



MIKE MURRAY

Nowhere Man

MURRAY

It's the third family wedding of the summer, another obscure cousin this time, and Walter—who avoided the first two—kneels his moist, towering frame into a conversation between two elderly couples he has never met, leans way into their personal space at table twenty-four, smiles through a growing anxiety as he hears not the words the couple are sharing but those of the annoyingly bossy, goateed deejay at the front of the hall demanding that all single men line up for the garter toss. That is, all losers who didn't bring a date, who shouldn't be living alone at fifty-four but should instead be watching children graduate high school or college and venturing out on their own by now, should be on the downhill run toward the close of a mortgage, should be smiling pretty at a juicy, growing retirement fund, and should certainly know where his next meal is coming from once he digests the half-baked stuffed chicken he's just been served.

That means every one of you single guys! shouts the commandant, cupping the microphone for more resonance. The floral centerpiece shivers. Moooooove it.

Walter puts an arm over the back seat of Close Lady, nods intently. If he shares a bloodline with any of these elders, the physical evidence is well disguised. But it's a deeper connection he seeks—aside from refuge—a link to the contentment in their eyes and manner. Lives wholly realized, potentials met, coupled souls now basking in the accumulated meaning of their years.

The group acknowledges him with vague smiles. "I'm sorry," Walter says toward one. "I missed the first part about why you were in the hospital to begin with." Despite his chronic inner palpitations [and genuine panic, to be referenced soon enough, Walter trying—unsuccessfully—not to think about that just now], he can appear, besides head-tiltingly lengthy, kinda serene [if the quivering jaw is not microscopically observed].

"Lobectomy," First Man says.

"Sounds serious," says Walter, increasingly concerned about age-related health issues these days. "That like an ear infection?"

"They removed his lung, dearie," Close Lady says.

"Holy shit," Walter says, nerves more responsible for the profanity than anything. [Walter rarely curses

and certainly not amid fresh company, especially pleasant-seeming elders, especially when he's intruded upon them and now his first impression is that he's a lout. A physically imposing but seriously wracked boor. Possibly.] The deejay is roving now, points to a reluctant teen whose tablemates thrust him toward the dance floor, looks for more victims. Walter feels the sting of eyes on his hunched back. "Infection?"

They clearly have moved on to another subject. First Man stops mid-sentence, just long enough to say "cancer," then returns his eyes to the others.

"Ear cancer?" Walter says. "I don't think I've ever heard of that." A laugh pops out of him. "Sorry. So, when was this?"

Whose name was that?

"Are you a friend of the bride?" Close Lady asks.

"Cousin," Walter says. "Fifth or sixth. One of many."

As he shakes the cold, blue veins of Close Lady's hand, he hears the deejay call out his name in an ominous tone. *Where is Uncle Walter? Wallllll-ter... We're not starting withOUT you...*

"You're related to the groom then?" Walter says more urgently. "What's his name this time... Peter?"

"That's right," Close Lady says. "Equally distant."

"I think they're looking for you," Second Man says.

"I'm a bit past that nonsense."

Walll-terrrrr... Come out, come out wherever you are.

"It's good luck catching the garter," Far Lady says.

"Five-time winner and still no wife," Walter says. He offers up a hapless smile, but behind it is genuine confusion [as in, hmm, what's up with that?] that at times boils his intestines [as in, what the *fuck?!*], Walter keeping the whole thing concealed, of course, but not from himself.

"That is good luck," First Man says. Close Lady smacks his arm. "See what I mean?"

There's a tug on his sport coat. Lucy, the six-year-old niece whose tiny bed Walter has usurped while he's in town, a too-clever child obsessed with revealing secrets and ratting out the insecure. A nosy little munchkin whose braided black locks and flouncy white dress, a ridiculously shimmering Egyptian goddess bib necklace that nearly plates her entire chest, mock the self-conscious. "Here he is!" shouts the pint-sized Nefertiti, poking his kidney with the butt end of a dessert spoon. "Found you!"

Walter is literally, actually, completely, unexaggeratedly [predictably] down to his last dollar. A crisp green one from two-thousand and six so pure and creaseless that it might have just been plucked from the money

freezer in Philadelphia. It is all that remains of Walter's final unemployment check. Will it go toward his rent, now three months in arrears? Will it cover his electric bill, now two months overdue with a promise, in bold, to switch him off Monday morning unless he squares his account? Will PennWest Bus Line accept it as partial fare to transport him back to Pittsburgh—just until he passes GO! or finds something to sell on Craig's List [such as the rusted tambourine his father supposedly bought him when he was three? Those two bags of unopened potting soil that've been rotting in the apartment building basement for a decade? The one-wheeled shop vac he yanks around his carpeted floors because the upright pooped out back in '07?]. "Come to DuBois for the weekend," his elder sister, Rosabelle, insisted. "We'll hang out at the wedding, then do whatever until you leave Sunday. The kids are eager to see their favorite uncle." And now here he is, broke and past being ashamed about it. Just frantic. Racing in his mind. Keeping it from her, a secret no one knows except the authorities whose business it is to threaten him. They stopped calling him only because his phone was shut off weeks ago. The mail still comes, though. It's free. Envelopes with windows and his name, thin ones that no longer include whole bills... just ugly print on yellow or pink letterhead to emphasize

the point: "You are a financial menace, Walter. We don't like you anymore. We will befriend you again for the sum of \$_____." [Fill in any amount; it's all bad cheese.]

For good karma, he slides the one-dollar bill into the satiny card box in the lobby at the reception. But his hand is not empty when he pulls it back, a mind of its own. In the bathroom, discreetly, he tears open the well-wish and exhumes a ten, not what he expects, of course, and kind of a shock, but it'll do. Trading one for ten. A good deal, but he realizes now that there are fifties swimming in there. How desperate is he? How daring? He plays it over and over, through dessert and drunken toasts, through the bridal dance, pictures his whisking by like an invisible breeze, absconding—*yes, absconding!*—with another reward, whatever he can muster. Plays it over so much that he chickens out, counts his blessings [all ten of them], until it's too late.

Money is not Walter's only problem. He is prone to humiliation, even in the simplest of circumstance. He can trace his extreme self-consciousness to a horrible moment in his childhood. When he was seven years old, in the second grade at Pebly Elementary, he was admonished in front of the entire class for...for...No. That's not right. Not at all. There was no inciting incident, none that he can recall. Beet-redness has always been

his fleshed color. A shivered spine as forever a part of him as his young boy's voice that failed to change, or his gnarled orange curls, or his birthing hips. Okay, okay, individually, these characteristics sound just so ridiculously invented, as if a leprechaun were being observed. But Walter is six-foot-eight, blowing that comparison completely out of the water. Which makes him seem maybe that much more ridiculous? Consider his stoop! His hunkered walk, as if apologizing for his height with every step, bending to reduce his presence by a good foot, a giraffe dipping for fruit. A giraffe with curly orange hair. What's left of it. *Come on! He's not balding, too!* Well, no. But the curls, which were lush and loopy as...as...well, as a really healthy head of super-curly, super-soft, super-loopy orange hair [delicate as pillow fill?]. . .are only a fraction of their former loopy lushness. Oh, about three-eighths, maybe half an inch raised off his scalp. It won't grow bushier than that, not anymore, but okay, the line of it, the coverage, well that's still impressive—a skullcap of nappy orange felt. Not so much impressive. Distinct, though. A real attention-getter.

Here is where the basic brown eyes could be described, and then the pudgy nose, the dime-sized nostrils that let in too much light, reveal too much of the inner decor. But again, seriously, the breaking down of such

details creates a more pathetic cartoon than the human Walter really is when taken as a whole. Which is why he favors family and long-time friends over new encounters. Especially with women. Attractive women. Regular women not so much. But either one he can feel, during that initial scan, absorbing the one or two details they will highlight when relating their meeting to others—if he is mentioned at all. They will talk about his warping posture. They will talk about his pale skin and tangerine glow. They will focus on the dewy forehead. Impressions Walter cannot control. Caricatures written in gestures and smirks. Not the real Walter. Not him at all. [Well, maybe on paper.]

Back to the unemployment. The *un* part. A good job for a tall man with marginal people skills. A quiet office, paperwork, entering data, recognizing trends, compiling reports, forwarding recommendations. Decent pay. Decent? You're either comfortable or you're scrambling, and Walter has always been scrambling. So scratch that. Lousy pay. Go with long hours, cramped cubicle, stale air, shitty pay and no chance of promotion. Medical, though. Which he's used frequently. *The poor guy's not falling apart, too, is he?* All that was meant is that Walter used his medical coverage whenever he needed to. And it was adequate. Better than adequate—but not like “gen-

erous,” which is something seen in newspaper ads. Or “rockin’,” which is how they read in alternative weeklies. They were okay. Average? Not the point. The point being that when Walter complained of lower back pain the first time his medical coverage provided him with several examination methods, from “take off your shirt/I’m going to feel around back there” to “hold still while this space-age time tunnel genomes every cell of your inner person” [during which Walter experienced an anxiety he feared was claustrophobia but was really apprehension at being anatomically revealed, the technician being gorgeous—not gorgeous, but attractive enough to cause perspiration and other claustrophobic-like symptoms; and it was all he could do to lie still for those twelve or six minutes, or those twenty, it was all a noxious blur, a real headspinner, Walter trying desperately, futilely, to maintain his calm, uttering playful nonsense that seemed, to him at least, like witty topical humor until she basically told him to shut the hell up, in tone if not in exact words...but maybe not in tone, because that wouldn’t be professional, and she was all that: professional. So maybe it was just that she didn’t respond to him at all when he tried to relax her with jocularly while his giant naked frame sweated up the sheet they’d draped over him, puddled the cushioned plank he was resting on—but not

resting, which is evident.

Somewhere back there a left bracket, an open window allowing in too much air, the point being lost.

So back to

[.

And then

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Bottom line: Walter has no spinal curvature. No fused vertebrae. Just low self-esteem, which cheaper tests [i.e., one quick peek at the guy] would reveal.

Further back, a more vital thread: the job lost. Still there, just with another in his place. Walter having asked for a raise, gutsy for him. Seriously. Ballsy but necessary. Admirable. The right thing, considering his dedication, his debts. Asked by his superior to show more initiative for, oh, about six months and then he’d revisit the idea. “Money doesn’t grow on trees” was used in earnestness. Even Walter had to chuckle *to himself* when he heard that one. Only it wasn’t so to himself as he thought, so of course «You find this whole business laughable?» is the next thing out of the superior’s mouth, carbon dioxide that smells like «uh-oh» when it reaches Walter’s aforementioned nose [description of ears not yet relevant but perhaps worth noting later]. Anxiety blocking any attempt at a casual «no sir» or «of course not» or, bet-

ter yet, «I was just agreeing with you, boss.» The worry averting his eyes, screwing his concentration, forcing out some nervous laughter that only stokes the sudden fire across the desk. A lecture ensues, during which Walter, who knows the importance of agreement at such moments, bobs his head like a spring is loose neckwise, accepting blame and insults as if he's enthusiastically for more hot peppers on a roast beef sub. A manila folder is produced, Walter's name in blue script on the tab. A thin history. Performance reviews from the past several years, identical concerns and requests from management, minimal results. Passable. Functional. Cost of living increases regularly awarded as mandated by law. Nothing more. And here today, the nerve of him to want money he doesn't merit. Their money. Company funds. A reward for what? *For what?!* Spittle on the electric pencil sharpener, round dots of it on the faux mahogany finish. Walter sinking in the office chair, the seat a leather swing on a metal frame, the back a strap of black, equally giving. But Walter, with so much mass, can't sink as far as he'd like, can't slither under the carpet and squirm back to his desk. He is forced to listen to his *berate-au-mont*, which is not French and not even a word but how he plays it in his mind for no reason he can think of other than to distract himself from the queasy moment. *Berate-*

au-mont...Berate-au-mont...Berate-au-mont...Smooth on his mind's tongue. Over and over again. *Berate-au-mont...Berate-au-mont...Until the talking has stopped,* possibly for some time, an answer awaited. From him. From Walter. A question he can't retrace. The meeting ended. The next day, Walter let go, a history of neglect cited. Warnings ignored.

The severance is more than he's made in a month. It is five weeks' worth. That's it. When he reads the numbers on the check he thinks he is a rich man, if only for a day. Or a week. But he signs up for unemployment that afternoon. Money for nothing. He'll be all right. Only he's not. After he calls his mother, who is eighty-eight and living in a nursing home near DuBois, a mile from his sister, Rosabelle, he kinda breaks down. Not because he's upset about losing his job. But yes, yes, very much that. But mostly—or at least somewhat—because his mother is pretty much goners mental-wise. Three times he introduces himself on the phone and three times he tells her he's been fired and is feeling low about it. [The boy needs his mommy.] Each time there are long pauses, and while Walter doesn't want her to be depressed about his situation, about his failure—his latest failure, because there have been others [in romance *duh!*, in school...like “let's put this schmo through seventh grade again...in athlet-

ics *Yowza! The titanic clod hunker-lobes like Zera in Planet of the Apes, all knuckles and slapping toes!*...and, more than a few times—call it several; or seven to be specific—professionally. Unprofessionally, but everyone loses a job or two in life until they find a calling or at least a place to lay low for a good while, so we'll give him that. We'll give Walter that. Won't pound him when he's down about getting the axe from the arts nonprofit, about getting the boot from the project team at Bayer's research arm because his statistical analyses were only sometimes helpful, about having to quit the bank because they wanted him to take a stab at tellering instead, which he knew—he KNEW—was a bad idea for a man like him so tall and publicly sweaty and so money-flustered...

Again, a [up there somewhere left unattended. Maybe eight or ten lines up. And everything after relevant, okay, but seriously flawed in the presentation. Abnormal to say the least. Or "Ab" would be saying the least. But that's him. That's Walter. He moves along, he settles in, his mind wanders, his thoughts disconnect and boom—*BOOM!*—he's scrambling to survive again, to find his place. It's completely apropos. And don't look that up because there aren't two p's in the first syllable. Not like *apprehension* or *appendix*[Walter possessing the

first but not the second]. But like *aptitude* [another 'not].

So [
and then
].

In the restroom, before heading off to Rosabelle's car—the reception finally winding down—Walter approaches the first available urinal, the low-mounted one for young boys, directs his stream downward at such a steep angle he nearly strikes a shoe. The release is powerful, wondrous. Pant-spattering.

"Fine catch," Some Guy says.

Walter glances right, toward the sink, Some Guy double-washing his hands.

"The garter," Some Guy says. "Saw it land on your shoulder. Half those guys couldn't reach that high."

"Lucky, I guess," Walter says.

Some Guy stares wide-smiledly while he cranks the paper towel dispenser, rips off half the roll. Walter looks down, finishes up. Wants to shake but feels Some Guy's eyes still locked on. Slides himself back in and zips up, those last few dribbles leaking cold to one knee.

"Lucky tall," Some Guy says.

"Or not lucky t'all," Walter says at the sink.

The joke escapes the man. His eyes cloud. Others

needing to wash. The restroom filling with laughter now, men straightening ties for the ride home, waiting wives, children running amok. None of that Walter's. Somehow missed that path, forked left instead of right. As if someone switched the sign.

SOME MEASURE OF HOPE. THIS IS ALL OLD GROUND. WHAT MIGHT HE LOOK FORWARD TO? THE LATEST GARTER BRINGING HIM NEW LUCK? PROSPERITY? CONNECTION?

Catching up: His mom. Losing her brain, her kids losing their wits, especially Rosabelle, who is so strong and so tender and so loving and so giving and so patient, and now so tired and so scared and so guilty for wanting her dear mother to pass on *soon please!* that she goes to confession twice a week to beg for absolution. She has problems of her own—obvious physical problems like her limp [bad hip, from when she fell in Walter's apartment, tripped over his giant shoes *six years ago!*], arthritic joints in both hands so her computer entry career is over. *Look at the size of those knuckles!* And gout.

But she married well. Enough. A quality man who shakes Walter's hand coming and going, who doesn't just pass the phone to Rosabelle when Walter calls and tries to say nice things without eventually complaining

about his persistent loneliness, but talks to Walter and asks Walter what the weather is like ninety miles to the south and west, asks him if the Pirates have any prospects this year, informs him that their three children are eager to see him one of these weekends soon so if the car's sea-worthy he should fire up the engine and get his ass over to DuBois. And he says ass with playful gusto, an emphasis that tells Walter he isn't really a curser but is using it to be funny and maybe it's just between the two of them, guy to guy, man to man. And it makes Walter feel like a guy, like Henry's buddy [Henry being the brother-in-law, of course]. A guy can never have too many friends—and Walter's got about zero. For real. Yeah.

Telephone Henry is not like Flesh Henry, though. Flesh Henry is too busy to chat or catch a game on TV. Especially the last few years as Ma's slid downhill. It's Flesh Henry's money that's got her in the nursing home. Some of it Rosabelle's, but her work options are limited these days because of her bloated knuckles—and *man, they hurt like a mother!*—and her frequent trips to The Home to sit with a woman who, let's be honest now, wouldn't know/wouldn't care if Rosabelle never showed up again. Flesh Henry admires his wife's dedication. He's told Walter so. But even Walter [and now the word *dimwitted* was almost used adjectivally, and that wouldn't be

right. Or accurate. Walters a bright guy. Admittedly *unbright*, of course, but when he's around family he's actually jovial and proportionately sweatless.] Even Walter thinks there's no more point to these visits. So he stays away himself. Hasn't seen her in months. A year? More? Wait, there was Christmas in '09. They hugged. He felt it. Mama hugged him and said she loved him. *I love you, son*. She said it right into his good ear. Walter heard it.

No he didn't. But the hug was real. The hold. Not a good grip from the frail old thing, and Walter's a piece to get around. [Not thick, just a bit wide.] So she touched him, his shoulder or elbow or something. A limb. Brushed him good, probably to keep from teetering. They were on her bed, side by side. Sitting. The television on. A movie. Hitchcock. *The Birds*. Tippi Hedren. Rod Taylor. *Confident guy!* Bunch of screaming kids. Pecking. Blood. Cool stuff. The volume too low. Walter with the clicker, wanting to finger it up but knowing that would be bad. Very bad. Focus on Mommy, study her eyes, her empty sweetness. Where does her mind go in those vacuous smiles? A pre-Heaven? A quick glimpse of a better world? Hopefully. *Please God, let it be all right for her. Take her soon. Get her off our backs*. Take away the guilt Walter feels at not lingering more than ten minutes on Christmas Day, for not buying her a gift, because...

two reasons: one obvious [the old lady's had it] and the other, consider his status: Walter's always broke. Didn't even take wine to dinner. Drank plenty of Flesh Henry's, though. Good stuff. As if Walter could tell Boone's Farm from whatever a good bottle would be called. Something French. Always French when people refer to class. What do slummy French people drink? Crystal Light?

Bought Rosabelle a sweater that year. Went through all the racks at Macy's. Anything with a big red sign. Found something with a purple dot on the tag screaming "Additional discounts taken at register!" The perfect gift, budget-wise. Kind of pretty, too. Stretchy white with cardinals sewn onto the front, two of them on a branch, singing, he knew, because little black notes were floating near their beaks. A happy sweater. Upbeat. Expressing love. And Walter loves Rosabelle. She does so much for him with Henry's money. Puts him up when he's in town. Feeds him all the squares. Doesn't lock the pantry [an overstuffed walk-in!]. Lets him sleep in. Doesn't wake him for church. Asks nothing of him other than to make the drive from Pittsburgh. Hands him a twenty when he leaves—for gas. Always something thoughtful under the tree for him. A box wrapped like a pro. Walter's name on a Santa tag in the same script their mother used on his brown lunch bag back in the school era. So Rosa-

belle inherited that, has the penmanship gene on Mom's side. Walter fearing she's got the brain problem, too. The big A. 'Cause if Rosabelle goes, he's sunk. The other two—the sister in Chicago, the brother out west—they don't like him. Plain don't like him. Here are words he's heard them use to his face [TO HIS FACE!]: *mooch*... *lazybones*...*no-goodnik* [seriously]...*asshole*...*leech*...and more in that same category. At no time are they delivered in a playful manner. Meant to encourage? Perhaps. But no. Certainly no.

Walter takes it all in stride. What can he do? He is what he is. He discovered that many moons ago. Yes, *many moons*. Tried to complete the courses at Pitt. Really hunkered down there. Did his best at the community college(s). All in all, after like nine years, the credits added up to something. A pitiable degree. A sheet of paper that basically said "Walter slept here." Enough to get him starter jobs, entry level stuff. Which he probably could have gotten without all the ugly schooling, without blowing all that cash. His mother's cash. Some of Rosabelle's cash. A little of his own. A wee bit.

Bottom line: They'll be factual orphans soon enough. All they'll have is each other. All Walter will have is Rosabelle and Telephone Henry, because Flesh Henry's slipping away patience-wise. And if Rosabelle goes, there's

nothing. No one. He'll be left to his own devices. He has no devices. The car's had it [Same as Mother]. Which is why he took the bus. So this might be his last trip to DuBois for a good long time. Unless Flesh Henry comes through. That's why he's here, really: cash for a car [and free wedding food]. Nothing splashy. Just something so he's not cut off, not soup-kitchening.

They don't come to him. Not often. Almost never. Pittsburgh yes. Walter's no. They've slipped in. He knows that. Slipped out. He can sense it. Catches evidence in the kids' rooms: ticket stubs from ballgames on his nephew's dresser mirror, a photo of Lucy hugging a Science Center robot. Group shots from the Point, the rivers' convergence not two miles from his own home, happy family shots, arm's length self-shots, all four of them sunglasses, grinning [the fifth, a girl, Trina, in a school somewhere mid-state—Carlisle? York? What's over there? Or is it Maryland? Maybe. But not a Terrapin. Something else, a different mascot. Or no mascot. Not for sports. She's a brainiac, real dynamo, or at least feisty. Never warmed up to Walter like the others had young. Eyed him with suspicion even as a tot. Wary. The parents clued in, never leaving them alone together. Nothing bad. Nothing *B-A-D*...Just poor chemistry, intuitive misunderstanding. Didn't like Walter's aura?

His orangora? Might have been it. So Trina's left the roost, won't be back, not with her brains, not to DuBois, that's for sure. So there's Rosabelle, her little girl gone, managing the two tykish leftovers, managing Mumsy, their palatial home. Well, not palatial. But big. Cavernous. Echoey's better. Yeah, echoey. But filled with stuff. Homey stuff. Family furniture from generations past, a dinette set from the house they all grew up in—chocolate brown table with three extra leafs; china cabinet with Mom's old crystal, her rooster plates; and that sturdy buffet, at least as long as Walter flat out, end cabinets he used to hide in. *Hide in!* Before the spurt. Well before that. When Dad was around, but Walter could never picture those days. Can't recall. Tries very hard. Often. Stares at old photos to compare features, sees little to connect them except the stupid nose. The pudgy nose. And maybe the eyes—the basic brown eyes, just diametered enough not to be called beady, but just barely. Dad was five-six. Mom a couple more than that, a couple less now. None of the siblings much beyond her. Crazy. *Crazy!* that he should stretch out like this without a precedent.

But back to Pops, good-looking guy. Smiling always. Squeezing whoever's in photos with him. Holding firm. Serious love. For Mom, for Rosabelle, for neighbors and dogs. Brows angled high, the points almost touch-

ing, teeth glimmering. Glistening. Despite the menthols that did him in. *Just like that.* One day eating Swiss steak while the races were on, the next day living in a hospital after a casual visit to his doc. Walter supposedly there when the news hit. Too young to remember, too young to summon watching DaDa shrivel and die. He tries to remember the grip the man had, his arms around Walter's shoulders, his neck, like in the photos. It just doesn't come. It just won't come. Walter pretends it does. Imagines the heft and security of Father's beefy forearms, the millworker's forearms. The heat of his smoky breath. Anything...Nothing.

DINNER WITH ROSABELLE AND FAMILY, LOOKING FOR AN OPENING TO ASK FOR CASH. REAL CASH. HEFTY CASH.

Walter opens his eyes around ten. The house is still and humid. The second floor a furnace of sunlight, and Walter under a top sheet and bedspread. The mattress soaked [not from *THAT*]. He's up and opens a window. Kind of a breeze, but mostly just hot. Not comfortable at all. He goes right to the shower, cleans up. Screws the shave. Doesn't need to anyway. Rarely does...just lucky like that. Dresses in a cream triple X polo shirt that Rosa-

belle bought him a dozen birthdays ago. Extra long. Just right. Tucks it into navy blue shorts, buckles in. Giant sneakers he's also had forever. They don't wear down because Walter doesn't tax them.

Downstairs, no one. A note on the kitchen table, the familiar handwriting. Rosabelle's mark: "At 9 o'clock mass. Wal-Mart afterward. Mom's later? Help yourself to the eggs." He does. Eight of them. Figures she's getting more or she wouldn't have insisted. Scrambled, like his waking thoughts this morning. Like always. The bus will leave at four. And what's he going back to? A rabid super. A notice on his door. A gasping car needing brakes and four new tires and a catalytic *converticonstimulusomnidetriculator*.

How to ask for money. Does he sit them both down—Rosabelle and Flesh Henry together? Or just Rosabelle? On the bus to DuBois Friday night he performed the calculations. He wrote it all out in the margins of the PennWest route schedule. He was thorough, built in some breathing room. Get the phone back on so potential employers can track him down—but *don't answer strange calls!* Pay six months ahead on the rent *after* paying the three months behind. Repair car—or trade up for something functional, reliable [cheap but leggy]. Load up the utilities. Stock the fridge, the cupboards. Get a new dress

shirt, a sportcoat. Maybe even a whole suit. There could be more. *Lots more!* But he stopped there. Just enough to give the appearance of normalcy, to eliminate some sweat, the pulsating chest.

He could add in more for a Russian wife, a youthful import who knows how to cook. Who could look past his shortcomings and make him a passionate man. A lover. Something he's never been. *Anything* he's never been. He could toss in a house so he'd never fear eviction, a yard to stretch out in, grass to mow proudly, a barbecue in the back. A place his family might want to visit. Even the sister in Chicago, the younger brother out west. The insults would stop. The calling a spade a spade. Besides, they'll need each other when Ma goes. *Any second now.* More than ever. Tighter connections. Links to their past. *Come on, guys. Bygones...bygones...*

There's an envelope in Flesh Henry's sock drawer. Cash there. *REAL* cash. Why they invented the mint. A few of these won't be missed. Maybe one of each. Or two. Or three. How many's this? Still nearly as thick as when he picked it up. Sure it is. He'll never notice. *Convince yourself.*

In the closet, Rosabelle's side, a jewelry box. In it, jewelry. Genuine gold? Silver? How is Walter to know? He's no expert. So much of it, so many styles, compart-

ments. Shivers considering the Egyptian bib, the one that just might do it. Runs his fingertips over the nubbles of gold, the lapis seas. Glorious. *They let the little snitch wear this?!* Pockets something lighter that he untangles from the rest. A more modest necklace. Okay, done. What's that? Not *real* diamonds. Couldn't be...examines the bracelet. Battles his conscience. Looks for something similar. Nothing like it. Puts it back. Grabs three other pieces instead, his hands suddenly taking charge, scooping on their own, dispossessed from his mind. Earrings, anklets, a strand of pearls. Or marbles. What is all this? The broker will know.

Walter without a choice now. His pockets over-jangled, his heart thumpety-thump. On the way out, after packing his wedding clothes and cramming down more food, he stuffs a couple of ancient rooster plates in his knapsack, just yanks them out of the china cabinet like they won't be missed, like they belong to him, too. *Okay, he can kinda make a case for that, but...* All they are is old. Can't be worth a damn. But they scream of Momma, of her doting over them, protecting them through his childhood. *Don't use my good plates! Those aren't for food.* Ugly roosters, red and green. Barely roosters at all. Too sketchy. But okay, okay, not for food. *Geez!*

Waiting for the bus (there's just one departure on Sundays), Walter feels the full weight of his frame. He is not ashamed of his thievery, only nervous that Flesh Henry's car might find him first. Hours to go yet, so where else could he be if he's not at the house, not at Mother's? Have you seen my brother-in-law? *Big flame-headed guy with no purpose, a sackful of loot? Yet another fucking garter that won't amount to beans?*

He loiters in the nearby woods, just beyond the parking lot, peeks out from the trees. Nibbles on soda crackers he had jammed into his pockets. Squirts down a mini box of cherry-flavored Juicy Juice. Gnats can't be shaken. Ants on his socks. Plagued by all things tiny and fearless. Around the corner, an Arby's. When he's really hungry (which is now, but he's got to stay hidden), maybe around three, he'll slink over there—*Hah! Slink!*—and grab some takeout. Five roast beefs for as many bucks, a special plastered in the windows. Just what he needs. He might be recognized, but it's a risk he'll take when his stomach churns. It'll be a long ride back to Pittsburgh if he doesn't snag a meal. Not awful awful long. Just empty, the last thing he wants to feel when he slips back. He needs to be strong when he returns to the city, caloried enough to withstand the mental assault of his station there.

In the morning, he'll trade jewels for cash. He might end up with thousands. *Millions?* For that moment, he could be rich again, like the day he was fired. A brief financial windfall. Walter has no plan beyond that, no roadmap for success. He's fifty-four and counting. The years have slipped away; his prospects. But okay. Okay. Who cares? Mums will die and Rosabelle will forgive him because she has to, because she knows he has no one left. Henry will have to accept that even when Walter reemerges, pockets inside out. That's just the way it is.

There was a time, when Walter was three—*and portable!*—that his father took him to the circus, the one that blew threw small towns every August. Just him. Just Walter. The guys. The men of the house. [This was before Out West Brother.] They were watching the elephants behind the tent, the trainers preparing them for the show with prods and verbal commands. Daddy stood there with Walter atop his feet, extending his little arms and stiling him around the monstrous heaps of steaming dung. Walter rested his tiny head against Pops' belly, peeked up at his old man with cackles and complete trust amid the towering beasts. The elephants trumpeted as they were led in on their hind legs, their billowing trunks so high in the air that Walter was sure they were sniffing the clouds.

It's his only memory of his father, and of course it isn't real. But he keeps the movie on a loop in his mind, while blindly—*secretly!*—massaging the luscious bib necklace, his now after all, throughout his swoony afternoon among the trees and bushes and throughout the cramped ride home. It's hard to miss something that was never really there, and Walter can't tell...has never really been able to tell...whether he misses his father so desperately, so painfully, so uncontrollably, *so incomprehensibly!* that his entire life has been ruined, or whether he's just inventing something psychological to tell to the police.