Carnegie Mellon University
Research Showcase

Dietrich College Honors Theses | Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences

11-1-2009

Death of a Lover

Brian J. Burdulia
Carnegie Mellon University

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.cmu.edu/hsshonors

Recommended Citation
Burdulia, Brian J., "Death of a Lover" (2009). *Dietrich College Honors Theses.* Paper 75.
http://repository.cmu.edu/hsshonors/75

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Dietrich College of Humanities and Social Sciences at Research Showcase. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dietrich College Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Research Showcase. For more information, please contact research-showcase@andrew.cmu.edu.

Death of a Lover

A Novella by Brian J. Burdulia

Part I

James Merritt sat with his back to the wall. He and Mark were seated at a table in the farthest corner of a dimly lit bar. His friend was nursing a beer while James had been drinking rye from the first.

“He knows. You know that, don’t you?” Mark was uneasy, rapping his fingers on the table.

James was spinning his glass between his thumb and his middle finger, watching it glide on the pool of water that had gathered on the table. He lifted it and drank slowly, tensing the corners of his mouth against the bite of the whiskey.

“Of course I know. She told me. It was a bit after the fact, but she told me that they spoke. That she told him everything that had been going on.”

“Who?” Mark asked

“Beth, of course.” James had come to realize over the course of the previous 24 hours that the events in his life had reached the point where something was about to happen. Momentum was building to the point that no longer could everything remain static. He would have to either confront matters head on or run from them all together, leaving them behind, and not return. With every round he would change his mind as to which option was the more prudent.

“Do you know what she said? She said she felt compelled to tell him, *compelled*.” James, squinting even in the dimness of the low bar lights, had the same grimace on his face that generally comes with drinking hard liquor.

“She blindsided me. I know how that sounds, the hypocrisy of it given the circumstances, but I still wasn’t prepared for it. Honestly, I don’t know how I would

have prepared myself for it anyway, but it still seems like a hell of a thing to do to someone, regardless of all the rest."

The "all the rest" that James Merritt was referring to was a brief and secret affair that had been going on between himself and Beth Reynolds. Neither one of them expected it, but even the unexpected has consequences. Beth had been engaged at the time she and James began the affair. Had it been anyone else, James could have simply walked away, having lost only Beth in the process. As it was, Eric, Beth's fiancé at the time was James' oldest friend and the one person he wished it wasn't, and as long as he stayed there was just no way to escape what they had done. He knew this and had made up his mind to leave.

"I would be more concerned with Eric if I were you. Who knows what he's liable to do." Mark was uncomfortable with the entire exchange. He felt an obligation to both of his friends. Still, he couldn't help but feel as though he were doing something wrong by sitting and talking with James. It wasn't a matter of loyalty, but of decency. He wasn't certain if it was even the kind of thing that should be openly discussed.

"Oh, quit being so damn dramatic." James dug a crushed pack of Marlboros out of his jacket and fished inside for the last cigarette. "I really don't think it will come to anything like that. He's not the type. Plus, there's an etiquette in matters like this." He put the cigarette in the side of his mouth, but his lips were dry and the filter stuck awkwardly on them.

"Is there? Is there really?"

"Of course there is," James finally lit the cigarette and put the match out in the ring his glass had left on the table. "I've got to have an opportunity to leave. He has to

give me that at least. If I were to stay, sure, something might happen, but Beth's made it clear where she stands. I have to go."

The bar was full, and someone bumped Mark from behind. He turned to see who it was and lifted his hand with a nod to show there was no harm done. James finished his rye and pulled the ashtray closer.

"Where are you going to go?" Mark asked, turning back to the table.

"I'm not sure, Bahamas maybe."

"The Bahamas?" Mark couldn't find the practicality of it.

"Yes, the Bahamas. Seems as good a place as any, don't you agree?" James raised his eyebrows and took a long drag off of his cigarette. He let the smoke lazily curl out of his mouth before he blew the rest high into the air. "I think I'll use this as an excuse to get out of the country for a little while. To be honest, I think the Bahamas will be the perfect place. I can put this whole ordeal out of my head, and all of that sun and the Caribbean water should be just what I need. It should be healthy."

"You're going there to drink rum for God knows how long," Mark was looking intently into his glass, "and what are you going to do for money? It seems like you haven't thought any of this out. How are you going to live?" Mark fished something out of the foam of his beer and inspected it in the light.

"I've got some money I was going to travel with. If I slum it, it should last as long as I need it to." James said, content with his explanation.

The two men fell silent. Mark straightened the cuffs of his shirt and smoothed the front of his jacket. James looked absently around the room. There was a couple sitting at

the bar, facing each other with their legs interlocked. When the waitress came by James caught her attention by holding out his empty glass and pointing to it.

Mark was scratching his neck just above the collar of his shirt when the waitress returned with James' rye. "I just don't understand why you didn't tell me."

"Oh Hell, Mark," James said, rubbing his eyebrows, "how could I? Don't say things like that when you know damn well the circumstances. I mean, this wasn't something that we could all go out and discuss over beers. There were *circumstances* that had to be considered."

"At least tell me how it happened. I never had the slightest inclination."

"Believe me, it was a surprise to me as well. I didn't expect any of this. I know this is what people always say in these kinds of situations, but it was a complete shock. I think to Beth too." James had grown quieter and was now cradling his rye without taking regular sips. He lowered his eyes and for a moment seemed to be wholly present in his exchange with Mark. "I want you to know one thing."

Mark, sitting completely upright since he had arrived, leaned in, almost knocking the pint in front of him over with his chest.

"It never had anything to do with Eric."

"I know, James. I know you would never do anything like that. Not for those reasons, anyway."

"No," James said, lowering his voice, filling it with a sincerity and urgency that usually emerges as sobriety fades. "It's as if, when I was with Beth, I had never even known him. Is that terrible to say? That I would have done what I did no matter what?"

"I see what you're saying, James," Mark said, though he could hardly find anything within himself that even approached sympathy. "It was about Beth, not Eric."

"No." James' voice was getting louder. "Well, yes, maybe, but you don't understand. If I had met Beth on the street, you see, neither one of us ever having known each other, it wouldn't have been any different, and I know she feels the same way," James said, slamming his fist into the table to emphasize his point. "Eric was never a part of the equation. The only reason he is now is because of chance. It's just chance that he and I were friends long before he ever started seeing Beth."

Mark was looking around to see if the sudden passion and growing volume of James' speech was drawing the attention of others at the bar.

"What happened between me and Beth was more fate than anything else, but the fact that she was with Eric, *that* was chance."

James was trying to look at Mark, but his eyes kept drifting and settling somewhere just over his friend's shoulder.

"James, I get it. Keep your voice down. People are beginning to stare."

"You don't understand. You don't understand a damned thing about it. About how this was a coincidence more than anything else."

Mark was beginning to run out of patience. The frustration in James' voice made him believe that, more than anything else, he was trying to convince himself of the truth in what he was saying.

"Oh come off it," Mark finally broke in. "You're getting awfully drunk and you're making a scene."

"So what if I'm drunk? You still don't understand. You probably think this had everything to do with Eric."

"I do not, but I'm getting tired of sitting here listening to you make like this was something that was out of your control."

"But don't you see? It was. It was out of my control. I had no idea it was going to happen. I was as surprised as you."

"Don't, James. Don't try to play the victim with me. This isn't any kind of situation I want to be in either. We've all been close for a long time, and to be honest, it's pretty low what you did. I'm not saying it's your fault or Beth's or anything like that, but the way it turned out is pretty low."

"I know, but that's the *chance* of it. That's what I've been saying…"

"Stop it," Mark had forgotten about the attention he was worried James was drawing to the table and began to match him in tone and volume. "Eric is damned decent and didn't deserve this, least of all from someone he trusted."

James' eyes were still wandering, but the look on his face had begun to betray his words. If he couldn't convince Mark of what he was saying, he had no choice but to question it himself. His eyes weren't as bright as they were a moment ago, and he was sure that Mark was right.

"Let's just get off of it, what do you say?" Mark asked, taking a deep breath and sipping his beer. He wiped the corners of his mouth after, adding that, "there's no need to get all upset about it at this point."

It hadn't yet gotten very late, but the room was beginning to quiet down. Of the two bartenders, only one, a young lady who wore her blonde hair in curls, was still

serving drinks. The other, a good-looking middle-aged man in a white shirt, leisurely washed glasses at the sink. James watched the couple who had been sitting together at the bar get up. The man put his arm low across the woman's back and she leaned her head onto his shoulder as they walked to the door.

"How is he?" James asked with disarming sincerity.

"Eric?"

James nodded.

"Honestly, I think he knew," Mark said, and James could sense that he was uncomfortable telling him these things. "I feel as though he knew it the entire time. Maybe not the specifics, but he knew that something was going on, and I think that killed him. It ate at him, like when something is broken but you don't know what it is so you can't do anything to fix it. It was that kind of frustration. He had an idea though."

"Have you spoken to him recently?"

"Yes, we spoke yesterday. He was on his way to meet Beth, talk some things out, you know? We had dinner at that little place over near Prospect."

"So they're back on good terms, he and Beth?" James felt the particular discomfort of someone who couldn't stop himself from looking for answers to questions he would rather not ask.

"I don't know how *good* their terms are, but he seemed very calm talking about it. How they were going to have to get it all out in the open, be adults about the whole thing. It's strange, really. They were never on bad terms. Throughout the whole thing, they kept up a good front. It's like they skipped over all the unpleasantness and moved right to putting things back together." Mark paused, pulled his glass directly under him and

looked down into the beer. “I’ll tell you one thing though, he seems happy. I think he knows that he can be with her again, and that she’s only with him now. He seems content about that.”

James finished the rest of the rye and placed the empty glass on the table. The waitress took notice and began to come over to get him another, but he waved her off.

“Damn things sneak up on you,” James said rising from the table. He fished in his pocket and pulled out a handful of crumpled bills. He paid for his drinks and Mark’s beer and left enough extra for a tip.

“Where are you going?” Mark asked him, nervous at his friend’s sudden motivation.

“Home. I’m drunk and it’s late.”

“James, you’re not really going to leave, are you? That was just the booze, right?” For some reason the idea of James leaving didn’t sit well with Mark.

James laughed and patted Mark on the shoulder. They decided they would get lunch the next day, and James left for the door. Outside, the air was still cool for the beginning of spring, and he pulled the collar of his jacket tight around his neck. He leaned off of the curb and threw his hand up at the first taxi he saw.

The cab pulled up outside of Beth Reynolds’ apartment. James sat in the backseat. The driver told him they were there, but he didn’t move.

“This your place?”

James closed his eyes and leaned his head back onto the window.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

He gave the driver his own address and then nodded off as they pulled out onto Division. James Merritt would be leaving New York in the morning. This much he knew.

* * *

The next morning was crisp and clear. James spent most of it at a small diner eating fried egg sandwiches and drinking black coffee. The diner was on a corner next to one of those neighborhood bodegas, and he sat at the counter facing the window. People hurried in and out next door carrying canvas bags full of fresh produce, coffee beans, and exotic Goya juices. On the floor next to the stool was a small suitcase, not much bigger than an overnight bag, that James had packed that morning without much thought as to what was going in it. There were some shirts, a toiletry bag, and the three lightest pairs of pants he owned.

He sat drinking coffee and thinking about Beth. What her life was going to be now. Would she and Eric simply gloss over what had happened? Did she still love him? He shook the thoughts from his head and settled the bill. Picking up his bag, he walked outside and shuddered against the chill in the air. Taxis were waiting along the curb, and he hurried into one.

"Kennedy," he told the cab driver, "no rush."

At the airport, James bought his ticket, one-way, to the Bahamas. The planes were taking off and landing outside the window as he sat at the airport bar, filling the hours before he left Brooklyn with beer and regret. His flight took off just after 6:00 in

the evening. The jet climbed higher into the air as the sun began its own descent. Sitting in his seat, James thought back. He remembered the night they went to dinner, all of them, Beth, Eric, Mark, Mark's girlfriend and Beth's best friend, Juliet. He felt an awful feeling in the pit of his stomach that night, the way you feel sitting in the front seat of a rollercoaster car just before the drop. It wouldn't be long at that point, he was sure of it. They would all know before long and then it would all be over, his relationship with Beth, any trust his friends had once had in him, and certainly his friendship with Eric. He remembered wanting to be able to pause time at that moment, not let it progress any further than it already had. He had to quarantine it all somehow.

His fears were realized later that night when Juliet followed him into the men's room. He was at the sink, and she walked straight up to him. She didn't care one bit if anyone else was in the bathroom. She stood next to James, staring at her own reflection in the mirror while he locked his eyes onto her. She took out her lipstick and began applying it very matter of factly.

"I know, James," she told him. He froze. "I want you to know I'm all for it. I don't think Eric is right for her at all and I'm glad that the two of you are together. She seems happy, and I'm happy *for* her."

James couldn't form words. His mouth was left hanging and his hands were still sitting under the running water. When Juliet walked out, James could feel the cold sweat drip down the back of his neck. Juliet was a lot of things but tightlipped was not one of them. The events of the next few weeks had played in his head at that moment, and he soon found out that his own predictions were shockingly similar to the reality of what occurred. In many ways, James had bought his ticket to the Bahamas that night, he just

didn’t realize it until he was sitting 30,000 feet above the Atlantic ocean, waiting to land somewhere that might allow him to forget.

Part II

James had been in the Bahamas for about a week when he woke up on the beach after a night of particularly heavy drinking. Bits of spray from the surf woke him from his respite in the sand. He had been staying in cheap motels most nights and sleeping on the beach others. He would only rent rooms nightly, and if he wanted to stay in the same place two nights in a row he would check in anew the next day. This way if he found himself on some part of the island he either didn't know or was too drunk to recognize, he could simply find the nearest motel and sleep for the night without worrying how to get back to wherever it was he slept the night before.

From where he was laying, he looked up to find a man of considerable dress, fascinated, standing over him, blocking the sun. In silhouette, he could tell nothing of the man's face, but gathered from his clothes he was neither native to the island, nor was he a recent arrival. Well dressed, but considerate of the Caribbean heat. Fashionable leather loafers sitting below the cuffs of tan linen suit pants held up with suspenders over a thin cotton shirt unbuttoned at the collar. Over his right arm was the jacket that matched the pants, and in his hand, a pocket-watch. James was fairly certain, without the aid of the watch hands, that it was in the 11 o'clock hour, and most likely closer to noon judging from the way the sun was sitting directly behind the man's head.

Shifting himself onto an elbow while at the same time trying to shield his eyes from the sun, James kept his attention fixed on the stranger. He made no attempt towards initiating a dialogue. He felt, given the situation, that it wasn't his duty to explain himself. He was the one who was being intruded upon. As consciousness and sobriety gradually found their way back into James' mind he began to wonder exactly how long he had been observed before he awoke. Eventually, when the rays of sunlight that were

filtering past the stranger's head had caused James' eyes enough discomfort, he turned his attention away from the man and towards the ocean.

"Son, I'd like very much to know just who's sleeping on my beach," the man said, finally breaking the silence. His inquiry was forceful without containing any real anger. It was clear, however, that he truly did want to know.

The dynamic had suddenly shifted, and James found himself struggling just a bit to straighten his posture as best he could without jarring himself too much. Looking upwards in the direction of the man, he offered no real admission of guilt, but still answered politely, albeit matter-of-factly, "I didn't realize this was a private beach," he said, patting himself down in search of a cigarette. "I walked down from the street and didn't see any houses, so I didn't think anyone would mind."

"That's because there aren't any," the man responded, warmly proffering his hand to James, "yet. I suppose, you'd be correct in calling the land a bit 'undeveloped' as of now, but it is mine. Don't get me wrong, someday, you'd be perfectly welcome to spend more than a few nights here, but that's when I'm finished and there's a hotel with rooms and proper beds, and, well, that just isn't today. I do hope you understand."

James took the man's hand and struggled a bit to his feet, doing his best to correct for any unsteadiness in his legs. Upright, he was taller than the man to the point where he could plainly see the patch of hair missing from the top of his head and the light brown wisps that seemed to be trying to cover it. He could now see, also, the face of the stranger, which was round without any real firm lines to the jaw and, although tan, had a distinct tinge of red that made him look as though he should be out of breath or quite embarrassed. James assumed that the smallish man was simply squinting behind a pair of

circular wire-rimmed glasses, but found out later that it was the natural way of his eyes, almost squeezed shut by his high, puffed cheeks.

"Ortley Hazlet," was the name of the gentleman who was still holding James' hand and transitioning the aid up into an introduction.

"Nice to meet you," James responded, not quite comfortable yet, both in terms of his nausea and the level of familiarity the man seemed to exude. "If I had known that someone owned this beach, I would have gone elsewhere last night. I didn't mean to trespass."

"Not at all," Hazlet drawled, "honestly, you really cannot be blamed. There is nothing posted, and I've only bought the land fairly recently. It's been an ongoing process, but the papers were finally signed and filed last week, so since then I've been coming down here most mornings and taking walks up the beach, getting a real sense for it. In fact, it's nothing out of the ordinary to find some vagrant passed out still smelling of cheap rum, or hoards of young native couples, half-naked in the morning after they've been out until all hours. Usually, though, I have one of the local police with me to disperse anyone I come across."

"Well, all the same, I apologize," James said, wincing a bit from the stiffness in his back and legs. "I should really be on my way. Again, sorry for any trouble, I didn't mean anything by it." James turned and began to head back up the beach, stooping a bit to brush sand from where it had caked to his calves and knees.

"Son," Hazlet called out after him, "I'm having lunch prepared. Maybe you wouldn't mind a little food to sop up some of the lingering alcohol."

James stopped, realizing that he had no plans other than to head back in the direction of town once he reached the road. After that, he was at a loss. He turned back towards Hazlet, figuring that he might as well secure himself a meal as long as the man was offering.

Hazlet went on as James walked back towards him. "…although, it'll most likely be breakfast for you, eh?" he chuckled.

They walked through the small downtown area that James remembered only fragments of from the night before. Hazlet had put his coat back on, looking every bit the proper businessman, save for his tan and the unbuttoned shirt. Nonetheless, he walked down the street with impunity, taking in every façade, every crack in the sidewalk with the thought of future ownership sparkling somewhere behind his eyes.

At his car, a pale salmon-colored 1959 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud convertible, Hazlet pulled a bill from his wallet and handed it to a young black boy who had been perched on a fence, keeping watch over the mint automobile.

"Aren't you worried about theft?" James asked, looking up and down the length of the car. "No disrespect to your watchman here," he said motioning towards the boy.

"It's the only Rolls in the islands," laughed Hazlet, "if anyone took it, I would know. Besides," he continued, gesturing with his hands, "here it's not as it is back in America. These people don't long for the material world like they do there. They don't feel an entitlement to it," he said, leaning towards James with both hands on the door. "James, if you have a mutt, you can't ever feed it fresh meat. You'll ruin it. It will come to expect it every time you feed the thing. Eventually, the creature will even resent you for bringing kibble rather than steak. Imagine that, the ungrateful little bastard would

actually bite your hand for trying to feed it, to care for it. The point is, if you've had only nothing, then nothing is all you'll ever expect."

Hazlet opened the driver side door and started the engine. James felt hesitant about getting in. He looked down to where he saw the same boy who had been watching the car join some older ones leaning against a storefront. There wasn't much conversation on James' part during the ride, and he mostly just listened as Hazlet talked.

The Rolls pulled to the top of a curved gravel driveway so that James would open the passenger side door and be standing before the broad stone steps that lead to the entrance of Hazlet's estate. James exited the car and stood before the house, a massive two-story mansion in the late Victorian style. Each window was trimmed in a brilliant white, and the house itself was almost the same pale salmon as the Silver Cloud parked in front.

The entire edifice sat on a piece of land that was, at one time, meticulously cleared of the surrounding tropical growth, but which had now has begun to encroach upon it and tuck it back into the natural landscape of the island. The front of the home, however, seemed carefully maintained. It was barren of the palms and century plants so common to the rest of the island, so as to provide an unobstructed view of the façade. Hazlet, or at least his gardener, had chosen to festoon the grounds with countless pottings of white gardenias with the occasional bird of paradise for color.

James wondered who would ever be able to truly enjoy the beauty of the estate considering its placement on the island. The drive from town had taken at least an hour, first skirting the bay before eventually turning deeper into the heart of the island where cars became fewer and fewer until eventually they were the only ones on the road. The

road itself began as a major thoroughfare but turned into little more than a semi-paved single lane by the time it reached the estate. It morphed seamlessly and without notice into Hazlet's driveway, and James estimated that, bare minimum, they were driving on the man's property for at least a mile before they reached the clearing upon which the palatial home sat. Once the trees had cleared for a plain view of the grounds and the house, it looked more like a preserve where James half expected to see all sorts of rare and exotic animals roving about.

Hazlet put a hand on James' shoulder and motioned towards the looming doors, "come," he said, "we'll take lunch on the patio."

The two walked into the foyer, which, had it been partitioned, could have easily served as a perfectly accommodating place of residence for anyone of lesser social stature than the man to whom the whole house belonged. The ceiling was vaulted to the full two stories, and, in doing so, separated both the first and second floors into perfectly equal Northern and Southern wings so that anyone wanting to traverse from one side to the other would inevitably have to pass through the cavernous hall. The interior of the home was made to mirror the exterior in that the furnishings were tasteful and deliberate. The foyer itself stretched the depth of the house and allowed for any guests who arrived by way of the front door to pass through the home and onto to the back patio without having to enter any other rooms. In addition, it also provided access into the rest of the house through the many doors in both walls.

In one of the doorways stood a maid, poised as if she had been waiting for Hazlet since he left. She was wearing a white apron over a white dress, which seemed at once to give her a shining glow and also to accentuate her dark complexion, which stood in sharp

contrast to the white of the dress. Hazlet handed her his jacket and told her that he would be on the patio and that she should come out in a moment to give them the options for lunch.

He walked further into the hall and motioned for James to follow him out through the glass doors that opened onto a raised wooden deck that ran the length of the house, stopping at each corner instead of wrapping around as some Victorians do. Looking back at the house, James noticed that the entirety of the first floor was walled, floor to ceiling, with expansive windows. On the second floor, vast balconies mirrored the design of the wooden deck, giving the entire back of the house a nearly complete view of the surrounding land.

Hazlet, with James in tow, walked down off of the deck and onto an intimate patio where there waited a round iron table and two chairs. Surrounding the seating area and along the path that led to it, carefully landscaped palms and low ferns were planted to give the feeling of walking through an enclosed hallway before reaching the small patio. James sat with his back to the house, and Hazlet positioned himself slightly askew from James' line of sight. It was at this point that James first saw the beach and the water some fifty yards from where they were sitting and realized that Hazlet's property sat on the very tip of the island. It explained why they had seen no other cars on the road during the trip out. The only reason that anyone else would be driving upon that particular road would be to come see Ortley Hazlet. James turned his attention back to Hazlet, whose gaze had been fixed on James in an unsettling look of both curiosity and subtle familiarity.

“Do you want that I should keep calling you ‘son,’ or perhaps you wouldn’t mind letting me know your name now?” Hazlet asked with an encouraging smile.

Fully aware that he had been keeping his name from Hazlet, James conceded, realizing he was more or less cornered with hospitality, “James. My name is James Merritt.”

Any man who lived in such a house and possessed the ability to bring a 1959 Rolls Royce Silver Cloud to a small Caribbean island would surely be able to find out a man’s name with minimal effort if he so wanted.

“Nice to meet you James,” Hazlet said, offering his hand. The palm faced downward across the table.

James leaned forward somewhat hesitantly and took Hazlet’s hand. He couldn’t help but feel that with each show of kindness there was something behind the old man’s eyes that belied every gracious gesture, that somewhere out in the palms or tucked back into a remote corner of the great house there lurked some devious ulterior motive that James consented to more and more with every shake of the old man’s hand.

Just then, the maid whom they had met at the front door arrived and made a low sort of coughing noise to draw Hazlet’s attention.

“Ah, Emalee,” which was pronounced with more of a hard “a” sound than James was familiar, “Please put down Mr. Merritt’s place setting and let us know what we have to choose from today.”

“There is cold chicken and warm roast beef,” Emalee informed him with practiced enunciation. Her accent was still very much present, but she made every effort to speak just as you might hear at the finest restaurants or lounges in America. James got

the feeling that such forced propriety was the will of her boss and that he went to great lengths to maintain it.

"I'll just have a gin tonic. Plenty of ice and lime too please," James asked with a faint smile.

"Hair of the dog, eh?" Hazlet broke out with a slight chuckle. "I'm not sure which is more impolite, to begin eating before a guest, or to let a man drink alone. In any case it's too early for me to join you, but I will have some tea," he said turning back to Emalee, "with a wedge of lemon and some cream."

"Yes sir," Emalee nodded and turned, rigid like a military about-face and proceeded back towards the house.

"I'm certainly not going to judge you, James, as I've only just met you, but do be careful with the drink. I've seen plenty of young men lose everything they've got to it. Their homes, money, and youthful good looks too. There was even a tragic case in which a dear friend lost something much more dear than all of that." Hazlet looked down at his hands folded in his lap and shook his head slightly. "But," he continued, jumping back into the moment, "I trust that you've got your head on right, and won't let that demon brew get the better of you."

"Mr. Hazlet, I appreciate your worry," James told him, "but you can't lose what you don't have."

"I hope, James, you're not telling me you have *nothing*. There's nothing more pitiful or shortsighted than a man who believes he's alone. Not to mention dangerous. A man who's got nothing has nothing to work towards. He becomes prone to making bad decisions, and on top of that, you never know what opportunity awaits you." Hazlet

slowed down at the last part and, with one elbow on the table, looked straight at James as he said it.

"I just mean that I've tried to pack light in coming here."

"That I can see," Hazlet quickly responded, taking James' comment as the first possibility that the young man had begun to crack the door ever so slightly into his background. "Most vacationers tend to pack more than a small case, or at least stay in a hotel, that is, unless you prefer the feel of sand to a mattress."

"I wouldn't say that I'm just visiting," James responded, though he continued to chose his words carefully and leave his answers deliberately veiled.

"No?" the man prodded, determined to slip through any opening James left in the conversation.

"I've left myself open to the possibility of extending my stay," James said, looking around as he said this, "if I find that the island suits me."

Emalee returned with a tray holding the drinks, which she placed on the table before Hazlet and James. The gin was housed in an exceptionally heavy highball glass, the walls of which had clouded from the ice, while Hazlet's tea sat steaming in an ornate pink and yellow cup of exquisite delicacy.

"Thank you Emalee, and you can prepare the lunch as well. We should eat after our drinks. What do you say James?"

James sipped off of the gin and nodded, clearly taken more with the drink than with the prospect of food.

"Two plates of chicken, Emalee. You can bring them out when they're ready." As Emalee returned again to the kitchen, Hazlet turned back to James. "I think you'll

quite enjoy the chicken. It's done in the traditional style here in the islands. I've found that it works best when one can sort out what's really exceptional from a people, what's worth saving. The food, some of the music, things like that. It leaves us free to step in and impart the rest."

James was unsure what Hazlet considered "the rest," but chose not to prod as to what he meant. The look of him, like a self-proclaimed humanitarian, a modern-day Rhodes come to the Caribbean, sent James back to his drink.

"Tell me, James, what did you study?"

"I studied English," James said without offering much more than a quick response, though not for any real reluctance to talk about his college years. He had simply passed through them without much attention given to how he might one day look back upon them. To him, school had been a job, a job he had carried out well and left with the requisite diploma and education. All in all, it was what was expected of him, and he did it without comment.

"Really!" Hazlet seemed genuinely interested. "I shall wear white flannel trousers, and walk upon the beach," he sang, waving a hand in the direction of the water. "I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each."

James, stirring the ice cubes in his gin with his middle finger, looked up slightly and nodded across the table.

"So you picture yourself a man of letters then, I take it?" Hazlet asked. "We can all certainly benefit from men who are capable of doing new things."

James exhaled slightly, becoming a bit more contemplative, "I had given it thought at one point I suppose, but the idea never enticed me to the point where I wanted

to return to the classroom. I put in my time at school, and I certainly have never regretted it, but there was a strong pull afterwards to leave myself open to the unknown. I think it was that I wanted to experience what was outside of the campus," he said, addressing more the glass in his hands than Hazlet. He was wanting very much for his lunch to arrive. His hangover wasn't benefitting any from answering Hazlet's near endless string of inquiries.

"I can certainly relate, my boy. I myself only completed just over two years in the university before I bought my first piece of land. I was no real entrepreneur, but I could certainly recognize opportunity when I saw it. The world runs in cycles, which is plain enough to see. What is down now will surely be up later, so I took what I had and I ended my studies. It was only meant to be for a short while, but land was on the cheap then and I began to do well. Eventually it reached the point where here I am talking to you today, but tell me, what is it that you picked up with after school?"

James could imagine Hazlet speculating, buying up property with an excited glint in his eye, paying pennies on the dollar for the things that the people around him had worked all their lives for. He was what some would call a perfect child of circumstance, a man born from the happenings that surround him. "Whatever paid," James told him. "I jumped around a lot, painting houses when the weather allowed for it. I even worked a fishing boat out of Long Island for a while. Before I came here though, I was working in Manhattan. It was a good job and it made my parents happy, but…" He trailed off as he said it.

"I think you were right for trying different things," Hazlet picked up. "It's not good enough simply to make one's fortune and sit on it. It's not what we're meant to do

if we have the means. You see, I believe that the successes we have in life, every trial and tribulation, it's all meant to be used by those that have the aptitude to do so. We can help raise the people around us up to their proper stations in life. Have you read Kipling, James?"

"Yes, a bit, when I was younger."

"Ah, Din! Din! Din!" Hazlet exclaimed.

At that moment, Emalee returned with another servant. The man was tall and thin, and wearing a similar outfit to Emalee's: a white dress shirt with white slacks. They began setting down the plates of food in front of the two men, though Hazlet continued on, making no reference to their presence.

"I'd like to do all over the island what I've done here," he proclaimed, "to provide for them respectable work of the type that they're suited to perform."

The tall man who had come with Emalee reached across and picked up the cup and saucer from between Hazlet's forearms.

"…it is the role of men like us to provide for them who cannot do so for themselves…" Hazlet droned on.

James began running the peel of lime around and around the rim of the empty glass, looking, as he talked, from Hazlet to Emalee to the other servant as the two continued to work, almost mechanically. Neither one showed any indication of hearing what was being said, and James felt unsure of where to settle his eyes.

"Thank you very much for the drink, and for your hospitality," he broke in, dropping the lime peel into the empty glass and standing up. "I think, however, that I

should probably be taking my things and heading back. I hadn't realized how late it's gotten, and I'd like to find a hotel before it gets dark."

"Nonsense," Hazlet replied, taking short breaths and settling back into his chair. "I'm not allowing you to go back and spend another night sleeping in the sand. I won't have it. You'll stay here."

"That's very kind of you, but–"

"Emalee will take your things to one of the bedrooms."

Hazlet motioned for Emalee to take James' suitcase, which he had been carrying with him, up to one of the many vacant rooms. There was little James could do to refuse, seeing as how the house was so remote that any journey back to town would leave him alone on unfamiliar roads well after the sun went down.

"Now sit," Hazlet said, gently spreading a napkin across his lap, "we'll eat."

James was still standing as he watched Emalee walking briskly up the path carrying his suitcase. He wasn't opposed to staying there for the night, but Hazlet had become irritating in the way he was talking at James.

"Actually, if it's not too much, I think I might get some sleep," he said, doing his best to appear worn. "Honestly, I really didn't have a restful sleep last night."

"I should think not!" Hazlet replied. "Absolutely, you should get some rest. Stephan, take James up to his room, and James, if you should need anything, call for either Emalee or Stephan and they will provide it for you. We can talk more in the morning."

James nodded politely and turned to follow Stephan back to the house. The sun was beginning to sit slightly lower in the sky, and the light filtering through the palms

threw sharp patterns onto the back of his shirt. He stopped Stephan when they reached his room.

"Excuse me, but do you know if Hazlet does this kind of thing often?" James asked, becoming a little wary of the old man's good nature. "I mean give out rooms to strangers he's only just met?"

"Mr. Hazlet takes a shine to all the young white men," Stephen replied. He smiled and opened the door for James. "Good night, Mr. Jimmy. You need anything, just ask."

* * *

James stayed at the house for just over two weeks. He was at first unsure of staying with the man, thinking that every day he extended his visit he would owe the man more and more, but eventually the situation settled into a sort of comfortable routine. James never asked to be brought back to town, and Hazlet never asked him to leave. James didn't find the idea of a free ride in a mansion on a Caribbean island altogether objectionable, and Hazlet was thankful for the company. He knew he would leave eventually, but for the time being, he was fine going on as he was. Most mornings James woke up late and told Emalee what he wanted for breakfast. He would eat alone on the deck since Hazlet was often in town before the morning broke. After breakfast he would fix himself a drink and walk down to the beach. Hazlet kept an extensive liquor cabinet despite claiming not to drink. With a glass of gin or sometimes rum in hand, James would walk alone on the beach. He would often think of Beth, though occasionally, and

with the aid of whatever he was drinking, he managed to concentrate more on his surroundings, taking in the natural beauty of the island and feeling content to be away from the mess he'd left in Brooklyn. These moments were brief, however, and he was often brought back to the real reason he left. His mind was continually pulling him, like the tide, to the place he wanted least to be.

In the morning, light streamed into his room, which was walled almost entirely on two sides by windows with transparent white blinds, more for decor than purpose, making it impossible to sleep once the sun crested the trees. He crept out of the house, careful not to draw any attention or wake anyone who might still be asleep, and walked down the path that led from the backdoors to the private beach.

On this particular morning, he walked down to the beach as he usually did. He let his mind drift in the gentle bob of the water. He closed his eyes and let his head sink all the way under the water before throwing his arms down and breaching the surface, exhaling as his mouth met the air. He had left his clothes and swam out some 200 yards from the shore, over the rocky bottom to where his feet could no longer touch.

In the water he let himself drift with the gentle ebb of the tide and settle into the silence that comes with the isolation of leaving everything on shore. Waves in Caribbean waters are dull, lulling, low breakers that barely announce their presence when they reach shore and coax you into infantile ease when you're in them. Not really waves at all. James rested on his back with his eyes closed and let the sun warm his body. Such complete relaxation can regenerate a certain weariness in a person or open them up to all their anxieties just when they feel it safest to let down their guard. In trying to leave his

memories of Beth on the mainland, James felt every emotion that he had intended to forget come rushing back. He opened his eyes to the bright sun and winced.

Treading water, he turned away from the island and faced the wide expanse of the sea before him. He tried in vain to imagine he was surrounded on all sides by the emptiness that lay ahead of him, but behind him was the island, and further beyond that was the reason that he was there. He stopped kicking his legs and slipped fully below the surface, waiting until he felt the sand with his toes.

* * *

It was raining, and they were watching the newly formed rivulets stream down the windowpanes, dodging left and right as they formed larger and larger runners on the glass. He was standing in the kitchen of Beth's parents' house, which they kept in Montauk, one of the nicer beach towns you hear about in the gossip columns of the papers. Her parents were gone for Europe and had the notion to return sometime before the winter. Spring was just beginning and showed its immediacy that night in the form of a sudden thundershower.

"Let's go swimming," Beth exclaimed suddenly, turning her gaze from the window to the side of James' face. She had both hands wrapped around a large teal mug, which she was holding just under her nose. Even though winter was still fresh on both their minds, the pool was heated and they had been indoors all day.

"But it's raining," he told her, feeling foolish to state so obvious a fact. Just moments ago they had been staring out absentmindedly at the deluge.

"I know, but it just seems so inviting," Beth said, stepping back from the window and walking over to the door that led from the house down to the sunken pool in the back yard. "There's all this water, and I just want to run out into it. I want to be a part of it, and feel it on me."

James looked back out the window to the pool, where the raindrops made it appear as though countless invisible pinpricks were assailing the surface of the water. The idea of being out in the thunder and the rain excited him. She wanted to run into it for a feeling of unity, a oneness with the pool, the rain, and everything around her. She wanted to feel the absolute enormity of the world. He, however, wanted to know what it was to feel small. He had always wanted to be in the middle of a great storm, to feel the awesome force of nature that can exert its will over a man's life without any regard for his relatively minute world. It scared him and thrilled him. The muscles across his shoulders tensed, and a small drop of sweat fell down the side of his face as he lost himself outside, watching the rain crash down upon the stone patio and the wind pin the leaves to their branches. He wanted to feel it too. He wanted very much to be a part of it, to be a part of what was taking place outside, the fervor, the chaos. He wanted to feel alive in it.

"Yes!" he told her, and she jumped slightly at the sudden energy in his voice. "We should, we should go for a swim. Let it rain!"

"Really?" She looked for a moment both skeptical and as though he had just called her bluff.

"Absolutely," he assured her, "imagine the absurdity of letting rain stop us from swimming," he said with a small laugh. Then, as if to prove his seriousness about the

issue, he lifted his shirt off over his head and balled it up before tossing it onto a chair. Catching his enthusiasm, which had momentarily surpassed her own, she hurriedly placed the mug on the counter and began to slip out of her dress.

They burst through the back door and bounded down the long steps leading to the patio. He dove headlong into the water and surfaced to tilt up his face and open his mouth to the rain. He was, in that moment, unfettered and open to all the possibilities of the night, allowing himself to be taken up by the storm or crushed beneath it if need be. She stepped into the pool at the shallow end and glided off of the last stair with a graceful stroke, propelling herself to the spot where he waited.

"James," Beth started when they found themselves face to face, "you realize of course–"

"We're damned," he cut her off, recognizing the beginning of a familiar discussion, one that began the same way every time. "No matter what we do…"

She stared at him, cut short by the finality and unwavering truth in his words. He was at once sobered and set free by the statement. Saying it aloud echoed between them like funeral bells, and at the same time allowed them to settle into the carriage of the unknown. Whatever was to happen was out of their hands. They had set into motion events that had quickly outgrown the two of them to a size and magnitude that was far beyond their collected will.

He listened for the wind. It was blowing cold against his neck and back when he grabbed Beth by the shoulders. They waited. He gave in to the sensory impulses around him, dealing only with what was real and immediate. As the rain picked up and a low rumble gathered above them, he felt his grip on her tighten, almost apart from himself. In

his grasp he could feel her begin to tremble slightly, either from the cold or because the strength of his hands frightened her. The storm crescendoed, throwing rain sideways at them, and blew through the leaves until they'd have to yell over them to be heard. Above, a hideous crack sent a shock of light and sound through the sky and down to the core of each of them. From the violent uproar, James took his cue and pressed his lips into hers. It held their passion without the comfort of a veil. Devoid of the tenderness of false notions, it was a kiss worthy of the damned.

* * *

James sucked all of the air he could into his lungs. No matter how badly he might want for it, nothing was going to settle, even transiently, on the floor of the Caribbean. He was stuck with every memory he intended to forget. Every sound, every taste, every smell that reminded him of why he was trying desperately to drown out his past would be with him always. If he couldn't put them out of his mind he knew that he would have to somehow numb himself to the pain they caused. He would have to kill every part of himself that still cared, and if it turned out that there wasn't an ounce of him that he could separate and pull away from what happened, well then…

James heard a faint shouting from behind him, and he turned around to scan the shoreline where he saw a tall figure dressed in white standing on the beach, waving its arms in the air, beckoning him to swim to shore. He couldn't be sure if what he was seeing was the sun playing off of the water or if there really was someone who wanted him to come ashore. In any case, the morning had become less serene and the swim had

left him ravenously hungry. Closer in to the shore, he realized that the figure on the beach was neither an apparition nor a palm waving in the breeze, but Stephan.

"Mr. Hazlet, he want to see you, Mr. Jimmy."

James pulled on his shorts that were laid out, along with his shirt, on the sand. "Thank you, Stephan. Did he mention what about?"

"No, Mr. Jimmy."

"You know, Stephan, you can call me 'James,' or even just 'Jimmy' if you like."

"Ok, Mr. Jimmy."

James shook his head slightly and walked to the path, buttoning his shirt. "Stephan," he turned and called back when he reached the trees, "can you tell Mr. Hazlet that I'll be in shortly? I want to change my clothes."

"Yes, Mr. Jimmy."

Emalee led James through the large double doors into Ortley Hazlet's office, which sat on the first floor, nestled in the far corner of the house. It was filled with a number of impressive teak and brass antiquities, and walled with great windows that looked out majestically over his land. James looked more intently at the view and noticed that through a small clearing, Hazlet was able to see clear down to the small cove where James had just been swimming.

"Thank you, Emalee," Hazlet said from behind an expansive wooden desk that seemed to envelop the small man who sat behind it. "Please close the doors as you leave." From behind the desk he looked almost like a child sitting in his clubhouse, reciting from *Robert's Rules of Order* and making grand schemes intended to someday deliver him the world on a string.

James stood in the center of the room and surveyed the rest of the office, which was adorned with a low bookshelf housing *The Great Boer War,* and *The Collected Works of Rudyard Kipling* among other titles he could not quite make out. Above the bookshelf hung a map half the size of the wall itself, titled *The Commonwealth of the Bahamas*. James could faintly make out the date in the lower left-hand corner, *1806.* He took a couple of steps backward and nearly tripped over a shaggy mass heaped on the floor. Startled, he leaned in slightly to find himself looking face to face with Eleuthera, a very tired looking brown and white mottled Spaniel. James had decided that it was a Springer and over the course of the previous weeks, it usually gave his presence as much consideration as it would the dust blown in from the patio.

"You know, I bought Ele the day I got here?" Hazlet chimed in."

The dog stuck its tongue out and licked at the end of its nose before sneezing and putting its head back on the floor.

"Fine animal, that dog. I know it might sound ridiculous, but sometimes when I feel cut off, like these islands are completely apart from the real world, the civilized world and all, I think of that dog as the only real companion I have here. I think of her as an equal."

Hazlet waved Emalee out of the room and stood up from his desk, "The real crown jewel is over here, though," he said walking to the wall where a red striped flag with a cross in the upper corner mirrored the map across the room. Below the tattered and faded rag was a solid brass housing with a compass inside. Hazlet ran his hand over the metal and gave the glass a couple of sturdy raps as he looked into its face. "It's

actually from the HMS Warley," he said wistfully. "Imagine it, my boy…there was once noble work to be done in this world. And it was done by some of the greatest –"

"Stephan told me there was something you wanted to talk to me about," James said, cutting in. He had already begun to grow tired of the office and all of the relics that it was home to. The air itself was not so thick, but the atmosphere was such that it disagreed with James to his very core. The whole of the room was a kind of cocoon, or even a temple, that Hazlet had constructed for himself, so he might be wrapped in the world that he was trying to build on the sands of that Caribbean island. He motioned to a chair across the desk, and James sat.

"Yes, very much so," Hazlet said, settling back into his chair. He turned and was half facing James as well as the windows behind him. "I'm have a party at the house tonight, and I want to extend to you a proper invitation."

"Thank you," James replied, "but I really don't think I'm the type that would fit in." He could care less where he fit, but the thought of having to attend a cocktail party with the kinds of men who still thought that the lesser regions of the world existed only to be carved up into pink and yellow slices on a political map in an office somewhere wasn't what he had in mind when coming to the islands.

Hazlet insisted, however, and James felt cornered. He looked down to find Eleuthera sniffing at the cuff of his pants. She gave brief consideration to settling there beside the chair, but turned and headed back to the spot where she had been dozing. He couldn't help but get the feeling that she was wholly unimpressed. It was as clear as if she could speak.

James thanked Hazlet for the invitation, and, with a sense of defeat, walked back towards the door. Outside, he muttered a short, “damnit” under his breath and made his way hurriedly back through the kitchen and out to the deck to gather his things that he’d left after his swim.

Stephan was sitting on the top stair smoking a cigarette with his back to the house when James stepped out. “Oh, Mr. Jimmy,” he exclaimed, startled, standing up quickly and dropping his cigarette. He put it out with his shoe while he waived away the lingering smoke in the air. “I didn’t hear you coming. I was just taking a short break.”

“James!” he corrected him, turning in a flash to face Stephan, “call me James.”

“Mr. Hazlet likes us to call the white guests ‘mister’ or ‘missus,’” Stephan replied meekly.

“Well, not with me,” James asserted, annoyed at having to show up to the party that night. “You call me James. Do you hear?”

“You don’t understand,” Stephan said coolly, his voice different, deeper and not so much contrived out of servitude, “things don’t just change here. People don’t change. Hazlet give me a nice place to stay, don’t hassle me too much, and I’ll call the white folk ‘mister.’ It don’t bother me none.” He pulled out another cigarette and lit it without taking his eyes off of James, who was beginning to feel that he might soon want to find someplace else to stay.

* * *

James made it a point not to linger in the entrance to the large drawing room where the party was being held. Too much time silhouetted in the doorway would surely invite some precocious island socialite to come introduce himself. He'd be sucked into an evening of being passed from one circle of people he didn't know or care to know to another, each one filling the air with more and more mindless chatter. His immediate focus was refined to locating the bar and spotting Hazlet so that he could keep an eye on him from a distance and wait until he looked to be in the middle of some important conversation. At which point, James would walk up, excuse himself for interrupting and inform his host of how appreciative he was to be in attendance, thus showing his face without running the risk of being pulled into any lengthy exchange.

He spotted the bartender on the far wall and began to slip between small groups of people, dodging through the crowd with more effort than he would have liked. Exasperated, he finally reached the small bar and thought to himself that there would be nothing wholly wrong with the party if it weren't for all of the *people*. In fact, in all likelihood, he would probably have had a remarkable time if he hadn't had to spend most of it actively avoiding anyone who was looking to talk with him and snaking his way through the throng just to reach the booze.

Glass in hand, James began to look for a quiet corner with as little distraction as possible where he could sit away from the other guests and enjoy his drink without drawing any more unwanted attention than was necessary. He looked out over the crowd, ex-pats, profiteers, and slinky blondes all dressed up and living on the dimes of the white Caribbean elite. The real Bahamas existed someplace far away where the women's skirts rose so high on their thighs that hemlines would often kiss the bottom of a belt and the

drinks were equally as likely to strike you blind as they were to leave you turned completely around, stone drunk.

From his vantage point on the wall, James watched an American woman with two men. One was older with a cropped salt-and-pepper beard, and the other had a darker complexion, Middle Eastern or maybe Moroccan. She was pulling the attention of the two men back to her every time it ran the risk of drifting somewhere else. At one point, when their conversation seemed to turn serious, she nearly crumpled to the ground, her knees buckling as she looked back over her shoulder as if to blame a faulty heel. Each of her companions caught one of her forearms and held her up. James was fairly certain he would not have been so quick.

At the same time, he was succeeding in keeping an eye on Hazlet, making sure that he stayed always just out of his line of sight. He had been making fairly regular trips back to the bar, topping off his glass of rum and asking the bar tender to heap more and more ice into the glass until the freshly chopped hunks sat awkwardly above the rim. He needed to cool down, and the only solution he saw was in the ice that happened to compliment his rum so well. Even standing at the edge of the crowd, exerting no more energy than it takes to lift a glass, James could feel his clothes become heavy with perspiration, so it was completely beyond him as to how there was a small group of guests crammed into a clearing in the center of the room dancing to the slow, subtle rhythms of a three-piece ensemble that Hazlet had hired for the evening. A drummer with nothing more than a snare, a bass drum and two symbols kept a steady calypso beat behind a large double bass and a jazz guitar that was being restrained for most of the evening. The guitarist gave way occasionally to intricate little fills that sprung out from

his fingers whenever he thought he could get away with it. The band was playing slowed down and jazzed up covers of popular American songs that had been big hits in the states some forty or fifty years ago, Dionne Warwick and Herb Alpert mixed in a coconut husk and served to the wealthy. In the middle of it all, however, James' eyes were drawn instantly to the sensual movements of the one woman who seemed as out of place amongst the people around her as does a fire burning, un-fueled, across the sand. She was dangerous and alluring, accentuated in the midst of the stiff movements that bent and broke around her like prison bars made of brittle wood. Even the sharp red of her dress exploded against the drab black and white of the other guests' garb. She stepped out from a flat backdrop, her hips finding the steady lower registers of the bass while her arms reveled in the syncopation of the guitar like its six strings were reactionary to the sway of her upper body. In the soft light, she glistened as she wore the heat of the night on her skin in small drops. James felt the sweat of the glass in his palm, his attention fixed on her.

The alcohol had left him a blank slate, making him act more on impulse than forethought as he felt himself drawn to the woman on the dance floor, caught at the mercy of his own desires. When he reached her she immediately began to dance around him, running her hands all over him as he stood watching. He didn't know what to do or say. He couldn't dance, and he didn't want to yell over the music. Instinctually, he took the woman by her wrist and led her out to the back deck where the air was cooler. She followed him willingly and breathed a sigh of relief when they finally reached the deck. Her name was Sienna, and she spoke with a slight French accent. He skin was dark, the

product of growing up somewhere where the sun and ocean breezes are a way of life – perhaps Antigua, he thought. She asked him who he was and what he did on the island.

"I've only arrived just recently," James told her, "from America."

They spoke very little. James was far more interested in staring at her than he was conversing with her. His eyes made the trip from her feet to the top of her head several times over the course of their brief conversation. She enjoyed the attention, and would occasionally place her hand on his forearm, letting it drift up to his chest and shoulders when she did. The heat of the night was beginning to oppress them, and Sienna loosened a button on James' shirt. She was so unlike Beth, and in that James felt himself irresistibly drawn to her. Perhaps with Sienna, he would finally be able to put Beth from his mind for good. Just then he wanted her. He wanted to know if what he thought was true, and he wanted her as plainly as any man wants a beautiful woman.

"Come on," he told her as he took her by the hand. They forgot about the party altogether as James led Sienna down to the beach. It felt good to get out of their clothes. James' shirt was nearly soaked through, and Sienna's dress had been sticking to her with every movement she made on the dance floor. The sand caked to their backs as they rolled over each other through the night, and a breeze cooled their naked bodies as they lay together on the beach. Sienna rested on James's chest, and he thought that maybe this was the first step in leaving Beth and a part of himself in the past. Maybe he could remove what had happened from his life, rip it like pages from a book and scatter them in the surf that was creeping towards where they lay, lapping occasionally at their bare feet.

* * *

The days slipped by into weeks and months as James carved out his own small piece of the Bahamas in a small house a short way from the edge of town. He had left Hazlet's shortly after the party that night, thanking him for his hospitality and wishing him the best of luck with the hotel. As a last show of kindness, Hazlet found James the house he moved in to. It was part of another property deal that Hazlet had his hand in about a year back. He had bought up much of a residential neighborhood in the area around where the cruise ships docked in the thoughts that he might expand some of the high-end shopping in town. The project stalled, however, and he found himself sitting with the deeds to many small lots that were hard to sell. Hazlet gave James a deal, however, letting him rent until he found someplace else or gathered enough money to buy the land outright.

Sienna stayed with him most nights, and most nights they would fight. They were usually awful one-sided screaming matches in which she would berate him while he silently sat by, drinking and ignoring whatever it was she was upset about. Usually, she wanted them to go out to the parties that were held at the mansions owned by the rich, faceless, foreign elite, or drink in the hotel bars with the judges or provincial mayors of the island. She had taken James for one of that crowd when she saw him at Hazlet's, and now she was expecting to be taken to a similar sort of event every night. James quickly learned that Sienna wasn't the antidote to his longing for Beth. Her abrasive demeanor and shallow wants only proved to accentuate the disparity between the two women, leaving James to pine all the more for Beth.

She would wake up in the morning, sometimes, to an empty bed, the back door left open. Following the path down to the beach, she would find him passed out, slumped against the trunk of a tree with a bottle at his side. She knew he was thinking about Beth always.

"You think she misses you?" she would often taunt him, chasing him from one room to another. "I wouldn't miss you. I wish you were gone right now!"

When he got fed up, James would turn and face her, his glass tilted, spilling rum onto the floor. His anger would well, but he never said anything. He simply stared at her, allowing her to read the hate in his eyes. He would whip the glass across his body shattering it against the far wall, and she would turn her head against any errant shards. She never flinched when she watched him take up a bottle from the table and storm out to the beach.

"You coward!" she would scream from the doorway. "If you were a man you would have hit me with it!...*Bâtard!*"

They went on like that, Sienna continually ignoring the fact that James wasn't at all passage into the island's inner circle, and him too drunk or apathetic to kick her out of his life. Each was living in a world that never seemed to overlap the other except occasionally at night, in the dark and behind the bedroom door.

* * *

Back in the States, Juliet had been arguing with Mark as well. Once he had rented the house in the Bahamas, James sent a letter to Mark, along with a key to his

apartment, asking his friend to send him some of his belongings. Juliet had found out about this a short time later and demanded that Mark give her James' address in the islands.

"Why do you want it?" he asked.

"Mark, I swear. Do not question me. I simply want it, and that should be more than enough reason to let me have it."

There was rarely an instance in which Juliet did not get her way when she and Mark were in the middle of a disagreement. Their apartment was small, and Juliet's domineering personality often filled it to the point that Mark had nowhere to turn. Beyond that, Juliet was literally following Mark around the room that night, incessant about the address to the point where she was practically chasing him. He would move behind the sofa and the chair, and even once took refuge behind the large houseplant in the corner before he realized the absurdity of it.

"James is my friend just as much as he is yours, Mark," Juliet yelled, "I have every right to his address if I want it."

"Don't you dare, Juliet," Mark shouted back.

She lunged for Mark as if he were carrying the address on him, and he leapt backwards, catching the edge of the coffee table and falling to the floor. Juliet calmly crossed the room and stood over Mark. "You're acting like a child," she told him in a voice that made it clear that she knew she was about to get what she wanted. "I need to be with a man, Mark. I will not tolerate this, you jumping all over the place, running away from me when I'm trying to talk to you. Now you give me James' address and start acting like a man," she said sternly.

Mark got to his feet looking completely embarrassed. "Fine," he said, low and angry. "I don't care what you do with it. Go ahead, write to him." He grabbed a pen from the desk and scribbled James' address on the back of an envelope that was lying on the coffee table. There were car-horns coming up from the street through an open window, and Mark stormed out of the door, leaving Juliet alone with James' address. She went to the kitchen where she opened a bottle of wine and poured herself a glass. Returning to the living room, she sat down, the glass in one hand and the envelope in the other. She cared precious little about what Mark had to say on most any issue, and this was no different.

* * *

James woke up sometime after ten. The light filled his room at the same time every morning, and without curtains on the windows he had no choice but to wake up when the sun broke over the tops of the palms. The sky was clear, and there was no humidity to give the day that feeling of dragging that comes just before a heavy rain.

Sienna had left the night before after a fight, and James didn't expect to see her for at least a couple of days. He took up a pair of pants off of the back of the chair and shook out a shirt that he found lying close by. An empty bottle of rum sat capped on the table, reminding him that while he was out he needed to pick up another, along with a bag of fresh limes. He decided to get breakfast in town at one of the spots off of Bay Street. There was a place that at night was a bar and grill serving stone crab claws and frozen daiquiris to the tourists that come over off of the cruise ships. They did a decent

breakfast too. Two eggs scrambled, with some lump crabmeat for a few dollars extra. If it was slow, James could usually convince the waitress to bring him a plate, even though it was usually past noon and on to lunch when he came in.

That day it was busy, and there was a crowd from one of the ships. It was easy to tell when a new ship had recently arrived because all of the tourists were still eager to explore the island for a couple of days after pulling in to port. They all wanted a native experience and usually never made it beyond the first two blocks in town with all of the same jewelry and clothes stores that they had just left in the states. After the novelty wore off and the husbands' wallets were emptied, most of them stayed on the ship for the breakfast buffet.

By the time James walked down, it was lunchtime, so he ordered a side of grilled shrimp instead of trying to talk the waitress into accommodating his eggs. She was busy with the tourists, and he didn't want to be a bother. The seating was mostly open air, and the crowd consisted mainly of families and large parties, so there were plenty of smaller tables available. James sat outside, facing Bay Street rather than the water, but he didn't mind, as the day was pleasant. After the shrimp, the waitress came by and asked if he wanted anything else. The sun was high, and he figured it was still only about twelve thirty so he ordered a Kalik.

He sat quietly with his beer amid all of the noise and commotion of the tourists and watched the cars go by on Bay Street. Most were unmarked taxis, little European-looking vans. They were all quarter-scale Econolines driven wildly by Bahamians ferrying tourists from the airport to the hotels and back. James quickly finished the glass and signaled for another Kalik. He wondered about the difference in what it must feel

like having a set date to return to the States and coming to the islands without any real plans to go back. He took a sip and felt what it was to be rootless.

The sun was high now, and the awning he was sitting under no longer shielded James from the glare and the heat. He finished his beer and left cash and tip under the empty glass. Across Bay Street, he walked up the block to some of the smaller stores. One street over from Cartier and Louis Vuitton were rows of narrow storefronts with enterprising Bahamians sitting in front of each. To drive by, it looked like the real Bahamian experience, but the storeowners were typically savvy of their clientele and proximity to the cruise ships. Though the façade was typically rundown, the prices inside were adjusted to give the tourists a sense of getting a deal while still selling at a substantial mark-up.

James stopped into Island Spirits for the rum. The prices were too high and he knew it, but he didn't want to make the trip all the way out to the liquor store that only sold to the Bahamians and to some of the island whites. He bought two bottles and had the clerk fill a paper bag with limes at the counter.

"Bring a couple bottles of island rum back home, eh?" the clerk asked with a sly grin. "Real authentic, can't buy this in the states."

"Yeah, good deal too."

"Best prices on the island," he threw his arms out wide and flashed a broad smile.

James gathered the rum and the limes off of the counter. "Sonofabitch," he muttered to himself walking out of the door. It was too early to head home, so James spent an hour walking around the old town. He stopped in one of the pawnshops with barred windows and a pink neon "checks cashed" sign and browsed for a minute.

"How much for the rod and reel in the window?" James asked the man at the counter.

"Fifty dollars, U.S." The clerk was a dark, thin Bahamian with a thick accent.

"I wouldn't pay more than twenty."

"Then you ain't gonna buy it."

"I could buy that reel new for less than fifty in any sporting goods store in the states." James had no real intention of buying the rod, but felt modest outrage at hearing the price.

"Well, you ain't in the states. You in the Bahamas, and in the Bahamas, it fifty."

"You'll never sell that for fifty. I'll be back in a month when you drop the price to twenty, and then I'll pay you fifteen."

James walked back out to the street. The sun was lower in the sky, but it was still the hottest part of the day. At the little market on the corner he bought a cold six-pack of Kalik. The moisture from the cans darkened the bottom of the paper bag, so he carried it under his arm to keep the beer from dropping through. He turned at the corner and walked back towards Bay Street.

Down from the stores, James crossed the highway and sat on the low stone wall that ran along the narrow beach. He placed the beer next to him and leaned the bag with the rum against the wall next to his feet. He reached in and took a beer. Wiping the sweat from the mouth with the heel of his hand, he took a long drink. The cruise ships were silhouetted against the water, and, from where he sat, they looked quiet. He almost liked the thought of them, their transience and knowing that everyone that came in on

them was going to leave when they pulled out of the bay. The annoyance of the tourists was never permanent because the tourists were never permanent.

In front of him, he watched a seabird dive straight into the water and emerge with a long fish, still alive in its beak. He thought that it might be nice to fish while he was there. Plenty of people try their entire lives to fish the Bahamas, and he could cast off any morning nearly out of his window. He wished for a moment that he hadn't antagonized the pawnshop owner. He would have paid thirty for the reel and felt that if he had been less hostile the owner might have been more receptive to dropping the price.

Fishing, he thought, was for the lost, and he did not feel lost. In fact, he knew all too well exactly where he was. It was that relentless presence that had become a drain on him. He was face to face with himself always and would have liked nothing more than to feel like he was somewhere else.

He opened another beer. The air was beginning to cool off, the sun sitting lower in the sky, and a flock of seabirds over the water circled a school of blues about fifty yards out. They dove in, one at a time, taking turns and emerging with a fish in their beaks after every dive. One bird lost its grip, and he watched a fish drop back into the sea.

James left a small pile of beer cans at the foot of the wall. It was still light out as the very bottom of the sun had just reached the edge of the water, making it look like the horizon was holding up a great orange ball. He kept close to the wall, walking along the shoulder of Bay Street. On the other side of town, just past the corner of Bay and East, there had been a car accident. It had just taken place when James got there, and police were trying to keep onlookers away from the wreck. One of the taxis had lost control and

turned on its side, sliding until it came to rest on the sidewalk. It had clipped another car, completely smashing the right front bumper and spinning it across the road into the opposite lane.

The taxi had no fares, and the other car was empty except for the driver. Nobody in either vehicle was harmed, and the police sat both drivers on the curb, checking each for concussions. On the sidewalk a man had been walking home when the taxi careened off of the road, pinning him between the roof of the van and a signpost. The police were waiting for the paramedics to arrive before they made any decisions about whether to try to move the car or to remove the signpost.

James watched from across the street where the police were keeping everyone at a distance. The crowd was small. Most people walked by without stopping or paying the wreck much attention at all. It wasn't that way in the states. There, people were drawn to disaster with an almost insatiable appetite. The worse the devastation, the closer they'd peer, pressing their noses to the glass for a better look. Here, a man was quietly bleeding to death on the street, and the island around him carried on.

"I saw a man die today," James said to Sienna when he got back to the house. He put the rum down on the table and sat in one of the chairs. "On the street, he was bleeding to death."

"So you didn't see him die," Sienna said from the bedroom. "You only think he died, but you can't be sure."

"I know he died," James said.

"You don't know anything," Sienna told him. "We're going out tonight," she continued, quickly changing the subject. "There's a party on the far end of the island, someone your friend Ortley knows."

"I'm not going," James called into the other room, "and how did you hear about this party in the first place?"

"You're going," Sienna said, appearing in the doorway between the two rooms. She was wearing only stockings and a bra. Her hair was up, and she was fixing an earring in her left ear. "My friend called today to tell me about it. He was the one who took me to the party where I met you. You never met him."

"Fine," James said, "go with him. Have a good time." He blew out the inside of an empty glass that was sitting on the table and opened the new bottle of rum. "I'm not in the mood to go out tonight."

"Goddamnit, you come," Sienna snarled. "Frederique already has a date – believe me, I checked. I will not show up alone, and if that means going with you, then so be it." She returned to the bedroom.

James sat there and drank his rum. He was hungry and he knew without checking that there was no food in the refrigerator.

"Get dressed!" Sienna yelled out from the other room.

"I'm going!" he shouted back. He finished the rum that was in his glass and poured himself another to take into the bathroom while he showered.

As their taxi barreled through the night towards the far end of the island, James and Sienna sat in the back seat. He wore a tan suit, and she was in a black dress. He stared out through the windows, content that he could hardly see anything beyond the

side of the road. He said almost nothing to the driver or to Sienna except to ask if he could smoke in the car. They had left the last street lights at the edge of town and proceeded underneath a thick canopy of trees that reached out above the road. Any moonlight was lost to the leaves. James kept his eyes trained on the window, where the darkness seemed tangible, like it was only inches away on the other side of the glass. If he were to reach out, he might be able to run his fingers along its smooth edge.

* * *

Beth smelled of *Bois des Îles* the night she began dating Eric. James realized much later that it was the smell of that old French perfume that would stay with him and remind him of her for a long time afterwards. Her dress was a dark maroon and if he could have given a color to her fragrance it would have been no different. She was like a rare orchid behind glass, and he was very much aware of the barrier that stood between them.

They had been left alone in the center of the room. Eric left to get drinks for himself and Beth, and while he was gone, she and James spoke at length. It was winter then, but the heat in the apartment was up and the air felt thick. James' shirt stuck to his back as he leaned in to better hear what Beth was saying. She spoke demurely, a hush that made him unsure as to whether or not she knew what she was doing, purposely pulling him forward in his chair. He couldn't recall what it was that he said as they were talking, but the laugh that followed out of Beth imprinted itself on James' memory forever. The way she stopped just short of closing her eyes, keeping them open just

enough to watch him share in her delight, and the way she clasped her hands in her lap, pressing her slender arms together all the way to the elbows. It was as though she were offering the most sincere prayer he had ever seen, so pure that it held no trace of religion at all.

Eric walked back in the room, carrying in one hand the glass holding Beth's wine and in the other his vodka tonic. James swirled what was left in his own glass – mostly melted ice with a little bit of scotch – and excused himself, saying that he too should freshen his drink. He got up, smiled at Beth, and gripped Eric's shoulder before walking away from the couch and into the kitchen.

* * *

The car pulled up in front of the estate at nearly a quarter to ten. It looked much like Hazlet's, and James felt that, for the most part, there were no differences between any of these soirees. The party had started at nine, but Sienna hated the idea of being one of the first guests to arrive. James also couldn't imagine getting there before everyone else. He could see himself, far too sober, just waiting for someone to come up and engage him in some vaguely hegemonic back and forth that mattered little to him while they inevitably watched the moon sparkle in their own eyes. He hoped that in showing up after most of the other guests, everyone else would be paired and grouped, babbling incessantly to each other and leaving him a clear path to the bar. He stood with Sienna at the base of the steps, one hand stuffed way down in his pocket, intently smoking a cigarette so as to wait a bit longer before they entered. He blew smoke into the dark

indigo expanse of the night and watched it drift apart like pulled cotton candy, dispersing in all directions through the still air.

Inside, Sienna immediately began surveying the room. James could feel her next to him, searching for the next rung on the social ladder that he imagined she would be climbing by the end of the night. She couldn't wait to laugh at every insipid joke that spewed from the mouth of the island's ruling class, and James couldn't wait to reach the first group of stogy aristocrats that he could pawn her off on. He would slip her off of his arm and seamlessly diffuse into the room, always making his way towards the next drink. His opportunity presented itself in the form of the men he recognized as the chief magistrate on the island and two foreign investors who were interested in the work that Hazlet had been doing on the hotel.

"Do look after her, gentlemen," James said with great flourish once Sienna had approached the men and made her introductions. He flung his free arm out and in one motion took a low bow while pushing Sienna with the other hand into the center of the group. He didn't stick around to see the look on the men's faces, but rather turned, and with the tenacity of a bloodhound, found his way to the bar.

James then spent the remainder of the evening getting stupendously drunk, though no one would know it as he tried his hardest to make himself thoroughly unapproachable. Any time it appeared that someone might be nearing him with the intention of engaging in conversation, James would narrow his eyes and finish his drink regardless of how much remained in the glass. Eventually, he grew tired of the party and left the small table he had been seated at to find Sienna. She was dancing in the middle of the floor with a man who was dressed far better than James. They were holding each other close,

and James watched as Sienna ran her hand up the man's arm in the same way she had done with him at Hazlet's. She then pulled his face down to hers and whispered something in his ear that she punctuated with a small kiss.

James pondered his options. He could go confront the man on the dance floor, making a scene and stopping the party. This appealed to him in that he would most likely end the evening for the rest of the people in attendance, but he was dissuaded when he realized that course of action would most likely result in him leaving with Sienna. What he considered far worse for the man was to allow him to play out the rest of the evening with her on his arm. With any luck she would make him as miserable as she had James within the week. He decided then that he would leave, making his way out quietly and without drawing Sienna's attention.

He arrived home by taxi, giving the driver a generous tip, which amounted to the last of his money, and stumbled in through the front door. He was fairly certain that he wouldn't be seeing Sienna anymore, and he decided the occasion called for a celebratory drink. He wandered through the house, bumping into chairs and doorways until he found a glass on the bed stand that he carried into the kitchen. He rinsed it and set it down on the counter while he went to the freezer to get some ice. When he returned from the freezer, he noticed a small red and blue envelope sitting on the counter near his glass. Sienna must have found it while he was out that morning and placed it on the counter without telling him. He finished fixing the drink, rum, ice, and lime, and sat down with the letter. He turned on the small lamp at the table and tore open the envelope.

Juliet could very capably copy Beth's handwriting, and the letter read as if Beth were writing it herself. It was short, and it said everything James needed to hear in a few

delicate and purposely vague sentences. She was asking him to come home, and he didn't need to know why or under what pretenses. All James needed to know was that it was sincere, which he felt it very much was. He placed his drink on the table and went into the bedroom. There he pulled his suitcase out from under the bed and began to haphazardly stuff into it his clothes and the last bottle of rum. While leaving Sienna carried with it more relief than heartbreak, it also meant that James no longer had any true ties to the Bahamas. This, along with the arrival of the letter and the end of his money, made him believe that his best and his only course of action would be to return home to New York. He closed the suitcase and stood it by the front door. He decided he would leave in the morning, and with that he passed out, spending his last night in the Caribbean trying to sleep off the past three months.

Part III

James spent most of his first day back in Brooklyn alone. In the morning, he ate at a small cafe one stop from Coney Island, and afterwards walked to the boardwalk where he bought a hot dog and watched the people waiting on line to ride the Cyclone and the Parachute Jump. It was hot, and a line of sweat was forming down his back.

The beach was loud, and James imagined the sounds sitting on the low stone walls in Nassau. Everything felt different being back in the states. In the Bahamas he had been alone in the quiet of the islands. In New York, children screamed and chased each other in the surf. Car horns blared in the street, and even the birds seemed louder, angrier somehow.

He walked up to Surf and over to West 8th where he took the Q back up to the Flatbush Avenue station. He made the short walk back to his apartment, where he showered while it was still light outside. The power was out, but the phone company hadn't yet cut off his service, so he sat on the edge of his bed and dialed Beth's apartment. There was no answer, so he called Eric's where he heard Beth's voice on the other end of the line. He hung up and called Mark. They made plans to meet later that evening, giving James a chance to sleep beforehand.

* * *

Beth lived by herself in a three-story house just after the Williamsburg Bridge, an investment her parents had made that she was living in until it matured. The decoration was sparse where you could find it and tended more towards empty rather than minimalist. The furniture she did own was elegant but comfortable and gave the

impression that she was more concerned with how her guests felt than how she appeared to others. From the third story, she could watch the sun set behind the skyline. It was the main reason that the only two chairs and table in the room were situated next to the window on the western most wall of the house. This was where Beth was sitting with Juliet, watching the sky turn a brilliant orange with tinges of rose and pink on the day that James got home.

"Did you hear James is back?" Juliet asked Beth, sipping on a glass of blush.

It was either too late or too early for coffee, and wine was the only thing in the house that Beth had to offer other than tea. Juliet would have done without it, though not by choice and was grateful that Beth usually kept a bottle on hand.

"I heard," Beth responded, "he was supposed to have been out of the country for a while, no?"

"The islands. You know very well where he was. You're absolutely awful at playing coy."

Beth kept staring out the window. She had a cup of tea in her hands, which she seemed to have forgotten about. Juliet watched the distance in Beth's eyes.

"I'm going out with Mark tonight. We're meeting with that guy he knows. The football player, what's his name? Davis, I think. Did you ever meet him?" Juliet paused to take a drink off of her wine. "Anyway, James is coming. Want to join?"

Beth was startled by the question. "Absolutely not. How can you think that would be at all appropriate?"

"I just wanted to see if you were still listening," Juliet said, looking satisfied with herself. "You are going to have to see him eventually. You know that, don't you?"

"Of course," said Beth. She appeared flustered, as if she were going to have to see James right then and there. "I just have no idea what to say. What can you say to someone about this sort of thing?"

Juliet finished the wine in her glass and reached for the bottle on the table.

"Does Eric know he's back?"

"He knows. I was with him earlier today when we heard. He spoke to Mark. It's strange. When it came up he just got quiet, pensive. I was expecting him to be angry, but that wasn't the case. He stayed calm. It was almost frightening, how calm he was."

Beth looked back to the window. The sun was down behind the buildings now as she took a drink of her tea. Juliet was working on another glass of wine, and they were both quiet as the last lingering bit of sunlight faded from the sky.

* * *

James met Mark at a crowded bar near the entrance to the Manhattan Bridge. The night seemed hectic and wild, and the looming presence of the bridge imposed itself upon them in the rain. Mark and another man were seated at a low table when James came in. He walked over, and they shook hands. Mark was sitting without a drink, and the man he was with had a beer and a strong athletic build.

"James, this is Geoffrey Davis. We went to college together," Mark said, introducing the two men. "Davis played football for Rutgers. Tight end."

"Davis?" James repeated, stretching out his hand and thinking. "…Davis!" he again proclaimed, suddenly placing the name. "I remember the Army game. A hundred

and twenty five yards with two touchdowns before the end of the first half. They couldn't cover you with all eleven guys that game."

"That's right," Davis said beaming. "We benched the starters in the second half it was such a blow out."

"Mark, you didn't tell me you were friends with football stars," James said, pulling a chair over from an empty table.

"Davis and I were roommates our freshman year. He would have been kicked off of that team if I hadn't have done his calculus work for him that year."

"Damn good thing you did too," James exclaimed. "Did you play any pro ball?" he asked turning back to Davis.

"No," Davis lamented. "I had to stop altogether after my junior year. Arrhythmia."

"Jesus, is it serious?" James asked.

One of the girls waiting tables walked by, and James quickly lunged out to get her attention before Davis could answer.

"Excuse me," he said to the table.

Once he had caught her eye, he turned back to Mark and Davis.

"First round is on me. What's everyone having?"

Davis held up his hands and shrugged. "Whatever you're having, but make it a double."

"Good enough. Mark?"

"Oh, nothing for me. I'm fine."

James held up a finger to the waitress, asking for a minute before turning back to Mark.

"I've been gone three months now," he said, his eyes narrowing a bit, "have a drink with me."

"You know I'm not a big drinker, James. Really, I'm alright," Mark protested.

"Goddamnit, Mark. It's not about the booze. It's about welcoming a friend home after he's been away. I mean, we are still friends, aren't we? I know a lot has changed, but…"

James tilted his head and watched for Mark's reaction.

"Of course we are," Mark responded, a nervousness creeping into his voice.

"Then have a drink with me." James said, demanding it now. "Three whiskeys," he said, looking back to the waitress. "Doubles."

No one said anything for a moment, and James looked up to one of the televisions over the bar. There was a tennis match on, the finals of some tournament.

"Nadal will win," James said, offering the prediction to the table.

"He can't beat Federer," said Mark quietly, "his game is perfect. He just doesn't make mistakes."

"It's on clay though. Nadal doesn't lose on clay. Anyway, who wants to watch perfection? There's no emotion in Federer's game," James went on, "You can't root for Federer to win. You just can't. You can only expect it. Nadal's game has life in it, there's an urgency to it. What do you think, Davis?"

“Tennis isn’t a sport. They’re all a bunch of pansies. You can’t get hurt playing tennis, unless you roll an ankle I guess. It’s a pansy sport.” Davis said, finishing his beer. “Didn’t you used to play in college, Skippy?”

Mark nodded, and James and Davis couldn’t help but laugh. The waitress came over with the drinks.

Davis picked up his glass and looked over to Mark, still laughing, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean anything by it.”

James, still chuckling, raised up his glass and offered a toast, “homecomings,” he said, and took the whiskey in one quick gulp.

Davis watched out of the corner of his eye, and upon seeing James shoot his drink, did the same. Mark had already put his glass on the table after taking only a sip when he noticed what the other two were doing and exhaled deeply before picking it back up, struggling to keep up.

“James, what about the Bahamas?” Mark asked, a pained look still on his face from the whiskey.

“Not right now, Mark,” James replied, looking at the television screen. “We’re out with your old school friend. I’m sure that he doesn’t want to hear a bunch of boring stories about the last three months.”

“You were in the Bahamas?” Davis asked.

James let out a sigh and looked towards the table. “I just got back. I wanted to spend a little time out of the country, but what’s truly important, is this,” he said, holding up the empty glass. “It’s a problem that needs to be rectified immediately.”

"The man's got a point," Davis said. He threw his hand in the air to get the waitress' attention and pointed to the other two men to signify another round.

"Honestly, I don't want any," Mark insisted when he saw the waitress acknowledge Davis' request.

"Don't worry, it won't go to waste," James said with a wry half-smile.

"James! I want to know! Tell me what happened down there. What brought you back so suddenly?" Mark had nearly worked himself up into a fit. He couldn't hold back any longer, and if the night had gone on as it was, James and Davis sitting there getting drunk, pounding the table with a sort of crazy abandon in their eyes, he wasn't sure what would come first, tears or rage.

"Relax, Skippy," Davis boomed, slapping Mark hard on the back. "Every story goes better with a couple a' drinks." He grabbed a new glass of whiskey up off of the table and shoved it into Mark's hand. With his arm around Mark's back, Davis reached again, retrieved another cup, toasted the room, and drank down the liquor. James followed suit, taking it down to half with a reckless smile on his face.

"I don't want a drink!" Mark cried. He tried to push Davis' hand from his shoulder but only succeeded in spilling the whiskey down the front of his shirt. Davis and James broke out laughing while Mark jumped up from the table. He put his hand in the air and was ready to begin a tirade when James seemed to settle.

"Julie's here," he said, pointing past Mark to the doorway where Juliet was shaking the rainwater off of her coat.

"Oh, calm down, Mark." Juliet walked up behind him and placed her hand on his shoulder. "This is what happens when you let him drink," she said, winking at James and

Davis. She smiled as she eased Mark back into his chair, and placed her coat on the back of an empty seat. Tugging her sleeves up, she settled in between Mark and Davis.

"James, how *are* you?" she asked, leaning across the table and giving him a kiss on the cheek. "Bahamas, huh? I bet you just got yourself into all sorts of trouble down there didn't you?"

"Oh, no. Quiet as a mouse really," James chuckled. "I just needed a little rest and some sun."

"And a good glass of rum, I'm sure," Juliet teased.

"You know I'm here too, Julie," Davis jumped in, trying to sound hurt.

"I know you are, Davis. I mean, you're the biggest thing in here, how could anyone miss you?"

It was funny and strange to see a man of Davis' size and stature become sheepish at the gentle prodding of a woman, but that was the effect that Juliet could have upon walking into a room. She could completely hijack a conversation, leading it at every turn like a conductor, and afterwards leave everyone without any real idea of what she might be like away from a party. There are certain people who find comfort in the noise and superficiality of conversation. Juliet certainly fell into that category.

"Now," she said, "what was all of that excitement about when I walked in. It looked like Mark was ready to spit, which is funny, really, because you know he wouldn't even raise his voice to hail a cab in the middle of Times Square."

"He had gotten all anxious, wanting to hear about the Bahamas," James said. Mark had calmed down, but was still indignant and for all practical purposes had

separated himself from the table. He sat, arms crossed with a scowl on his face, looking elsewhere about the bar.

"Oh yes, stories. I want to hear all about your little escapades down there in the islands," Juliet said.

"Absolutely and in good time, but what we were trying to impress upon Mark here, myself and Davis that is, is that there is an order to these things."

"And what might that be?" Juliet asked with raised eyebrows, playing along at Mark's expense, which prompted a loud snort from him in response.

"Drinks, of course," James said, trying to turn his voice intensely dire. "Drinks first, and all things to follow. We're having whiskey, would you care to join?"

"Goodness no," Juliet protested. "I'm certain I don't look like a man, so why on earth would I want to drink like one? Besides, I was having wine at Beth's just a little while ago, and I absolutely cannot mix my drinks. I'd be in Mark's lap before we even got the check."

"Well, then wine it is. We need another round anyway," Davis said, rubbing his hands together. "Allow me," and with that he pushed his chair away from the table and got to his feet. In one fluid motion he laid one arm across his waist and the other behind his back and took a deep bow, nearly sprawling headfirst across the table. Steadying himself, he straightened up and set out in the direction of the bar.

"Poor fool doesn't know if I want red or white," Juliet said, shaking her head and watching him stumble away. "Anyway, James, like I was saying, I came from Beth's, just a little while ago. We were talking and you came up, seeing as how you just rose

from the dead and all. You should go see her, you know? She's staying in tonight, but she'd love to hear from you, I'm sure."

"We'll see," James said. "I'm not trying to cause any problems for anyone. Not for Beth," he went on, pausing for a moment to take a sip from his drink, "and not for Eric either. I mean, you know better than anyone, Julie, and you do too Mark," he said, turning slightly and pointing to Mark who was still actively trying to ignore what was being said. "Oh, quit it, Mark," he snapped, "just stop it. Now, what I was saying is that you both know that I never wanted…"

The whole table suddenly turned with a start. Davis was standing next to the table with an empty wine glass in his hand staring down a slender, well dressed, individual who himself was looking down at the large purple stain that was quickly spreading across the otherwise white linen of his shirt.

"Paid nine dollars for that goddamn glass of wine," he snarled at the man with the stain on his shirt. He took a step towards him and pressed the empty glass into the man's chest. James, Mark, and Juliet all sat in stunned silence as they watched Davis back down a man who easily gave up sixty pounds to the massive Davis. James quietly sipped his drink with his eyes fixed on the scene unfolding before them.

"Your friend's out of his mind," he eventually whispered to Mark.

"No James," Mark replied, "he's drunk. Thank you for that, by the way."

All three kept watching as the man with the stain, rather assertively, stated his case that it was Davis who bumped into him, spilling the wine. If any blame should be assigned, he argued, he should be the one assigning it. He also felt that the fact that he had been rather cordial about the whole matter, up to that point, was a courtesy that Davis

should have been grateful for. When Davis did eventually pull the glass away only to slam it down upon the table, breaking it off at the stem, there was a vaguely discolored purple ring that lingered on the man's shirtfront. James speculated that there was most likely another ring pressed into the man's skin that would have been easily visible if he were to have removed his shirt.

It was at this point that the larger of the two bartenders and a goateed man who had been working the door that night rushed over and grabbed Davis around the waist and shoulders respectively. James was sorry to see Davis go. He could drink, and James wanted to hear a few more football stories. When he looked over to see Mark gathering his jacket and getting Juliet to her feet, however, he realized that Davis' outburst had ended his night of drinking early. About this, he was simply resentful.

Outside, the three men waited on the curb while Juliet huddled under the awning of the bar, staying as dry as she could in the rain. Mark was trying to hail a cab while Davis angrily pleaded his case to the goateed man at the door and James desperately worked to shield the rain so that he could light his cigarette.

"Davis," Mark called when he finally got one, "the taxi is waiting."

Davis lumbered over and looked suspiciously at Mark and James, who had made no motion towards getting in. "What gives Skippy, why don't we head to another spot?"

"No, Davis," Mark responded calmly, if not a bit quickly, "Juliet and I are going to go home. We're meeting her parents for brunch tomorrow, and you two have already gotten me tipsy enough. I'll call you soon, though. We'll all do this again." He didn't want to sound as though he was trying to get rid of Davis, though in fact, that was exactly what he was doing.

Davis gave Mark a good hard slap on the back and James a firm handshake. They waved him off, and Mark turned to James and checked his watch.

"Listen, James. Juliet and I are supposed to be meeting Eric downtown. He was working late, and we had planned to meet up when he finished. I don't know what you want to do. I mean, if you wanted to come, you know you're welcome, but…"

James held up his hand. "It's ok. I'll have to see him at some point, but not tonight. I just don't think that the mix of booze and the sudden surprise of me coming back like this would make for an enjoyable evening for anyone. I appreciate it, I do, but just not tonight."

Mark nodded and flagged down another passing taxi. He waived Juliet over, who hurried into the cab and out of the rain. From inside she called out to James, "you're not coming?"

"No," he responded, "I think I'm going to head home. Regards to Eric."

James stood on the curb and finished his cigarette. The rain had slowed, and the night was cool without being cold. He rubbed his forehead and looked down the avenue for the light of an open taxi. Eventually, he saw one and hailed it. He got in and ran his hand through his hair, pushing the wet strands off of his face. He gave the driver Beth's address and leaned back against the door as they pulled out to leave Manhattan.

* * *

Eric stared hard out the window, looking intently at the umbrellas and slickers hurrying by on the street. He squeezed his eyes shut and scratched the bridge of his nose.

There was no avoiding what was on his mind. James might as well have been sitting across the table from him that night. Next to him, Mark slumped his shoulders, sitting on the high stool. He had gotten the bartender to make him a cup coffee, and with both hands wrapped around the cup, he would take sips of it every so often, talking to Eric meanwhile.

Their conversation was confined, for the most part, to the news of James' return. Eric had been tense since hearing of it, like he was watching a storm front make its way up the coast and settle over New York.

"Where's Julie?" Eric asked.

"She had the cabbie take her home after he dropped me," Mark responded. "We were asked to leave this Irish bar on the East Side. I think Juliet let it ruin her night some."

Eric was chewing on a stirrer, barely looking at Mark.

"I could tell today, when I was with Beth," he said, "that she's thinking about it. I don't mean necessarily that she's thinking about him, but about everything. She was quieter."

Mark wasn't sure how to respond. He saw Eric's face and knew that his mind was somewhere else. He lifted the cup of coffee and took a sip.

"It was better when he wasn't here," Eric went on. "I think that without it in front of us, Beth and I were able to put it out of our minds. We didn't have to think about it. Now, I can see it in her, she can't help it." Eric took a drink then put the glass down and turned to look at Mark. "How is he?"

Mark placed his own cup on the table. Eric's sudden change in tone made it difficult to discern where the question was coming from. He thought that he sensed genuine concern in Eric's voice, even if it was only subtle.

"He's different," Mark replied. "I can't quite tell how, but he's different." Mark took another sip of the coffee and then continued. "I can't be certain. He wouldn't talk about anything that went on down there, but I just know he spent the last three months drinking. I just know it. You can tell it in his face. He looks haggard." Mark was twisting the corner of his mouth, looking annoyed.

The place was quieter than most. The lighting was low, most of it provided by wall fixtures that hung every so many feet along the side and back walls. The front was comprised of one large glass panel with the door on the left, and the bar took up the whole right side of the room. Everything was very clean, tastefully minimalistic, with the clientele decidedly Wall Street.

Eric looked on, faintly amused, as Mark proceeded, his voice raising somewhat. "I mean, all he did down there was get *drunk*. I'm sure of it! And what's more, that's all he's going to keep doing. We were out with that friend of mine, Davis, you've met him I think," Mark said, pausing and thinking about if for a moment, "anyway, so we were out, we were at that Irish place I was telling you about, the one we got kicked out of, and the two of them were just drinking the whole time. I mean they were *drinking*! And James, he was putting Davis under the table. Davis! You know how big he is. Now, I might not go in for all of that, but I'll have a drink every now and then. If it's good liquor and an occasion, then I don't mind, but…"

"Mark," Eric stopped him, putting his hand on Mark's arm. "Calm yourself," he said chuckling slightly. "It looks like you've had a couple of drinks tonight. Now what's the occasion?" he joked.

"Well, that's what I'm saying," Mark defended himself, "they got me to drink, practically forced me even. That's the way he is now."

"It's ok, Mark. Relax. It's not that strange," he went on, thinking back. "When we were in school, I don't know if I ever told you this, but James was sent to the hospital, twice." Eric shook his head slightly. "He had gotten some news from home, and he just went off the deep end. I found him," he went on, "passed out on the floor of our apartment. He had finished a liter of Johnnie Walker, all on his own. He had a glass and some old records he had been listening to. The thing is, I hadn't even been out for very long – an hour, two at most. I couldn't wake him, so I had to call the ambulance. It's God awful watching someone do that to themselves." There was distance in Eric's face. He took a drink and looked at Mark, who had calmed down.

"You said he did it twice?" Mark asked.

"They let him out of the hospital on Sunday," Eric continued. "He was back on Wednesday. This time he had been drinking at a bar, alone. When they wouldn't serve him anymore, on account of his being too drunk, he left and picked up a bottle on his way home. He never even made it in the front door. A cop found him passed out in the middle of the sidewalk two blocks from the apartment."

They both sat quietly for a moment. Mark began to say something but stopped.

"Let's get some food in you," Eric suggested, breaking the silence. "Hmm?"

Marked looked up from his coffee. “Oh sure. Sure. I am quite hungry all of a sudden.”

Eric signaled for the waitress who was taking drink orders at another table. She raised a finger, telling him she would be right over. Mark was quiet, waiting for something to say.

“I don’t know what I’m going to say when I see him,” Eric confessed. “Beth is having this engagement thing on Friday, and I know she’s going to invite him. She has to. People would begin to wonder if he wasn’t there.” Eric finished his vodka tonic and spat one of the ice cubes back into the glass. “I just don’t know what to do.”

When the waitress came over, they got up from their stools and followed her to an empty table in the back.

* * *

When Beth answered her door to find James standing on the stoop, the color ran from her face. He had arrived twenty minutes earlier but stood outside, looking up and smoking cigarettes while trying to compose himself. There was no way of telling what he was about to do. He didn’t even know what to say when she answered.

“You shouldn’t have come here,” she blurted out. Beth was hardly collected herself, and when she said it she did so without coldness or malice.

“It’s nice to see you too, Beth.”

"I didn't mean it," she told him, feeling sorry that she had said it at all. "I mean, I don't know if I meant it. It's just that Eric isn't here and I wouldn't want anyone to see you at my door at this hour knowing he's out."

"No one knows anything, Beth," James told her. The jolt of standing there with her had done more to sober him than he had expected. Memories of their time together and the very smell of her perfume had cleared his head of the night's drinks. "No one would think anything other than that I came to see a friend after being away. Which is the case, isn't it?"

"Of course it is, James." Beth had been clutching the collar of her robe, which she had changed into, not expecting anyone except for maybe Eric. She eased her grip and took a step forwards into the light that shone down on the stoop. "God, it's still raining. Come in here," she told him and stepped aside so that he could enter. She led him into the living room, which, aside from being one of the larger rooms in the house, was also the only one that was completely furnished. There was a large red rug with fringe that reached almost to the edges of the room. A high couch with wooden feet faced an empty fireplace that had long been bricked over. It was still nice to look at, however, and Beth had made it the focus of the entire room with each of the chairs and couches placed in a loose horseshoe around it. There was a wide mantel that ran above the bricks and a mirror that hung above that. James sat on the couch and Beth, after hanging his coat, took a seat in the chair next to it. The arms of the two pieces made a right angle, and James and Beth could look at each other if they only turned their heads slightly.

"I'm sorry I just dropped by like this," James said, "I should have called or something beforehand."

"Some notice would have been nice, yes, but it's ok. I'm glad to see you." Beth smiled through all of the unease. James' sudden arrival was still fresh on her nerves, and she could feel her heart beating faster now that he was sitting in her living room.

"Beth, I don't want to cause any problems, not to you and not to Eric," James said, getting up from his seat. He walked around the room, nervously picking up a small statue that Beth had on one of the end tables. "It's just," James said, putting the statue down somewhere else. He reached into his back pocket, and felt his hand on the letter, which he had been carrying with him for the entire evening. He paused, not taking it out. "It's just that I *wanted* to come back. I just needed a reason." He took his hand out of his pocket, leaving the letter where it was.

"You can't mean me," Beth said with alarm. "I can't be that reason for you. Not anymore." Beth had turned around in her chair to watch James as he nervously paced the room. "James, you can't say things like that now. I can blame it on the liquor this time, but please don't do that any more." She turned back around, not looking at James any longer. "You have been drinking, haven't you?"

"That's not why I said it," James said, thinking the whole time about the letter.

"I'm not a prude or anything," Beth said, standing up from her seat to look him in the eye. "There's nothing wrong with it, but you know I hate it when you drink so much. Please tell me it wasn't so much."

"I was out with Mark and Juliet," James responded, looking away.

"Yes, but was it so much?" she pleaded. "I mean, you hardly ever used to…it's just that when we were…"

"Beth!" James yelled. He quickly caught himself though and quieted. "Please."

There was a silence, and neither one of them moved. Beth wrung her hands, and James looked down at the floor. His feet were leaving wet rings on the rug the longer he stood in one place.

"You're soaked. You're going to catch cold," Beth told him.

"I'll be ok."

"Please, let me get you something warm." She hurried out from behind the chair and ran towards the door that led to the kitchen. As she rushed past him, he reached out and grabbed her arm, freezing her where she stood. He turned her towards him so that they were standing in the middle of the living room, face to face. Neither one spoke. James tried hard to keep his breathing regular as he looked Beth in the eyes. He felt for a moment as if everything that had happened before wasn't real. The Bahamas became a bad dream. It couldn't have actually happened, he thought. He couldn't believe that anything but that moment, standing there alone with Beth, could ever be the truth.

Beth's eyes were so full of fear and want that James could nearly see the reflection of their past in them. She was trembling, and James loosened his grip, suddenly conscious of how tight he was holding her. "Please let me get you some tea," she finally said.

James quickly let Beth's arm go. He felt disoriented and took a series of long breaths before answering. "Of course, I'm sorry," he stammered and then quickly added, "thank you."

Beth ran into the kitchen yelling, over her shoulder, "I want to hear all about the Bahamas. I've never been, and I hear it's lovely." She was speaking as if she were out of breath and racing to catch it.

Once Beth had left the room, James quickly pulled the letter out of his pocket. He looked around for a suitable place to put it, as he wanted Beth to find it after he had gone. It was too much for him to hold. Seeing her had stirred things in James. He had hoped, at the very least, that he could control them, suppress those feelings, but he was wrong. She could do with the letter what she wished, but he could no longer keep it. He ran to the mantle and slid it between two brass candleholders. James then rushed to the coat rack where Beth had hung his jacket and grabbed his coat. He had to leave.

She returned from the kitchen to meet James head on as he was preparing to go. She was holding the tea she had made for him in two hands and had a look of surprise on her face.

"Where are you going?" she asked. "I've got your tea here."

"You were right. I shouldn't have come. It was a mistake." James moved Beth aside and began towards the door.

"James, wait." She put the tea down and turned to follow after him.

"No, Beth," James said, stopping at the front door. "I don't…I can't cause any more trouble for you."

"Then you never should have come back!" Beth yelled. "Just go."

James turned up his collar and stepped out onto the stoop.

"Wait." Beth said, stopping him again.

He turned to see a pained expression on her face.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I didn't mean that."

"I know. It's a lot to make sense of. Believe me, I know."

"There's a party. I'm having a party on Friday," she told him with a certain sadness in her voice. "It's for our engagement. I understand if you don't want to come, but–"

"I'll be there," he told her.

James turned again and walked down the steps of Beth's house. She stood there, clutching the doorway, as she watched him walk away, down the street and eventually out of sight as he turned the corner, leaving her standing there under a cool summer rain.

* * *

James hadn't had anything to drink in days. He kept replaying the encounter with Beth in his mind. Knowing how she felt about his drinking was enough to make him want to try his hand at moderation, even if it lasted only a short while. He was determined to stay sober for the duration of Friday's party, but he also knew that the prospect of standing among friends and congratulating Eric and Beth on their engagement could be more than he would be able to handle. Nonetheless, his life was fast becoming the sort that makes the people around you look down their noses at you, not with contempt, but with pity. If he was going to change, if he was going to eventually be able to leave Beth in his past, he would have to do so with a clear head. When James made decisions, they were often sudden, and usually final. This one, however, felt weighted down in uncertainty.

The party was held on the first floor of Beth's house. All of the rooms on that floor open into each other through ornate French doors, giving a sense of space that

played nicely with the sparse manner in which the house was furnished. She left all of the couches and chairs where they were in the main sitting room and turned one of the back rooms into the bar area. People found their way to one of the couches or chairs and hung themselves over the arms or half sat, half leaned on the backs, drinks in hand. Something about James must have seemed unapproachable. He was clean-shaven and had bought a new shirt, robin's egg blue with an Albany collar, but still, the consternation on his face betrayed the rest of his appearance as he sat alone for most of the evening. Feeling as though he were apart from the celebration, he observed it from afar. Guests moved about him, sliding past and paying him as much attention as they would a ghost.

Three months is a long time in Brooklyn, and people talk. James didn't know exactly what everyone had said about him after he left, but he had ideas. It didn't matter what was true and what wasn't. To be honest, he couldn't be sure what had gone on in the Bahamas himself. God knows that when some men drink, they're liable to do anything. The only things James could truly recall without a rum-soaked haze around them were the flights on and off the island. Everything in between either felt sideways or was completely lost to excess.

Beth was working her way around the room, trying deliberately to greet every guest with genuine sincerity. Most of the time she did so with Eric at her side, and every so often someone would grab her wrist and pull her hand to their face. They would examine the ring Eric had given her with the studied intensity of a jeweler looking through the lens of his loupe. The women would shriek, and the men would give Eric a hearty slap on the shoulder. In these moments, James would turn his focus elsewhere. Ever since he arrived, he found that his attention had been directed almost exclusively

towards Beth and Eric. He couldn't look away as they played the happy couple to perfection. Neither one let themselves acknowledge the presence of the elephant in the room that was James Merritt.

Every so often, however, he thought he saw something in Eric's eyes. It unsettled him. He would check James' position in the room, looking to see where he was and what he was doing, each time with hard concentration in his eyes. It was as though suddenly Eric hadn't known James all of his life, like he was now trying to figure him out for the first time, the veil of friendship lifted.

Beth called for the attention of the party. She asked everyone to gather round, and the din in the room subsided. She and Eric wanted to thank everyone for coming, and Eric had a short toast he wanted to give. It was at this point James finally left his chair. If his presence could be so easily overlooked during the course of the evening, he thought no one would pay him any mind if he were to leave now. He made his way against the movement of the partygoers who were coming in through the French doors to gather in the sitting room to hear Eric's toast. With everyone next door, there was no line to the bar, and James walked straight up. Beth had hired someone to mix drinks for the evening. Guests could choose between martinis or a Tom Collins along with anything straight or on the rocks they might want.

"What can I make for you, sir?" the boy behind the bar asked as he watched James approach.

James picked up a bottle of whiskey and began to walk away. The bartender tried as politely as he could to ask him if he would like a whiskey, but James never looked back.

"I'm an old friend of the bride's."

He made his way out of the room and down a small hallway that lead to the back stairs. Not wanting to encounter anyone, he moved quickly, but Mark had also left the sitting room shortly after Eric began his toast and saw James head towards the stairs. He followed after him and called out his name as James reached the first step. James paused and turned to face Mark.

"I don't know why I thought this would be a good idea, Mark." James slumped against the banister leading up the stairs. "I thought I could start over. I thought that I could come here and maybe, if I really tried, I might even be able to be happy for Beth and Eric, but when I heard Eric start that toast…"

"James–" Mark began, but he was cut off.

"Do me a favor. Don't tell anyone you saw me, and when it's all over come get me from upstairs. I'm leaving again, Mark. In the morning, and I don't think I'll be coming back this time." He had made up his mind to leave, but he couldn't yet bring himself to leave Beth's house for the last time.

"James!"

He turned and proceeded up the stairs before Mark could say anything further. "Don't be fooled, Mark," he called back over his shoulder, "it's sobriety that's the worst part of drinking." He held the banister in one hand and the whiskey bottle loosely in the other. He slowly climbed up to the third floor of Beth's house where he knew no one would follow. He heard the sounds of applause and clinking glasses as he reached the top of the stairs. He was no longer part of that world, and he wanted only to distance himself from everything he had sown.

Mark returned to the party. He would faithfully carry out James' request, and in the morning he would take comfort in saying goodbye. He was drained, and it was beginning to show. He could no longer stand the stress of walking the tightrope that stretched between James and Eric. Each had been pulling in opposite directions, and he found he was continually trying to balance himself between the two. Mark was not the type who easily allowed a friend to walk out of his life, but James hadn't been a friend in some time – at least not in the way that Mark had always understood the term.

On his way back into the front room, Mark found himself face to face with Eric, who had just concluded his toast to cheers and handshakes. Up to that point, Beth had been doing her best to keep him at her side at all times. To her guests it looked as though she simply wanted her fiancé in tow while they worked the room, but in truth, she was more than a little nervous at the prospect of Eric breaking away and confronting James. She had been vigilant, navigating her way through the night without letting the two get within arm's reach of one another.

"I need to talk to you," Eric said, grabbing Mark by the arm and turning him around. They made their way through the crowded sitting room as people raised their glasses and patted Eric on the back as he passed by. He smiled and rushed Mark as discretely as he could into the kitchen. Once inside, he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the folded letter that James had left days earlier on Beth's mantle.

"I've been holding on to this since yesterday," he said, "I came over to help Beth set up for the party and I found this on the mantle."

The party had started up again in the next room, and the voices melted together in a loud clamor. Eric was holding the letter out at arm's length, waiving it in Mark's face like the key piece of evidence in a murder trial.

"What is it?" Mark asked. His voice was shaking.

"It's a goddamn letter!" Eric yelled, before thinking about who might be listening. "It's a letter," he went on, lowering his voice and collecting himself the best he could. "It's from Beth, addressed to James while he was still out of the country. That son-of-a-bitch was here and Beth didn't say a word."

Eric paced the kitchen, tapping the letter against his thigh and using it like a finger to point whenever he spoke.

"What does it say?" Mark asked, his own mind racing. He wanted to rush out into the party and grab Juliet, drag her into the kitchen and show her what she had done.

"I haven't read it," Eric said, "I've been going back and forth for two days now trying to decide what to do. I just don't see what good it would possibly do, me reading it. I have a good enough idea of what it says without having to see it right there in Beth's own handwriting."

Mark stood in silence. He felt trapped. He wanted to rip the letter from Eric's hand and tear it to pieces right then and there. He hated Juliet for writing it and for the feeling of loyalty that made him protect her. He hated that he couldn't bring himself to tell Eric that Beth had nothing to do with any of what was going on, and he hated knowing. And for the first time, he began to truly hate James for his part in all of it. He wanted so badly for the night to be over and the morning to come, for James to leave again, this time with the intention of never coming back.

"So then you haven't talked to Beth about this?" Mark asked, cautiously posing the question so as not to show that it was one he already knew the answer to.

"No, not yet. I figured I would wait until after the party, but honestly, I don't know if I can let it go any longer. I feel like going and walking up to her right now, demanding she tell me what's going on. To hell with her guests."

As they were talking, someone from the party eased the door open a crack and stuck her head into the kitchen.

"Can't you see we're talking!" Eric snapped at the woman.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, stunned at his severity, "it's just that Beth wanted me to come find you. I think she wants you to meet someone."

Eric shoved the letter back into his pocket and paused for a moment, looking at Mark.

"Where is he, anyway?" he asked. "Did he finally have the good sense to leave?"

"I saw him on the stairs," Mark said. "He was headed up with a bottle of whiskey from the bar. I would just leave him. Let him get good and drunk and pass out upstairs. At least then he'll be out of the way and you won't have to worry about him for the rest of the night. You might even get to enjoy yourself some."

Eric nodded and tapped a knuckle against the counter. "Right," he said, and walked back into the party. Mark was left alone in the kitchen thinking about the letter, and Eric, and James, upstairs, drunk and full of self loathing, and Juliet, who couldn't leave herself out of a problem that wasn't hers, and Beth, most of all, Beth, for what she did in starting the whole thing.

* * *

Eric waited an hour before he ventured upstairs. He entered the room on the third floor to find James sitting alone at a small table directly below one of the tall windows that looked down onto the street. A nearly empty bottle of whiskey sat on the glass tabletop before him, and the heavy glass he had been drinking out of rested on its side, dropped from his hand. He sagged in his chair, barely able to keep himself upright. He was sinking and had to clutch at the arms or the edge of the table to keep from completely going under. There were no lights in the room, as Beth had never placed any lamps in any of the corners and the overhead bulb had burned out long ago. The space was rarely used except occasionally as a reading room when the sunlight allowed. It was one of the empty, forgotten places that existed within the walls of Beth's house.

All the same, a broad patch of light fell over the table, illuminating the area where James was sitting. The streetlamps, skyline, and moon, which was full and sitting low in the sky, threw a fair amount of light into the room. The table and the two chairs were the only pieces of furniture, and, without any upholstered pieces or area rugs, there was a faint echo that gave the small room the illusion of depth.

Eric quietly shut the door behind him and walked over to where James was sitting, the sound of his footsteps filling the room. He paused at the edge of the table, looking down upon James, before setting the bottle and the glasses, along with a small plate of hors d'oeuvres, on the glass. Pulling out the other chair, Eric took a seat across from James. If they were to look, James to his left and Eric to his right, they would see the shining visage of mid-town, shining at the edge of the water. Eric's eyes were fixed

on James, and James' chin was sinking ever deeper into his chest. For a long time they sat there, as they were, quietly unsure of what to say or how they might begin to say it.

Every so often James' head would bob slightly, leaving Eric to wonder how conscious he was and if he even knew that he were in the room at all. A silence hung around them, unbroken, until Eric reached for the bottle and slowly cracked the seal as he unscrewed the top for the first time. Putting the cap down, he slid the two glasses he had brought with him across the glass tabletop and poured two shots, leaving them untouched for the time being.

The usual pleasantries and small talk didn't seem to apply in that moment, and Eric could only think to make a low half coughing sound deep in his throat. Upon hearing the guttural noise from the other side of the table, James straightened up in his chair, lifting his head to look at Eric. He wanted to speak. Eric was the only person he felt he needed to justify himself to. More than to justify himself, he felt the overwhelming desire for Eric to forgive him. He wanted to hear that everything between them was again as it used to be, as it was when they were younger.

James was the first to offer any words, slurred though they might have been. "I'm sorry," he said, finding it easier not to look at Eric.

"I know. I know." Eric too was looking around the room, teetering on the edge of a conversation he didn't particularly want to have. He felt the need to head it off before it ever gathered momentum. What he was going to do would be easier that way, without all of the emotion and latent anger. It required a detachment that he felt slip away when James spoke. There was still too much of Eric that saw James as he used to be, a friend. It was something that no matter what, he wouldn't be able to change. He

realized it and also that he would, very soon, have to come to terms with it, move past it somehow.

"What do you say we put all that aside for now, James?" Eric said, hoping to gloss over James' sudden inclination to clear the air.

"It's just that I don want you to blame her. Please don't. Please don't blame Beth for what happened, Eric, cause it wasn't her fault."

Eric felt the unease of knowing that there was no escaping the discussion unfolding before him. There was a sudden urgency in James to bring what he had been hiding within himself for the last three months into the light. A strange lucidity of intent began to cut through the booze, and every contradiction, every moment of guilt, every pained lie that he had worked so tirelessly to suppress was suddenly finding life in his words.

"It was mine. It was my fault. Beth never cheated on you, Eric. You can't think of it that way. You can't. She only made a wrong decision. One bad decision, that's all. I was the one who cheated. I was the one who wronged you. She always loved you. Through the whole thing, deep down, I mean, she always loved you."

Eric pressed the teeth in the back of his mouth together hard. He shut his eyes and ran his hand through his hair. He didn't want this. He didn't want to hear any admissions of guilt, any words that could lead him into forgiveness. He ran his palms nervously over his thighs, smoothing out the wrinkles in his pants and crinkling the envelope that he could feel through the cotton of the slacks. He slid his hand into his pocket and fingered the letter that he had been carrying with him throughout the duration of the party.

"Eric, I wish it hadn't been you. I wish it'd been someone, anyone else." James was leaning his elbow on the table, resting his head in his hand and looking in the direction of the window. "It made me sick, when I thought about it, you know? Whenever I realized it was you, I'd get these headaches, real bad. It hurt to think about it." James shut his eyes, squeezing his eyelids tight and carving deep lines in his forehead. He snapped his eyes open and looked up towards Eric. "Why'd it have to be you?" he asked, his voice shaking. He stared for a moment at Eric, pleading with him for the slightest reprieve before hiccupping and lowering his head back into his hand.

"I'm sorry, Eric," he whispered. "God, I'm sorry."

Eric tilted his head back and slowly opened his eyes to the ceiling. His one hand was still inside the pocket of his pants and the other was holding the collar of his shirt tight to his neck. Breathing deep and biting his lower lip, he looked deep into the darkness of the empty room. "It's ok, James." He struggled to say it because more than anything he wanted for it to be, despite knowing full well it wasn't and never would be again.

With those words, James retreated deep within himself, losing the tenuous grip he had on the moment and fading gently into the warm haze of the whiskey. The plate before him caught some of the moonlight, and he reached out for it like a hungry child. His fingers fumbled with a piece of cracker, and in trying to lift the bite to his mouth, a small bit of tapenade slid down James' chin and fell onto his chest, leaving an oily mark on his shirt.

The table was small and plain with a square top and wooden legs colored a deep red. From his side, Eric reached across it and firmly but caringly placed his hand behind

James' ear, at once holding his head and at the same time pulling it forwards towards his own. He listened to the commotion from the party on the first floor and although he couldn't make out any of the voices, he knew somewhere downstairs Beth was smiling, talking to a friend and staring down into her glass. He imagined her only half listening, nodding once in a while, and occasionally looking up, hoping she hadn't appeared completely lost in her own head. It pained him to think that he would never again be a full participant in her thoughts, that from then on she could never think of him without tying his image to another. He touched his forehead to James' and shut his eyes.

With his free hand Eric found the shot glasses. He left one where it was in front of him and slid the other towards James. His hand was as unsteady as his thoughts, and little splashes of golden liquid leapt up and over the rim of the small glass. He tenderly patted the back of James' neck before releasing his grip.

"Have a drink with me, Jimmy," he said in a hushed tone. His voice had become shaky, and he struggled to keep from completely falling apart. His eyes were beginning to fill with tears as he raised his glass to James, who obediently took up the drink in front of him, mirroring Eric's gesture. "Cheers," he said, but the word got caught somewhere in the back of his throat. Both men put the glasses to their lips and threw their heads back. With pursed lips, Eric lingered in the bite of the liquor and watched James, who didn't react at all, drift forward, eyes closed, and catch himself on the edge of the table, swaying as if in a breeze.

Eric looked away and shook his head. The pain he had been fighting so hard to keep out of his mind eventually welled up and broke across his face. Tears were now rolling down his cheeks as he turned back to the table and reached out to take James'

glass from his hand. He poured another shot, full to the brim and slid it back across, leaving his own glass empty.

"How about another?" Eric could barely speak now as he rapped his empty glass on the table. He was looking out the window because he could no longer stand to watch his friend's face. "For old time's sake."

Eric winced as he watched James, blind drunk, grope at the table in front of him before finally finding the glass, bringing it feebly up to his mouth. Again and again he repeated the process, taking the empty glass from James' hand and refilling it, each time ignoring his own. With every shot James took, Eric lost whatever remnant of composure he thought he still possessed until his own hand wavered so uncontrollably that he thought the glass would surely break from the way it skittered on the neck of the bottle every time he fixed another drink.

"We're drinking together, again," James would say from time to time. Sometimes he could even turn his mouth up in a smile, though his eyes remained shut, "like friends."

Eric's usual manner of confident, deliberate speech had completely abandoned him, and his voice now trembled so violently that he would have to pause several times just to finish a short sentence. He felt ill every time he had to coerce James into another drink, his hand too limp to hold the glass until Eric reassured him that they would have, "just one more." He let out a low wail at hearing James' short sudden breaths. He would reach across the table from time to time, shaking James awake whenever the desire to sleep, to stop, became too strong.

They went on like that until the bottle was emptied and James, perched in his chair, rested with his head lolled back and his face staring at the ceiling. His arms hung

limp over the sides, and Eric sat across the table staring, unable to move. His eyes were red, and the dried remains of little rivulets of tears stained his cheeks. He wasn't sure how long he stayed that way, sitting alone in the dark, but the party downstairs wasn't as loud and boisterous as it had been when he left. An ambulance siren rang out somewhere outside of the window, and Eric began to gather himself. He wiped his eyes and his nose on the sleeve of his shirt and swallowed hard. Standing up, he pushed his chair back under the table and placed one of the shot glasses in his pocket. He leaned over James. He wanted to lift his arms into his lap, or tilt his head forward so it didn't hang that way, like a weight on a broken spring. He couldn't though. The way he was is the way he would have to be found, so Eric picked up the plate from the windowsill and stuck the bottle they had been drinking from under his arm. With one hand he straightened his collar and fixed his hair. He couldn't dwell on this any longer. He had to regain his composure and join Beth downstairs.

Eric Foster was getting married in one month, and he couldn't let what happened with James ruin what had been, at least while he was in attendance, a perfectly enjoyable engagement party. He walked back across the dark, forgotten room on the third floor, turned the knob, and stepped out into the hall. Without looking, he closed the door behind him. He would return, as she had done with him, to Beth, who sat somewhere two floors below, staring into a glass of wine wondering where her fiancé and James Merritt had gotten off to.