day about a woman off Chantilly who grew exotic breeding roosters in her backyard until one morning she fell down dead while feeding them and they "reacted violently." Thomas asked me what I thought that meant and I said it could either mean sorrow or they pecked her eyes out. Or both. He asked me what did I want in my obituary and all I could tell him was things I definitely *didn't* want in there: She never met the love of her life although she thought she did on several occasions, she didn't like to dance in the rain, she met countless strangers. I told him to say I loved him, of course, but otherwise he could just run a picture of me, bilious yet still hopeful, staring out the window. That would suit me just fine. And if he felt like it maybe something along the lines of much-beloved and greatly-missed. But don't go overboard.

I roll the cart to the car and put everything in the back seat with the donuts, melting cupcakes, chips, Halloweenies with Fireball BBQ sauce, punch fixin's, and a recently opened jug of Gordon's.

Maybe I should try out a different hair product.

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Two-hundred-year-old tortoise Dr. Benjamin Machulis studies my eyes, tongue, right buttock cheek, arm, thumb, how hard I kick him when he taps my knee, all close-up and personal. He hums while he stares at the wall and puts his hands around my throat. It tickles. He asks me questions. I go to him in large part because he's an openly gay, closeted Socialist, and I don't mind so much when he goes poking around down there. Plus he always has good jazz on pub-

lic radio. A fellow semi-sub-rosa in the land of the blind. I examine the top of his head, frosty as cooked Italian icing. I'm tempted to reach down there and give him a good scratch.

He palpates my abdomen. Which also tickles.

"What do you do that for?"

"Erotic function."

"*Erotic func-?*"

"Aortic. Relax, Janet. Eyesight the same?"

"Seems to be. Although how can you tell, really?"

"Sleep?"

"Lunesta. Three milligrams." Not that they always do the job.

"Bowels?"

"So-so."

"Stamina?"

On and on and I tell him we need to make it snappy. Yes, doctor, yes. I've been a little turned around, have lately had difficulty with skilled and essential bodily functions such as swallowing, squinting, grinning, toenail clipping, bending to pick up socks. For whom the belch tolls. Pronouncing certain words. I've never been able to snap my fingers but never wanted to. Robbie snapped his fingers and whistled incessantly, absolute red flags.

In fifth grade I won hopscotch every morning and hot-pepper jump rope and bean bag. Queen of the Jungle Gym. Cartwheels the length of the front yard that stopped traffic. Recently my legs have started to go to sleep when I sit on the toilet for like two minutes and I stumble when I stand up. My hands sometimes are numb. And, yes, the very suggestion of physical activity makes me sweat. Not long ago I could simultaneously brush my teeth left-handed, stand on one leg, and pat my stomach. Now I get dizzy and have to shut my eyes. I tell him this and he prescribes some new medicine full of z's and x's that's supposed to either level me out or pep me up. Why not both, I ask him.

I remind him he put me on uppers when Robbie split and two weeks after I started I was on Bayou Road singing "Land of a Thousand Dances" with Wilson Pickett at the top of my lungs, doing the pony, and ran a 4-way doing sixty in broad daylight. I told him he was talking to someone happy as pie to pay that goddamn ticket.

He walks with me down the hall to have my blood drawn. I ask him if that's like Etch A Sketch and he tells me to lay off the gin.

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Four-thirty. Coming down to the wire. Suzie and Mom are helping me get things ship-shape. Last minute atmospherics and food prep that Mom loves doing so I let her take care of everything while I recline on the sofa fatigued as wilted spinach.

Mom calls from the kitchen and says we should've had deviled eggs. She asks if I got any dip and I say no. "Use the Ranch in the fridge."

Suzie holds up my medicine bottle. "What's this?"

"Nerves."

"Nerves like nervous or nerves like they're not working like they're supposed to?"

"He didn't say."

"Did you ask?"

"I can't remember."

Except for the booze and shitty ex-husbands, Suzie and I actually have very little in common even though she's my best friend. I have other old friends most all of whom I'm sorry to say seem more and more like obligations. I'm one of those people who loves other people more at a distance. The litmus test: Do you smile when their number pops up or do you wince? Oh great or oh shit? Nine times out of ten I don't answer. I'm becoming horrible in countless ways.

Ox-hearted Suzie needs by her own admission to lose ten, but is still lovely and graceful. She can also be brutal. She's a devout, pro-life

Catholic who gives up sweets and white bread for Lent, won't go to bed until the fifth date, minimum. Whereas I think a woman ought to be able to do what she wants with her body and that organized religion is the bane of mankind. I used to be lovely and semi-Catholic but post-Robbie am a pile of steaming, superstitious, agonized, post-Papal guts walking the widow walk in composition soles. Mom's always cutting out beauty and health advice: Ten Tips for Puffy Eyes!

Suzie meanwhile still wears V-shaped sweaters and sprinkles gold glitter on her boobs and dangles a little crystal crucifix between them. I told her now there's a goddamn fishing lure. You should hear the sound her feet make sliding across the floor. Surveillance system or not, she's comfortable as an old dog. Too bad neither one of us likes pussy. After a while the one thing that Robbie and I had in common.

I need to dial it back, need Phoebe Snow to pull a big ocean liner up out front and carry me away. Avec Thomas and Mom and Suzie of course.

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I check the front porch light again. Twined orange crepe paper rings the living room walls in delicate swoops. Plastic bats are hung from the chimney with care. Suzie and Mom with big witches' hats. One-hundred percent black candles. Spooky mood music. Three dozen cupcakes, two gallons of Hi-C and Nehi orange soda nestled in melting ice in galvanized washtub. Three twelve-packs of Fritos, and, as of five-twenty-seven—twenty-seven minutes after kickoff—a grand total of three smelly boys, including Thomas.

First to arrive, physically precocious Charley Malzone, whose feet are as big as dinner plates and who should be in the fourth grade if not the fifth but isn't. Thomas warned me that Charley has a thing about bosoms. He said Charley's the publisher of the underground, destined to be a

classic, *Biggest Hits*. Say it over and over, fast.

Charley stares at Suzie's cross while she scoops some ice cream for him.

I ask him, "Where is everybody?"

"Tim Jefferson's house."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, invitations went out last week. In the mail. They're having a real magician, a space tent, and make-your-own banana splits. Thomas and me weren't invited."

"Oh."

Suzie bends low and hands him his ice cream. He doesn't budge.

I tell him, "Just you wait, Charley, you're gonna be glad you're here."

Next, here's possessed, malevolent Nazi Youth Tod Pitts, proud boy with a slanted head, big ears and eyes close together. No pumpkin knife for you, Pal. Tonight he's a pirate. He jumps up and tries to stab the porch camera with his broadsword then starts screaming at it, Germanically—*Onoffonoffonoff!*—seeing if he can make it smoke. He makes me nervous. Suzie drags him inside and swats him on the head.

Now, five-thirty . . . Wait! There's the bell! A late-arrival! Thomas runs to the door. Please, please let it be precious India Roberts. He's been sweet on her since Doodlebugs.

Hiding behind Thomas, in slinks Anton Durette, hugging the wall, the eyes and shyness of a pup seal about to get nailed with a baseball bat. Suzie almost melts on the floor in helpless, undignified love.

After a few more minutes of no one else coming and the boys eating and burping, it's time for Goddess Isis to ascend like the rising moon, sit on her attic throne in her skullcap, smoke a Beedi by candlelight with heavily-kohled, evil-eye eyes, surrounded by backyard purple gazing ball and yellow mums, a vintage set of ornate Tarot cards from Krazy Kats. All being captured in living color.

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What's taking them so long? I'm shivering up here. I hear screaming and running and the front door slams. Hope Herr Tod hasn't killed anybody. Little hand grenade'll probably try to kill me. Oh, look, Tod, it's the fucking Grim Reaper. Sorry.

Finally, Suzie, in a walk-on role as Charon, comes up, hands me a new drink. "O Queen of the Moon, I regret to inform you that the night is young and we're not."

"What's that mean?"

She shrugs. "Means your services are not required."

"Nobody?"

"No future tonight except your own. That beautiful last kid whatchamacallit freaked."

"But Thomas was so excited, he helped me get it all set up." The table and his boom box, rode his bike to Walmart and got "Curse of the Ancients" from the deep-discount bin.

"Yeah, well." She pats my shoulder and bums a smoke. "Maybe later, you know, when he gets back."

This hits me like a whammy. "Ah."

"Yeah." Suzie puts on one of the scarves and plops on the chaise longue. She's plastered as one of the cats.

"But where are they?"

She waves her hand to indicate the whole big wide world. "Where nine-year-old boys're supposed to be, Janet."

Out the door, into the night, mouths frothing with cupcakes, a pack of wild dogs with their sacks and swords. Suzie goes downstairs to pee and I stand up in front of the camera and raise my right hand:

"The reason I'm drinking so fast, Ladies and Gentlemen of the jury, is 'cause I'm trying to wash down this sudden hard-boiled-egg lump in my throat. Can anyone please explain to me the survival benefit of a lump in the throat?" Nobody answers. Then I ask if anyone knows the exact

word for when we are confronted with undeniable reality. Again, silence.

Suzie and Mom come back up in a little while and we're having a drink and Mom says get over it. She reminds me how many times I stood her up. I shuffle the cards and lay them out. The directions say go with your gut. I tell them they're both gonna marry somebody so rich and so crazy they don't even have to live with him. Suzie says she'd settle for a good enema.

After an hour they split. Both of them tell me they love me, yeah yeah yeah. I put an old Webb Wilder on the boom box, turned up to the max, "Horror Hayride," go down and fix another, come back up and fill the Isis room with foggy, runic smoke, build card-house after card-house, no ninety-degree angles, and blow them over until I get the future I deserve.

I know I promised Thomas I'd cut off all the cameras. Sue me. I left this one on, ladies and gentlemen, so that when he's old and gray and snoozing by the fire he can tee this up on his TV and remember when he was nine and I sat up here like a goofball waiting for him to come home. All that's important to know, don't you think? Not so he'll look after me when I'm old and gray, but just so he'll know how much he was loved. So, yes, yes, I drink and smoke and look like the Sunday comics when the colors run, and, yes, I still walk into his room at three in the morning and stare at him. Doesn't everybody?

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