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Los Angeles Man

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Creative Writing and Writing for the Performing Arts

by

Aretha Amelia Sills

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The Thesis of Aretha Amelia Sills is approved:

Committee Chairperson

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For David

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Part 1

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“The Los Angeles plain and fringing coastline has supported a continuous cultural occupation for at least the last 8000 years. Partial remains of a skeleton referred to as ‘Los Angeles Man’ were recovered from the ancient channel of the Los Angeles river in the Baldwin Hills area. The ‘Los Angeles Man’ appeared to be contemporaneous with the partially preserved remains of an imperial mammoth.”

–The California Energy Commission

Is the best of the free life behind us now? Are the good times really over for good?

–Merle Haggard

Part I

The anxiety was familiar enough, yet tonight several newborn strains mingled in Martin with a delicate, insidious sort of power. He and his wife Marilyn sat at a table at the foot of a small black stage whose pinkish velvet curtains had faded from red. The club was almost full, mostly gay men, except for a few older couples and some anachronistic kids in 1940s gabardine, probably record store clerks. It was becoming increasingly difficult to defend the four empty chairs.

The show was set to start at any moment but they were still waiting on his brother Gil and his partner Bradford. Marilyn's twin Laurel and her boyfriend were also late, but he hoped they'd never appear. Laurel was irritating and somewhat unstable and about three months prior, for reasons so compulsive and pathetic he couldn't articulate them even in thought, he'd slept with her twice.

He blamed his father. Until recently, Martin believed that even if he hadn't been gifted with a specific kind of genius the way Dietrich had, he could love another person. He at the very least had a talent for monogamy. Given recent events, however, he doubted he could claim superiority over his father in any area of his life.

Marilyn leaned on his shoulder. He kissed her ear, recalling how intimidated he'd once been by her awkward beauty. She was decked out in a silk shirt and linen trousers. Her hair hung loose, except for a girlish barrette near her temple, the sole reminder of her

usual crazy-lady daywear. Furry scarves and hobo bags, oddly-cut tunics and striped leggings, all so ugly they seemed like an attempt to defy criticism by confounding the eye.

“There’s Bradford,” she said. “Talking to that big guy.” Martin turned, but they were all big. Marilyn waved and called to him.

Bradford came over and kissed the top of Marilyn’s head, complimented her on being so skinny. “Martin, looking well,” he said, the tilt of his head intimating the opposite.

“What can I say?” Martin asked, leaning back until his chair teetered on hind legs. “I’m a handsome man.”

Bradford smiled and cocked his head, doglike.

Gil appeared in the midst of the crowd as if out of ether. Had he been there all along? He had a talent for emerging and disappearing as though made of fog. He looked so *rich*, his jeans’ deep color and odd stitching telling of boutique origins. Martin was struck, seeing him glide toward them through the maze of tables, by how he and Gil resembled each other, except for Gil’s beautiful face and gleaming dark-brown skin. They were like a picture and its photo-negative, their square heads a bit too big for their small bodies. Gil was adopted so there was no reason for this to be true, except that they were brothers, no matter the actual relation.

Martin stood and they hugged, briefly but thoroughly. It had been months. As they separated, Gil smacked Martin on the chest hard. “Man. Dude. Martin. *Tell* it to me, motherfucker.”

“Same old, Gilbert. How are *you*?” But the question was swallowed by other greetings and Martin knew Gil would never answer truthfully or with any specificity, anyway. He’d be *cool*, he’d be *swell*; he’d evade as ever.

Laurel suddenly loomed above him, clasping her on-again boyfriend Jake’s arm. The sisters shared the same set of features except Marilyn’s had been pinched by a lifetime of disapproval of her flighty, charmed twin. Laurel seemed to float on a lotus like some sort of bodhisattva. You couldn’t get a clear sense of what she looked like even looking directly at her. Her beauty had long ago absolved her of any responsibility and now that she had lines at the corners of her eyes she appeared undeservedly dignified.

Marilyn had found herself born into an impossible situation, he realized. She was truly lovely, until the beautiful one appeared and stood right above her, refracting light around the room. He put his arm around his wife, thinking he loved her more than he ever had.

Jake gripped Martin’s neck and kneaded it, looking like he’d just come from restoring a Galaxie 500 or herding cattle. His crow’s feet fanned like a postcard sunrise when he smiled. There were kisses, introductions, drink orders. Martin avoided eye contact with the new arrivals, but that wasn’t so unusual that anyone would notice.

The house lights dimmed. A bald black man sat at the scratched-up piano to a light round of applause. His blue jacket barely stretched over his belly. He shifted his behind on the bench and hit the big first notes of “Wheel of Fortune.” Sophie Allen ambled from the wings, making an ironical face, like *Who the hell are you people?* Her champagne-colored wig glowed under the low-hanging spot, so she appeared as an angel,

or an alien whose head emanated light.

She gave a little kick and jerked the microphone to her mouth. Applause drowned out the piano and Sophie scowled, as if to say, *Hey, I'm singing here*. A low laugh rumbled toward the front of the room, and she had them, just like that, by pretending she didn't want them.

Her voice was no longer in its prime, but there was that famous unadorned tone, smoky at the edges, clear and loud. He could almost hear her explaining on one of the cassette tapes she sent him on a weekly basis: *Open with a peppy number, Martin. You've got to grab them right from the word go.*

Martin had taken a job ghostwriting Sophie's memoirs. The ostensible reason for the anxiety-producing family reunion had been that he had gotten comps, but since Gil didn't need free tickets and Laurel didn't know or care who Sophie Allen was, Martin was aware the rare gathering had been at Marilyn's urging, to celebrate that there was a job at all.

He'd been writing a memoir at the request of his agent when he decided he couldn't do it. It was as simple as that. Marilyn had begged, told him she was leaving if he couldn't make some money. He didn't blame her. It was rough on her having to support them, not to mention the whole torturous thing about her wanting to have kids before it was too late, then doubting if they should, which was again his fault because they should be able to afford it by now.

The insuperable problem was that there was stuff he didn't want to make public. Not only about his father, who was the only reason anyone would read about Martin. He

couldn't get around the fact that to write his life story he'd have to tell strangers about his life. He'd even tried. Earlier that year he'd written several brief chapters that revealed to him the stories he could tell might not be that interesting to anyone else. The ones he wouldn't tell might be, but not in the way his agent wanted, and then of course he refused to tell those tales so it was a moot point. His agent wanted celebrity dish, of which there wasn't much. He wanted Martin to blame his father's failure on one spectacular and scandalous incident like everyone else did, when in reality, all of Dietrich had colluded in his loss of fame and fortune. It had been a willful act.

Then this job came up and Martin took it, thinking it might help him learn how to be shameless. Help him *let go of shame*. That's what Marilyn said. It wasn't working yet.

His wife hadn't left him, because he'd taken the job and because, as he'd overheard her hissing at her sister on the phone, she couldn't face the dating scene with her breasts shriveling up. He was glad because he loved her hard features and soft heart, even when they fought and she refused to touch him for weeks on end.

Sophie sidled to the piano bench, bumping the big man with her hips while he continued to quietly play.

"This is Morris Berry," she said, turning to face the audience. "A few years back, my regular accompanist died." The crowd seemed unsure if they should applaud for him now that the subject of death had been broached, by an elderly woman, no less. "Morris used to play with Mitzi London. Remember her?" The adjacent table of men, all in taut earth-tone sweaters, clapped. "A long, long time ago, Mitzi stole my piano player," Sophie said, dropping her words sparingly over a silky pattern of notes. "It took me thirty

years, but I got even. Two can play at that game; isn't that right, Morris?"

Morris cast a wary glance over his shoulder. He'd heard it a million times.

"I'm not proud of myself," Sophie said, "but pianist envy can make a girl do terrible things." The rolling music gained speed. Sophie cackled. She raised her mic and began to sing: "I've got an island in the Pacific, everything about it is terrific. I've got the sun to tan me, palms to fan me, and..." She waited a moment. "An occasional man."

The stage patter was probably set years ago. Martin bet it never varied by so much as a syllable. Still, it worked. Everyone stared at Sophie, dazed and indulgent—all but Laurel. She was watching Martin. She gave him a flat smile that seemed to boast of being smarter than him in every way. It sped through him like an electrical shock until he averted his gaze, dominated.

Marilyn elbowed him. "Sophie's awesome," she said, whispering into his ear, a sensation so intimate that Martin was flooded to his fingertips with tingling panic. He needed to keep it together, for her, to prove she was the better one, because she was sane, and made useful things with her hands, because she knew about nutrition and design and read some of the newspaper. He needed to prove that the things Marilyn strived for wouldn't always lose out to random gifts of fate, like charisma and beauty and sociopathy.

His wife could never know what he'd done because people like them, the lesser lights, deserved their happiness; it was their consolation prize. He offered her his wine as she finished hers. He had to stay clearheaded if Laurel was going to be around.

Sophie perched on the edge of the stool. She began slowly, without

accompaniment. “Build your dreams to the stars above, but when you need someone true to love...” She sounded suddenly ragged. “Don’t go to strangers. Lover, come to me.” Her voice broke and throbbed, tricks she must have picked up in her country music days. Morris sneaked in behind her, elegant. “For when you hear the call to follow your heart, you’ll follow your heart, I know. I’ve been around. I’m an old hand. I’ll understand if you have to go.”

Bradford’s arm circled Gil’s waist. They’d had an understanding, as Gil called it. Gil had tried to pretend Bradford’s infidelity was easier with his permission. That was as much as Martin knew. Gil was tight-lipped above all.

Would Marilyn make a humbling bargain just to keep him, to save face? Martin watched his wife’s fine posture, her long neck erect, as if she were waiting for a teacher to call on her. He took her slim hand in his and she fluttered her lashes, scrunched her nose. No, he decided. If she knew the truth, she’d find ways to hurt him he couldn’t yet imagine.

Sophie came to the end of her set, which was “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” It was August but her biggest hit had come late in life, ending up on every corporate Christmas mix when the Frank Sinatra or Ella Fitzgerald version proved too expensive to license. He knew Sophie hated the song, but he also knew she believed in giving the audience what they’d paid to see. Afterwards, she blew kisses and bowed. She’d never been truly famous, but she was the one who’d survived and so the audience treated her like she was Billie Holiday, or at least Rosemary Clooney. It was the victory of the last woman standing and she didn’t seem to mind a bit.

They demanded an encore. Sophie paused in the applause and touched her hand to her heart. Then she gave a flippant wave and walked offstage. The audience rose, whistling for her return, but Sophie was old school: the end meant the end.

The unease that had unsettled Martin all evening lifted somewhat. The show hadn't been a disaster, though he wasn't sure why he thought it would be. Because he'd invited people? His belief in his own potential for failure apparently extended past things he had any actual control over.

Bradford dabbed at dry eyes. Jake shook his head. "They don't make them like that anymore," he said, several times, as if it were a statement full of meaning, then visited the bar. The rest of the party lingered around the table, parsing the performance and catching up. Bradford and Gil had just been to Bali, and Bradford educated them on the delights of the spa at the Bulgari.

Marilyn had the same look on her face as when she was watching Sophie. When she wasn't working at the furniture store on La Brea, Marilyn designed poured-concrete sinks and countertops. She got most of her clients through Bradford so it was smart to kiss ass, but she also seemed to believe he had actual taste. "What's the season to go if you want to avoid tourists?" she asked, as if they could afford the plane fare, let alone the Bulgari. Her sister, legs crossed, sneered and looked away, punting at the air with a high-heeled foot.

Martin swished the dregs of Marilyn's wine and downed it. "So Bradford," he said, "when's the best season to go to avoid terrorists?"

Laurel snickered. Martin didn't dare look at her. He probably should have.

Bradford defaulted to his end-of-the-record-industry conversation. He'd recently been let go and he was weathering the music business' last days like he was in an Edith Wharton novel, clinging to all that was outmoded and correct. He talked as though stealing music off the internet was a crime that should be punished by lynching. Martin suggested the lynching be carried out by recently laid-off Tower Records employees.

He didn't understand Bradford's rage. They were loaded. Gil had discovered a gigantic pop act in the 80s called Tyme for II. When he was too old for A&R but still too valuable to fire, they made him a VP. Following in the footsteps of his adoptive father, the *Billboard* profiles always said. Now Bradford could make artisan cheese or whatever the rich-man fantasy was now. Start a green business.

Bradford blew air out his nose. "Seriously, Martin," he said. "It's not a joke. Young people think that stealing is okay. They've done studies on this. Which industry will those kids take down next, because they don't want to pay for entertainment anymore? Film? Video games?"

Marilyn was looking at her empty glass. Gil's head bobbed. He was pretending to be lost in Hoagy Carmichael's croaky croon. "Winter Moon." Martin felt bile bubbling up in him, the need to shut Bradford down. He knew it would upset Gil. He could let it pass, couldn't he?

"Tell me," Bradford demanded, his red, righteous mug shaking slightly. "Which one? Publishing? Will you care when it's your turn?"

Laurel raised an eyebrow at Martin, as if egging him on. He thought about Dietrich in his Nehru jackets and later the pale denim pant suits, chasing trends like

Captain Ahab. The abysmal acid-rock albums, the girls half his age, the obsession with blackness, as if that could absolve the sins he'd committed against black songwriters. His father had deserved to lose what he'd earned on the backs of other people.

"The music industry needs to be taken down," Martin said. Marilyn put her hand on his arm like a mom at a stop sign. Martin pulled away, leaning his body in to the table. "Wasn't the whole thing built on theft? How many bat-mitzvahs were financed by Willie Dixon songs?"

Bradford acted shocked. "That's a little beyond the pale, isn't it? Blaming the Jews?"

Martin wanted to smash his forehead on the table. Why did Bradford so willfully misunderstand? Why did Martin always phrase things so they'd be so easily misunderstood? "Communions, quinceañeras, whatever. The songs that built your label belong to usurpers, to this day. The A&R guys who put their names on them gave them to their children and nieces and nephews who still live off them. *That's* stealing, Bradford. What do forty-five year-old men know about what kids want, anyway?" he asked. "Of course they steal from you. What have you given them to pay actual money for in the last ten years? John Mayer?"

Laurel laughed, short and loud. Her boyfriend returned from the john with that empty grin and took his seat. Martin felt something like pride spreading from his chest. He wanted to make Laurel laugh again. He was emboldened by it.

"How do you expect to thrive on the same tired old shit?" Martin asked. "Do any of the executives ever even leave Boystown?"

Bradford's pink face went white. He stood.

Gil mumbled that everyone should just chill. Martin's ears were burning hot.

"I am not the music industry, Martin," Bradford said, holding his coat before his chest like a shield.

Gil gazed at them, calmly, the corners of his mouth just barely turned up.

Martin exhaled. "Bradford, I don't mean *you*, personally." God, and he'd gotten so good at letting bullshit go, too, at turning it into a joke. It was Laurel's proximity that was stirring his need to showboat, he realized with shame. Bradford's only crime had been to sign some New Romantic bands with fake British accents before drifting toward the marketing department. He'd helped turn everyone in the 80s gay and for that he should be congratulated.

Martin stood, weakly. "I can't resist a rant sometimes. I'm sorry." He held out his hand and Bradford shook it, tight-mouthed. "Let's go meet Sophie before you leave."

He knew Gil would appreciate that. He was one of those snobs who'd come across so many famous people that the only ones who impressed him were old or dead—vestigial celebrities who no longer served a purpose other than reminding the world that there used to be such a thing as authenticity.

They followed the bartender's directions into the steamy kitchen, past gossiping waitresses, through a doorway hung with a gray curtain. In a storage room, Sophie autographed a record against the back of a tall man in cheap tweed. "That one is very rare," the man said. "1959."

"Martin," she exclaimed, and he enjoyed being greeted like a hail-fellow. That

never happened to him. “My biographer,” she continued, wrapping her arm around his neck. Everyone smiled, waiting for someone to speak. Martin introduced his wife. “Either I’m drunk, or there’s two of you,” Sophie said.

Everybody else seemed to think the sisters looked exactly alike. Why was he convinced Laurel was prettier?

“So,” Sophie said, “who’s the evil one?”

They all laughed, except Martin, who tried not to wear any expression at all. “And this is my brother,” Martin said, quickly, without elaborating on the difference in their complexions. Gil stepped forward to shake her hand like he was about to genuflect.

“Not twins, I take it,” Sophie said, winking at Gil. She swept an arm upward, now addressing the whole group. She knew how to work a crowd of any size. “Martin is a fabulous biographer. He lets me do whatever I want.”

Marilyn said that sounded like him and Martin tried to read her expression. She wasn’t smiling in any happy kind of way.

The record collector asked Sophie to sign more albums and she obliged. A couple poked their heads into the small room, gushing over the show. Sophie’s attention turned toward them.

Gil yawned, putting on his jacket. “Time to hit it,” he said.

“So is this it? The annual visit is over?” Martin asked, surprising himself. He wasn’t even drunk.

“We’ll go to lunch next week,” Gil said, gripping Martin’s forearm. “For sure.”

The rest of the goodbyes were just as short. Marilyn seemed irritated at her sister,

Jake's eyelids were sagging after his fifth Jack and Coke, and Laurel was pissed that she'd have to drive. There was a quiet wait for the valet.

When the Silver Shadow finally appeared, Martin returned the brief, approving smile from the kid in the red vest. The car had been his father's. It cost so much to maintain that it almost wasn't worth keeping, but it was dented and the pewter paint had gone milky. Was there anything cooler than a beat up Rolls-Royce?

On the way home, Martin noticed that Marilyn wasn't speaking to him. She stormed up the stairs. He wasn't sure what he'd done, specifically that is, and he wasn't going to guess in case that got him into more trouble. Marilyn was in the bathroom when he got inside, so he stripped to his boxers and crawled into bed.

She emerged in underwear that drooped on her hips, pulled a nightgown over her head, and climbed under the covers. "I'm tired of this," she said, turning her back on him.

Oh god, what? He was tired of it, too. He waited for her to explain, but she didn't. Martin touched her ribcage. "What are you tired of?" he asked.

"You and Laurel."

He felt several solid kicks inside his chest, closed his eyes on swarming spots.

"You guys think you're so smart. You make fun of people right to their faces, like you have a, a," she said, sputtering for the word. "*Right*. Like you're better than us." She whipped around to face him.

"Do you mean Bradford?" he asked. "All I meant was—"

"It's every time, Martin," she said. "What makes you assume people are shallow just because they don't hate everything?"

Martin thought that he loved his wife because he liked her. He had no idea why she loved him. “You’re right,” Martin said. “I’m sorry.”

“We want a baby but what if it’s like me instead of you?”

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“I mean if it’s not smart. Are you going to make fun of it to its face?”

“Who says you’re not smart?”

“You do, every day, in a million little ways,” she said.

“I love you,” he said. “More than I can ever tell you. Do you know that? If I make you feel dumb, it’s because I feel dumb. Me, not you. I’m a total asshole. I have no redeeming qualities other than you.”

“Shut up,” she said, smiling, reluctant. She wanted him to go on.

“I mean it,” he said. “You’re much smarter than me. You’re accomplished and beautiful. You’re perfect in every way.” He kissed her and she pulled his head to her breast. “Marilyn,” he whispered. Her body against his felt like sliding into a warm bath, like bliss, and he knew he had to tear himself away. He had to tell her.

She breathed into his ear reprovingly. “I love you too, Martin.”

The falling pitch of her voice—the way it had diminished by the time she reached his name as if she were walking down a staircase—and how accustomed he was to her disappointment, was causing a rebellion in him that he couldn’t contain. All he wanted at that moment was liberation from his lie. That was the only thing that could free him from a life of perpetual anxiety, of being a prisoner to his own secrets. He saw the lone way forward and it was confession. “You’ll never know how much,” he began. “I’m not

trying to be dramatic. I did something really bad and I'm afraid you'll never forgive me."

"It wasn't *that* bad, honey. I can see how Bradford would bug you."

"No," he said. "That's not what was bad. That's just a drop in the bucket of bad."

"What," she said, not like a question, but like a dare. "What."

His ear was pressed to her breastbone. He thought that he would tell her and she would kill him. One sharp chop to the neck and all his troubles would be done. "Do you know how I've always had a girlfriend, from the time I was like fifteen, and so I've only ever been with a few other women, and how that sometimes bothers me?"

He felt her muscles clench beneath him. "No," Marilyn said, slowly. "I didn't know that it bothered you."

What was he doing? The room around him spun, the bed supporting him disappeared; he was sure he was listing. She'd never understand. She'd never get that what he'd done had absolutely nothing to do with her.

He inhaled, the way she was always telling him to, properly, from the diaphragm, filling his belly, prana and apana or whatever. Inhaling correctly was a big deal to her. He opened his mouth to speak, unsure which words would emerge. The intake of oxygen seemed to clear his head a little. He was pretty sure her sister would never confess. In fact, the only reason he'd been able to sleep nights again was that Laurel had as much reason to keep their secret as he did, although every time the sisters fought, as cruel as sisters, he held his breath.

But now he needed to confess to *something*. They'd passed an "Oriental" massage parlor on Western on the way home, and in the pointed silence he'd wondered about it—

who went there, who worked there, was it even legal?

“Years ago,” he said, “I went to a massage place,” he said. “You know, called, like, Golden Lotus III?” In truth, he’d never stepped inside one of those mini-mall brothels with a fake-neon Open sign and a vinyl banner featuring a large pink blossom of some kind—a lotus, he presumed. Even at his loneliest, he would have considered it another unnecessary human interaction fraught with body odor and despair and questions of etiquette. Were you supposed to tip? How to ask for what you wanted? Most importantly, there could be no doubt that the woman with the press-on nails who had to touch his penis would regard him with disdain if not disgust. Some men wouldn’t care; he couldn’t help it.

She flinched. “*How* long ago?”

“Before I met you. After Bethany and I split up.”

She sat up, forcing him to do the same. “But even then you knew about human trafficking, right? Even with your fucked up upbringing, you had to know you were participating in the humiliation of a woman—possibly even a girl—who had little-to-no choice in the matter? Who probably had family on two continents to feed, and could either work at a sweatshop downtown or jack you off?”

“Yes,” he said.

“Why are you just telling me this now?”

“I had to get it off my chest,” he said, almost more embarrassed of the tedious phrase than of the crime to which he was confessing.

“Actually, I think you’re trying to distract me from the conversation we were having earlier.”

“That too.”

Marilyn quietly laughed, tugging him to her chest again. She seemed to forgive him with a kiss on the crown of his head. “Oh, Martin. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened to you if we hadn’t met.”

He thought he might weep with relief, with gratitude. Had he accidentally hit on the perfect confession? He pulled away to look at her in the silvery slice of moonlight from the clerestory window, to gauge what she was seeing in him at that moment, because he simply could not trust his luck. His luck was of a perverse brand that could turn on him in an instant, another dubious gift of heredity. Amidst the moonlight-limned dismay, there was a new look in Marilyn’s gaze, one that said a man who would go to a massage parlor was not the one she thought he was; he was *better*. She appeared thankful he had acted like a normal man for once.

+++

Jan 16, 2007

Dear Diary?

I promised Marilyn I’d try. Here goes, if only because she spends so much on these leather-bound notebooks every Christmas, unaware all the others are still in my desk drawer. For the record, I remain unconvinced that anyone would or should care about my life, or Dietrich’s. Marilyn thinks sharing my story will not only pay the home equity

loan but will heal me in some essential way. She's a believer in this culture of confession while I'm a skeptic, I guess. But as she says, I can talk myself out of doing anything.

My first memory of Dietrich is mostly about Loretta, weirdly, so I can't tell this story in any book. Marilyn said I should just start writing and edit later. So, no editing. Unvarnished thought. Is that possible? I prefer a nice shiny coat of varnish, to be honest. Like on an old master painting.

Okay, so: Loretta was ironing, wearing a blue polyester knee-length number somewhere between a nurse's and a waitress uniform, but without the name badge. It drove Dietrich up a wall. He wanted her to look hip and groovy, not indentured to a cruel white master. For godsakes, he'd say, everyone would think he'd forced her to wear that mammy get-up! To which she'd answer, "Then fire me," and he'd shut right up.

The first time I'd seen her in "street clothes" on her day off I'd asked her if her dress was broken and she laughed. I liked making her laugh. It didn't happen very often. I had trouble wrapping my brain around the concept of her day off, as well, and what that implied about our relationship. How could she take a day off? She was the only person who noticed me on a consistent basis. And truly, she didn't have a real day off because around nightfall she'd take pity on me and let me eat a Swanson's TV dinner and watch the NBC Mystery Movie with her, probably because she knew otherwise I wouldn't get fed. I loved her quarters, the pool house on the lower level where everything was ship-shape—flowered curtains, a sewing machine nook, the comforting pile of wall-to-wall carpeting. The big house was all dark floors and white plaster walls and Moorish

tiles. Heavy furniture from old Latin American churches. A 1920s Spanish mansion with all the gothic trimmings. Dietrich's decorator must have been into S&M or something.

But I seem to be stalling. In this memory I promised you, I was so small I was seated cross-legged on the ironing board and Loretta was singing. I don't remember the song. This is the kind of thing I should make up, right? Or will Oprah call me out on national TV: "You made up the songs your former nanny sang to you and I told the whole world to read this pack of lies?" Is it possible to even write anymore without some Oprah fantasy? I hate this world. Let's just say "Woman to Woman" by Shirley Brown. I was the only five-year-old toe-head in Studio City who knew every song on the R&B chart.

Dietrich came down to the laundry room in a white dress shirt, black socks and boxers, like he was going to some fancy event. This wasn't what he wore to the Strip or the Palomino. Loretta handed him the slacks she'd been ironing and he put them on.

Dietrich asked Loretta to go with him. I wanted Loretta to stay with me. That would mean Columbo and Swiss steak in the pool house. She might even let me lean against her on the sofa. I was always falling or crying just so she'd pick me up. I had all these little ruses.

"Go with you?" she'd said to Dietrich, like that was ridiculous. Out of the question. Everything from her mouth was bracing, a little kick.

Why not, Dietrich wanted to know.

I will have to start making up dialogue too, I guess.

"Because I'm not your girlfriend," she said. "I'm your housekeeper."

Dietrich made a joke about how that made her the best girlfriend he'd ever had, and Loretta looked like that was just the kind of foolishness she'd expect from him.

"Get out of here," she said, like she meant it.

And I don't know why that memory, except it was a moment of triumph for me, as I watched my father's face. This was '74, but Dietrich had never quite moved past that 60s Mephistophelean look, in spite of all his attempts to stay current. His hair and his D'Artagnan were always dyed blue-black. He was copiously tanned. A tiny guy and barrel-chested, but he had these gigantic dark eyes and I knew he was hurt. That he'd really wanted her to go, and she probably was dying to go and maybe she would have if he'd asked her properly, not an hour before a black-tie event, but Loretta was all pride. She was like a tensed muscle.

Maybe he knew he'd hurt her feelings, and that's what that look was. Shame. But most likely he was pouting. Those brown eyes enabled him to pass for Greek when he felt like German was just too white and fascist to be cool, and they also allowed him an air of a child wounded by life. This look, plus the fact that he was still a famous record producer, was why even as a miniature, aging Anton LaVey impersonator he scored so often.

Loretta didn't fall for it, at least in that instance. I had won this time. It was only a temporary victory, though, because I knew Loretta was in love with my father, not me.

When I walked in on them in my father's room one horrific midnight, on some level, I perceived her loss of status. She'd been underneath Dietrich, after all. She even became discomposd for a moment, and as she sat up I saw two long boobies before they

were swiftly shrouded in a sheet. Just as quickly, her old self returned. “Mister man, what do you think you’re doing out of bed?” I was whisked away to my bedroom and I remember kicking her, beating her with balled fists, quivering with real yet inexplicable indignation, rage even, fully expecting to be punished because one did not cross Loretta in such a way, and yet not caring. This insult, whatever it was, was not to be borne! She swaddled me tightly in a blanket, shushing me until I calmed down. It revealed to me that I wasn’t the one who’d done something wrong, she had.

So it’s not only that I don’t want to tell some of this stuff, I can’t. Loretta is still alive, and she does not tolerate foolishness, under which category telling strangers your personal business (for money, no less) would definitely fall. My first love. She still terrifies me.

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He’d done the awful thing three weeks earlier. That July day hadn’t started like one that would upend him. From his office window, Martin had seen that the persistent Black Walnut leaves had filled in baby green but the grass was already dead and if he didn’t water the jasmine and Marilyn’s basil, they would be next. It was the driest it’d been in Los Angeles since he rode around the Valley on a banana-seat bike in striped shirts, when there were still empty lots with grass as yellow as his hair.

Martin hit play on his old cassette recorder and listened to the whole tape before transcribing. None of Sophie’s stories were very enlightening. His list of careful questions went unanswered. “Martin,” she’d say, “Remind me when this machine is not running to tell you about Artie Shaw. It’s too blue for the general public,” then ramble on

about *Dancing With the Stars*. She either forgot the details he'd requested, or avoided any responsibility for her own life. "Singing found me," she said. "I was just minding my own business."

No one could be honest telling their own story.

After another break up, Laurel was sleeping on the couch and she'd spent the day burning through the vodka and a bottle of expired Vicodin, sprawled in front of the television, serene and lovely in a flimsy tank top and low-cut yoga pants. Her presence had forced Martin up to his attic room. While Marilyn was at work they usually steered clear of each other.

It hadn't been an act designed to bring about the end of his marriage. It wasn't meant as revenge. In a few weeks he was going to turn thirty-nine. Until recently he'd been full of pride that an early drought had given way to a solid partnership, better than any of his friends had. He'd almost convinced himself that he'd chosen romantic longevity, rather than the fleeting shimmer of youthful sensuality. But then he had a realization that was no less sobering for its obviousness. What he'd missed couldn't be recovered. It was a sad middle-aged surprise.

Laurel climbed the ladder to his attic office on a dreamy high, still in her sleeping jersey, and sat with her elbows around her knees. She told him how Jake, the latest boyfriend, had proven unworthy and incompatible because, as far as Martin could gather, he did not devote constant, round-the-clock attention to her. She cried and then she came to Martin, who fidgeted at his desk thinking of a polite way to explain he had to get back to work, and placed her outstretched hands on his thighs, her vague face imploring him

with dead eyes, a men's magazine fantasy. At that moment, he was sure there was one thing that could make up for a wasted youth.

Other than the grubby carpet embedded with staples, and what he hoped was her doped-up disinterest, it was exactly like sleeping with Marilyn. The act itself had momentarily quieted his nattering brain, had calmed his seething, pouting self, reminding him of his possession of a human form, and that being aware of it could occasionally relieve a little pressure. It was a respite from thought, but of course, fleeting and false. The mind could not be lulled long by *this* spurious human contact.

Laurel cried again, and said if he told Marilyn she would kill herself and then haunt him, which provided some security.

“You know I don't *like you*, like you, right?” Laurel said, tears already dry.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Just making sure. Guys are so weird about twins.”

After that, days of torture. He avoided his home while Marilyn was gone, became a constant, spectral presence at local cafes as if he were an aspiring screenwriter. Sleep abandoned him during those epic nights. When he wasn't crafting alibis and imagining the moment of discovery, his thoughts obsessively turned to the Valley's disappearing hobby shops or the remodeling craze erasing Southern California's vernacular architecture. How no one had hobbies anymore. Maybe those who used to make things had all become collectors, the ultimate capitalist art form, or maybe work had overtaken so many of their waking hours that work for pleasure had been made obsolete. But what did he know? He didn't really work.

He didn't have hobbies either, but the shops had been reassuring. Old men and awkward boys could meet inside and chat about model railroading. There was sense in those shops, but they were all being replaced by juice bars and chain pharmacies, stores so prevalent they must somehow make sense to everyone else. Sometimes he prayed for another earthquake or another recession, or better yet, *both*, recalling the early 90s when papered storefronts, abandoned homes, and collapsed freeways had driven away the carpetbaggers and day trippers, leaving only those who couldn't or wouldn't flee. Los Angeles was better with blight. Booms must bust, he told himself, and wasn't the real measure of a city what remained after they did? Some said the housing market had peaked already and it did seem there were more Sunday open-house signs. He could hope, anyway, though he feared this latest tsunami of affluence would leave nothing he loved about LA intact when it receded.

He worried about the Valley's lost kitchens, their modest pink tile and scalloped pine cabinets, yet he'd allowed Marilyn to turn their house into a spare, modernist space that would embarrass him in ten years time, most likely just as preserved 1940s colonials came back into style. Open floor plan, so now they paid a bank \$2,500 a month to hide their unmade bed behind shoji screens and Marilyn had to go into the bathroom and run the faucet when she called her sister to complain about him.

Of course, not any more. Now Marilyn only had to whisper through the screen to where Laurel was sleeping on the couch, breathing loudly enough to disturb his every thought.

They'd been fighting about money for months. He hadn't wanted the renovation. He'd inherited the house and thanks to Proposition 13 and California's vanquished infrastructure, the taxes were low. The combination of her stable income and his sporadic one had been fine, *before*. But now that they had an open floor plan, he was poor and worthless. When he'd said that, it had only enraged her. There were threats. She was leaving him. She couldn't take it anymore, she'd said. He had no *ambition*. It seemed to actually cause her pain. The house had been good enough for my grandparents, he'd said. You live in the past, she'd said. You don't take any responsibility for your family.

Family, he'd thought guiltily, is a couple a family?

But he'd started half-heartedly putting the past to work, filling the leather-bound blank books with stories he couldn't tell, in hopes that it might prompt him to write something that he could. But Martin had missed Dietrich's glory days in New York and then LA, the girl groups, the doo wop bands, the novelty hits and surf-guitar sides that had made his father rich. He'd only seen the sad decline. Sad declines were not what people paid money to read about: they wanted scandal. The truth of Dietrich's fall could satisfy that requirement, but only if Martin followed the example of most music writers by failing to examine it too closely. Thank god he'd got the job working with Sophie so he could put those blank books back in his desk drawer, for a few months at least.

One morning soon after that first time with Laurel he'd woken to a silent house. He'd only fallen asleep a few hours earlier. Marilyn was at work and Laurel must have gone to yoga. She never had any money but somehow went to classes daily. Or maybe,

he hoped, she'd moved out, a solution he was still too agitated to suggest. He didn't know what would set her off, and if she got spooked, he'd get thrown.

He decided to reclaim his space. He took his tape recorder to the office and began to work, though the room had now been electrified with free-floating guilt particles. Sophie's disembodied voice was going on about the old days. How now men dressed like babies, in caps and lumpy pants like they'd done a doody. Ladies just didn't know what it was like to be seduced by a full-grown man anymore or they'd be up in arms, let her tell you.

He heard the front door open below him. Sophie's rant became background noise as he tracked Laurel's movements through the house below—the fridge door, the sink, the television all signaling her whereabouts in antagonistic and echoey bursts of sound. He could not work this way. He had to tell her to leave. He had to tell her how wrong and stupid he'd been and how much he really, truly loved her sister, how it had been a momentary lapse of meaning in his life. A dreadful, terrible mistake he had perpetrated on his marriage and himself.

Footsteps on the office ladder. A wan, troubled face emerging through the trap door. Then she was sitting at his feet once again, without even a greeting, explaining why she'd done it and why they could never do it again and they did it again.

Once was a question but twice was a decision. To do *what* he didn't know. Marilyn would forgive Laurel after much weeping and a few years' exile, but never him. That was the only thing he knew for sure.

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Since Sophie seemed more interested in filling cassette tapes with random musings (the digital recorder he'd given her been a resounding disaster) and mailing them from the Wilcox post office than in face-to-face meetings where she might have to answer his questions, he needed to remind her that their communications had a purpose. They were supposed to be writing a book. He'd asked to meet at her favorite spot, the coffee shop in the Best Western on Franklin.

He was on edge from too many refills and the oldies radio. Chances were one of his father's songs would come on, which was complicated. He resented it if anyone pointed out their genius or if they didn't. He knew the publishing split on every last one, who got screwed originally, and who was getting the checks now.

Sophie flirted with the busboys at the counter for ten minutes before she came over, appearing satisfied that everyone had noticed her. She slid into the booth all done up in a loose chiffon top and polyester slacks, her face a deep orange, her brows heavily penciled on. She was like one of those big Chuck Close paintings that you thought was a photograph from far away, but as you came near you saw the flat blobs of pigment that created the illusion.

The waitress dropped a menu on the wet table. "You need one, Sophie?"

"Not me, doll." Sophie cracked her big ring twice on the tabletop.

He could already tell she wasn't going to do a thing she didn't want to.

"You want more juicy stuff," she said, tapping at her hairdo with quivering fingers. "Am I right?"

Martin looked at his own hands clutching a brown mug. Someday they'd double-cross him too. "I don't expect you to trust me yet."

"I've been talking to press my whole life, kid."

"I'm not the press."

"What are you then?" Her eyes were mocking him, but kindly.

He thought of a George Jones song, "The World's Worst Loser," but she wouldn't get it. It was interesting she thought of the whole exercise as publicity, but then she was probably only in it for the paycheck, like him. "You know," he said, "my dad was kind of well known." She might feel more at ease with him if she knew, like he was on her side. "He was a record producer. Dietrich Constantine."

Sophie lifted a careful eyebrow. "So you know from crazy."

Martin felt ashamed. Not because everyone, even Sophie Allen apparently, was acquainted with the story of his father's ruin, but as if he'd been caught bragging. "I want the book to be good," he said. "That's all."

The waitress set a cottage cheese plate in front of Sophie and left without asking what Martin wanted. "That's nice," Sophie said.

He couldn't tell if she was making fun. Maybe she was admiring the cottage cheese. He opened the menu and shut it, confused. "I mean, I understand you need to protect your privacy, but it won't be any good if you aren't honest. You've got to tell some stuff. About your life."

"I *am* honest. They'll get what they get and it'll be fine."

The issue, which they were both apparently unwilling to air even here in relative privacy, was that she had been busted for possession of heroin in 1955. She was blackballed at first, then simply forgotten, so it added up to almost thirty years in which she lived as if undercover, a great pop jazz vocalist filing medical records in Van Nuys, a songbird silenced by the man. She'd been rediscovered in the 80s and worked fairly regularly since, thanks in part to that irresistible mixture of notoriety and adversity in her bio. The bust and its aftereffects had naturally fueled the publisher's interest in her life story as well, but one too many profiles that focused on "the scandal," as she called it, at the expense of her music had Sophie seeing red. She had a grown son who found Christ and wouldn't talk to her because of the shame of it all. She was *not* putting up with it anymore.

Martin wasn't getting paid enough to force the issue too hard. The publisher could do that if they wanted to, but still, somehow, it seemed she had an obligation to the truth. "You paid for your transgression thirty years over. Want me to call your son? I mean, who the hell cares what his prayer group thinks? I'm willing to bet they're not big jazz fans."

"Do *not* call that supermarket manager!" she nearly yelled. "That'll get me in even more trouble. He hates anything to do with me. Mothers don't get written about. Mothers stay home and crochet doilies. Former horseheads need not apply!"

She didn't seem to like her son very much, yet she was willing to crap up her own book. "Sophie, this doesn't make any sense to me. Everyone already knows you had a

habit. You're not ashamed of your life, he is. How are we going to explain the years you didn't sing?"

"If everyone knows, there's no need to rehash it."

"You're going to have to tell the publisher," he said.

"Tell them *what?*" she asked, darkly enough to scare him from further questioning. There were clearly reasons she needed to sacrifice her book to her son. She was giving him this one, a way of making amends for a maternal crime she would probably also keep secret. Martin wanted to tell *that supermarket manager*—Bernard Jr. was his name—that he could relate, but it was time to give it up. Maybe they could form a support group. It was only to the sons of scandal that disgrace loomed so large. To the rest of the world infamy was old hat, certainly not personal—necessary grain for a perpetual gossip mill and nothing to dwell on for that long.

"Okay," Martin said, smiling, unsatisfied.

"You're unhappy."

"No," he said. "It's up to you, how you want it to turn out. Ultimately."

"That all you wanted to talk about?" she asked. She took a dainty sip of water.

"Seems like we should meet every once in awhile." He'd hoped to earn her trust, which clearly wasn't happening. He felt himself sinking lower in his seat. The Lorelais' "Soldier Mine" came on the radio. "Is she ever going to take my order?" Martin asked, looking around.

“This shit ruined it for everyone,” Sophie said, pointing her fork above her head, cocking her ear at a lush chorus of oohs. “Baby music. They stopped making music for adults right then.”

Martin laughed. That wasn’t true, exactly. Not that it was false. “My father produced this song,” he said. It was at another private ironing-board concert when Loretta told him she’d written it for her older brother who died in Korea. Dietrich and Stan Levi, the owner of Constantinople Records, put their names on it, like they all used to do, so of course the rights had been auctioned off with the rest of his father’s stuff when the creditors took over.

He hoped Sophie would just fall quiet and listen, though hearing it now, he thought his father maybe had gone a little heavy on the *oohs*, masking some of the torment in Loretta’s tough alto.

“Your father murdered adulthood. No offense.”

Well, his era had certainly presided over the end of Sophie’s, though it would be giving him too much credit to say he’d done it alone. Dietrich would only have been a few years younger, but it seemed like they’d inhabited completely different epochs. His time had come too, and it had been just as hard for him to give up his cushy seat at the center of cultural relevance.

Martin thought regretfully of the movements he’d missed—he’d been a shade too young to see the best LA punk bands in their prime, had passed on Nirvana even before they were branded the voice of his generation, as well as most rap after the Sugar Hill Gang and all Sunset-strip lite-metal. He’d never been as inspired by the four-track-in-the-

basement indie scene as he was by old country, R&B, or jazz records that earned their surface noise the hard way (how he loved that consoling sound, like the ocean, like Fred Astaire dancing with sand under his shoes!). He'd marched against the Gulf War, in pro-choice marches, usually at the urging of a girlfriend, and had felt stirrings of unity, but the fractious, arduous reality of political organizing had discouraged deeper involvement. He'd never even started a fanzine. He couldn't figure out if his was the only generation that hadn't yet had a moment worth giving himself to, or if he was a person who couldn't give himself over to his time. The failing, as usual, was probably his.

"Maybe adulthood is overrated," he said with a shrug, a joke to change the subject.

"How would you know?" Sophie asked him. "You've probably never seen a grown-up in your lifetime. They went the way of the dodo bird."

"My wife is a grown-up," he said. "Compared to me, anyway."

"Just because women have been forced to take over all the man's duties doesn't make them adults, either."

That old saw. He hoped she didn't start raving about Deuteronomy next. "So what is the criteria here? How does one qualify?"

"I know it when I see it. And I haven't seen it since the advertisers then the DJs and then everyone else decided that teenagers were the only audience that mattered. Since everyone decided not to grow up. But you know what, Martin? Frank sang about *sex*. Billy Strayhorn wrote about *sex*. This shit with the 'baby this' and 'baby that' is about

kids playing doctor, diddling each other, about quickies in the backseat. Since when did real sex become square?”

He had no answer for her. Even though he knew Loretta’s song was about loss, it sounded like it was about puppy love. It had been neutered somewhere along the way, proving Sophie’s point. He capitulated with a grudging smile.

“You’ve never even *had* sex, I bet. Real, honest-to-god adult sex.”

How could he tell her that was all he’d ever had, until recently, disastrously, and that his slow and steady sex life, and not enough playing doctor, had stealthily capsized him? But then how could he know what kind of sex he’d had if she was right?

“I take whatever I can get, basically,” he said.

Sophie finally stopped aiming her fork at his face like a dart. She made a throaty laugh. But he wanted to know what she meant, what real sex was. Was she just glorifying cigarette smoke and fedoras and easy misogyny, the trappings of her era, justifying her own generation’s unique moment of ascendancy at the expense of everyone else’s?

“So did your grown-up wife enjoy my show?”

“We all did,” he said. “It was the only thing we agreed on all night.”

Sophie appeared almost vulnerable as she quietly smiled. He thought their effusions that night had been enough to reassure her, but he should have known better. She was a performer. “Everyone was asking when your next one is. They can’t wait.”

She scowled, hardened again. “One a year is usually all they give an old broad. Thank God for the homosexuals or I’d be busking at the old folks home.”

He nodded, ashamed. That show had been a much bigger deal than he knew. He told her how much it had affected him to see her sing, how perfectly the whole thing had gone off, complimented her witty song selection and the way Morris Berry's understated playing had supported her smoky tone. Soon she was smiling, filling him in on Morris' digestive troubles, and he felt glad to have salvaged the moment.

It almost felt like sitting around the kitchen table with Dietrich, when Martin would drag him from a funk by bringing up an old hit. Only a hit. As a born record nerd, he secretly preferred some of the oddities and flops, but he knew that only the hits would get Dietrich laughing about studio mishaps, artistic temperaments or the epic venality of certain label presidents. Bringing up a hit was the key to the treasure trove of stories. The stories made his father feel good, too. How Martin wished he'd written them down, but in the unending misery of adolescence, he never understood time would actually pass, taking his father and his trust in his own memory when it went.

As soon as he thought it was safe, he asked Sophie if he could turn on the recorder, and she shook her head. "I hate that thing," she said.

"I know," he said. "But this is good stuff."

"You want to record for posterity that Morris Berry swears by Swiss Kriss?"

"Why not?"

She laughed. "Alright, he'd tell you so himself. At length."

He pressed play and asked about her days on the road with the last of the big bands, and she actually began to speak of the dangers and the glories of being the only woman on the tour, the wage disputes, the politics involved in accepting or rejecting

passes from band members versus band leaders. She seemed happily engaged until he asked where her son lived while she was away. Though the answer seemed simple enough—with her parents—giving it appeared to drain her. She began to yawn.

Martin insisted on driving her home, even though she only lived three blocks away, worried that the walk might be too much for her. She was so vivid a person, it almost came as a surprise that age could get the better of her. Just walking to the car took several minutes, her hand on his elbow, her steps tiny and cautious. For the first time he was aware of each of her eighty-three years.

He double-parked in front of her apartment building on Argyle and thanked her for her company and the conversation. She hesitated with the car door open, waiting for him to come around and help. “Did I offend you with my talk about adults and all that?”

“No,” he said, trying to delicately tug her from her seat without making it seem like that was what he was doing. “I think you’re on to something, actually.”

She patted his arm twice after she made it to her feet. “You don’t seem so confused. You’ve got a nice wife, a nice family that spends time together. You know, family makes a lot of people run for the hills, unless they’re from the hills and then I don’t know where they run.”

“I’m from the hills,” he said.

“Well, let me know if you ever find out.”

As he saw her to her door, he wondered how it felt to be that clear-headed guy she described. He wanted to ask her to elaborate on the idea of *real sex*, to know what the hell

she was talking about. Maybe she could even help him understand what he'd been looking for when he slept with a woman who was so much like but was not his wife.

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Feb. 1, 2007

I was about three when Dietrich flew Loretta in from New Jersey. He hadn't had a song anywhere near the charts in several years but one came his way that he was sure would change all that and he wanted it for her.

Even on the sleek teen songs of her day, Loretta's voice suggested an almost religious desperation. The other two-thirds of the Lorelais, Loretta's cousins Lettie and Norma, had chirpier, youthful tones that flitted around her fuller, dark ones. It was as if she were singing spirituals about the abasements of love instead of the soul, when neither the lyrics nor the melodies of the clean, mostly cheerful ditties usually had any such transcendent aspirations. Promo shots of the girls also belied her power: bubble wigs and sheath dresses, arms tensed at their sides and mouths parted like hopeful mannequins. But the fact of her voice remained and it haunted Dietrich that she wasn't widely understood to be one of the greats.

It had been seven years since the Lorelais' last hit. She was only thirty-two, but she looked worn down and underfed. Her eyes too big, creases on her brow starting to cut deep, inscribed by the worry that was her life supporting an elderly mother and a brother with Down's Syndrome. Dietrich took her into the studio with a bunch of long-haired, mustachioed session guys who worshiped at the altar of Muscle Shoals, funding the whole thing himself. The songs were merely okay, some new ones and some youth-

pandering covers. I can imagine how the demo tracks had excited the underemployed Dietrich, whose talents ran more toward enthusiasm than discernment (and this I think is an unquestionable asset for a prolific hit-maker).

Loretta, because she didn't know any other way, sang each one like she was pleading her case in front of God himself, performing the alchemy only a great artist is capable of, transforming the commonplace by her ability to connect the listener to their own experience.

Still, everything about the album smelled stale to the major labels who had moved on to country rock and young white singer-songwriters. This was before comebacks were in any way cool. Sentimentality for the recent past is a current phenomenon, methinks, a trait of a culture that has given up on the concept of modernity or new ideas in most every way but the technological. And yes, I did major in sweeping generalizations in college. How did you know?

Mudra Records, a vanity label run by a Buddhist drug dealer, put out a single but rock DJs wouldn't play it no matter how many promos were delivered with tiny envelopes of coke slipped inside. They released an LP, maybe hoping that the soul stations would pick it up. It immediately clogged the cut-out bins.

We had boxes full in the basement, still sealed, each with the lower right-hand corner sawed off. When I was a kid, the album—self-titled, Loretta Price—was up there with Sgt. Pepper's or The Dock of the Bay on my list of all-time all-times. I didn't realize until my teens that pretty much no one else had ever heard it. The cover fascinated me. Loretta, my severe Loretta, laughing in a low-cut top, a bright gloss on her lips,

straightened hair blown back by some unseen fan, her name unfurling in a carefree script across the top. The script looked so confident, no different from one that had moved millions of records.

Dietrich could never seem to fathom the end of his era. The aperture had cinched slowly enough to go unnoticed, a string of failures that just seemed like part of the deal, except that the hits he'd counted on stopped coming along as well. I somehow always knew that every day was the end of something, maybe because Dietrich's obtuseness on the subject, his mania to stay hip, inordinately embarrassed me, his watchful son.

Loretta Price was the first time Dietrich truly felt the sting of a flop. Loretta had never appeared to take the whole thing too seriously. She claimed any talent was a gift from God, nothing to do with her, and for the last five years she'd lived far outside the realm of fantasy-land. When my nanny at the time ran off to follow Led Zeppelin without giving any notice, Loretta stepped in. Dietrich objected, but she insisted she was not too good to work for a living. Who did he take her for, Princess Margaret? She'd quit a perfectly good job at the old folks home because of him, so who was he to stop her?

I didn't know any of this until later, obviously. I cobbled the story from various sources, things overheard, and a few late-night kitchen-table talks with Dietrich. When a British label did a CD reissue in the mid 90s, there was an interview in Mojo with some of the session guys. The reissue hadn't sold many copies either.

I discovered the album when I was about six. I tugged one of the LPs out of the boxes in the basement and carried it to the portable turntable in my bedroom, a red plastic number with a hippo decal. The record was warped and smelled of mildew. I lay

on my side and listened to Side One. This was Loretta, the same one I'd always known, the enemy of foolishness, singing about not being able to sleep because of some guy. Not being able to sleep! Loretta made me go to bed so early. In another song, she was going crazy because her man had left her. Loretta would never do that, either, unless, I thought, the shell of a person could guard secrets, the way the pavement and grass were only a thin crust over the shifting earth below. Thanks to my father's stories of the big one in '72, I was obsessed with earthquakes, especially my odds of dying in one.

The next morning at breakfast I asked Loretta to sing "Mother and Child Reunion," the Paul Simon cover she'd done. "Where did you hear that?" she asked.

"In my room."

"I don't want you listening to that. It's not for kids."

"It's about a child."

"Alright, smart mouth, but the rest of it's about grown-up things and you're too young to understand."

My father came in the kitchen in only his red swimming trunks and sat in the breakfast nook with me.

"Loretta did a record," I said.

Dietrich laughed. "I know, I produced it. What do you think, Martin? You think Loretta ought to be taking care of a turd-blossom like you with a voice like that?"

"She should be on American Bandstand."

"Did you hear that, Loretta? Martin thinks you should be on American Bandstand. We tried, but Dick Clark is a shit-for-brains."

“Dietrich, how am I supposed to keep him from cussing when you insist on talking like that in front of him?”

“Say shit-for-brains, Martin.”

I was caught between angering Loretta and making my father laugh. My father won by looking right at me, grinning.

Loretta turned her back on us to wash the dishes.

“Now say he’s a no-talent DJ and a cheap sonofabitch.”

Loretta faced us, a twisted dishrag clenched between her fists. She was shaking; something was rumbling to the surface. We both became quiet and stared at her, awestruck. “Maybe it just wasn’t any good,” she said. “Did you ever think of that? Just not good enough? No, you’re too busy blaming everyone else.”

Dietrich got to his feet as if matching her—they were about the same height—and said, “That’s bullshit. I don’t put out shit records.”

Dietrich was yelling at Loretta! I thought I should warn him: this was not wise. I recall the table base screeching as my father stood, the sports section fluttering to saltillo tiles.

Loretta, who never had to raise her voice, never even had to make a peep to communicate her displeasure, shouted—shouted!—right back at him. “Stop cursing in front of the child. I work so hard to teach him what’s right and then you come along with your carelessness and your foul mouth!”

At that point she trembled like bubbles were rising to the top of her, like she was the La Brea Tar Pits. Her hard angles softened, she melted into tears. I was astonished. I

wanted to touch her the way she touched me when I cried, but I was too late; she had fled the room.

My father sat, fists on the tabletop as if unable to unclamp them. He appeared dazed and when he finally spoke it was as though nothing much had transpired in the kitchen that morning. He picked up the fallen paper and leafed through it. "Okay. No more cussing. Loretta doesn't like it."

I never brought up the record again, but I listened to it all the time, volume turned low, especially after Loretta left us, about six months later.

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A few days before Martin's 39th birthday, Marilyn guessed at the truth. He had been setting the table for dinner. Laurel was still staying with them and at that moment she was napping on the couch. Marilyn told him to wake her. He stood above his wife's sister, stiffly, and called her name. She gurgled and stretched, looking up. She smiled slowly and said *hey*, waking grit in her voice.

Over soba noodles with black bean sauce, Marilyn grew tetchy. She pushed her plate away and glowered at her sister, at him. Later, behind the shoji screen she whispered to Martin that she knew.

"Know what?" he asked, reaching for her waist under the comforter.

"I know," she said, removing his hands from her middle.

He couldn't read her face in the dark. "Know what?" he repeated.

She ripped the blanket from him. "Just. I don't know. Just go."

He sat up, panic sticking in his throat. *How had she known?* Laurel's face had been hidden by the back of the couch. All Marilyn would have heard was the word *hey*; she knew it from the word *hey*? He hadn't slept with Laurel in weeks. It was never going to happen again. His fear once so blinding had even been receding into the hazy sort of anxiety he was used to.

He would have told her, he thought, eventually, when they were strong enough. Maybe when he was making some money. He'd have leverage then. He sat there in his underwear, mulling those pointless things, when Marilyn pulled him into the bathroom and closed the door behind them. She turned on the faucet to cover the sound their voices, her brown eyes fearsome. "If you can swear to me right now you two didn't do anything, you can stay."

She began filling her neti pot with hot water, as if on autopilot, as if she couldn't bear to let a wasted drop hit the drain, even in a moment of crisis. He silently pleaded with her to stop. To *not* use a neti pot in front of him, to prove she actually gave a shit about her husband seeing her with salt water that had just cleared her sinuses streaming from her nose, to prove she still thought of him as a sexual partner. He almost wanted to say to her at that moment, *Yes, God knows why, but another woman did actually want to sleep with me.*

"You're not answering me," she said.

He shook his head. He nodded. Drops of hot water bounced off the sink and pricked his ankles. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Her thin nostrils flared wide. "You can't do it."

“I swear,” he said. “I don’t even know what I’m swearing to.”

“Out.”

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The first thing he did when he slid inside the Silver Shadow was call Gil and leave a message. He was driving aimlessly on Ventura hours later when the phone rang.

Martin heard that unmistakable Manhattan reverb in the background, honks and brakes ricocheting off buildings. He couldn’t even hear the 101 a few hundred yards away. The wide valley sky seemed to absorb the sound.

Fuck. He knew he was pushing it after that last fight with Bradford as it was; he definitely couldn’t stay there if Gil was out of town. “Are you in New York?” Martin asked.

“Had a meeting. Where are you?”

“Near Ralphs,” Martin answered. “The newer one. If that makes it any more exciting.”

“How’s the Silver Shadow?” Gil asked.

“Expensive.” It was the only thing they’d fought over when Dietrich died, but Martin had won because Gil had actually owned a working car.

“So,” Gil said, a bit impatiently, as if he had heard in Martin’s voice that an inopportune question was coming. “What’s up?”

He couldn’t tell him. He waited as long as possible without calling too much attention to the pause. “Just wanted to say hello.”

“*Hello, again. Hello,*” Gil sang, doing Neil Diamond.

He was actually pretty good. Martin tried to laugh. “How’s the job?” he asked.

“Still got it.”

“They’ll never fire you.”

“Why not?”

“Where else will they find someone to work 18 hours a day?”

“Anywhere, it’s the music business. Interns compete to work that long for free.

I’m old. I’m ancient. When I weigh in on A&R their eyes glaze over. And they’re right.

When I drive home, I put on Ornette Coleman, or NPR. I’m fucking old.”

“I don’t know how you stood it this long, to be honest.”

“Have you ever even had a job, Martin?”

“So you’re really worried about it, your job?”

“Do you read the newspaper? Oh, right. You think the house built on shifting sand cannot stand. You’re with the downloaders on this one.”

“You’re not? Gil, your father died robbing a convenience store, because guys like Dietrich gave them shitty contracts then took all their royalties. They don’t steal royalties anymore but the contracts haven’t changed since the Edison disc.”

“Your father was the establishment, and now you’re the radical who wants to tear it all down. My father, my real father, was a member of the Black Panther Party, and now I’m the establishment. Ain’t life grand?”

Why was Gil behaving as if Martin was the kind of person who might *act* on his posturing? “Are you angry with me?”

“Only when you insist on implying that my job is evil. My job is ridiculous. My job is superficial. My job is mostly boring and the amount of money I make may be slightly immoral, but it’s not evil to make music that most people actually like.”

“I know. I just love to complain to cover my failure to do anything at all. And don’t I do it so well?”

Gil’s velvety laugh felt beautiful; Martin had saved at least one potentially ruinous interaction.

He couldn’t think of anywhere to go except that Best Western on Franklin where he’d met with Sophie. Marilyn should have kicked him out years ago, while rooms were still cheap. He knew a fetish photographer who used to shoot there but went to Van Nuys now. Such was Los Angeles; there was almost nothing of the old grime left. Well, there was the place across the street with a sign that read Parking in Rear. No cable, no pool. Parking was the only amenity they could think to advertise. He wished he was man enough to try it, it might have saved him fifty bucks, but he couldn’t handle grime either. He was getting the world he deserved.

The hotel room was fine, over patterned. In spite of all the attempts to distract him, he could only see where new carpeting and drapes and bedspreads had gone pilly and drab. He tried to sleep but that word *hey* kept ripping through his head. Maybe Marilyn should have been a musician, if she could gather so much from an inflection, a sound. His father would hear small earthquakes no one else even felt because guitars in the basement vibrated and hummed. Come to think of it, his father had known when Martin was lying, too, but that was probably because he was a liar himself.

His phone rang and he was so sure it was Marilyn he didn't even look at the display.

"Where are you?" Laurel asked. "I need some money."

He exhaled heavily. "I got a hotel room."

"My credit card is frozen." Her voice sounded damp.

He didn't answer. What was wrong with her?

She blew her nose. "My car is cold. Jeanette's in Ojai."

Jesus. He knew they would have to synch their stories at some point, however.

"I'm on Franklin. The Best Western. There's two beds."

Twenty minutes later she was knocking on the door. "What did she say?" he asked as he let her in, stepping back so she wouldn't have to pass too near him.

She crawled into the other bed without turning on the light. "I don't hate her, you know," Laurel said, facing away from him.

He got back into his own double bed. A streetlight glowed blue through the sheer blinds. "Of course not." He needed to keep Laurel rational. He needed her sane and calm. "I never thought you hated her. I just thought you were bored."

She made a wet laugh. "Yeah," she said. "I did the worst thing ever, because I was bored. You're such a prick, Martin."

"What did you tell her? Please? I need to know."

"Why did *you* do it?" she asked.

Because he'd only slept with two women before Marilyn? Because all his life he'd felt like every move he ever made was projected behind him on a fifty-foot screen

and now he realized no one had even been watching? “I honestly don’t know,” he said.

“It’s the worst mistake I ever made.”

She waited a while before she spoke and he wondered if he’d hurt her feelings.

But then that, he realized, was not possible.

“I told her she was acting like our mother,” she said.

“Christ,” he said.

“I said I was worried. That she should see a doctor, because mom started slipping at our age. And that I was so not attracted to you it was laughable.”

“That’s all?” he asked.

“Don’t act like you’re better than me, Martin.”

He hadn’t meant to do that, but he probably had. It sounded like him. “Laurel, one more thing,” he said. “How did she know?”

“Have you even noticed that we’re twins?”

They always claimed to have twin ESP. Maybe it was time he believed them.

Her sobbing kept him awake until three, not that he would have slept anyway but there were times when his own company was as much irritation as he could stand. Why had he finally discovered meaningless sex long after he was supposed to? How could its pull be so strong that it had dragged him from a perfectly safe perch? And why didn’t Laurel come to him like she had before? After the first frantic encounter, he’d tried to take his time. He couldn’t stand her thinking he was bad, for Marilyn’s sake as well. The sisters were so competitive.

In the morning he watched her sleeping. She snored. Funny that Marilyn didn’t.

He didn't want to, but he wanted her. He could almost feel her skin on his. She had kissed his collarbone and his chest, but not his lips. He'd started withholding his kisses with Marilyn too. Maybe that's how she'd known. Most likely it was an accumulation of small tells and then a moment it came together. Probably when her sister suddenly greeted her useless husband like they were old friends.

What if he slid into bed next to her? But she didn't want him anymore and his passivity in the situation had preserved his dignity, in a small way. He turned over to watch the Jacarandas through the curtains. He heard her rise, close the bathroom door, pee. She brushed her teeth. With his toothbrush? He pretended to sleep while she dressed. Patterns of light flickered red on his eyelids. The toilet was running, it sounded like ringing. There was a Bob Dylan song, "I Threw It All Away." He was a wretch. The worst he knew. His father's son, after all.

The door clicked behind her as she left. He slept fitfully until checkout, dreaming of the twins with their long brown hair. They watched him shower, giggling in matching dresses. They'd made up, as he knew they would, at his expense, as it must be.

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Griffith Park was green for the first time in months. Waiting out his exile at a sidewalk café, Martin watched an orange helicopter dump a load of bright dye, reseeding the burnt hilltops. At first he thought they were painting the hills for a film shoot or a deranged city beautification project.

He'd watched the park burn a few weeks earlier from his porch across the 101. The flames rose hundreds of feet into the evening sky, the dome of the observatory a

glinting penny about to be tossed into a furnace. It didn't seem impossible in the science-fiction universe of Los Angeles that the fire could jump eight lanes and consume his home as well. Today he felt like that had actually happened.

He re-read Sophie's monologues on his laptop. He had a headache from trying not to cry. He called a few friends, hoping to find a place to stay but no one was home. He called Marilyn for the fifth time, to no answer.

He opened and closed the paper in despair. The state department had given immunity from prosecution to Blackwater contractors accused of murdering 17 Iraqi civilians. His personal problems had become so consuming, he'd lost touch with reality, as if his life were floating free of all historical context.

For years he'd been complaining about Marilyn's friends' dinner parties where everyone ranted about the undisguised criminality of the Bush administration, but otherwise continued on as if oblivious, taking out giant home equity loans and creating delusional domestic utopias. It was indignation as performance. He'd stopped bitching about it on the rides home, because she'd always say the same thing: "Last month you said that people with kids had lost the ability to speak of anything else, before that it was about their contractors, now it's politics. What *do* you want them to talk about?"

Nothing was the answer, so he kept it to himself.

"At least they're paying attention," she said. "Someone has to bear witness."

He conceded that point to Marilyn, but argued that embittered wheel-spinning about Halliburton was mere sanctimony if they weren't going to do anything to help the situation but choke on articles in *The Nation* and kvetch to like-minded acquaintances. He

could sympathize because he'd personally felt that powerlessness in the face of such an indifferent and ballsy enemy, and how it had turned a generation of resourceful, educated people into impotent rage junkies. But she didn't seem to get that the venal government's ultimate victory was to encase this potential opposition-force in cages of their own making by inspiring them to behave like demented conspiracists.

“Well, then why don't *you* do something about it,” Marilyn had said. “There are anti-war protests downtown all the time. Why don't we go?”

To raise signs and chant with thirty anarchist hippies and listen to bad poetry distort like Jeep-beats through a scratchy megaphone? The press didn't even cover those events, so what was the point? Growing up in the shadow of the baby boomers had made wilting activists of his generation, if only because it seemed so damn embarrassing, so self-serving, and ultimately so futile, to protest. And then the power structure clamped down harder after the boomers retreated into comfy middle age, sucking up all the good apartments, jobs, and righteous causes and leaving nothing to those who came after them but the ability to disapprove. It was like having a beautiful, glamorous egoist for an older brother—could you compete on his level? No. You'd be smart and serious and maybe somewhat sardonic when you pointed out all the pitfalls he'd missed because he always had the sun in his eyes. Now that Cheney and Rumsfeld had the country completely, irrevocably in their control, Martin regretted his failure to fight, to do anything but complain, really; but could history really hold birth order against him? Probably. No, definitely. But history didn't know how few choices were available to the younger brothers shivering in that shadow.

“How can we make a dent against forces so shameless? Old forms of dissent have become meaningless and cliché-ridden,” was his answer to Marilyn.

“Then create a new form,” she sensibly replied, and he gave up defending the philosophical purity of his ideological ennui.

Yet here he was, outside a coffee stand in Los Feliz, experiencing pain, because each day, whether or not he read them, the papers revealed new crimes and nothing could be done. Now it seemed as if the malaise of inaction had seeped into every aspect of his life. Or was he just, again, looking to place blame anywhere but on himself? He could almost hear Marilyn telling him so. Oh, how he needed her.

The afternoon was balmy and bright. Santa Anas had strewn garbage across Rowena. He counted biodiesel Mercedes driving past, people who looked like his acquaintances, only ten years younger. Why hadn't he realized what a privilege it was to be twenty-nine? Two yoga girls at the table next to him gossiped about seeing a friend's husband kiss a woman in the frozen-food aisle at Whole Foods. They debated the ethics of telling her, because they'd feel like such assholes if she already knew.

His cell phone buzzed, it read *home*. He grabbed it.

“I'm so fucking crazy,” Marilyn said.

He breathed in sharply, considering how to answer her.

“Martin, are you there?” she asked.

His computer went to sleep. “Yeah.”

“I'm so sorry,” she said. It sounded as if she was starting to cry. “Martin?”

He should confess. It would be best if he could. “Should I come home?”

“Laurel explained it all to me again today,” she said. “She gave me half a Vicodin. Wake me up when you get here, okay?”

“Okay,” he said. What exactly had Laurel explained? Or was it just that the incontrovertible logic of her husband’s undesirability had finally sunk in?

“I’m such a lunatic sometimes. I can’t believe what I accused you guys of.”

He felt like his chest was in a vise that kept loosening then clamping down. Although Marilyn always knew everything, she didn’t generally want to believe it. She was a Cassandra with a blind spot, and luckily that blind spot was him. Laurel understood this as well as he did, no doubt, and used it.

“Don’t be silly,” he said. “I’m just so happy you called.”

Martin hung up, smiling, his knees bouncing. The helicopter emerged over the ridge and dropped a trail of green powder, dyeing the forlorn gray moonscapes that loomed above tiled roofs and bearded palms. He winced, bracing for a new series of miseries as he and Marilyn made up: her acting penitent, him searching his hollow self for the fortitude to tell her the truth, knowing he wouldn’t find it.

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March 8, 2007

Another story I’m never going to tell. Loretta left when I was about seven, just before Dietrich adopted Gil. I didn’t know why at the time, though I did on one level. She was in love with my father but he wouldn’t marry her. It was all his fault.

Dietrich couldn’t find a replacement for a while, so Rosalinda and Jaime mostly took over, but on their days off my father was stuck with me. Every Thursday night he’d

get dressed up in a navy turtleneck and leather blazer and take the Silver Shadow to a dingbat on Las Palmas. The apartment building had a strip of shiny gold tile on the front like the ribbon on a package, with a gaggle of decorative metal geese flying over it. I would wait in the car parked next to the banged up Fairlanes and Novas. Dietrich went inside an apartment on the upper balcony while I read comics by the watery light of the streetlamp, probably why I had to wear glasses at ten.

Dietrich told me to never roll down the windows for anyone, though there were a lot of people who peeked inside to see if the Rolls held someone famous or trying to pick up a john. One time I waited for over an hour, reading through Ghostly Tales three times. A man with wild hair began beating on the window then threw a paper cup full of soda at it. I cowered in the seat corner, watching the liquid slide down the glass. After the man moved on, I went to the apartment on the balcony and knocked, waiting with the impatient moths until a man's muffled voice called for me to identify myself. I did.

"Martin who?" the man replied.

"Martin Dietrich." My father had actually been born Constantine Dietrich, but he'd swapped the names around years ago. It was more memorable that way. I didn't mind not having a memorable name.

"Who the hell are you, Martin Dietrich?"

"Dietrich Constantine's son," I said.

"Uh," said the voice, after some time. "How about that?"

Minutes later, the door opened. I got up from the floor and dusted myself off. A black man in a velour bathrobe invited me in to the small, yellowish apartment. Two

women wearing shorts and halter tops lounged on the floor, purses and things scattered around them. There were no chairs, no table, just a flagstone fireplace where the man sat behind a set of tall conga drums. He tapped on them lightly and the sound rattled around the empty room.

“Martin,” the man said, and hit his drums. “Martin.” He didn’t look at me.

The women smiled. One lay down, propped on a bent arm, watching me.

“Where’s Dietrich?” I asked. I could see an open kitchen and two closed doors.

He must be behind one of those doors.

“He fell asleep, son,” the man said, beating out a jerky rhythm. “I tried to wake him. Let’s give him a few more minutes.”

It was dawning on me that I should be worried. These people were not talking much. They looked contented, which always made me uncomfortable. They knew secrets I didn’t. I was grateful the women would smile at me, tilting their afros my way. “I really want to go home,” I said.

“Home is a state of mind, young Martin,” the man said. He’d never offered his name.

I thought I should quit whining about my wants in front of people who knew more about wants. Or so my father would have said.

“The car is open,” I said. “I don’t know how to lock it.” There I went, worrying about a stupid car. This family didn’t even have a kitchen table.

“Really?” the man asked, grinning at him for the first time. “That’s a mighty nice ride. We don’t want any illegal activities taking place in there.” He stood, pulling tight

his robe's belt, and slipped through one of the closed doors. He shut it behind him.

Another few minutes passed and I sat on the floor. Thick paint was caught on the edges of the brown carpeting like globs of margarine. The women hummed. I liked to think I knew every song there was to know between my father's record collection and my transistor radio, but I didn't know this one.

"You hungry, little boy?" the taller lady asked.

I shook my head. I was, though.

"You have any brothers or sisters?"

I said no. Gil hadn't yet arrived on the scene.

"Where's your mama?" the woman asked and the way she said it, as if I really should be with my mother right then made me sob, and then, maybe because I'd been caught sobbing, I cried; I saw for the first time that being motherless was pitiable, because someone else saw it too. I pulled my knees up and dropped my head to them. The woman crouched nearby, putting a warm arm around me. Her deodorant smelled like the orange trees in bloom, except chalky. I wanted to sneeze but needed to cry. She told me to go ahead, that Baba Leo said crying was a thunderstorm on a hot day. It cleaned everything out.

I looked up into her round face and she brushed my cheek with her soft knuckles.

"Like a cherry tomato," she said. "That bouncy baby skin." It was a feeling I'd forgotten since Loretta had left, like the middle of me had turned molten.

She lifted me. It was getting better. My cheek fell on her shoulder and I whimpered so she would stroke the back of my head. I wanted to clasp my hands around

her neck but I got shy. She carried me into the other room, where I saw my father and the man in the robe kneeling, murmuring to themselves, heads bent low. Between them was a double bed with a thin hotel quilt and hanging above that, a framed picture of an old man with long white hair wearing a necklace of beads. He had a red smudge on his forehead.

“This child needs to go home,” the woman said. Dietrich stood and took me from her, solemnly, like it was a rite. My father carried me to the car and placed me in the backseat. I didn’t blow my nose or wipe away the tears as they turned itchy and sticky on my face. They were sacred tears.

I asked my father who those people were, where we’d just been.

“That’s my church, Martin,” he said, and I guess I just accepted that at face value. What did I know from church?

After that, Dietrich still went once a week but I stayed with Rosalinda and Jaime. Years later, after Dietrich died, Gil and I had a meeting with his accountant and a lawyer to see where all the money had gone. The accountant pulled out twenty years’ worth of blue vinyl books full of check stubs. There were checks made out to a succession of nannies and girlfriends, most of whom except Loretta we knew by a crude or snotty nickname—checks to Valley Oak Prep and then USC, to the Liquor Locker and Dietrich’s favorite Moroccan restaurant, to Jaime, Rosalinda; an embarrassing amount to me, and a few less to Gil, to doctors and homeopaths, the United States Treasury—a few million dollars, dribbled away, one easy check at a time. By far the most checks, over two-hundred thousand dollars worth, were made out to Leo Spodeen.

“He was a pimp,” the accountant said, like he was spitting.

“Damn,” Gil said.

“What was I supposed to do?” the accountant asked. “Dietrich signed those checks.”

Gil nodded, stoic. He’d had a hundred bad breaks and overcome every one. That had made him philosophical. Smug, too.

“That was Baba Leo,” I said. “He ran Dietrich’s church.”

The accountant laughed. “He was a famous scam artist. He was a pimp who used transcendental meditation to bleed rich people in the 70s. But believe me, the thrills he was peddling weren’t spiritual.”

“No,” I said. “I saw Dietrich at his apartment, praying.”

Gil looked at me like I was insane. I knew better than to push. There were some things that no one would understand. I recalled how I had wept that night, overcome with a sense of my own loss, and then felt healed by someone else’s touch. It was a church. But I could never tell that story. No one would ever believe me.

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Martin rested his forehead on his desk and listened to the hum of the tape, to Sophie sleeping. She had thoroughly reverted to her old ways with no one there to prod her into giving useful information. Sophie would be a champ under interrogation.

He closed his eyes. Marilyn would be home soon and they’d endure another high-strung dinner, each of them too attentive. Could he keep it up, this life of hovering and nerves, of saying yes and smiling at everything?

The night before, for his birthday, she'd roasted a chicken. She hadn't eaten meat in a year, but she knew Martin had missed it. "You're a Leo," she said. "You shouldn't be a vegetarian."

She kissed the spot on the nape of his neck that gave him shivers and set a plate in front of him. He couldn't believe himself when he pulled Marilyn to his lap. It was so out of character as to be dangerous, but she laughed, shaking her head. She got up for silverware. He hadn't had to lift a finger in days. It was the cruelest torture she could have dreamed up.

Martin opened his eyes and watched a squirrel leap the treetops, still listening to the hiss of the cassette and the raspy rhythm of Sophie's breath. She'd been telling a story, but it seems she had fallen asleep. The sound filled almost half of a ninety-minute tape and he heard it out until it clunked to an end.

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He knew he shouldn't have answered the door. He recognized his mother from the Christmas cards that came from Belize. She was small and round, panting and red from the long flight of steps to the front door. A whimper formed in the back of his throat. There were some pictures from when he was about three or four when she'd come by the house for a visit. A mysterious image of himself that he'd scrutinized over the years: fat, the front of his shirt dirty, crying on the lap of a blonde hippie girl. What could have brought her back now?

"Martin?" she asked, appearing lost.

He nodded, but no sound made its way out. He could see her sunburned scalp through her fine white hair. Her eyes were the same pale blue as his own, same wide face. They leaned toward each other as if to hug, but didn't follow through.

“Do you recognize me?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “From the pictures.”

Her smile broke. “You too,” she said.

He invited her in. She looked around. “This was the house your dad bought for his parents, right?”

“We remodeled,” he said, as if that explained the large bare room, the unmade bed and the neat piles of clothing and junk mail on every surface. He missed doors.

They sat on the couch. She asked for a diet Coke. “I've got Pellegrino,” he said

“I half expected you to be a kid,” she said. “I guess that means I'm old.”

He realized he was nodding. He said no, she wasn't.

“Are you forty yet?” she asked.

“Thirty-nine. Just last week.”

“Oh, right.”

She told him her mother had died and left her an apartment complex in Rose Grove. East of Long Beach, she'd added as if his expression revealed his ignorance. She'd probably sell it because the town had lost its luster.

He'd had a grandmother thirty miles away? Had his mother been back to visit her over the years? Martin felt like he had to move or he'd be frozen to the spot. He bounded to the fridge and rooted through it. “Iced tea?”

“Why not,” she said. She got up and leaned on the counter across from him, rubbing the pitted gray surface with the flat of her small hands. “What is this?”

“Cement,” he said. “My wife designs poured-concrete sinks and tubs and things.”

“People pay for that?” his mother asked.

Martin handed her a glass. “They do,” he said.

“It’s different,” she said, attempting another smile.

“Sort of part of the whole green, recycled building thing.”

“Huh,” she said. She took a sip. “Sugar?”

Martin found a jelly glass full of chunky, discolored sugar on the windowsill and passed it to her. His mother pulled off the red rubber lid and smelled it. “It’s raw,” he explained, “basically. Unprocessed.”

“Marilyn,” his mother said, with finality.

“What?” Martin asked, looking up

“Your wife’s name, right? We wrote letters.”

“Yes,” he said. And yet she’d sent no warning of her impending arrival. He wanted to study his mother unseen, through a two-way mirror. He felt embarrassed to look at her for more than a few seconds. His eyes darted over the room. She’d follow along, so that they were both glancing everywhere but at each other. He wondered if she was acting strangely because he was, or if she was really so nonchalant as to show up at his house unannounced with nothing to say.

“Are you writing?” she asked.

“Occasionally,” he said. “I’m in the research phase right now.”

She climbed onto a kitchen stool and adjusted her bulky purple sweater over her stomach. “I was so proud when I heard you wrote that book on what’s his name.”

“Merle Haggard,” he said. A small San Francisco press had published a collection of his music writing called *Hag Fag*. Between the sincere appeals to crown Haggard the heir to Stephen Foster (he’d listened to him exclusively for two years, until his old girlfriend Bethany almost kicked him out) were cheap shots at indie bands and pop acts that no one cared about anymore, written for *The Weekly*. He no longer did much of that. He was happy to leave the close critical reading of Fergie’s solo album to younger writers.

“No,” she said. “That wasn’t it.”

That *was* it. “I guess I don’t know,” he said, studying the corners of the room, avoiding eye contact. Cobwebs.

She shook her head. “The TV star who killed his wife.”

He’d ghostwritten a mass-market bio of Robert Blake called *Murder in Studio City* but he never told people. “Oh, right.”

“Marilyn mentioned it in a Christmas letter.”

Marilyn had spent the last fifteen years disavowing her Mid-western roots, but could never shake the most egregiously telling habits.

“So,” his mother said. “You’re probably pretty angry with me.”

He wasn’t thrilled with her, no, but he wasn’t about to hash it out now.

“I can’t apologize, you know, because I was so young, and Dietrich was like a warden, and that house was a prison. Once I left I couldn’t get back in to see you.”

He didn't know what she was talking about. Half the runaways on Hollywood Boulevard came and went at will. Maybe she meant an emotional prison, which made him smile, both at the ridiculousness of the phrase and because his father never wanted any woman around for more than a few months, even the help.

"You don't believe me," she said, her shoulders squared, defensive.

"I do believe you," he said. He just didn't *care*. If she'd convinced herself that the Spanish mansion with the wrought-iron gate was Alcatraz, it must have made her feel better. "Or I should say, I believe you believe it, and that's okay. I mean, we can't change the past." This was why he hadn't wanted a reunion with his mother. He was forced to speak in hideous clichés.

She opened her mouth as if to sing or scream, took a huge breath and exhaled. Her hands fell lightly to her sides and she became calm. She was putting on a show, he realized: *See how magnanimous I am to let that pass?*

"That came out all wrong," he said. "I'm not angry."

"You *should* be," she said, glaring at him. "You have every right."

"I know," he said, resigned, "but I just don't have it in me."

Her puffy face was a blunt object she seemed to want to beat him with. It kept moving closer to his. "And that's my fault, right?"

He laughed, desperate to lighten the mood, backing toward the armchair near the mantel. "Since you weren't around, I don't see how."

"Here we go," she said.

No! He'd meant that she hadn't been there to mess him up. No harm, no foul, or whatever the expression was. He didn't know; he didn't like sports. Nothing was coming out as he intended. It couldn't. He was trapped in a scene she was playing. All he could do was pray she'd get it over with quickly, like he was being mugged. "I don't have any idea what you want," he said.

Glimmering tears pulsed in the corners of her eyes. "I want to know you. I want you to know me," she said. "Don't you want to know where you came from?"

Agree, he thought. Whatever she wants. You were supposed to hand over the goods, right? "Yes," he said. "I do."

"I want to tell you my story," she said.

Oh God, he thought, not another one.

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Suddenly there was a mother. It had seemed like something he'd needed, at one time or another. Theoretically, she was a short, blurry two-dimensional woman, her eyes red from a flashbulb, on whom he could pin a thousand fantasies and grudges. In reality she was pugnacious and needy, another person to appease. He felt gypped. Ontological questions were better left unanswered. As soon as he heard the key in the lock he knew he was in for it. Marilyn set her Trader Joe's bags on the floor, squinting as if she'd wandered into the wrong house. "This is," Martin began, searching for something to call her, "my mother."

"Doty!" Marilyn shrieked. The women embraced as if they knew each other. It was shocking. They *didn't*. Before he could stop it, Marilyn was herding them to the car

and into the comforting darkness of Vitello's, where Robert Blake's wife ate her last meal, and they were waiting for a table under the smug gaze of a hundred headshots. It was easier than he expected: the women had so much to say.

Even after they'd ordered all Martin had to do was nod. Marilyn was pink in the cheeks from a glass of pino grigio. She inched close on the red banquette. Each time his mother said something amusing Marilyn would turn her face to his. Soon she rubbed his knee under the table, high on family. "I wish I'd met Dietrich," Marilyn said.

"He'd have liked you," Doty said.

"The warden," Martin said.

His mother put down her fork.

What was he defending his father for? For all he knew, when his mother was around his dad had a speed habit that made him abusive or suspicious.

"What does that mean?" his mother asked.

"It's a joke," Martin said, feeling sick from the greasy baked eggplant. Why was he opening wounds when he'd been safe letting Marilyn take the lead? The thing to do, he thought, was change the subject. He asked her about the old days, living with Dietrich in '67 in Laurel Canyon.

Her blocky face lit up. She told them that she'd hitchhike to the Sunset Strip to sneak into Byrds shows. She was underage and McGuinn didn't like Dietrich, so she had to go alone.

Martin had seen pictures. She'd been a pretty doll-like girl with a huge head. Their coupling made no sense to Martin, but he couldn't bring himself to ask about the

things he actually needed to know, like how he ever came to be or why she'd abandoned him.

"Youth opened a lot of doors in those days," she said. "It was almost considered a talent."

Martin felt the first throb of a red wine headache. He was inexplicably jealous of her, her experience, the fact that a thrilling youth at a pivotal time had been handed to her on the basis of looks alone. It made him sad. What the fuck was wrong with him?

"Actually," his mother said, "this is really helpful, talking about all this old stuff, because I've decided to write a book."

"What, like, fiction?" Martin asked, praying that it be so.

"No," she answered, gleeful. "The truth. About Dietrich, those years, the whole crazy scene."

Marilyn pinched his knee and he pushed her hand away, annoyed. Just as quickly he recovered her fingers and squeezed.

"I thought maybe, Martin, you could help me," his mother continued, her lips pursed, contemptuous and ingratiating. She pecked at a dish of tiramisu.

When people wanted something from you, Martin thought, what was it about their need that made them hate you? He often got the feeling that salesmen wanted him dead.

The waitress had brought three forks but Martin used his to draw waves in the remnants of sauce on his plate that should have been cleared. He knew his face revealed everything he was thinking because his mother's did too and her reactions were transforming by the second. Now she was feigning calm again, as he took too long to

answer.

“Martin is a *such* a great writer,” Marilyn said. “He’d be *great* at that.”

Marilyn knew he wouldn’t write about his own life, so why would he help this strange woman? It was sweet though, how she encouraged him, even if she also thought Deepak Chopra was great. Martin smiled. Maybe he could smile his way out of there, back through the gauntlet of grinning headshots, into the cold car and to his darkened house, to the time before his mother had ever rung his doorbell.

“Help you?” he asked. “Like how?”

She appeared stupefied, her smile mimicking his. “I have the story, but you’re the writer,” she said.

Marilyn looked at each of them, in turns, brightly.

“You want me to write it?” he asked. Every time he read a biography, an article, a history of pop music that mentioned Dietrich, Martin’s chest thumped and he got lightheaded until the passage was safely past. It wasn’t only because they invariably got everything wrong. Dietrich was *his* story, his birthright. If anyone was going to exploit it, it should be him, and he wasn’t going to.

His anger tasted metallic in the back of his throat. No, that was eggplant and silty wine. Martin jumped to his feet, his napkin parachuting softly to the ground. He lurched across the dining room and jiggled the bathroom door. Locked. The women’s room gave way when he pushed. He rushed the stall and dry heaved. False alarm, though his stomach and throat chafed from the wasted effort.

He steadied himself on a mural of a Sicilian hillside and remembered being about

five, when throwing up drew rare praise from Loretta as a sign of progress in the battle against the flu, how for years afterwards puking had made him unaccountably proud, as if he were an expert. Entitlement and low expectations were the poles of the axis on which his upbringing spun. When Martin would fail to do his chores or complain that there was no food in the house, his father would sing, "I'm trying to read your portrait but I'm helpless like a rich man's child," and then howl, baring yellow teeth. Only if someone else was around, naturally. It was a Dietrich trifecta. He could congratulate himself, appear with-it by quoting Bob Dylan, and humiliate Martin with one simple lyric.

Unless he started to ask more of himself, Martin realized, he would be writing his mother's story, Sophie's story, anything but what he wanted, for the rest of his life. But what, he asked himself, did he want?

The door swung open and there she stood in her shiny pants and clunky shoes.

"Isn't this the ladies'?" his mother asked,

Martin wiped his mouth, looking over his shoulder. "I threw up," he said, a soft whine, a mild plea for understanding. He wouldn't be starting today, apparently.

"But you're alright now?"

Martin nodded, his chin close to his chest. He wanted her to rock him in her arms, to kiss his tears, to weep for absolution. He would give it, too, for a few motherly words, a brief caress. Perhaps he had shortchanged her; holding out for Loretta's return, he'd never missed his real mother as much as one was supposed to. Now, she was here. Here she was, just at the moment he needed her. He wanted comfort, but as he gazed into her distracted, slightly bemused face, it was clear she wouldn't know where to begin.

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Martin slid under the blanket and reached for his wife. She smelled musky and sugary from her paraben-free shampoo, like Deadhead girls in high school. She asked if he felt better. He said *a little*.

“Sorry,” Marilyn said. “Your mom wanted Italian.”

“It wasn’t the food, I don’t think,” Martin said.

“What was it?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” he answered, kissing her. He told her he loved her and traced her dimples with his fingertip. She loved him, she said, and they repeated it a few times, as if they were daft. *I love you* always needed a reply.

Marilyn yawned. “Nightshades are poison,” she said. “They weaken the bones.”

“What?” he asked.

“Eggplant,” she said. “Tomatoes, potatoes, peppers. Things that grow at night.”

“I love all those things,” he said.

“We’re designed to love things that hurt us. Sugar, fat, starch.”

“But why would that make me throw up?” he asked.

“Your body is telling you what it doesn’t need,” she said.

He knew not to ask why ice cream didn’t make him throw up. It would lead to a graphic ten-minute lecture on the digestive tract, how we craved foods that helped to break down other foods we shouldn’t be eating, so the best thing to do was cut out food.

“I love you so much,” he said instead.

“It’s amazing that your mother showed up after all these years,” was her reply this

time. “Are you going to be able to accept this as the gift that it is, or are you going to keep punishing her?”

“I’m trying,” he said. Marilyn kissed his forehead. He nuzzled into her neck. She scratched his upper back and he sighed, contented.

“The timing is pretty interesting,” Marilyn said. “Since we’ve been talking about getting pregnant. We can ask about your medical history.”

Just what he wanted, more relatives. Actually, they hadn’t talked about it in months, but how could he say no, now? He pushed his nose into the warm hollow between her breast and her arm. He nodded.

“Even if there’s cancer all over your family, I want to start, Martin. I may only have one year of fertility left.”

Where would they put a baby, he wondered, the concrete sink?

She rounded her shoulders, dumping his head to the cold pillow.

“Right now?” he asked, sitting up. “I’m still a little queasy.”

She smiled. “Right this second.”

Martin drew back. He had to tell her. Soon, before the damage was irreparable.

“God,” she said, curling away from him. “I was kidding. Not that pure panic isn’t the reaction every girl dreams of when propositioning her husband.”

Irreparable, he realized, had been passed the second Laurel’s hands had touched his weak thighs. He tentatively stroked Marilyn’s elbow, not knowing what else to do.

“How many times do I have to apologize,” she asked, “before you forgive me?”

How could he reassure her without using words like *forgive*, which would only

betray him later if she found out? “I understand,” he said, sure he was repeating himself from the last time they’d had this conversation. “I’d feel the same way, if I thought you were seeing someone.” Anything but *forgive*, because him requiring her forgiveness was too horrible to contemplate.

Her voice got tinny and high. “You know, sometimes I think you don’t want to have kids with me because my mom’s crazy.”

Martin lunged, gripping her arms, covering her mouth with his. Marilyn made muffled sounds. She grew quiet. He kissed her neck and the bony valley between her breasts, pulling her tank top over her head and her stretched-out organic cotton underwear to her knees. She raised her hips; they usually did her first, but getting off was a waste of time. He guided her fingers around him and was surprised at how quickly he was ready. Martin pushed into her, exhilarated. Pride crept over him as he finished inside, no birth control, no pulling out. Sex as a purposeful act.

They faced each other, breathing hard. How luminous she was, with her tall white forehead and her flushed cheeks. He’d managed to debase the one true thing in his life, like everyone he was always complaining of, the people who were ruining his city, razing bungalows for Tuscan villas and self-storage bunkers and condominiums that went unbought, all because he wanted something vaguely other than what he already had.

Marilyn made a breathy laugh near his ear. “I’m so happy,” she said. “Are you?”

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Martin read the first sentences aloud, to no one. “There’s two types of people. People who grab life by the balls and people who don’t. I grabbed.”

He'd talked his mother into writing a chapter to make sure she really wanted his help. Something about her authentic voice, he'd said, and finding it, and how no one else could capture its essence even if she managed to hire Tolstoy to ghostwrite, literally. Insidious flattery was not a skill he prided himself on, but in times of stress he used what he had.

"My mother wanted a daughter who wore ribbons and corsets and guarded her maidenhead like a mama lion, but she got me, who was as hard headed as she was free thinking." Martin pictured the lioness in a corset. He wrote *Good!* in the margins.

He shivered. His house was set in the cleft of a north-facing canyon. It languished in a blue shadow all winter but his office's dormer window caught the last sliver of afternoon sun as it passed overhead. The tinge of warmth on the dirty glass was the only thing keeping him up there reading the dreadful chapter.

His mother wrote of Southern California's square working-class suburbs and how stifling it was to be cared for and protected. Orange groves and drive-through dairies and first kisses, stuff he'd read a million times. Her mother made her perform embarrassing routines in wooden shoes and memorize Robert Louis Stevenson poems. "I always believed that my real mom was a princess who'd been forced to leave me behind with the evil Dutch witch. My dad left when I was three and I couldn't wait to follow."

But her mother's behavior didn't seem all that cruel. He was reminded that, on occasion, spending too much time in the company of an author could really make you dislike her. Of course, he'd have to give her the benefit of the doubt; he'd only read ten pages. *Interesting move*, Martin wrote on the page where Doty spit in her mother's hot

cocoa after being forced to do her Geography homework.

This was why he couldn't write about his father, he thought, even though his agent had promised the book was practically sold. Whatever words he used, whatever stories he told, people would only see what he wasn't saying. Every line about who Dietrich was could only reveal who Martin wasn't. They would read through him like gauze and he wasn't ready for that much exposure.

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Marilyn called from the furniture store to say that she'd gotten her period. She'd been crying for twenty minutes straight, which wasn't so unusual, but this time he understood why. He told her it only meant they weren't done trying and wasn't he lucky? She laughed. By the time she hung up she sounded almost normal.

Martin was relieved that he'd calmed her down, but he hadn't expected to feel the pulled punch of disappointment himself. He spent the next hour straightening the jars on the open kitchen shelves the way Marilyn liked and putting away laundry. He drove to Mayfair to get something for dinner.

Mounted near the exit were poster-board plans for transforming the nicely antiseptic old market into an Italianate monstrosity. There were architectural renderings, tile samples, paint chips. Another piece of his childhood was being resurfaced. Pretty soon there'd be no evidence it had ever happened.

On his return, Laurel was sitting on the top step. Neither of them said anything as he took the long crooked flight of cement stairs. She leaned to one side to let him unlock the door, then followed him to the kitchen.

“What’s for dinner?” she asked, nosing in one of the brown paper bags.

“Steak,” he said. “But you’re not staying.”

“Marilyn won’t eat that,” she said, taking a seat at the counter.

“It’s organic. It cost twenty dollars. She’ll eat it,” he said.

“So is this a celebration?” she asked. “Did it take?”

“Did what take?”

“Your seed,” she said, with a brisk laugh.

He turned his back on her when he felt his eyelashes get wet. He blinked. “What do you want?” he asked, churlish.

“I need some things I left here. I’m moving back in with Jake.”

Jake, the sculptor of trust funds. Or rusty metal or something. When Marilyn had first debriefed Martin, she’d called him a macho trust-fund sculptor, as if that were his medium.

“We’re back together,” Laurel said. “I’m pregnant.”

He turned to her; even the dark scythes cutting under her tired eyes were lovely.

She grabbed a bruised apple from the bowl of old display fruit and shined it on her soft pants. She only ever seemed to wear garments that could double as pajamas or workout clothes. “Wash this for me?” she asked, throwing it at him. He caught it, but as he held the apple under the tap it slipped and landed with a dull thud in the concrete sink. “Ouch,” she said.

“It’s fine,” he said, annoyed at having fumbled, at his embarrassment.

“I’m three months,” Laurel said, calmly.

He felt like someone was holding a lit sparkler above him and all he could see were the white lights popping off it. “Three months ago you weren’t with Jake,” he said.

“I told him I was at four months.”

“We used stuff,” he said, his head down, still washing the damn apple.

“If you’d stopped to look for a condom, you would’ve had to admit to yourself what you were doing.”

That was true, yes. “I guess I assumed you used *something*,” he said, passing the apple to her across the counter.

She propped one foot on the stool next to her. “I’m too hormonally sensitive.”

Right. His wife, too. “Does Marilyn know? I mean, that you’re... not that we...” he said, losing the will to bring the sentence to its obvious, nightmarish close.

Laurel bit into the mushy apple, radiant. He’d rarely seen her so happy. Only occasionally, with a new boyfriend, when she was putting on some better self. Even in their childhood pictures, he could always tell the sisters apart. Marilyn would sit up, back straight, smiling wide with the shaky confidence of the good girl while Laurel skulked in the background, effortlessly tugging the focus away.

“I told her to keep it secret until after the first trimester,” she said. “In case.”

Now he knew why getting pregnant had become an urgent issue again. “Laurel, if you tell her about us, I’m going to... I don’t know what I’ll do.”

She picked at her teeth with her pinky nail. “Kill me, like some *Lifetime* movie?”

More like an old folk song, he thought, but whatever, same thing. “That’s too stupid to even be insulting,” he said. But he knew that some men with secrets killed their

girlfriends or wives rather than let some commonplace infidelity come to light. Their sense of what they appeared to be was that precious.

Laurel set the sticky core on the counter and wiped her hands on her stomach. “If Marilyn gets pregnant too, the babies will be like cousin-twins.”

Martin tried to glower threateningly. “I’m tired of this. I don’t care what weird game you are playing. I want out of it.”

Her pretty, pointy elbows were clamped around her bent knees. She grinned. “You should get Marilyn pregnant and let us have the house and we’ll raise your babies. You can go get some twenty-year-old, which is what you really want. I finally figured out why men my age always end up with young girls. As I was nagging Jake to have a kid for the millionth time, it hit me: listening to this all day must just *suck*.”

She’d *wanted* a baby? He’d been a sperm donor? It did at least answer the question that had been circling his head, why had she slept with him? He walked around the counter, past her, across the room to his office ladder. The only response to this situation was retreat.

“Oh, Martin,” she said, swiveling on the stool to watch him pass. “You’re so dramatic. I’m just fucking with you.” Her laughter was forced, too big, but it didn’t seem to make her uncomfortable; she was a woman who was used to laughing alone. “Couldn’t you tell? I’m the worst actress.”

Martin climbed the ladder to his attic, yearning for a more dignified exit.

“Do you think I’m going to follow you or something?” she asked, still laughing.

He closed the carpeted trap door, muting her, and waited for her to go away.

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He cooked the steaks in the broiler even though they now had a stove with a grill and an underutilized range hood for which he'd be paying the rest of his life. He was hiding the meat inside the oven, almost as if it represented his mistake, sensing only now that the beef had been a very bad idea. If he quietly placed the steak in front of her, he thought, surrounded by roasted asparagus, and made a big show of serving the lentil salad, she might not notice the charred flesh he'd ridiculously assumed she would eat.

Ever since Marilyn had come home from work, he'd found it hard to speak. She appeared distracted, jumpy, her eyes still pink and brilliant from crying, and he wanted to reassure her, but when he opened his mouth he feared his secret might jump out instead and hurt her anew. As he set the overdone steaks on the table, her gaze leapt up, accusatory. The edges of the meat had curled, blackened fat glistened, and yet somehow the surface of the meat was the exact, indecisive color of mauve that doctors on Robertson used to paint their offices in the 80s. This was no way to convert a vegetarian.

"I thought I smelled meat but then I thought, *no*, he wouldn't do that to me, tonight of all nights," she said.

He sat across from her, the two forlorn and ill conceived chops on a platter between them napping in a puddle of watery blood. "It's organic. From a farm in the Central Valley where the cows roam free. The butcher said..." But he hadn't actually asked the butcher any questions, so there was nothing to tell her.

"I realize I made a chicken for your birthday, but this is pushing it a bit, don't you think?"

He nodded. "I'm sorry."

"This is for you. *You* wanted meat. I don't eat meat."

"I thought if I got really good meat... I thought maybe you needed iron, that it might be good for you."

She glanced at him sharply, as if in mute retaliation for a comment so wounding she could not reply. Amazingly, she impaled a cut of meat with her fork and dropped it on her plate. She sawed at it with the dull knife. It had been a while since he'd broiled a steak, and evidently the touch could be lost. She brought a piece to her mouth and chewed. He expected her to spit it out, but she persevered.

He asked if she wanted catsup.

"Wine."

He uncorked the red and placed a nearly full juice glass in front of her.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asked.

He chewed, but he couldn't taste much, and he wondered if it was the steak or if it was him.

"You think it's my fault? That it's my diet?"

Yes, it was natural for her to take it that way. He could not believe his stupidity.

"Of course not. I know it'll take a while for you, *for us*, I mean. At our age. I wasn't expecting anything on the first try." Did she not remember that he didn't want kids? How could he possibly blame her for failing at something he didn't want? Why had he bought red meat? He'd walked by the small, clean butcher counter, with its bright stacks of lushly-marbled filets, and he'd longed.

There was nothing his father liked so much as a steak dinner at Chadney's, or sometimes The Smoke House or the Cock'n Bull. It had been a weekly ritual to eat beef and giggle at piano jazz and put spitwads in the salt-shakers with Gil while Dietrich schmoozed industry folks at the bar. Later, they'd only gone on important occasions. Not just celebrations, but times that required consolation: the day Gil got beat up by some skinhead surfers or when Martin got rejected from UCLA.

When he'd passed the butcher counter, he'd been sure the price of the grass-fed beef would convince Marilyn of its moral certitude, but then she hadn't been there to witness the reassuringly exorbitant cost.

"Laurel is pregnant," she said, with bitterness. "An accident."

He looked down at his plate, his head suddenly too heavy to lift.

"You knew," she said, eyeing him strangely. "How did you know?"

"She came by today."

"What did she say?"

She had said that Martin was the father and then she said he wasn't. He knew he wasn't, because he couldn't be. "She said she was three months along."

"Four months."

"Four months, then."

Marilyn was examining him. His neck grew warm. He swallowed under-seasoned lentil salad as if he were not a guilty man. Marilyn had already guessed at his crime a few weeks back, which meant she knew, on some level, but didn't want to admit it to herself. This could not go on indefinitely. His time was up. He had warned Laurel. He could not

feel bad if she was hit by crossfire, because she was as guilty as he—guiltier for having initiated—though he knew couldn't get away with that kind of complacency much longer.

“I hate to say this, but I'm a bit scared for that baby,” Marilyn said. She squinted, looking pained, as if she knew it was a terrible thing to admit, and he agreed with a slow nod. They didn't need to elaborate. The reasons were all too clear.

He knew the look well; sorrow and jealousy had exhausted her. Her expression was etched with the precision a woman's face gets at forty, each feature defined in one last great showing of beauty. He'd never quite gotten over his surprise at Marilyn's initial interest in him. They'd met through mutual friends at one of those fulsomely hip houses on the highest point in Mount Washington where the owners had just enough money and foresight to buy Eames chairs and Russell Wright dinnerware at estate sales while one still could, and yet displayed Isaac Hayes LPs and Bruce Lee posters among other, more tasteful treasures. To Marilyn's dismay, those friends had been lost to their continued successfulness. They had not been fooled, as she had, by that initial first impression of him. His father was famous, he wasn't, though once upon a time second-hand celebrity had its social advantages.

Sometimes he thought they'd fallen in love with who they were inside that blessedly pre-remodel, mid-century showplace with the original wormwood cabinetry. With his Arthur Miller glasses and chinos, he'd probably appeared intellectual, connected; she with her nervous thinness and prescient quinoa side dish—the first he'd ever encountered—had seemed on the avant-garde of a world where he'd never belong, a

sophisticated, adult world that took place at potlucks overlooking the sublime and tatty Mediterranean-scrub, hillside lights winking in the fading day.

They'd sat side by side on striped canvas lawn chairs like they were on an ocean liner in a 1930s movie, hearts dropping pleasantly with risk for being so close to the edge of the boggy, cantilevered deck. Hills and canyons encrusted with barnacle-like dwellings descended before them all the way to a shining grid of streets and skyscrapers and the faint metal haze of the ocean, the singed afternoon light separating and flattening the alternating layers of landscape like mountain mist in a Japanese watercolor. He didn't remember what they talked about—just that when he felt brave enough to turn toward her, rather than the astonishing view, he found it difficult to look away.

As Martin pretended to be involved in eating his failed meal, the loss of the last ten years overwhelmed him, and the ten before, and before, as it often did, nostalgia stretching before him like those green and gold hillsides abating to the Pacific. That the moments he mourned generally hadn't felt so perfect at the time in no way limited his suffering for them, but in this case the loss throbbed with squandered promise. The mirage of a life they'd seen together in that distant glimpse of ocean hadn't come to pass, and it was his fault alone.

Marilyn cut another piece of meat, smaller this time. "Steak, Martin. It's not even that good."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't seem to understand it's an ethical choice, my vegetarianism."

"I do. I thought you might be okay with it, given the chicken."

“It’s not something you can decide for me.”

“Why are you eating it?”

“I’m hungry.”

Fair enough. “Laurel said she was back with Jake because of the baby,” he said, although he should not have been heading back into such dangerous straits.

“I don’t get it. They don’t have anything in common.”

What did Laurel have in common with anybody? She had the self-interest and attention span of a toddler, and they’d all been there, so there was that.

“I’m not convinced he’s the father, to be honest,” she said.

Martin stopped chewing. He felt nauseas. He spit his food into a napkin, like it was gristle, but in reality he could not eat another bite. “Why not?”

“I think she was seeing someone else,” she said. “She sort of hinted at it.”

“You thought it was me,” he said.

“Don’t start. I apologized. I know, it was a ridiculous accusation.”

“Why is that so ridiculous?” It came out louder than he’d planned, more abrupt, and she stared at him.

“It’s not ridiculous?”

Say it, he told himself. Say: *No, it was ridiculous.*

“What are you implying, Martin?”

“Why is it so ridiculous?”

“Because I know you’d never sleep with my sister. Jesus Christ, you’re sensitive.”

He loved his wife and who she made him out to be—her aspirations elevated him

too. There was something endearing and worthy of protection in her illusions. She trusted in people; she was good. To wake her up seemed so cruel, but then to keep her in the dark was much, much worse.

“You’re not her type, anyway,” she said.

“*Her type* seems like an awfully broad category. The only way I could be out of range was if I were a woman.”

“Well, it’s going back a few years, but maleness isn’t necessarily a requirement either.”

“Okay then. Her type is anyone who can pay for her to continue to go to Pilates and avoid getting a job.”

Marilyn smiled. That was it, but she wasn’t going to say it. Laurel’s type had money and he didn’t. Laurel’s type could carry her, whereas Marilyn was carrying him.

“I’m going to heat up that leftover Channa Masala,” she said.

“I’m sorry.”

“Buying a steak was such a Martin move. It’s almost funny. It will be funnier someday, I’m sure. Tonight, I’m just too tired.”

But as they readied for bed later that night, it was again not funny. She was in tears, standing before him in her oatmeal-colored nightgown. “I don’t understand. I don’t understand, why steak? Why steak? You think I need to eat meat, don’t you? Josepha got pregnant and she’s a vegan. Louise is macrobiotic. It’s much healthier, *much*, to be vegetarian.”

“I know,” he pleaded. “I’m sure you’re right. It had nothing to do with getting

pregnant. My father would console us with steak. It was just an unconscious reflex to make you feel better, to make me feel better. That's all, I swear."

"Your father would console you with steak? That's so perfect."

"He loved a steakhouse. What did we know back then? And the food supply was safer."

"You're an apologist for your upbringing, do you know that? What you and Gil went through would count as neglect if not abuse, in Gil's case anyway, in any court of law today."

"That's not fair. Dietrich tried, but not everyone is meant to be a parent. You have to take the whole era into account, the situation. He was a good father, I mean, with some caveats, but in general..."

"Right, and my mother was only slightly crazy. If we want kids, you're going to have to face where your father failed you. Otherwise you'll be repeating those patterns of abuse. Don't you get it? You'll be consoling our child with steak."

Was eating *one* hormone-free twenty-dollar steak every five years really such a symptom of pathology, for Christ sake? What gave her the right to analyze and diagnose his entire life, his whole family going back generations—her doctorate in psychology from the self-help section at the Bodhi Tree? He was an inoperable case, fatally wounded yet miraculously still walking and sure to infect their tragic offspring! Words gushed forth before he could stop them. "Look, I already know I have no aptitude for this. I'm going along to make you happy. So if you don't want to have kids with me, as I am, you may want to start looking around for someone else."

She paused, seeming startled, then turned out the light and got under the covers.

He waited for more but nothing came. They hadn't had a blowout in weeks, but when they were fighting about money and he'd been bumped to the couch, she'd always said when she wanted him to leave. Now he had no idea what to do. He sat, facing the wall, hearing no directions from across the bed.

Eventually, he got under the blanket and stared at the blue glow on the ceiling from the neighbors' television, and wondered if he'd finally hit on something she could not forgive, why he'd gone that far when clearly she was in pain. Of course he'd let her try to have a child. Because what kind of man would deny a woman that? Hadn't he felt a touch of regret when he learned she got her period? It was Laurel and her insane scare tactics that had him twitching like a fugitive. "I'm sorry, Marilyn. I just don't know if I'm ready and it's freaking me out."

He'd often had the sensation that his life was leading to a certain moment, a naïve belief that fate wouldn't have dealt him so many humiliations if it didn't have something better in store. He wasn't convinced it wasn't just obtuse Judeo-Christian bravado, but hope persisted. Hope that his wife would forgive him and they'd continue on as they had been, or that she would *not* forgive him and the stasis would end, or that he would tell her the truth and be absolved anyway, because she wanted a child so dearly and had such limited time find another partner that she'd forgive almost anything. The reflected light on the ceiling danced and he considered the absolute amorality of that last hope, the deep incongruity of the other two, and he understood that he was losing his very self in his attempts to avoid making a decision. He couldn't hold out much longer.

She was quiet but she wasn't sleeping. A tremor from her side reached him just before she began speaking to the wall. "If you don't want a child, you need to tell me right now. Right now. Don't waste another second of my time by stringing me along. It finally just occurred to me that you've been waiting my fertility out. Some men get over their childhood by doing fatherhood right, you know. But no one gets over it by running."

He shook his head no. He didn't want a child. He didn't want to correct anything.

"Frankly, I know that if we do this together, I won't have much help from you. I'm willing to do it anyway, even if *we* don't make it. I'm willing to do IVF, whatever, mortgage the house again. So right now you need to tell me what you really want. What you deeply, truly, from the bottom-of-your heart want, because I have no idea and I never have."

What did he want? He wanted to bolt. He wanted out, he wanted Dietrich's life, who had never put himself in this position, who had never truly hurt anyone because he'd never loved anyone. He'd never been hurt, either. His father had been wiser than people knew.

Her voice was hard, grave. "Just this fucking once, I need you to tell me what you actually want."

"I slept with someone else." It was as if her demand had hit between his shoulder blades, forcing the thoughts he'd been choking on clear across the room.

The mattress heaved as she jumped to her feet.

Martin sat up, filled with helium now that the heavy secret was out. But he wasn't worried, his leaden misery would weigh him down soon enough.

Marilyn had one hand on the bathroom door. The blue light from the clerestory window slashed below her eyes, leaving most of her face in shadow. Her shoulders were hunched.

“But I only love you,” he said, getting to his feet, afraid to move towards her. “What happened wasn’t love, it was just my ridiculousness. This thing surfacing, the thing I can’t shake, that I’m not good enough for anyone to want.”

Marilyn was still. “And I’m not anyone?” she asked.

It was so sad, what he’d done. So stupid and sad.

“I *was* right,” she’d said, as she stood frozen with her hand on the bathroom doorknob. “I’m *not* crazy. Maybe I wasn’t right about Laurel, but I was right.”

For a long minute, he did withhold the crucial detail. But though he’d never know why, he couldn’t stop there. Maybe he was sure it would come out, regardless. Or the pressure was too intense, like he was too deep underwater and his head was about to explode. Whatever it was, he kept talking.

“You were right,” he said, not looking at her. And then, even if he couldn’t feel them in his mouth, he heard himself saying the words. “About the whole thing.”

Her face was like a piece of paper burning from its edges; it seemed to collapse in slow motion. Her head bowed. She slipped into the bathroom and locked the door behind her. He waited, watching her move, a shadow behind frosted glass. She turned out the light and disappeared. Martin called her name, sitting on the floor, leaning on the glass. He fell asleep against the door, shirtless and cold, refusing to get a blanket because for the rest of his life he needed to be punished.

In the morning the weave of the rag rug was stamped on his cheek, the bathroom door was open, and Marilyn was gone.

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The sun was almost down. Marilyn had been gone for eighteen hours. Martin watched the front door from the couch, flipping through channels on mute, so as to hear Marilyn's Volvo clatter to a stop in front of the house. There was always a chance she'd return. She'd let him come back once, hadn't she? Maybe she'd pretend it had never happened.

The day had passed like this. He didn't eat. He drank some water when he felt dizzy. If Marilyn came home, he wanted his suffering to be evident. He'd straightened the living room and cleaned the bathroom. He'd also be blameless. He'd forgotten about the back patio, and though his wife had told him not to water in the late afternoon lest he court root mold, he thought that would be better than for her to return to a yard full of dead plants.

He tugged at the tangled hose and sprayed his grandmother's rose bushes and the native plants Marilyn had added, which his grandmother would surely weed if she were to rise from her patch of Forest Lawn and make her way home. Marilyn was forever pointing out dried seedpods clinging to leafless stems, the austere architecture of the little shrubs in bloom. She appreciated things remarkable for their functionality, the miraculous survival mechanisms of homely desert plants. Nothing she liked was traditionally pretty, including him, which only reinforced her essential worthiness.

He wondered how he was going to pay the mortgage. He'd have to finish off the advance from Sophie's book. He'd have to sell something; there was no way he could

make enough at any job that he'd be qualified for. He vowed it wasn't going to be the Silver Shadow. The water trickled out of the hose and stopped. Martin bent down to locate the kink and water doused his slippered feet.

When he turned around, Marilyn was standing above him, the remnants of the sun behind her. He squinted, shielding his eyes against her harsh glare. Her face was tight. She appeared gaunt, like she'd aged overnight. She looked beautiful.

She looked at him only briefly then tossed her head so that messy hair hid her eyes. She scratched an elbow and watched the creeping vine on the fence behind him. "So, I left," she said, "but this is really my house as much as yours. I thought it over and you should go."

Water from the hose pooled on the uneven brick patio. Marilyn reached across him to shut the spigot.

"I'd give anything not to have done it," Martin said.

"I know," she said. "But the thing is, you're not as good as you think you are. I don't believe you, I guess, is what I mean." She looked him in the face. "Men are just raised wrong. You were raised wrong. This whole culture is designed to keep you in an endless state of childhood."

She spoke with a precision that was frightening. It was almost as if the conversation were boring her.

"See, I saw you as benign. Maybe my girlfriends had more exciting husbands, ones who made money or were better looking, but I had someone who'd be true. But you know what? My girlfriends would rather catch an STD from their husbands than marry

someone like you. We're all in this together, really. It's like Stockholm syndrome. And it turns out they were better off. Even if you'd just cheated with a friend, something normal..."

Martin nodded. She at least seemed engaged now that she was lashing him with her cat of nine tails. The sting felt better than the ache it had replaced, anyway.

"Does it make you happy? I mean, to humiliate the women who love and care for you? Does that part of screwing around have a point, some purpose, like you know, beyond just spreading your sperm around?" Her copper eyes glinted, they were starting to brim over and her voice had that asthmatic kind of constriction that came before tears. "But you did spread your sperm around and I know how thrilled you must be about that, so maybe that's your real punishment."

"It's not mine. She said it wasn't mine. It's not. Marilyn, you have to believe me. I do want a child with you. I do."

"But the thing is, we let you. I let you. I coddled you like a baby child."

Martin wanted to put his arms around her, and maybe she wanted him to, too, but he couldn't. Something told him it was pointless, and what was worse at the moment, condescending.

"I only have myself to blame," he said.

She laughed, and he heard how the phrase must have sounded coming out of his mouth. "If it's any consolation," he said, frantic, "I know what I did. I mean, I *know*. I'd give anything—" and he stopped himself, about to repeat the same thought that had been inadequate the first time.

She was quiet, holding back. “Right, well. It turns out you will.”

He went cold. Of course. Here they were.

“And I know that that’s what hurts you the most,” she said. “I know it. Us acting out this tired old scene.”

Had she been this smart all along, or did it take rage to bring it out in her?

“Look, you forced me. Okay? I just want to be clear.”

“I know,” he said. He didn’t care about the house; he didn’t mind having to sell the Silver Shadow. It was her he didn’t want to lose, but there were no credible words with which to say it. He’d used them all up.

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The only thing Martin could think to do was call Gil again. “Can I stay with you for a few days?” he asked. He adjusted the rear view mirror. He could still see his house from his parking spot across the street.

There was a long silence on the other end. “Bradford isn’t, uh, about to, uh...”

“He’s still pissed about our fight at Sophie’s show?”

“Well, yes, but *man*... Marilyn stayed here last night. Martin. *Her sister*. I don’t mean to be all judgy, but, dude, that was cold.”

He felt his stomach drop. He’d never considered that other people would know. His skin hurt, as if his nerve endings were suddenly exposed. “Yeah,” he said. “Not my finest hour.”

“Sorry, bro. You can find somewhere to stay, right?”

“Sure I can. No worries,” Martin said, even though he hated that phrase, no

worries. Strangers said it to each other, co-workers. Saying it aloud was like admitting he and Gil didn't know each other at all.

People knew. Martin closed the phone and placed his forehead on the steering wheel. Now who was he going to call? Hotels would be a fine way to fritter away his last few bucks. He'd almost thought that what had transpired was so horrible, Marilyn would be too proud to tell their friends and he'd at least have the comfort of being a lowdown miserable fuck in private, but it was not to be. Marilyn was going to share. She was probably in there right now, calling everyone he knew. He saw in the rearview that the porch light had gone out. Maybe she'd seen the Silver Shadow sitting plaintively across the street, an hour after she'd told him to get out.

His wife didn't have Sophie's number. He called and stammered his humiliating request and wanted to kiss the phone when she assented without asking any questions. Her Argyle Street building reminded him of Leo's dingbat, although there were no decorative geese; it was an unadorned stucco box atop a carport painted with the words Argyle Manor.

Sophie let him in with a shrug as if nothing was out of the ordinary. Her place was small, featureless except for some vertical blinds and oil paintings of woodland scenes. For some reason he'd imagined squalor, piles of pink curlers and those vodka bottles with handles.

On the coffee table sat something lumpy and microwaved in a paper tray. The TV was on. She told him she was waiting for *So You Think You Can Dance*.

Martin felt like he should be explaining himself. "I'm not generally in the habit,"

he said.

“Of what,” Sophie asked, after his voice faded away.

“I guess the habit of needing a place to stay.”

“Wife kick you out?” she asked. Sophie was speaking in a clipped cadence, ready to suspend their dialogue when her show came on. He knew the rhythm. He’d spent a lifetime socializing in front of the TV. Maybe that was why he and Gil still couldn’t talk.

He nodded. At least she wasn’t looking at him. That was the advantage of holding a conversation between commercials.

“I only have a couch,” she said in a tone that suggested he must be some special kind of loser to have nowhere else to go.

He said it was just for one night. He apologized.

Sophie ate her beige meal. The show came on and she raised the volume so high it made him jump. She kept saying how talented the kids were, and Martin would nod. They were talented. It was kind of astonishing. At the break she brought out two long cans of Coors Light and cracked them. She handed him a tallboy and crossed her wide panty-hose covered feet on the coffee table. He sighed and took a sip. It tasted as if someone had ashed in it.

“You know, I was a very good dancer,” Sophie said. “When I was a kid we’d do those dance marathons, like that Jane Fonda movie. We were ringers hired by the promoters to make sure they didn’t have to give out any prize money. I went nineteen days once.”

“Jane Fonda was terrible in that movie,” Martin said. “It was like someone was

forcing her to act at gunpoint.”

“Huh,” Sophie said.

What was his compulsion to put forth an opinion on every piece of pop culture marginalia? Sophie was telling him something remarkable about a vanished era and all he could offer was a one-liner that he’d probably stolen. He asked her to tell him more but the show roared back.

“At the commercial,” she said, so they sat, him slouching, her with her feet up, and watched overblown dance routines. The beer did nothing to loosen the stranglehold on his chest. Martin drank the rest and felt himself grow weepy. He set it on the coffee table and she brought out another. He felt strangely compelled to tell Sophie what he’d done. He wondered if she’d ever done anything really bad, so he asked her.

She looked as though she was trying not to laugh. “What landed you here tonight, Martin?”

He thought of a few not-quite-lies he could tell her, fights over money, over babies. “I cheated on my wife,” he said.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“With her twin sister.”

Her smile was somewhere between sweet and evil. “Do you feel better now that you got that off your chest?”

“No,” he said, sullen, noticing she looked at him differently. Her brow was arched with what might be respect. She’d turned toward him as if suddenly needing to take him in. The last thing he wanted was to be proud of himself. Right?

“There are things worse than that,” Sophie said. She laughed. “But not many.”

He asked if they could change the subject, his experiment in confession a failure, and she said sure. They talked about the neighborhood wild man who terrorized the passersby, mostly Scientologists on Franklin. They talked of how many champagne-colored wigs she had. Sophie seemed distracted. “You know,” she said. “My son won’t speak to me.”

“Why not?” Martin asked.

“He blames me for his miserable life. He’s forty-five. At a certain point, it’s on him, am I right?”

“What’s he angry about?” Martin asked.

“You think he’d blame the guy who ran out on us, but that’s not how it works.”

Like me, Martin thought. I’m that guy now. A selfish, evil man. At least there wouldn’t be children to hate him too. He thought of Laurel with a shudder, imagining if she had been telling the truth. Thank god she’d admitted she was lying. He took a miniature consolation in his reprieve.

“He blamed me for working, for having boyfriends, for never having enough money to fund his ridiculous schemes.”

“But did you *do* something?” he asked. He didn’t trust Sophie’s innocent act, but it was also possible he and Sophie’s son shared the slow-release grudge of the unexceptional offspring.

“Like I’m going to tell my biographer. You just want me to spill it.”

“You’re the one who brought it up!”

Her lips pursed, a plea of grudging guilt.

“What does it matter what you did a long time ago?” he asked. “It’s interesting to know that famous people are human.”

“Because it makes you feel better?” she asked. “Some things are private. That’s all. It’s no big deal. Isn’t it about my talent, the people I worked with, the places I played? All that stuff is gone. Don’t people want to know what went on before them? Why can’t I just tell that stuff?”

Martin nodded. “You can, it’s just... no one will care.”

“Too bad,” she said.

They stared at an infomercial for hair loss cream, falling silent. A sheepish man said his wife liked to run her fingers through his new hair.

“What made you do it?” Sophie asked after a shot of a woman petting the top of a man’s head. “Isn’t one pussy the same as another?”

Martin exhaled, and it hung in the air, the last dying note of a song.

Sophie laughed. “Identical twins. So was there any difference?”

“No,” he said, his voice high. “I mean, not *no*. That’s a hell of a question.” He couldn’t leave her thinking there wasn’t a difference. What did she take him for?

“Who could tell those two apart in the dark,” she asked. “Just tell your wife it was an honest mistake. Is that why you did it? To see if it would be different with twins?”

He willed her to stop.

“Is that why men cheat when they’ve got perfectly good tail at home? Is your wife frigid?”

What did that even mean? Frigidity, the scourge of the 50s. Hadn't it become extinct like Oleo and single-income families?

"Your wife knows what you like after all these years, am I right? See, it takes time to hit a groove with a partner." She said she thought men were more vain than women, constantly seeking validation in the arms of different girls. "Hunter-gatherer instinct my ass. You just want to see if you've still got it."

"That's not true," he said, almost wailed. How had he suddenly become like other men? "I love my wife."

"So why did you sleep with her sister?"

He didn't, couldn't answer. Compulsion again, he thought, the only force so potent, so concentrated, it could upend his inertia. But that wasn't any kind of explanation.

"Don't like answering personal questions?" she asked.

"No one is writing about me, here! I've never done anything worth writing about!" His shirt pocket buzzed and he pulled out his phone, scared to look at the screen.

"Is it your wife?" Sophie asked.

Martin put the phone away while it still made the quiet death rattle of vibrate mode.

"The other one?" she asked. He looked at her, hoping her face would reveal what he should do. It didn't, though she did appear to be enjoying herself. "You better get it," she said. "Might be important."

He opened his cell. "What," he said, low.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Laurel asked. It sounded like she was just about to lose it, like she’d be screaming in a minute or two, but now was the moment of calm, the ocean before an earthquake or the silence after a baby falls and waits until everyone sees before he starts to wail.

Martin stood and walked into the kitchen. “I had to,” he said. Here was the mess. Makeup and *Us Weeklys* scattered on the counter. Cat food cans and clusters of Glucosamine bottles. Appliances in miniature or too large, a four-cup coffee maker and a giant plastic dome that may have been for desiccating fruit.

“No, you didn’t have to. Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

He did, but he didn’t answer her.

“The first thing she did was tell Jake. She didn’t even speak to me. Do you know that? I’m stranded in Glassell Park. I think I heard gunshots.”

“I can’t help you,” he said.

“I can’t spend all night in my car.”

“Laurel, don’t call me anymore, alright? I’m not going to act like this was your fault. I take responsibility, but all the same, I don’t want to deal with you right now. You’re not really a *friend*. You’re family, I guess, which is rich, considering, and if you want to make a joke, go ahead. Like I said, my role in this is not lost on me. But I just lost the woman I love more than my own life and it’s all my fault. I just committed suicide, in other words. Assuming I’m the same person I started out as this morning, which I highly doubt, but just assuming, even then, we won’t be related for very much longer, so that’s that, right? I don’t have to help you figure this out.”

“I’m pregnant with your child,” she said.

He blinked. The gold fridge was just like one they’d had in the apartment on Curson after his father lost the Laurel Canyon house, while they still rented out his grandparents’ house. His baby. A baby. She had to be lying. “I thought you were *fucking with me.*”

“I only told you because I thought you should know, but you were such a jerk about it...” She was quiet for a moment. “After Marilyn called Jake, the first thing he asked me was if it was his and I froze.”

“It’s not mine,” Martin said, foolishly. “It can’t be.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“It’s not possible,” he said. “I pulled out.”

“Not fast enough,” she said.

He thought about how long he and Marilyn had successfully practiced the same risky birth control. Ten years, actually. How he’d even tried to get Marilyn pregnant. How cruel it was.

“Jake kicked me out with nothing. I don’t even have a sweater. I can’t use the heater because I don’t know if I have enough gas. I can’t turn tricks because who wants to fuck a fat pregnant lady?”

“Jesus,” he said.

“That was a joke,” she said.

He laughed at how awful she was. “Go to the Best Western,” he said. “Call me from there and I’ll give the clerk my credit card.”

“Can I order room service?”

“Go easy,” he said. “It’s almost maxed out.”

He was starving, too. He thought about going to meet her just in case there were any problems with the credit card. He’d get some food, split. But no, he couldn’t. Maybe Sophie would offer him a Lean Cuisine.

When he got back to the living room Sophie eyed him and he stood a little straighter. “I need to go, to get some food,” he said.

“Should I leave the key under the mat?” She turned up the TV.

“I’ll be back in an hour.”

“I’ll make up the couch.”

“Don’t bother,” he said. “You can just leave the sheets.”

Sophie nodded, a weird gleam in her eye. “If you choose wrong now, you won’t be able to take it back,” she said.

He knew that, but he was just going to get a burger.

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Martin arrived first and waited on a white vinyl settee, pretending to study the terrazzo tiles. The stylish floor reminded him of his wife’s ugly yet beautiful countertops, also embedded with shiny construction detritus and probably made much the same way, and his heart constricted but he couldn’t avert his eyes. When Laurel spotted him he wanted to appear inscrutable, unfazed. He wasn’t going to let his heart pound, allowing her to misread his unexpected presence in any of her millions of demented ways.

He was wearing his favorite pants, baggy, heavy twill with a cuff, and he crossed

his legs knowing it made him look blasé yet professorial. He selected his clothes with care. They needed to say several things at once, quietly, and luckily he'd gotten out of the house with a few shirts stuffed in paper bags. Marilyn would let him get the rest later, though. It wasn't her style to trash stuff. She appreciated it too well.

Laurel backed through the glass front door. She turned toward him, looking down, searching through one of the overnight bags draped over her shoulder, her elbows raised. She was wearing one of the filmy t-shirts that only women who spent two hours at the yoga studio each day could get away with. Her breasts looked fuller. Her stomach stuck out by an inch. His heart skittered. It was true.

She produced a cell phone, then a long orange sweater out of her bag.

"I thought you didn't have a sweater," Martin said.

As she noticed him, a momentary light flared on her face. Maybe she was glad he came. Maybe she was thinking she had power over him. She didn't smile. "I found my gym bag in the trunk."

"I thought it might be easier if I just came and paid for the room. I was a few blocks away."

She dropped her phone back into the purse hanging off her arm.

He gave his card to the desk clerk as Laurel twitched nearby, looking away like a teenager as someone inspected her fake ID.

At the elevators, he said he needed to take off but he was going to grab something at the coffee shop first. She regarded him from under her lashes. "I'm going to order room service," she said. "I'm exhausted."

“Just, you know,” he said, edging away. “Twenty bucks tops.” From across the lobby, one of the indistinct and well-groomed men leaving the coffee shop appeared to be waving at them. Martin squinted. Shit. It was Gus, or was it Guy? Gabe. His wife was in Marilyn’s knitting group. Julia, a predatory anorexic, who menaced people with homemade cupcakes, hovering over them expectant, mantis-like, until they consumed the entire thing.

“Marilyn,” Gabe called, moving toward them. “Martin. What’s this, a stay-cation?” He looked certain they’d think it was hilarious. He bent to kiss Laurel’s cheek. Martin tensed. He hadn’t had time to warn her. Laurel let him kiss her, her face squeezing into a gracious sort of wince. Her posture was better, eager, sort of. She seemed more receptive somehow. She was doing Marilyn.

“We’re getting fumigated,” Laurel said, elongating and flattening her vowels. “Love your shirt.”

North-shore Nancy, valley girl? That’s what she thought of her sister?

Gabe proudly tugged at the hem of his Modest Mouse T-shirt. “Didn’t you guys go to this show with us?”

Laurel had arranged her bags over her stomach and placed one hand on the elevator door so he’d know he was holding them up. “Martin doesn’t go to shows unless the artist has one foot in the grave,” she said.

Martin was impressed with Laurel’s memory. Or maybe she was winging it. She was right. He never knew what to say to Gabe, who usually wanted to talk about Radiohead or other pre-approved bands. Although once when they were left alone at a

barbeque, Gabe delivered a four-minute monologue on a hand job he'd gotten at a massage parlor, not seeming to notice that Martin was squirming in his uncomfortable teak seat. These were the husbands Marilyn's friends had made their bargains for.

"Are you knitting this Tuesday?" Gabe asked Laurel. "I think it's at our house."

Laurel said *absolutely*. She grabbed Martin's elbow and pulled him into the elevator.

Gabe said he'd see her then, then. "Later, Martin."

The elevator doors closed too slowly. Martin was amazed how easily Laurel had become her sister. Her instinct for deceit seemed almost perfect.

Neither of them spoke of what had just passed, though he noticed she was shaking, almost imperceptibly, now that they were safe. Why couldn't Gabe tell it was Laurel? There were so many differences between them. Her face was fuller. Gabe would probably tell his wife that Marilyn was packing on the pounds. Laurel's eyebrows had little peaks and Marilyn's were straighter. Maybe it was only context, anyone next to him was his wife. She wasn't his wife. He'd never have married Laurel.

This time it was a small corner room overlooking the parking structure. The furniture was familiar. There were two beds. Being recognized had drained him and he decided to order in. They found the menu and called room service. She took a shower and he watched CNN until the food arrived. They ate on separate beds hunched over their plates and brushed the crumbs on the carpet when they were done.

"Are you going to stay here?" she asked, evenly.

She was trying not to betray her thoughts, he thought, and she was successful. He

wished he could stay. Even though they'd been spotted, it had blown over, and at Sophie's he was on display. Laurel was the only person he could be with right now who wouldn't be inspecting him like a specimen. He shook his head.

Laurel lay on her side and folded a white pillow under her ear. "Marilyn still hasn't spoken to me. She called Jake, not me."

He didn't want to talk about it but he did need to know.

"Which totally sucks. Jake was really happy about having a baby. He's dumb but he has money and he's sweet in that way only dumb people can be."

She seemed to take his silence as disapproval because she spoke like she was defending herself. "It solved our problem for a minute, didn't it? He'd be a good dad. Not that you wouldn't. But realistically..."

"Right, sure." This conversation was too complicated for him at the moment. Did she really think he'd be offended that she'd gone and got an appropriate spouse? Well, only a little, and he didn't know why.

"That's the worst thing. Marilyn's silence. She's never missed an opportunity to yell at me. She's done."

"I know," he said. "She was so calm. She was furious but it was cold. I don't know how I'm going to get her back."

Laurel raised her peaked eyebrows with something like concern. "You're not getting her back. You know that, right?"

He was embarrassed. He felt his cheeks flush. He'd never said anything so obviously deluded in all his life.

“It’s sweet you think you can,” she said. “You really love her, don’t you? I was never quite sure if you did.”

That made him angry. “How would you know anything about me?”

She smiled. “I meant it as a compliment.”

He rolled on his back and stared at the bumpy ceiling.

“I always make the mistake of thinking she’s as unlovable as me,” she said.

She was constantly working him. He wondered if she was even aware of it. He knew now who she reminded him of. Barbara Stanwyck. When she was playing a dame on the level she was a pretty good actress, if a touch sentimental. As a dame on the make she was a genius, untouchable. The best thing was not to buy into Laurel’s story, to keep bringing the conversation back to earth. “Are you going to the doctor and stuff?” he asked. “Is everything okay?”

“I’ve been twice. Everything’s fine. I’m puking for two hours every morning but other than that,” she said. “God, that sounds so self pitying. How attractive.”

For the first time he understood it. She was pregnant with his baby. It was probably his anyway, and now she was homeless.

“I was on Jake’s health insurance...” They both thought about that for a moment, but the implications were too terrible to dwell on. “Are you excited?” she asked. “I know that’s a stupid question, but just the same. To have a baby. Even in a small, tiny way?”

He watched her. There was something forlorn in her question and it made him feel softer towards her. This was a person who was all alone and at her most vulnerable. Whatever their sins were, a child was not to be blamed. He wasn’t the kind of man to turn

his back on a child. But he couldn't help *her* anymore.

Laurel's hands were pressed together under her head. She smiled, barely; if she were a normal person he would have thought she was frightened. Where would she go? Who would help her? He did feel funny when he thought about having a baby. It wasn't excitement, closer to dread in the way that the idea of death or some other bottomless unknown was, but still, there was an inkling of pride. He'd never gotten anyone pregnant before.

"No," he said. "I'm not."