

4/9/10

Incomplete

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Creamy White Thighs

A Novel

by Kevin McDermott

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*Facts are stupid things.*

- Ronald Reagan

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Prologue:

**Seeds of Scandal in Pekin, Ill.**

Judge Speeds, Teen-Cop Hassles Him

*Bold, Black Words*

PEKIN, Ill.—The biggest judicial scandal in Illinois since before Lincoln left began on a farm-fringed stretch of County Highway Four south of Pekin, which is south of Peoria, on a brittle night in early January at the cusp of the Millennium. By late spring, the scandal would engage both chambers of the Legislature, two governors, and reporters from newspapers and television stations throughout the state, as well as many from other parts of the nation and some from foreign countries. That would be in addition to the rapt engagement of the twelve-million residents of Illinois, whose lives, in reality, would be unaltered by the scandal—just as they had been unaltered, in reality, by Watergate, and Iran-Contra-gate, and Monica-gate—but whose attention would nonetheless be fixed on

the Prairie Capital by an appalling tale of the arrogance of power, a child adoption gone horribly wrong, and an Internet website called ``Heather's House of Discipline."

All of that would come later. On the brittle January night, the players in the scandal still numbered just two: James David Tipple, chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court and one of the top legal minds in the state for the previous four decades; and Pekin patrolman Eric Wiss, who was twenty-four.

The scandal ultimately would raise legal and philosophical issues to challenge even a jurist of Tipple's stature, but the only issue in play on the first cold night was the question of whether Tipple had been driving sixty-four miles per hour when the speed limit was fifty-five. In fact, he *had* been. From the moment he heard the chirp of the siren and saw the blue lights crawl across his windshield, Tipple knew he was (in the parlance of the thuggish young defendants who used to appear before his bench when he was a circuit court judge in Urbana in the nineteen-eighties) busted. Tipple had often marveled at how the defendants acted like cornered cats, though the law was consistently, maddeningly on their side, and now he pondered the reason: As the young patrolman walked stiffly toward him, flashlight flickering, shoulders braced against the whining wind, Tipple felt the pinch of instinctive fear felt by every driver who has watched a uniformed police officer's head bobbing in the rear-view mirror. How different the uniform looked here, at night, expelling frantic puffs of steam ignited by passing headlights, than it did in the florescent calm of the courtroom. There, the uniform looked bureaucratic; here, predatory. As Tipple's window whirred open, he marveled for a millisecond at how two centuries of American constitutional protection, and four centuries of English common law before that, hadn't dulled the natural human instinct to fear the uniform.

The officer: Brown hair, weak chin, a small and ill-defined mustache. He looked like a teenager, except for that damned uniform.

Tipple thought: *I outrank him*. Then he said: ``What's the problem, officer?"

The officer: ``Could I see your license and insurance, sir?"

Christ, he even *sounded* like a teenager.

Tipple: ``I don't think I was speeding.'' His own words startled him. Lying like a defendant!

The officer: ``Your license and insurance, sir?"

Like countless drivers before him, Tipple fumbled nervously with his wallet, trying

to look casual while pulling out his driver's license, trying to demonstrate how calm and innocent he was. But Tipple's wallet, unlike any other, contained a shiny silver medallion fixed on a card that identified him as the ranking judge on the highest court in the fifth-largest state in the nation. The child-officer saw it, and asked: "Is that a badge?" Then: "Are you a police officer?"

Tipple: "No, that's . . . I'm a judge. That's my i.d."

Tipple handed him the i.d.—what else could he do?—then he sat back and pondered the ethical and political implications of it, while the officer pondered the little silver medallion. Tipple knew it would come up in the computer anyway—*Tipple, Jms D.; w/m; dob 05/18/41; wt 156; ht 5-10; empl. Chief Justice, Ill Suprm Crt*—but did it cross some line, handing it to him like that? Tipple hadn't initiated it, of course, but he had felt an undeniable wave of comfort once it was initiated. *I outrank you*, the medallion said. *You're the one who should be nervous, junior, speed limit violation or no speed limit violation*. It was the comfort of power.

The child-officer, reading aloud: "James D. Tipple, chief justice . . . Illinois Supreme Court." Then, smiling: "Oh, yeah. I *thought* you looked familiar."

That was a new one. The cloud that had always gloomed Tipple's otherwise radiant career was that it didn't come with public recognition of the kind afforded to state legislators, whom Tipple outranked, or to governors, with whom he was, as he saw it, on equal footing. Each was, after all, perched atop an equal co-branch of government. Yet no one asked for Tipple's autograph the way they did that gubernatorial twit John Bell. No one took his picture as he walked from his car to his office. The TV cameras didn't follow him down the hallway when he left the court room. He could remember every newspaper article written about himself in the past five years and almost recite the headlines, there were that few of them—all written by young, inarticulate, poorly dressed reporters who showed him no fear and little respect, though he magnificently outranked them. When he walked through the halls of the state Capitol in Springfield, legislators were always mistaking him for a certain chemical-industry lobbyist with a similar nose. Chances were slim that Lieutenant Teen-Cop had genuinely recognized him.

Tipple asked, dryly: "You mean you actually know who I am?" Some vain part of him hoped that the child-officer wasn't making it up.

The officer: "Yes sir, highest judge in the land—Well, in the *state*." He looked

back at the i.d., checking himself, then cleared his throat. ``Judge, I'm afraid I clocked you doing sixty-four, and this is a fifty-five.'' Then, a smile and a child-like attempt at humor: ``I guess you know as well as anyone that you can't do that.''

Tipple: *Just say yes sir.* ``Yes, sir."

### ***Forgotten Wine***

The officer had been switching his weight from one foot to another, like he had to use the bathroom. Now he said, hesitantly: ``I—I have to ask, your honor—have you had anything to drink tonight? I noticed you drifting a little back there.''

The question hit Tipple like a snowball. Between the frantic dance of the blue lights and the shock of the cold wind through his window and the glint of the badge, he had honestly, utterly forgotten about the tang of the cold glass of chardonnay at the reception—forgotten so completely that he could, for one balance-beam of a moment, almost will himself to forget a little longer, just a tiny bit longer. But then the moment was gone and the glass of wine glistened brightly in his memory. Now it was the truth or a lie; continued forgetting was out of the question.

Tipple: *I outrank him.*

Then: ``I had a glass of wine, officer." Then: ``One glass." Then: ``Several hours ago."

The officer: ``All right, judge. I'll be right back."

Tipple watched the officer's head bob away in the rear view mirror, breathing white. Then he sat back in the yielding leather seat, trying to ponder the situation calmly, as he might ponder a mildly interesting case before him. Obviously, one glass of wine several hours ago wasn't going to put his blood-alcohol level over the top and, strictly speaking, that's all that mattered. No case, Junior. But speaking less strictly, he was a politician, on equal footing with the governor, after all. The mere suggestion of drunken driving for a politician carried with it its own sanctions. The young, inarticulate, poorly dressed reporters in Springfield who so seldom recognized him would recognize him with a vengeance if he was accused, even for one minute at the side of a road in the snow, of DUI.

The reporters: Snide, loutish, rumped. It wasn't their stories that offended Tipple; they didn't write about him often, and when they did, it was usually inaccurate but innocuous. It was the snide tone of their professional culture that offended him, based as it was on arrogance and sanctimony—on their unswerving belief that they were always right and anyone in authority was always wrong, despite the fact that the reporters had no particular training or background in anything except stringing words together, while the targets of their snideness tended to be experts in the fields of law, business, politics, or *something*. The reporters' breathtaking power was, in Tipple's estimation, unearned: They hadn't achieved it by completing law school or by convincing their fellow citizens to vote for them or by doing anything else to set themselves apart from the wider culture; they had achieved it by getting low-paying jobs at local newspapers and television stations, something any twit with a bachelor's degree could do. One minute they're mediocre college students in a vocational field of study, the next, they're expecting governors and Supreme Court chief justices to hold doors for them. They were very nearly as bad as defendants.

Tipple envisioned bold, black words: *Chief Justice Stopped for Drunk Driving*. Then they'd probably misspell his name.

The teen-cop was back. He said: ``Here you go, your honor. This insurance card is expired. You'll need to take care of that when you get home. Drive safe, now."

Before Tipple knew what had happened, the officer was bobbing back to his car and Tipple was pulling away from the shoulder, his license and insurance card on the seat next to him. Had he improperly pulled rank on the young man? Certainly not. This was obviously a responsible young officer who had simply determined that there was no infraction here worth spending any more time in the freezing wind. So much for the bold, black words.

Moments later, the blue lights invaded his car again, angrier this time. Tipple looked at his passenger seat, half expecting his license not to be there; why else would the responsible young officer stop him again, fifty yards down the road, if not to give him back something he had forgotten? But there were the license and the insurance card on the seat, and then the young officer's face was back in Tipple's window.

Tipple: ``What now?"

The officer: "I'm sorry, judge—that insurance card is expired."

Tipple: "You said that already. You said I could take care of it when I get home."

The officer: "My captain says we need to take care of it *now*, your honor."

Tipple felt a chill, unrelated to the frozen snow blowing around like sand.

Something had changed. The prepubescent officer's demeanor had gone from friendly to . . . obligatory. Like a child who had just been scolded and ordered to march right back there and—and *what?* Arrest him? For speeding? For a glass of wine? An expired insurance card? The officer said: "Technically, you can't drive without a valid insurance card, judge. That's the way the law's written."

Tipple, snapping: "I know how the law's written—I helped write it!" To hell with decorum, he was being harassed for his stature. "Why are you harassing me?"

The officer: "My captain says we need to do this by the book. I'm not trying to hassle you, judge."

*Hassle*, a white-trash defendant's word.

Tipple: "You are *harassing* me and I intend to file a complaint."

The officer: "I'm just trying to do my job, your honor. I don't want to hassle *anyone* - "

That *word* again!

Tipple: "Harass! The word is 'harass,' not 'hassle'!" Then, before he could stop himself: "'Harass' is a legal term! 'Hassle' is something you do to your neighbor at the trailer park!"

The officer's face went still, and then it appeared to redden, and then—yes, Tipple was sure of it—the last hints of affability drained right out of it like water from a colander.

The officer, with icy finality: "Whatever."

*Whatever*. Tipple, regretting a major strategic mistake, began assembling an apology in his mind, but too late. The officer was moving on, his previously amiable voice now stiff with formality as cold as the encircling wind. He said: "Your honor, you were speeding." Then: "No one is allowed to drive without a valid insurance card." Then: "And you mentioned that glass of wine."

Tipple stared blankly, remembering the way the glass glistened. One glass. He was still staring blankly when the two other squad cars pulled up, seemingly out of thin, frigid air, blue lights spinning.

The officer: "You wouldn't want anyone to think we were giving you special treatment, would you, sir?" Then: "Please step out of the car, judge."

Tipple, to no one: "Oh, my." He opened his door, then said, weakly: "That pack of jackals in Springfield is going to love *this*." The reporters. Oh, the reporters. In Tipple's mind, bold black words: *Drunken Judge Claims He Was Hassled. Or Harassed. Whatever.*

What happened over the next several hours in the small cement-block police station in downtown Pekin would lay the foundation for the scandal that would, by spring, engage the reporters—and the other twelve-million residents of Illinois—built high by that time into an appalling tale of the arrogance of power, a child adoption gone horribly wrong, and an Internet website called "Heather's House of Discipline."

Chapter One:

### **The Death of a Senator**

Democrat's Demise Provides Story of the Day

*Eyebrows and Ostriches*

SPRINGFIELD, Ill.—Four months after the brittle night in Pekin, sixty-nine-year-old Illinois State Senator Stanley Makowski—a bawdy Aurora Democrat known for blocking Republican legislation with creative parliamentary objections and viciously well-timed amendments—died quietly in his sleep in his hotel room in Springfield. His death, though tragic to his family and inconvenient to the Democratic caucus, would prove crucial to revealing the scandal, which was yet unknown.

It was six hours after Senator Makowski died that Garrick Martin, an amateur astronomer and statehouse correspondent for the *Peoria Post*, arrived at the silver-domed Capitol Building in downtown Springfield for work, unaware that Senator Stan, as he was called, had filed his last amendment. The news, when it arrived, wouldn't spawn anything like grief in Garrick. The last time Garrick had thought in any sustained way about the old

lawmaker was two years earlier, when he (Makowski) was indicted for mail fraud, won acquittal, then ran for re-election, thus prompting Julian Marcus—statehouse correspondent for WSPR radio and the only black member of the Springfield press corps—to suggest a fitting campaign slogan: “Senator Stan: He Wasn’t Convicted.” It sometimes surprised Garrick how little he cared about these people, whose official activities he had catalogued almost every week for the previous four years. For all of Senator Stan's political achievements—the spearheading of the new state constitution a generation ago, the landmark insurance reform package he had passed that very year, the roughly two-thousand other bills he had filed over a forty-year career—the primary impact his life and his death would have on Garrick Martin would be to provide that day's Story of the Day.

Most days had a Story of the Day, a single event that all the reporters in Springfield would write about. Most of the reporters who worked out of the honeycomb of small offices connected to the press lobby on floor two-and-a-half of the Capitol spent most of their time writing the same Story of the Day that everyone else on the floor was writing. The next morning, newspaper readers and radio listeners and television viewers in Rockford, Chicago, Bloomington, Decatur, Carbondale and East St. Louis would wake up to different stories in different newspapers and radio and television stations quoting different legislators (those from Rockford, Chicago, Bloomington, Decatur, Carbondale or East St. Louis, depending) talking about the same Story of the Day. The only time one of the reporters wasn't working on the Story of the Day was when he or she was working on Something Big, maybe something In-Depth, maybe even something Investigative, closing his or her heavy wood office door while doing it, which always sent a ripple of panic through the rest of the press room. Except for those times when someone was working on Something Big—and it was seldom Garrick, whose door mostly remained open—they would all work on the same Story of the Day. The death of a senator was as good a Story of the Day as any.

The white-haired, crew-cut Senator Stan had had sixty-nine pretty good years. Garrick had had thirty-four. His own hair was shaggy on the top and sides; not social-statement shaggy, just shaggy enough to make it clear he needed a haircut but hadn't gotten around to going. It was beginning to gray, not heavily at the temples—he would have preferred that—but lightly throughout his head, like someone had sprayed a mist of

white paint evenly around his shaggy scalp. It was his reminder, every morning in the mirror, of how much further along his body was than his life. The fine mist of white over his hair made no sense, it was obviously a mistake, and he would have complained to someone about it had he known who to complain to. Graying hair was for grownups, for parents, for married people—or at least people with some prospect of being married—for people whose careers were advancing, for people who ate something other than fast food, for people who had some reason to go home at night and to make their beds in the morning.

Graying hair was for people who could dress themselves and not wonder if they were doing it right. Walking into the Capitol on this bright spring morning that the old senator would never see, Garrick wore the uniform of his profession: A threadbare button shirt too tight at the collar to be fully buttoned (despite the notable thinness of his neck); a necktie of indeterminate fabric and color, stained with soy sauce; rumpled khaki trousers—slightly more formal than blue jeans, but more casual than just about anything else—and black gym shoes, which were, Garrick and his colleagues had convinced themselves, an acceptable alternative to dress shoes, as long as you didn't look too closely. Garrick owned one dress jacket, which he wasn't wearing now. It was hanging on the back of his office door in the Capitol, to be used when he went into the Senate chamber, where jackets were required if you were male.

This morning, as on many mornings when the Legislature was in session, the front lawn of the Capitol was being trampled under the feet of a rally: A big, shapeless thing, bristling with cardboard signs and baying dogma at the silver Capitol dome high above. Noisy, squirming rallies, the exception out in the real world, were the rule at the Capitol. Sometimes it seemed to Garrick that every morning of his life was spent side-stepping big crowds of people who were opposing animal testing or in favor of legalized drugs or opposed to the income tax or in favor of the death penalty. They tended to be brazen out-of-towners, bused in from places like Chicago and the Illinois suburbs of St. Louis, various kinds of True Believers, with one commonly shared belief: That their four-hundred or five-hundred-strong rally was the biggest thing to hit sleepy Springfield in a decade—when, in fact, it was generally just the biggest thing since the previous week's rally.

True Believers: Activists, enthusiasts, right wingers, left wingers, New Agers, lobbyists of every stripe, anyone who cared enough about any issue to pick up a sign or

shout a slogan or call a press conference. Every reporter knew that no True Believer could be trusted. The belief itself was irrelevant; a pro-life True Believer was as suspect as a pro-choice one, or a pro-gun one, or a pro-tax one, or a pro-business one, or a pro-tree one. Garrick once knew a man whose mission in life was to get the geranium designated as the state plant of Illinois—a geranium True Believer—and he wouldn't have bought a flower from the guy. The reason: Anyone who believed in a cause strongly enough to march for it certainly believed strongly enough to lie for it. A well-placed lie slipped into the mainstream media could advance a True Believer's cause by light-years, while having the opposite effect on the career of the sorry reporter who was duped into printing it. Lies were the kryptonite of the reporters' profession, the thing that could drop them from the sky, and any red-blooded True Believer would lie to a reporter in half a wink to advance whatever he or she happened to see as the greater truth. True Believers were rank amateurs in that sense; reporters much preferred to deal with professional politicians, who could be reliably counted upon to believe in nothing.

Sometimes, on slow news days, a rally might rise to the level of Story of the Day, if the issue was timely enough and the True Believers were loud and numerous enough, but not usually. By the time the True Believers got organized enough on a given controversy to actually hold a rally, the bloom was generally off the geranium and the Capitol culture was racing off after a newer, sexier controversy. News was a beast that reporters, politicians and True Believers created together, a thrashing thing that none of them could quite control once it awakened, but it usually died young. Big crowds of enthusiastic people couldn't necessarily keep it alive, not even with cardboard signs and bullhorns. True Believers weren't capable of understanding this, and Garrick had long ago stopped trying to explain it to them when they called him on the mornings after rallies, as they always did, demanding to know why the *Peoria Post* had deliberately ignored the biggest story to hit the state Capitol in a decade. The True Believers' world was divided into two camps: Their own, and their enemies'. They didn't buy that ``impartiality'' crap from anyone, least of all from a reporter who was purposefully, maliciously aiding the enemy by refusing to write the glowing front-page story that any right-thinking person could see the subject deserved. Today's rally—something about education funding, Garrick surmised from the cardboard signs—wouldn't make Story of the Day in any case, and certainly not after the news about Senator Stan came out later that morning. A dead

senator would trump an education-funding rally every time.

Through the heavy glass doors and inside the belly of the Capitol, Garrick navigated through wary lawmakers, stalking lobbyists, and tourists congregating in the central rotunda, all in typical tourist stance: Heads pulled back, eyes pointed skyward, like flaccid fish dangling from the awnings of a street market. They were pondering the magnificent underside of the Capitol dome, five stories above, and it was an impressive sight, all right: Marble, glass, and floor after floor of circular brass-railed balconies overhead, layered like a giant cake, framing the highest ceiling most visitors had ever glimpsed. The Capitol had been built in the eighteen-eighties, two decades after Abraham Lincoln had left Springfield on what turned out to be a one-way train to Washington, and it was a testament to its era, both in style and politics: The style was French Renaissance; the politics, crooked. The years after Lincoln's death were notable for their sobering level of government corruption, and in Illinois, the State Capitol project had been the biggest patronage trough around during the years of its construction. Garrick often thought it fitting that today's overpaid, politically connected lobbyists—the natural heirs to the kind of government that flourished like fungus under the presidency of that hapless other Illinoisan, Ulysses S. Grant—would spend much of their time leaning against overpriced brass railings that were put there by politically connected Nineteenth-Century government patronage workers.

Up the marble stairs, the steps worn curved and uneven by more than a hundred years of men's dress shoes and a few decades of women's heels; past the state Treasurer's office, where they set out a mechanical singing Christmas tree each year decorated with phony dollar bills; past the second-floor brass railing overlooking the first floor entry hall, a fistful of gray-suited lobbyists leaning there, talking softly and looking expensive; and then Garrick was approaching the press lobby on floor two-and-half, letting the Mural wash over him.

The Mural: A house-sized painting on the wall above the double wood-and-glass doors to the press room, depicting white and Indian leaders conducting some kind of important business in the middle of a busy Indian camp, daily Indian activity swirling all around them. The Mural was two stories tall, filling the wall over the doors so completely that it was impossible to step into the press room without feeling you were stepping across the grass and dirt of the Indian camp, perhaps interrupting the important business going on

there. Garrick didn't know what the depicted story was, and he didn't care. He liked the Mural, though it had taken him a year to figure out why the thing made him feel so at ease every morning as he passed under it on the uneven marble stairs. The white and Indian leaders depicted on the wall likely were either beginning or concluding a war—wasn't all of white-and-Indian history some variation on one of those two themes?—so the warm calm he felt each morning gazing at the scene made no sense, tinted as it was with unseen blood.

What Garrick noticed, though, after about a year: One lone Indian, a woman, sitting in a patch of grass next to a teepee in the lower left corner of the Mural, holding a baby, unconcerned by whatever piece of history it was that was being made in the middle of the painting. She appeared to be talking to the baby, maybe singing to it, both of them cradled in the tall weeds, the teepee forming a soft gray wall behind them. They sat in their own little piece of the world, a peaceful domain of weeds and dirt. Garrick could almost smell the warm, papery grass baking in the prairie sun when he looked at her. Something Big was going on a few feet away, but all she had to concern herself with was finding a soft spot in the weeds.

### *The Night Sky*

The planet Mercury turns so slowly on its axis as it circles the sun that the same side faces sunward for weeks at a time. Pluto's elliptical orbit makes it, at times, the eighth planet instead of the ninth, occasionally cutting in line ahead of Neptune. Jupiter is composed mostly of galactic liquids and gases held together by nothing but its own enormous mass, a vast glob of poison forever suspended in space. All of this made sense to Garrick Martin. He could envision the searing Mercurian surface, the sun looming close overhead like a child's magnifying glass over an ant hill; he could imagine Jupiter quivering, from oval to round to oval again, a multi-colored drop of rain that would never land. It all made sense—far more sense, generally, than the political process in Springfield, Illinois, U.S.A., planet Earth.

Since childhood, Garrick had preferred science class to social studies, and it would have been so embarrassing to try to explain how he ended up on floor two-and-a-half of

the state Capitol that it almost made him glad no one was close enough in his life to ask. He had gone to college in Bloomington with the intention of becoming an astronomer; had ended up enrolled in the journalism program due to what amounted to a misunderstanding; had stayed there for no particular reason except that it was easier than leaving; and now spent his days in a small office with a foul and confrontational office-mate, in a loud profession that required him to be at the center of the scene, where little bits of political history were being concocted, when he would rather be sitting off in a patch of weeds and dirt, watching the sky. Garrick couldn't say he actively disliked being a reporter, but the profession fit him like a cheap suit. He had the mind of a scientist, a mind for numbers. It was a quality that newspaper editors ranked about as low as fashion sense, which was pretty low. Garrick could pick out and name scores of separate and distinct heavenly objects with nothing to go on but specks of light in the night sky, but political shades of gray all looked the same to him. Clear logic and hard fact were the tools he most enjoyed using, and there simply weren't that many places to use them in the squishy domain of political journalism. It was a domain of conflicting opinions and shadowy interests, all presenting their own version of the facts, none of them quite factual. The ultimate goal of science—to get to the bottom of a thing—wasn't something the political reporter could ever do, nor would even seek to. Why waste time and newsprint trying to determine whether the Democrats or Republicans are right or wrong, when the answer is always going to be both, and neither, depending on who is doing the talking and how many votes he or she got in the last election? Political journalism wasn't an art, exactly, but it sure wasn't a science. Even those who did it well—and Garrick had long ago abandoned any notion that he was one of those—didn't live up to your average seventh-grade science-fair criteria of objective fact.

Even the structural rules of writing in journalism—the one part that, one would think, might adhere to a reliably predictable set of rules—seemed to Garrick to be the product of frenetic and poorly-ordered minds. Newspapers had, by the cusp of the Millennium, developed their own particular twists to the language, much of it involving numbers: The numbers one through nine were to be spelled out in news stories, reporters were taught, while the numbers ten and above were written as numerals—with the exceptions of ages and percentages, which were always written as numerals, even if they were nine or less. However, if a number was the first word in a sentence, it was always

spelled out as a word, even if it was ten or above. Eleven years in the profession hadn't convinced Garrick of why it made sense to have different rules for different numbers, let alone having one rule for a given number in one part of a sentence and a different rule for the same number used somewhere else. Astronomy didn't work that way and, as far as Garrick knew, neither did any other field. Logically, a nine was a nine. But in journalism, it might be a nine or it might be a 9, depending on a dozen factors. He had tried to argue the point to editors now and then, early in his career, that perhaps they should adopt a single standard—all numbers written as words or all as numerals, one or the other, regardless of what the number was or how it was being used—but his suggestions always had been met with blank stares from editors and fellow reporters, as if *he* was the one who wasn't making sense.

Practically everyone Garrick knew and everything around him—with the exception of Mrs. Janovik—was part of that nonsensical world. His foul office-mate Colleen Brenner, and his fellow reporters who covered the state Capitol for other newspapers and television and radio stations, flourished among the mental fog of the place, were enthralled by its shifting shapes and ghostly echoes. At lunches and over beers, they talked breathlessly about political intrigue—all on the limited scale of state government, but endlessly intriguing to them nonetheless—as if it were a three-dimensional thing that could be seen, touched, tasted. Though they grumbled constantly about the long hours and low pay and surly editors, they never seemed to want to stop talking about the work. They always wanted to be right at the center of the camp, as close to the campfire as they could get. And there was Garrick, sitting off in the weeds. He envied them their obsession. He could imagine how warm the campfire felt on their faces, but he couldn't feel it himself. His stories weren't alive in the way theirs apparently were. They wrote their stories and then they talked half the night at the bars about their stories and then, Garrick could easily believe, they went home and dreamt about their stories. His stories never did that for him. Looking at them on his computer screen, smaller-than-life words, disposable sentences that would end up in trashcans throughout Peoria and the surrounding central Illinois region within hours, he found himself increasingly wondering if this was all there was. His mind would ask him the question, more and more lately—*is this all there is?*—and he was beginning to fear the answer was yes.

Mrs. Janovik was, Garrick sometimes thought, his only connection to the world

outside the Mural, to the place where people said what they actually meant and where some things held true all the time, regardless of whether it was the start of a sentence or the end of an election year. His relationship with her was, he knew, a peculiar one. It certainly would have been hard to explain to his fellow reporters—most of whom were of or near his own generation—why he got up early every morning and sat in a cluttered, medicinal-smelling apartment drinking metallic coffee with a seventy-six-year-old woman.

The relationship had started, two years earlier, as a cynical one. Garrick had just moved into the second floor of the small three-story blue-shingled building, which Mrs. Janovik owned. The rent was more than Garrick the journalist could comfortably afford, but Garrick the astronomer had to have it. It was on the edge of the city, away from the downtown lights, and had a flat roof accessible by a stairway off the main hall, his own little observatory. He spent half his first night on the roof with his telescope, happily scanning the sky. The next morning, Mrs. Janovik appeared at his door in her bathrobe to announce curtly, with her hint of an eastern European accent, that he had better stay off her damned roof if he wanted to continue living there.

For a week he stayed off her damned roof, spending his evenings missing the sky and going over his devastated budget. He finally knocked on her door one morning to explain the whole thing and try to get out of his lease. She said: "Why do you want to stand up there and look at the sky anyway? Doesn't it look the same as it did yesterday?" That wasn't the point, he explained. The sky was big and complex enough to find something new to look at every night for a lifetime, like—in his desperation, he actually said this—like a wide, grassy beach, crawling with busy life and changing with every tide.

Mrs. Janovik stared at him stoically for a moment, watching him redden. Then she smiled and said: "A poet, huh?"

With that smile, Garrick knew he had her. Since adolescence, he had understood that old women and cats were strangely drawn to him, though he was mostly indifferent to old women and he actively disliked cats. Garrick could sit in a room full of people and if a cat walked in, it would invariably ignore the chorus of "here, kitty, kitty" from the cat-lovers in the room and trot over to Garrick as if he were a plate of salmon. It was the same with old women. They saw something in him, perhaps his patience, which was, as with most astronomers, considerable. Perhaps patience in others was a precious thing to people who spent so much time talking, slowly, about the past. Garrick, feeling whorish

about the thing but desperately wanting his roof back, smiled in return at Mrs. Janovik, then asked if that was coffee he smelled, and then he was in.

For a month, their morning coffees in her cluttered apartment were strictly, mutually parasitic, him providing the patient ear for her stories, her providing the roof (she lifted the moratorium after their second meeting). It was only gradually, and without realizing it was happening, that Garrick began to look forward to rapping on her door in the morning and taking his spot at the kitchen table. She talked about meeting her husband, six years dead now, and raising her two children, who might as well have been for as much as she saw them, and spoiling her three grandchildren, as perfect as any angels God had ever created. Garrick had heard variations of the stories before, from other old women—there must have been some kind of mass seminar, some time around 1960, to allow them all to get their stories straight, he thought with a little smile during one of her monologues—but, to his surprise, he found himself increasingly enjoying the stories, even when they started looping back on themselves after the second month.

For the first year, she never talked about her childhood, but that omission, too, was familiar to Garrick. He had had long conversations before with a few blue-haired women who, though otherwise gabby, appeared to have gaping holes in their biographies right around World War Two—women who, like Mrs. Janovik, obviously had started their lives under some language other than English. Garrick had already figured out she was a Holocaust survivor even before she told him one May morning, about a year after their coffees started. The story came out suddenly, without any cause or catalyst that Garrick could see. They were talking about gardens—specifically about one perfect garden that Mrs. Janovik had planted in 1972—and she stopped in middle of a description of a tomato, looked up as if someone had just whispered something in her ear, and said: “I lost my whole family in Poland.” Some criterion, mysterious to Garrick, had been met, and out came the story: How Mrs. Janovik had been a young girl near Warsaw when the soldiers had begun stomping up the hallways of her family’s apartment building one evening, right after dinner; how her mother had begged and screamed at them as they dragged the parents into one marching line and her and her younger brother, Albert, into another; how her mother had called back frantically to her: “Watch him,” the last words she ever heard her speak. And how Mrs. Janovik had tried, so hard, to carry out the last order from her mother, but had failed, kicking and screaming and finally getting knocked

almost unconscious by a soldier's boot, as they herded her brother into a rail car with the other boys. Garrick left Mrs. Janovik's apartment that morning feeling drained and vaguely resentful at the ambush. She had, in a small way, vandalized the Mural for him. He had to willfully avoid thinking of Albert now when he looked at the Indian woman, cradling the baby as men stood nearby talking about war.

Garrick stepped through the Indian camp of the Mural, through the glass-and-wood doors marked "press room," and into the press room lobby: A large room, wafer-thin state-government carpeting, a faux-wood countertop, an imposing office-sized coffee machine and a single desk behind the counter, bulletin boards and tables and shelves covered with press releases, and hallways spidering off in multiple directions to about twenty individual press offices—nooks with doors, really—created in a remodeling project in the 1970s. The remodelers had divided the previously open press room with a labyrinth of walls and doors to make sure the reporters for the *Peoria Post*, *Chicago Herald*, *Springfield Register-Journal*, *Decatur Courier-Review & Intelligencer* and all the rest could write their stories without their competitors knowing what they were writing—though they were usually all writing the same Story of the Day, which was why the doors generally remained open. Some of the offices had windows, or rather, half-windows. The press room was on the Mezzanine level of the Capitol, an extra floor crammed between the second and third stories like a freshly delivered letter shoved into an old book, so the reporters got to use only the top halves of the twelve-foot-high exterior windows built into the limestone facade of the building. In those offices that had windows—Garrick and his foul office-mate, Colleen Brenner, had, by happy chance, inherited one—the window started at the floor and rose about four feet, then stopped, so that looking out the window involved stooping.

Behind the counter of the press room lobby on this morning, as every morning, sat Macy, the mustached press room clerk, sipping black coffee and reading a splayed newspaper, the wood-encased speaker buzzing on the wall behind him. The squawk box, as they called it, piped House and Senate debate from the third-floor legislative chambers directly into the press room and the individual newspaper and radio and television offices. The House was in session already this morning, debating a bill about ratites.

Garrick, nodding: "Macy."

Macy, without looking up from the page: "Garrick. The ratites are back."

Ratites: Pronounced "ra-tites," an order of large, flightless birds, including ostriches, that were raised in herds on Southern Illinois farms like gawky, two-legged cattle. They were the basis of a tiny but determined Illinois ratite industry that produced oils, feathers and a stringy meat that was gaining a cult following among those New Agers who weren't vegetarians. Garrick, Macy and everyone else at the Capitol knew this and more about ratites because, a year earlier, the bird had become the unlikely subject of controversy, after Representative Harry Clemens, a Downstate Democrat whose constituents included several ratite farmers, introduced a legislative package of tax incentives and market enhancements that would put ratites on equal legal footing with pigs. This outraged those legislators who represented pig farmers, Illinois pigs outnumbering ratites "about a gazillion to one," in the words of Danville Republican Bill White. White's constituents included many pig farmers and, as far as he knew, not a single ostrich.

White was known for a bombastic, furious debating style—he had once debated himself right into an ambulance, after collapsing during a screaming fit on the House floor while arguing against utility taxes—and he led the anti-ratite charge that year. In debate, White taunted and infuriated Clemens by repeatedly referring to the ratites as ostriches. White alleged that Clemens was cynically using the word "ratite" in the legislation because no one knew what it meant. White was going to make damned sure everyone understood what Clemens was talking about spending valuable state resources for: "Ostriches! Ostriches, I tell you! Ostriches!" White almost managed to bury the thing, too, until Clemens dragged the Chicago Democrats into it. The Chicagoans: Largely black or Jewish, hopelessly urban, they wouldn't have known a ratite from a prairie chicken, and viewed the whole ratite controversy as some peculiar downstate Hatfield-and-McCoy thing that they didn't want to step in. But they desperately wanted state funding for a new convention center on Lake Michigan, and Clemens was in a position to deliver enough downstate votes to put the convention center over the top, for a price: Ratite relief. So the Chicagoans voted with him, making ratites a bona fide part of Illinois' agricultural montage. Now, a year later, Clemens was back, arguing that existing laws protecting cattle from people's unruly dogs should also protect ratites.

On the House floor, the debaters spoke to each other through microphones at their

respective desks, calling across the crowded chamber, people milling around between them, talking, arguing, throwing things, sloppy and chaotic representative democracy in action. But listening to floor debate through the squawk box, all that was heard were the voices of the principle debaters, disembodied orators who sounded like they were alone together in an echo chamber.

Clemens, echoing through the squawk box: "This is a fledgling industry that is struggling enough without constant harassment by people's poorly controlled dogs. You may not think this is a problem, ladies and gentlemen of the House, but if you had your life savings tied up in ratites, you would."

Representative White, once again leading the anti-ratite forces: "Representative Clemens, do you have any evidence that any dog in the state of Illinois has actually bothered an ostrich?"

Clemens: "They're *ratites*, Representative White."

White: "The truth is, for all you know, it's the *ostriches* that are bothering the *dogs*, isn't that true?"

Clemens: "*Ratites*, Representative. *Ratites*."

White and Clemens appeared to be doing their best to sell a sequel to the ratite controversy—*Ratite II*—but Garrick wasn't buying any tickets and he doubted anyone else would. The whole press corps had had great fun with the original ratite showdown, which transcended Story of the Day to become Story of the Week, but this one wouldn't merit more than a few lines in anyone's copy, the punchline having become a pretty old one. Macy, reading his paper, was only half-listening to the squawk-box.

Macy: Middle-aged white male, gray-flecked mustache, short-sleeved button shirt with a tie—the uniform of a state government bureaucrat, which, technically, he was. One of the one-hundred-thousand-strong army of Illinois state government workers, Macy's job was to make the coffee and make the announcements in the press room and make sure the reporters knew if the Governor was coming up the stairs outside the wood-and-glass press room doors. Macy had been there longer than most of the reporters and had greatly intimidated Garrick early on, in part because Garrick wasn't clear on why the state of Illinois would provide the Capitol press corps with a clerk, or why the press corps would accept such a gift from the government. It was a question that, four years later, Garrick still couldn't have answered; Macy was, like so much of the Capitol culture, just there.

But Garrick had discovered that Macy, whose long association with the press corps gave him a news sense lacked by other bureaucrats and many reporters, was a valuable resource. Macy would occasionally stick his head into Garrick's office to tip him off to something happening—a bill introduction, an agency announcement—that was of particular interest to the readers in the Peoria area. He would sometimes even tip Garrick off to a statewide story, something the other reporters would have wanted, Something Big. Those tips, Garrick noted with some discomfort, seemed to be based in sympathy, as if even the press room clerk understood that Garrick was sitting off on the sidelines, away from the action, and that the only way he could ever get into the game was if someone tossed him an easy pass now and then. He gratefully caught the passes anyway. Macy had once tipped him off to a statewide story that turned out to be big enough to require working on it for three glorious days, his office door closed the whole time, the other reporters pacing around out in the lobby wondering what the hell he was up to. It had been the most gratifying week of Garrick's career.

Representative White, getting worked up, his voice buzzing sharply through the squawk box: "... Oh, sure, in Illinois, we have to protect the ostriches, but you can do anything you like to a *dog*! You can shoot it! You can stab it! You can chase it around in circles until it has a heart attack! ..."

Garrick rounded the corner of the first hall to the right and found his office door open, unmistakable evidence that Colleen was already at her desk. Garrick exhaled slowly. When he had started in journalism, he had been surprised, first, by the thick presence of women in the profession, and second, by how much they talked like men. Colleen Brenner talked like a man who had spent time in prison. She was definitely a woman, short, heavy, ten years older than Garrick, with graying hair that had once been brashly red, a college-educated professional without any criminal record as far as Garrick knew, yet obscenity, insult and various levels of threat rolled off her tongue in the casually unthinking way that a reserved soul like Garrick might say good morning. She didn't even have to be angry. In everyday conversation, Colleen casually used words that most people would use only in duress or pain; when angry, she made up new ones. Between these conversational peaks were deep, wide valleys in which she said nothing at all, eschewing small talk with Garrick in the close quarters of their office, perfectly content with dead silence until he gave her some reason to violently shatter it. Garrick knew he should view the silences as gifts, but

they, too, made him uncomfortable, and even after four years he still caught himself yammering half-conversations in the small silent room, as he waited for the next verbal grenade to go off. Colleen was unmarried and uninvolved with anyone as far as any of her colleagues knew, something Garrick never questioned. With her soft, round face and furious eyes, Colleen was actually quite pretty, though you couldn't have convinced Garrick or the other reporters who had to work around her.

Garrick's discomfort with Colleen was made worse by their physical surroundings. The *Peoria Post* bureau, like most of the press offices, was so small that stepping into it felt like climbing into an old-fashioned space capsule, one that had perhaps been taken over by bureaucrats. Stacks of documents, binders, reference books, press releases and paper of every variety covered most surfaces. Cork boards hung on three walls, covered with more press releases, some of which pre-dated Garrick's entry into high school. Colleen's desk faced one wall, Garrick's faced the other and the backs of their chairs almost touched when both were sitting. Eye-to-eye contact involved twisting of necks and backs, so on the rare occasions that they talked to one another, they generally looked straight ahead at their respective, press-release-covered walls, their voices aimed in opposite directions. Since Colleen had made it clear early on, in the most creative of language, that she wouldn't relinquish the single low window, and Garrick had taken the same stance, the window stayed between them, its light partly obscured by stacks of press releases.

Garrick nodded at Colleen and sat, taking care not to let their chairs collide, then talked to the wall: "Morning. What's up today?"

Behind him, Colleen's eyes remained fixed on her newspaper.

Garrick: "See the rally downstairs? Education funding, I think."

Colleen turned a page.

Garrick cleared his throat, then offered, weakly: "The ratites are back."

Across the hall, visible through Garrick's open door, was the open door of the *Chicago Herald* office, from which there now emanated the noise of someone gathering up papers, pushing in a chair, preparing to leave. Garrick and Colleen both looked up and, for the briefest of moments, both imagined themselves in there, causing the noise. The *Herald* was the state's largest newspaper, one of the largest in the country, with bureaus in

Washington, New York, London, Moscow. The *Herald's* Springfield bureau was the largest corner office in the press wing—two half-windows, instead of one—and fully four times the space of the *Peoria Post* office. The *Herald* had an equally lopsided share of prestige, though everyone on floor two-and-a-half was well aware of the chinks in its armor: The impenetrable fifty-word lead paragraphs on its stories, evidence of its brazen arrogance toward even its own readers; a habit of stealing lesser papers' stories and presenting them as original work; a corrections section that drew howls. It was said that the Washington press corps, the Springfield reporters' better-dressed counterparts on Capitol Hill, called the *Herald* the Baby Huey of the newspaper industry: Big and dumb. But it was still the *Herald*, the pinnacle of Midwestern journalism. Even Garrick, whose professional ambitions were as muted as any, found himself occasionally picturing his own by-line under that classically scripted blue masthead.

Now from the *Herald* office emerged one of its two Springfield reporters, Harvey Rathbone III: Mid-forties, paunchy, bearded, unkempt in a slightly academic way. Harvey the Third had ended up at the *Herald* after a few years of playing musical chairs in the Capitol press wing: first the *Bloomington Examiner & Bugle* Capitol bureau, then the *Decatur Courier-Review & Intelligencer* Capitol bureau, and finally, the big chair at the *Chicago Herald* Capitol bureau. This wasn't uncommon. The majority of the occupants of the cubbyhole offices in the press wing had, at some earlier point, been occupants of different cubbyholes in the press wing. Every time the Capitol bureaus for the *Herald* or the *Chicago Sun-Times* or the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* or any of the other larger newspapers or television stations had an opening, there was a graceless scramble among reporters at the smaller bureaus to fill the seat—sometimes spawning spinoff scrambles among the smallest of the bureaus to fill *their* seats. The newspapers usually hired away reporters already working in the press wing at competing bureaus because those reporters knew the territory, had demonstrated their political reporting skills, and it saved money for the newspapers on moving expenses. The moving, in those cases, just involved putting one's personal belongings into a few boxes and walking a few feet up the hall, generally to a more comfortable chair, abandoning one geographic chunk of readers and picking up another. Some of the older reporters had spent their careers hauling their picture frames and coffee cups from one cubbyhole office after another, always landing just down the hall from their roots. It made for unsteady loyalties, friends coveting one another's jobs,

newspapers coveting one another's employees. But the alternative was for the smaller-market reporters to resign themselves to sitting forever out in the weeds, away from the important business going on near the campfire, and none but Garrick could even comprehend accepting such a fate.

Harvey, emerging from the *Herald* office and into the hallway, paused in front of the *Peoria Post* office to slip into a too-small sports jacket, and stuck a thin notebook into his lapel pocket. His tie: A red and green design, vaguely Christmasy, though it was early April. He paused and nodded at the two seated reporters. Garrick nodded back and said: "Harvey." Colleen issued a deadpan stare at the red-green tie and said nothing.

Then Harvey the Third was gone, Colleen's nose was back in her newspaper, and Garrick's eyes were on his computer screen, going over the day's wire budget, the one-line summaries of stories or possible stories that the Associated Press planned to offer to the state's newspapers later that day. The Associated Press: The world's largest news organization, with hundreds of bureaus worldwide—including one fifteen paces down the hall from the *Peoria Post* Springfield bureau—sending stories to thousands of newspapers every day, to be published under the omnipresent byline "A.P." The Illinois A.P. wire budget usually determined what would be the Story of the Day at the Capitol, then either Garrick or Colleen or both would usually have to cover it for the Post. It was for empty pride and no other reason Garrick could fathom that Helen Heston, Garrick's editor in Peoria, preferred the Story of the Day to carry the byline of Garrick or Colleen rather than just printing the story that A.P. sent to them, though the stories themselves might be—probably *would* be—almost identical. The readers didn't particularly care who wrote it, Garrick suspected, and it seemed to him his time might be better spent working on something that wasn't already being written by the A.P., a service the Post was already paying for anyway. After he or Colleen wrote the story, they would usually check it against the A.P. story, to make sure they hadn't missed anything. Garrick had never understood the point of duplicating work like that, but he supposed that was why he wasn't an editor.

Garrick's own, more personal motive for carefully studying the morning wire budget: To see what story Claire Ottoman, the A.P. Capitol bureau chief, would be working on that day, so Garrick could arrange to cover that story as well.

The wire budget items crawled across Garrick's screen, a line of glowing ants.

One: "Gov. Bell plans to announce a new tourism initiative this week. We will have an advance story." Another: "School advocates rally at the Capitol for more education funding. Possible story on merits." Another: "Illinois sets an execution date for the 'I-55 Killer'."

Garrick looked up from his computer screen, a thought having buzzed in his ear like a mosquito. Behind him, at the same moment, Colleen, too, looked up from her newspaper, suddenly pondering the same thought.

Garrick, talking to the wall: "Why is Harvey wearing a jacket?"

Colleen, picking up her phone: "Fuck if I know."

### *A Sleek, Black Comet*

It took Colleen two minutes to find out, and four minutes later, Garrick was slipping through the back hall entrance of the Senate floor and into the press box, which sat to the left of the Senate President's podium. The brass sign on the press-box door read: *Gentlemen Shall Wear Jacket and Tie at All Times in the Senate Chamber*. There weren't any similar signs anywhere else in the cavernous red-leather-and-mahogany Senate chamber, the Senate leadership apparently having felt that the reporters were the only people who needed to be told. They meant it, too, which was the only reason Garrick and the other male reporters ever wore jackets at all. Garrick's jacket: Outdated and threadbare, with a dizzying pattern on it that employed just about every color of the spectrum. His reasoning when he gritted his teeth and bought it was that had to go with anything he might happen to be wearing on a given day, because he sure didn't want to have to buy two of them. The other male reporters in the press room all had purchased their own respective jackets on a similar theory, so that a visitor to the Senate chamber who happened to look at the press box on any given day might see seven or eight men who appeared to have just regrouped after having robbed a second-hand clothing store.

The Senate microphones were silent for the moment, the senators milling around the floor or reading newspapers at their desks, but there was a thick anticipation in the air sensed even by Garrick's political instincts, dull as they were. Colleen's three phone calls had established the "where" and "when" of the thing—get to the Senate chamber, they

told her, something's up—but not the "what," that part being a mystery even to her sources. They were right, though, as Garrick instantly surmised, perhaps from the pitch of the quiet murmuring: Something was up. Harvey the Third was seated there in the press box, along with five other male reporters, all squirming in their multi-colored jackets, and one female reporter.

She was Claire Ottoman, the Associated Press bureau chief, who had arrived in Springfield two years earlier and promptly turned the press wing hierarchy on its head by breaking a huge story involving a campaign contributor to Governor Bell and eight-hundred pounds of frozen lobster. To the general public, the lobster story was, like most big stories, forgotten within a week, but in the press room the aftertaste lingered: Claire had kicked the legs out from under Harvey the Third's big chair. Harvey, viewed until then as the unquestioned top reporter in the press wing, was beaten thoroughly to the campaign-donor-and-lobster story, beaten badly enough that everyone in the press room listened with glee to Harvey's frenzied telephone conversations with his editors in the days that followed, as they plotted out how they might salvage some scrap of pride. The *Chicago Herald's* solution: It came back a week later with its own campaign-donor-and-lobster story, strongly implying it was something that had just been discovered, then ran an editorial on the subject the following day—"Fishing for Influence in Springfield"—which cited the *Herald's* own story as the source of the lobster controversy, thus completing the larceny. The ploy fooled no one except the *Herald's* seven-hundred-thousand readers; the occupants of the press wing knew better. They suddenly viewed the top spot in the hierarchy as disputed, and it had been ever since.

As a result of Claire's reporting talents, most of the men of the press room had completely overlooked her odd but undeniable beauty. It was a quirk of the newspaper business that the men, though certainly capable of leering behavior toward female colleagues, first had to dispose of the question of professional ego before they could get down to the business of leering. The stubborn fact was that, however they all enjoyed watching Claire regularly beat Harvey the Third, she was also beating the rest of them, which had the effect of making her silky-black hair look, to them, a little less silky, her sultry coal eyes a little less sultry, the soft lines of her figure a little less soft than they might otherwise have looked. Breaking a big story had the effect of an aphrodisiac to most of the men on floor two-and-a-half; conversely, getting beaten to a big story had the effect

of a cold hose, and Claire had been dousing them all since her first week.

Garrick was alone in the fact that his news stories and his libido came from separate places, and from his vantage point out in the weeds, the whole Claire issue took on the added dimension of lust. Claire didn't fit any pop-culture definition of physical attractiveness—reporters almost never did, except in television journalism, where no amount of good looks was likely to balance other deficits—but she had a subtle, almost baffling beauty, the unexpected sum of plainer parts. Her hair: Jet black, a no-nonsense shoulder-length style that said she was too busy to worry about hair. Her mouth: Top lip slightly fuller than the bottom, an accident of nature which, more than any other characteristic, might have drawn all the men in the press wing to her, if not for her stories. Her eyes: Dark, calm and calculating, and topped with the best set of eyebrows Garrick had ever seen.

It was Claire's arrival in the pressroom that first made Garrick aware of the immense role that eyebrows had always played in what made women attractive to him, for she made him realize that all the women he'd ever had or wanted had worn bold, dark eyebrows, the kind of eyebrows that mocked the whisper-thin lines drawn over most women's eyes these days, the kind of eyebrows that couldn't be missed. For awhile after discovering this, he tried to convince himself it had something to do with strength and individuality—that he was attracted to the bold and confident expression that dark eyebrows gave—but he finally had to admit to himself the truth: Eyebrows made him think of pubic hair. It was a Pavlovian switch in his head which, once triggered by a substantial sweep of hair over a woman's eye, made it impossible for him not to imagine the owner naked. On the eyebrow front, Claire reigned supreme over any other woman Garrick knew. They weren't the darkest or thickest he'd ever seen—the eyebrow equation was more complicated than that—but they were unusually dark and thick, and naturally sculpted into a steep arc that thinned out gracefully as it headed ear-ward, a sleek, black comet, the tail finally dissolving to a point. The result: She looked slightly angry even when she wasn't, and very angry when she was, which wasn't nearly as often as Colleen Brenner but often enough.

Claire's anger had never been directed at Garrick, in spite of, or perhaps because of, the fact that he had persistently pursued her romantically since her first month on the job. In two years, she had turned Garrick down for more dates than he had ever requested

of anyone in all the previous years of his life combined, gingerly telling him with each refusal how flattered she was, how much fun it would have been, but how she didn't date competitors; then letting the unlikely compliment hang there—Garrick Martin, a competitor—but giving up nothing else. Still, something was undeniably there, crouched under those magnificent eyebrows. She had passed up too many opportunities to bluntly tell him to go away. Somewhere between the date requests and refusals, they had managed to build a friendship—not the close, easy kind of friendship that sometimes arises between comfortably platonic men and women who see the world in the same way, but the tense and electrically charged kind that arises when the man desperately wants something more and the woman hasn't completely, entirely ruled it out.

Garrick saw that just one seat was open, on the far side of the press box, nowhere near Claire, so he flattened himself against the wood-paneled wall and scooted along the narrow path behind the reporters' chairs to get there. Claire glanced over and smiled briefly, her naked eyebrows taunting him.

The open chair was next to Jack Worman, the lone Capitol reporter for the *Springfield Register-Journal*. The other reporters called him The Worm, and he let them, which illustrated much about him. In a professional culture that didn't particularly care what others thought of its clothing, its hair style or its general appearance, The Worm cared even less. Not caring was a point of pride for The Worm. Forty-one years old and, like most of the men on floor two-and-a-half, a bachelor, his wiry black hair and goatee held shapes of their own, changing from day to day, depending upon how he had slept on them. Contrary to popular myth, The Worm did shower, but only at night; he couldn't rise early no matter how early he went to bed, and he needed to have time for breakfast. Skipping breakfast was never an option. It wasn't unusual for Worm's colleagues to note, right to his face, that part of that morning's breakfast was still lingering in his goatee, to which he would always respond: "I'm saving it for later." Body-wise, The Worm looked more like a bull than a worm: All big head and broad shoulders and long torso, but with short, stocky legs and no hips, as if he had been compiled from the spare parts of several differently shaped humans. When he was late for press events, which was often, he would run to the crowd of reporters, small legs working furiously, big head down, and it looked for all the world to Garrick as if he was a bull charging an invisible cape.

Garrick, sitting and whispering: "What is it? They said something was up?"

Worm: "Senator Stan."

Garrick looked out over the Senate floor to the third desk from left in the second row, to the brass nameplate: *Hon. Sen. Stanley Makowski*. The seat was empty.

Garrick: "What, did he get indicted again?"

The Worm shook his big head, solemnly.

John Johnston, the white-haired Senate President, took the front lectern, banged the gavel and called for order. Johnston had a pebbly-asphalt voice, but oddly pockmarked with soft s's, so that even when discussing serious issues—tax issues, crime-and-punishment issues, or, as today, death issues—he sounded as if he was impersonating a drunk.

The room hushed, and Johnston leaned to the microphone and filled it with his soft gravel: "Ladies and gentlemen of the Senate, it is my sad duty to inform you that Senator Stanley Makowski passed away last night."

A small collective gasp rose from the Senate floor, only a few voices strong, most of the members already having heard the news through one leak or another. In the press box, no one was gasping but all were writing furiously. Garrick's notebook: "*johnston, sad duty; sen stan dead—last night.*"

Johnston: "I don't need to tell anyone in this chamber what kind of a man Stanley Makowski was, about his steadfast belief in democracy, freedom, and the universal truths that bind our state together ..."

Claire Ottoman, writing intently, cleared her throat and rubbed an index finger above one eye, which distracted Garrick so much that all he got down in his notebook was: "universal truths."

Chapter Two:

**Stroking Joe Six-Pack**

I-55 Killer Faces Execution

*Just Gone*

Eight years before the peaceful death of Senator Stan Makowski, a truck driver named David Randolph suffered a violent one: One bullet in the shoulder—which, more than anything, startled him, coming as it did from a stooped, white-haired old man he had noticed walking on the side of the road—and a second one in the eye, which killed him. The killer: Brad Connor, a thirty-eight-year-old unemployed mechanic with prematurely white hair, a genetic lie that helped cause four deaths, each one a driver who had stopped to help what he or she thought was an old man walking alone down the shoulder of Interstate Fifty-Five in central Illinois. By the morning of Senator Stan's death, Connor had hitched his last ride, and he now sat on death row in the Stateville Correctional Center at Joliet. His appeals gone, the state had set his execution date the previous day, giving him three weeks to continue eating the taxpayers' food and breathing the taxpayers' air. Claire Ottoman had written the story for the Associated Press, grinding her molars the whole day as she tended to do when she wanted to be somewhere else. This morning she arrived at work looking forward to writing about new legislation, rallies, even ratites, anything but death. The first words from the first source she called, two minutes after settling into her chair: "Senator Stan is dead."

Now, as Claire exited the Senate press box and navigated toward the press room in a flock with the rest of the reporters, she contemplated the injustice of being made to write two stories about dead people in two days. It was a small injustice next to the ones suffered by Brad Connor's victims and, now, by Senator Stan, but an injustice nonetheless. Claire had been offered a post the year before in the Associated Press' New York City bureau, which might have led to the Washington bureau. She turned it down to stay in Springfield, in part—in larger part than she usually would acknowledge to herself—because a state Capitol bureau in the Heartland was one of the few jobs left in journalism where a reporter would almost never have to write about the process by which living things become non-living ones. It wasn't that she couldn't use the word. Certainly she could—*death death death*—but she would rather write about campaign contributions, utility legislation, education funding, ostriches, frozen lobsters, anything. And this wasn't the end of it, either. They would have to bury Senator Stan—not much way around that—and someone would have to write about the ceremony in which people are committed to the ground after they stop breathing. *Funeral funeral funeral*. The first funeral she had

ever been to was her sister Anna's and, though she'd lost count of the ones she had attended since, Anna's was the one that would replay in her mind each time she watched a coffin sink into a hole.

Macy looked up from his newspaper as Claire and the rest of the flock of reporters streamed into the press room lobby. Colleen Brenner was standing there too, sipping coffee and going through press releases, with Macy keeping her in his peripheral vision to make sure she wasn't touching the squawk box. Colleen, whose sense of humor was as subtle as her language, was known to plant what she called Ear Bombs, meaning she would turn both knobs on the squawk box—House and Senate—to top volume while they were in recess, thus guaranteeing that, the moment the Speaker of the House or the Senate President called the chamber to order, anyone who happened to be sipping coffee in the press room lobby was likely to spill it. Macy, whose job required him to sit near the squawk box, was a frequent Ear Bomb casualty.

The third person in the lobby when the flock landed was Sean Lovett, sipping coffee, his head two feet from the squawk box, having apparently forgotten about the danger his ears were in. Lovett: Young, with an expensive haircut, expensive suit, expensive shoes—not a reporter. Not anymore. The previous year, Lieutenant Governor Bob Kramer had hired him away from his job at United News International, where Lovett had been a Capitol bureau reporter. For Lovett, it wasn't a hard decision. U.N.I. was, in theory, the wire service that competed with A.P., but in reality, it was a dying company that had spent the previous ten years trying to stay out of bankruptcy. Most newspapers didn't carry U.N.I. stories anymore, and most of the copy Lovett had written was for radio stations—small ones. Pay cuts and late paychecks were the norm, long waits for less and less money. Of course, Kramer's offer to become a political spokesperson came with its own deficits. Being a flack for *anyone* meant swallowing hard and not looking in the mirror for awhile, and being a flack for an office of such questionable relevance as lieutenant governor was that much worse. The lieutenant governor before Kramer had resigned on grounds of boredom, and the Legislature hadn't bothered to name anyone to complete the last two years of the term. But U.N.I. was a sinking vessel and Kramer had offered the only lifeboat in sight, rickety as it was.

Macy, to the passing flock: ``So, how did he die?''

Garrick: ``In bed.''

Colleen: ``Vomit, or hooker?''

Claire: ``Oh, nice, libel the dead.''

Macy, chuckling: ``Has to be false to be libel.''

Lovett: ``I vaguely remember some editor telling me that, back before I got a real job.''

Worm: ``You were poor but honest, Lovett. Now you're just evil.''

Lovett, shrugging: ``Beats poverty.''

Harvey the Third, to Lovett: ``So, Mister Spokesman, where does the lieutenant governor stand on the issue of dying in one's sleep?''

Lovett, hands open in a speech-making posture: ``He's against it.''

Garrick, never good at banter, slipped around the corner to his cubbyhole, stopping long enough to watch Claire walk toward her own office, hips swaying gently, magnificent eyebrows frowning, as they had been all morning. Garrick wondered momentarily why the old senator's death would particularly bother her. Then he was back at his desk, dialing Helen Heston's number, his fingers flying over the number pad in one sweeping motion. Garrick had recently been asked Helen's number by another reporter and, once on the spot, couldn't think of it, had to look it up, that's how accustomed his fingers were to dialing the number without any meddling from his brain.

Helen: Notably tall, dark-haired, fifty-ish, neither attractive nor unattractive—as typical-looking as a mid-sized daily newspaper's regional editor gets, right down to her gender. Most of the reporters on floor two-and-a-half of the state Capitol answered to female editors, to the point that male ones were something of a novelty. The phenomenon had its roots in the late 1970s, when newspapers were routinely savaging Big Business in their editorials for refusing to let women and blacks into their castles, while forgetting, as editorial writers frequently did, that few Businesses were as Big as the newspaper business. The people who controlled the newspaper business at that time, from the publishers to the delivery truck drivers: White men.

That had started to change by the cusp of the Millennium, after the American public—which had by that time already concluded that its politicians and cultural leaders were lying racists and sexists—turned its hyper-critical eye to the media. Its conclusion: More lying racists and sexists, and hypocrites as well. Suddenly, the white male newspaper publishers, already hemorrhaging readers for all kinds of reasons and unable to afford to

lose even the darker or softer ones, began a frantic campaign to colorize and woman-ize their news rooms. Women and blacks flooded into the media castle like a spring rain, filling up first the feature departments, and then rising slowly to the city desks and the photo desks and all the other desks, and then lapping at the stairs of management. In college journalism programs, too, the floodgates opened, which was part of the reason Garrick didn't leave his school's journalism program after having landed in it by accident: It was, he soon discovered, among the most female-intensive programs on campus. Journalism had become what Garrick's professors called a "pink collar" profession, a term they used either grumblingly or gloatingly, depending upon the gender of the given professor.

Still, the growing influence of women in journalism, while social progress on one level, was, on another level, a cynical lie. The white male publishers who opened the floodgates weren't about to let the water rise to the top floor. Managing editor's office? Unlikely. Executive suite? Forget it. They had been serious about all those egalitarian editorials in the seventies, but not *that* serious. The best of the women rose, not to the top, but as high as women were allowed to rise, and then stayed there, finding their own level at that nebulous place called Middle Management: Above reporters, who did what they were told, but below the top tier of white male executives, who ultimately did the telling. By the time Garrick landed in Springfield, this had been going on in newspapers for two decades, and Middle Management was pretty well drenched with estrogen.

Though Garrick saw her face-to-face just three or four times a year, Helen Heston was the central fact of his professional life, the tinny, disembodied voice that he answered to every morning and every afternoon. It was an unnerving voice, too, full of a language that had taken him months to decipher. Helen frequently reminded Garrick to make sure the views of "Joe Six-Pack" were represented in his stories, and for a long time Garrick had no idea what she was talking about. Joe Six-Pack: A fictional middle-aged, balding, minimally educated man who sat around in a sleeveless t-shirt drinking beer from cans and watching sit-coms on television and who, it was eventually clear, was Helen's mental image of the typical *Peoria Post* reader. Garrick often marveled at how Helen could denigrate an entire stratum of society with that one phrase, while simultaneously decreeing that those were the readers Garrick was to stroke shamelessly.

Often, Helen would specify that, to find those stories that would interest Joe Six-

Pack, Garrick should Get On His Horse. Translation: Get off your dead ass, leave your cozy little Capitol office with the half-window, and go out and do some real reporting, like *I* used to. Helen had been a genuine legend as a crime reporter in her day—the older reporters at the Post still talked about how she showed up at the door of the parents of the murdered teenage girl in Urbana one Christmas morning, two days after the murder, asking to see which presents under the tree were their daughter's, and how they *had let her in!*—and her contempt for the kind of pampered, pinstripe journalism that emanated from the state Capitol was evident. While not naming names, she would often lament to Garrick about how far the reporting profession had slipped since she had practiced it. If Helen got to lamenting enough, it would trigger her “flutter,” an involuntary twitching of her left eyelid that came and went depending upon her mood. As tics go, it wasn't an especially pronounced one, and Garrick, who seldom saw her in person anyway, might not have even known about it, except that Helen made frequent reference to it. When Helen was unhappy about something, which was often, she wouldn't yell or threaten; she would flutter, and then she would tell Garrick how unhappy she was about the fact that she was fluttering. When Helen didn't believe Garrick was approaching a story with enough gumption—which was often—he was subjected to statements like: “Garrick, I'm really starting to flutter about this thing. I want you to get on your horse and go over there and find out what Joe Six-Pack thinks.”

Garrick was just getting through the preliminaries of Senator Stan's death with Helen as Colleen walked into the little office and sat, her back to him. Garrick, into the phone: “They think he died around two in the morning.”

Helen's disembodied voice: “Any indication of drugs?”

Garrick: “No.”

Helen's voice: “Alcohol?”

Garrick: “`Fraid not.”

Colleen, loudly: “Did you tell her about the hooker?”

Helen's voice, hopefully: “There was a hooker?”

Garrick: “There wasn't any hooker.”

Helen's voice, deflated: “Oh.” Then: “All right, look, Makowski was a major figure, I'd like to have something big on this, Garrick. Why don't you get on your horse and go over to his hotel? Maybe someone heard something last night.”

Garrick: `` `Heard something'? Heard *what*? He was asleep, and he just kind of—died. I don't think there was that much to hear.'`

Helen's voice: ``Ask around anyway. I can just imagine what the *Herald's* going to have tomorrow.'`

Garrick, coolly: ``They're going to have a story saying he's dead.'`

Helen's voice: ``Look, Garrick, I don't want to get into this again—'`

Garrick: ``Neither do I.'`

Helen's voice: ``—but they've been kicking our asses every week.'`

Garrick: ``They're the biggest paper in the state, Helen. The Senate leadership spoon-feeds Harvey. How am I supposed to—?`

Helen's voice: ``Oh, c'mon, Garrick, cut the crap. *We've* got a little clout around that Capitol, too. It's just a matter of using it.'`

Garrick: Patient breath. Then: ``Okay. Fine.'`

Helen's voice: ``And tell Colleen she could help by not pissing everybody off.'`

Garrick, to the back of Colleen's head: ``Quit pissing everybody off.'`

Colleen, not looking up from her desk, responded with a middle finger held up over her shoulder.

Helen's voice: ``I just don't want a damned obituary, okay? We could write an o-bit from here if that's what we wanted.'`

Garrick, mumbling now, trying to end the conversation: ``Fine, it won't be an o-bit.'`

Helen's voice: ``Will you take care of this, Garrick?`

Garrick: ``Fine.'`

Helen's voice: ``Because I'm starting to flutter.'`

Garrick: ``Don't flutter, Helen. I'll take care of it.'`

Garrick hung up, and Colleen twisted around in her seat to look at him. Colleen: ``She's fluttering?`

Garrick: ``She wants us to `use our clout.'`

Colleen: Snorted laugh. Then: ``For what, a fuckin' paperweight?`

A thin hum now drifted down from the ceiling of the little office, and Garrick and Colleen looked up in unison at the intercom speaker planted there. Garrick—who had

noticed lately a habit of wondering idly about meaningless issues, an early sign of aging, he supposed—wondered idly why people always look up when intercoms come on, as if they might see the words popping out.

Macy's voice, through the intercom: ``Attention. Will everyone please come to the front desk. Except Ron Kruger. Repeating: Everyone—except Ron Kruger—to the front desk please.''

This meant the press wing was to assemble in the lobby for a surprise party for Ron Kruger, the white-haired, glinty-eyed Capitol correspondent for WQNC-TV of Decatur, who was retiring. Kruger, whose cubbyhole office was tucked right there among all the others, was hearing the message drifting down from his own ceiling just like everyone else—he was looking right up at the speaker, in fact. Once all the reporters were assembled, Macy would make a second announcement, this one innocently calling Ron Kruger to the front desk on some pretense. When Kruger arrived, the gathered reporters would shout: ``Surprise!' and Kruger would feign surprise. It was a worn old skit and not an especially good one—all participant, no audience—but Kruger was retiring and protocol was protocol.

Macy, into the microphone, moments later, with Garrick, Claire and a dozen other reporters gathered around him in the lobby, eyeing the nearby cake: ``Attention. Will Ron Kruger please come to the front desk.' Then: ``Um—you have a phone call.''

The reporters laughed. Then Kruger emerged from his office right on cue and, right on cue, the reporters yelled: ``Surprise!' Kruger widened his eyes, grasped his chest with one forearm, pinwheeling with the other, and made a good show of almost collapsing, which Claire privately thought was perhaps in bad taste, considering.

### ***'Som-Bitch Buzzed Me!'***

As the rest of the protocol unfolded—the glowing, eulogy-like introduction from Macy, the tense and halting speech by Kruger, the assault on the cake—Garrick glumly pondered Helen's demand: *I'd like to have Something Big on this*. Then he pondered Gerald McCune, as he often did in such moments. Helen held the view that reporters shouldn't merely cover the news, they should go out and discover it like a treasure, work

it like a sculpture, court it like a lover, give themselves over to it. Garrick relied on the traumatic memory of Gerald McCune to guard him from the dangers of that view.

McCune: Middle-aged, short, fat, bald, coke-bottle glasses, a former mid-level bureaucrat in Governor Bell's office. He had shown up at Garrick's cubbyhole office one day the previous year, carrying a thousand-page typewritten manuscript which, he said, would Blow the Lid off the administration. People outside the newspaper business, civilians, were always using phrases like that: Blow the Lid, Inside Scoop, Sweet-Heart Deal, Stop the Presses—phrases they imagined that reporters frequently used. McCune was willing to give the *Peoria Post* the Inside Scoop on the Bell Administration—payroll cronyism, state contract patronage, Sweet-Heart Deals on legislation—all meticulously documented in his yet-to-be-published book.

Garrick was wary, but a cursory glance at the manuscript and a peek at McCune's state employment record failed to debunk him—both appeared real enough—so Garrick was forced to reluctantly mention the thing to Helen. Helen fluttered for a moment or two at Garrick's lack of gumption, then dubbed it a story in which Joe Six-Pack would be interested. She got pretty worked up about it, too, outlining it in a memo to the managing editor, scheduling a page-one Sunday piece with a photo-portrait of McCune, and telling Garrick to Get On His Horse and check with other sources about McCune's allegations. The publisher himself sent Garrick a memo saying the story sounded intriguing, and he was glad the *Post* was finally going to make a splash in Springfield. Garrick, though still unaccountably hesitant about the thing, found himself getting enthusiastic, picturing bold, black words—*Post Uncovers Corruption In Bell Administration*—which made it that much worse when McCune turned out to be a lunatic.

McCune's lunacy was established on the Friday before the Sunday on which the big story was to run. Garrick had already spent a week writing most of the story and sent it to Peoria, and the layout artists and headline writers had already begun working their inky magic with it. Though Garrick had McCune's thousand-page manuscript in front of him, he hadn't had time to read most of it—Helen was pressing him relentlessly to finish the story—and so he was relying heavily on McCune's verbal summaries during their interviews. They were tying up loose ends in Garrick's office that Friday, the office door closed.

Garrick: ``Okay, I'm still unclear on the stuff about the education funding. You say

there's paper to show they changed the numbers after the bill was passed?

McCune: "Oh, I watched them do it. I'll gladly go on the record on that part. Governor Bell was standing right there over us, making suggestions on how we could hide this shortfall or that deficit." Then, pointing at the manuscript on Garrick's lap: "It's in Chapter Seventeen."

Garrick: "And this was after his speech on education funding?"

McCune: "Right—this was right before the St. Louis incident."

Garrick: "Um—the 'St. Louis incident'?"

McCune: "Right. That was when Chief of Staff Riley sent me down to St. Louis, to start the negotiations on that enterprise zone in Collinsville. Or at least that's why they *said* they were sending me."

Garrick, intrigued: "That *wasn't* why they sent you?"

McCune: "Well, apparently not. They knew by this time I was writing this book, though I didn't *know* they knew."

Garrick, confused: "Um—so how do you know now that they knew?"

McCune: "Well, I figured it out after the St. Louis incident."

Garrick, repeating: "The St. Louis incident—"

McCune nodded, matter-of-factly. "It was lunchtime when I got down there, and I decided to buy a hot dog and sit on the grass under the Arch and eat it. And while I'm there, I see the governor's plane approaching from the Illinois side of the river—you know, that little Cessna he flies around in? I could see the state insignia on the side of it."

Garrick: Silence. Then: "Um—what does the governor's plane have to do with —?"

McCune, pointing at the manuscript: "Chapter Forty-Two." Then: "So I'm sitting there eating my hot dog and watching the plane approach, and it just keeps coming closer and closer. And I'm thinking, 'Wow, he's coming awfully close to the downtown metropolitan area.' Then he dives! The next thing I know, he buzzes me! Som-bitch *buzzes* me! Right there under the Arch!"

Garrick became aware at that point that his mouth was hanging open.

McCune: "That's a violation of federal law, you know. You're not allowed to fly planes under that Arch."

Garrick: *Omigod*. "Mr. McCune, tell me again, *why* did you leave the state

payroll?—”

McCune: “I still can’t believe that som-bitch *buzzed me!*”

By that night, Helen was able to get one of the city desk reporters to whip up a quick feature about dog kennels to replace Garrick’s Sunday piece, her left eyelid fluttering so wildly that the managing editor suggested she should see someone about it. The photo desk came up with a nice feature photo of some girls jumping rope on a sidewalk to replace the portrait of McCune, the photographers as usual approaching the crisis unencumbered by grace or humor. No one outright blamed Garrick, exactly, there being no clear way to do that, but it was obvious that his stock—never blue-chip to begin with—had plummeted to a Depression-Era low. The publisher stopped sending him encouraging little notes and went back to not knowing who he was. Helen was short with him for weeks, not even bothering to tell him to Get On His Horse. A year later, Colleen still made airplane noises at him. As the wound gradually healed, it dawned on Garrick that his professional instinct—something he hadn’t thought he possessed—was trying to steer him clear of the McCune plane wreck from the beginning. He willfully ignored its pleas, in large part because Helen had said something to the effect of: *Let’s get Something Big on this*. The episode had made Garrick hesitant about going after Something Big, an endeavor that obviously was laced with landmines. Better to stay on the well-marked path of the Story of the Day—though he knew such a cowardly approach made him less worthy than ever of Claire, who seemed to come up with Something Big every other week and who, Garrick was certain, never found herself chasing airplane stories from lunatics.

The cake eaten, the press room lobby quickly emptied, with the promise of free drinks that evening for Kruger, the final part of the protocol to be carried out before sending him on to retirement. Garrick Got On His Horse and drove to the Springfield Arms, the largest hotel in a town thick with them, to find out whether Senator Stan had called out any revealing last words before passing on. The Springfield Arms: A round, tubular shaft of cement twenty-six stories high—higher than anything else in town—with an expanded top, so that, from a distance, it looked for all the world like a great, circumcised phallus rising from the flat Illinois horizon. Colleen called it The Prick of the Prairie. The second-highest building in Springfield was the state Capitol dome, its smooth, round surface topped with a nipple of a flag tower, two blocks over from the phallic hotel.

From a few miles outside the seat of Illinois government, they were the only discernible landmarks.

In the hotel lobby, Garrick identified himself to the clerk, who gave him Makowski's room number without having to look it up. Moments later, Garrick was riding the elevator up the cement shaft, to the seventeenth floor. Makowski's room was locked, and Garrick knocked on the door directly across the hall. The woman who answered: fifty-ish, frosted hair, slightly heavy, dressed like she was trying to look like she had more money than she had. She might have been Mrs. Janovik twenty years ago, Garrick thought. The fact that she had a room in The Springfield Phallus meant chances were good that she was a lobbyist, but Garrick ruled that out as soon as he introduced himself, because she seemed in awe at talking to an actual reporter—an unlikely reaction from a lobbyist, but a common one among Real People. Garrick had learned early in his career that Real People nurtured a romanticized image of what reporters do, an image that never involved things like ostrich legislation and lying lunatics. They thought reporters went around solving crimes, their every step dogged by danger, and always got the girl in the end. Garrick had never solved a crime in his life, hadn't gotten the girl in two years of trying, and his only danger was Colleen.

Garrick: "I was just wondering if you heard anything last night, when Senator Makowski died?"

The woman, earnestly: "Oh, you guys are doing an investigation? I bet you're going to blow the lid off this thing, aren't you?"

Garrick: "Just wondering if you heard anything—anyone visiting him, anything like that?"

The woman: "No, but I'm not trained to listen for stuff like that, like you guys are. Boy, that must be an exciting job!"

Garrick: "Um. Yeah, it's interesting."

The woman: "I bet it gets a little hairy sometimes, too."

Garrick: *Hairy?*

The woman: "I bet you get to meet all kinds of interesting people."

Garrick: *Som-bitch buzzed me!* "Yeah. So—um—you didn't hear anything?"

The woman: "Friad not. Like I told your partner this morning, I slept like the dead last night."

Garrick: ``My partner?--''

The woman: ``Yeah, that girl reporter? She came up here this morning, right after the ambulance left. Short dark hair? Pretty girl, except her eyebrows needed plucked.''

Garrick returned from the hotel with the same nothing that Claire had returned with hours earlier, but the fact that she had been there and gone before Garrick had even had an inkling of the need to go, before the announcement even went out—of *course* she had!—nibbled at him the rest of the day. It was as if all the other reporters in general, and Claire and Harvey the Third especially, were tuned in to some secret frequency that Garrick couldn't receive. How in the hell would Claire have learned about this before the announcement, short of calling Senator Stan every morning and asking if he was still breathing? (*``Come to think of it, Claire, I am feeling a little winded. You might want to come over here—I think there's going to be Something Big.''*) Garrick didn't ask around the hotel any further, fearful he might learn that Harvey the Third, The Worm and all the others also had been poking around that morning, while Garrick had been cluelessly sipping his coffee and wondering whether he would be able to get a good view of Mars tonight.

Back at his desk, Garrick turned on his computer and powered up the off-brand program that the Post used to write and transmit stories. Garrick didn't know a lot about computers, but he did know that there were much better programs out there, programs that didn't bark incomprehensible messages at you and freeze up twice a day. The computer geeks at the Post had, for reasons known only to themselves, decreed that this was the program everyone at the paper was to use. Garrick had once asked one of them why, and was told, to his open-mouthed silence: ``You wouldn't understand.''

He had to admit that was probably true, but still. Newspaper computer geeks were, in that way, akin to newspaper photographers: less likely to answer a question than to scoff at it. The photographers all fancied themselves artists, slumming it at newspapers until someone could discover them and buy them their own studios. They were constantly put-upon by reporters to squander their artistic talents, to demean themselves with photos of fires, car crashes, committee hearings and other minutiae, often having to make due with bad light, and they weren't happy about it. Similarly, every computer geek at every newspaper in America should have been working at Microsoft, if only there were justice in the world. The injustice of being stuck in such a low-tech profession as the newspaper business was

bad enough without poorly dressed, technologically retarded reporters asking stupid questions.

On Garrick's computer screen:

*By Garrick Martin*

*Peoria Post State Capitol Bureau*

*SPRINGFIELD—Veteran state Sen. Stanley Makowski, Illinois' most senior Democrat and long-time nemesis to Gov. John Bell, died in his sleep early Monday of an apparent heart attack. He was 69.*

*Makowski's long political tenure was marred in recent years by controversy, including an indictment on federal allegations of mail fraud and misuse of campaign funds. More recently, he had to defend himself against allegations that he benefited from legislation that affected a ratite farm in which he had invested.*

Garrick looked long at the words, a line of glowing ants. Then came the uninvited question, the one that arose once a month or once a week or, lately, more than that, demanding an answer: *Is this all there is?*

### ***Moment of Truth***

The final portion of the protocol surrounding the retirement of Ron Kruger unfolded that night at Norb's Place, a turn-of-the-century bar and grill favored by lobbyists and reporters for its food, atmosphere and location two blocks from the Capitol. Norb's was known for two things: A backward face-clock on its wall—the nine in the three-o'clock position, the six in the twelve-o'clock position, and so forth, with hands that moved counter-clockwise—and its horse shoe sandwiches. Garrick didn't come to Norb's often. He had a tendency to watch clocks, and this one gave him headaches. Horse shoe sandwiches gave him indigestion. Horse shoes: Toasted bread, covered with hamburger, chicken or some other kind of meat, then covered with a cheddar-based cheese sauce, then topped with a mound of french fries. It was called a sandwich, but it didn't fit the definition of any sandwich Garrick had ever seen: A football-sized mass of wet cheese,

salty fries and the obfuscated shapes of meat and bread underneath. To pick one up like a sandwich would have been a mistake. It was a uniquely Springfield dish, invented around the turn of the century and still served in most of the restaurants in town. Norb's Place claimed to have invented the thing, but so did a number of other restaurants, and, oddly, the question had never been settled. Garrick had tried one horse shoe, three years earlier, and found the combination of foods so heavy and reckless—an orgy of fat, oil and salt—that it appeared to have been designed to thumb a nose at all modern notions of healthy eating. Though all of Springfield claimed horse shoes as a part of the local heritage, the actual dish was, as far as Garrick could tell, regularly consumed only by people of a certain age. He supposed the horse shoe probably would disappear as a menu item once its primary customer base died off, succumbing to cheese-sauce-induced heart attacks. Senator Stan was known to be crazy about the things.

Much of the Capitol press corps had commandeered five of the small, square bar tables and set them end to end under the backward clock, making one long table with four uneven seams. On one side: Garrick, Claire, Colleen, Harvey Rathbone III and, at the head piece of the piecemeal table, Ron Kruger, already fairly drunk with gin and freedom. Across from them: The Worm, the upper edges of his goatee glistening with popcorn oil and beer; Cole "Tooth" Smiley, all teeth, Capitol bureau reporter for WCRB-TV of Carbondale; and Larry O'Shaughnessey, the twenty-six-year-old, boy-faced, curly-haired family man who had succeeded Sean Lovett on the sinking ship that was United News International. "Shiny," as Larry was called, wasn't typical of the male reporters on floor two-and-a-half. For one thing, he had two young children, putting him into a category of humanity that few of his colleagues could fathom. Shiny was young enough himself to believe the romanticized image of journalism that was presented in old movies, all the stuff about fighting for justice and protecting the powerless and Blowing the Lid off government corruption—or at least young enough to believe that the image might be true, although he was beginning to wonder. Shiny's tenure in Springfield was beginning to Blow the Lid off his beliefs. His new colleagues here seemed less interested in fighting for justice than in standing around the press room lobby drinking coffee and talking sports and politics and (when the few women of the press corps weren't around) women. Shortly after his arrival, Shiny asked Worm why none of them had investigated persistent rumors that a bunch of senators had hired a stripper to perform on the Senate floor during an

after-hours birthday party a few months earlier, and he asked it with such earnestness and innocence that Worm didn't have the heart to tell him it was because all the male reporters had been there too, tucking dollar bills into her g-string.

Not everyone had the luxury of going home to what Shiny went home to, Worm reasoned. Shiny was one of the few married men on floor two-and-a-half of the Capitol, and his wife, Debbie, a researcher for the Illinois Department of Historic Preservation, had become an instant legend among the male reporters, though not for her research abilities. Debbie O'Shaughnessey was a red-haired, blue-eyed, ivory-skinned vision with a face by Norman Rockwell and a body by Vargas. Her many peaks and curves were so perfectly, so stunningly arranged on her small frame as to be—as Worm phrased it—“ridiculous,” something Worm mumbled to the other men of the press room whenever Debbie would walk in, smiling warmly, to pick up her husband for lunch. Worm would watch her walk down to the UNI office, and he would mutter, softly: “Ridiculous.” Garrick was unaffected—Debbie's eyebrows were practically non-existent—but the other men concurred: *Ridiculous*. No woman really looked like that, particularly no woman married to as white a piece of bread as Larry “Shiny” O'Shaughnessey. It wouldn't have occurred to the men of floor two-and-a-half that the women of floor two-and-a-half might view the young, slim, hazel-eyed, soft-spoken Larry with a similar lust, because the expression of their lust was more subtle. Worm, for one, could no sooner fathom female subtlety than he could hear a dog-whistle.

The uneven table was rounded out by Julian Marcus, bureau chief for WSPR Radio and the only black reporter among the Capitol press corps—every single white member of which had, at some point in his or her career, savaged a company or state government agency in print for failing to take racial integration to heart. Most of the reporters believed themselves to be unusually enlightened in matters of race, and Julian's arrival three years earlier had spawned such a peculiar wave of tortured and determined enlightenment that Julian wondered briefly whether he might not be better off in some dusty Deep South town with Confederate flags flying over its buildings, where at least he would know where he stood. The other reporters' early treatment of him had been maddeningly polite, a wall of politeness, when he could see from their interactions with each other that their true natures were hardly more polite than the rapists and muggers he had covered in circuit court in Detroit. Cole Smiley's first beaming comment to him: A

congratulations about how utterly white Julian sounded on the radio—a nagging flaw of which Julian was well aware and had spent his whole career trying to remedy.

Gradually, the other reporters stopped tip-toeing around him, taken in by his authoritative-but-soothing voice, the trademark of the Public Radio culture, his oversized, self-mocking mustache and afro—thirty years out of style, though Julian was only thirty-seven—and his peculiar talent with the language, which manifested itself largely in his talent for concocting nicknames for the people around him. Soon after arriving in Springfield, Julian, bored and lonely and unable to scale the wall of politeness, took it upon himself to nickname each member of the press corps. He began with Cole, whose name and persona, Julian thought, just begged for it: A television reporter with notably big teeth, whose last name was Smiley. How could anyone miss that? One morning at the coffee machine, Julian said, casually, between passing of the cream and sugar: “Morning, Tooth.” Cole looked around to see who the new black guy was talking to, then, finding no one else in sight, decided that “Tooth,” whoever he was, must have already left.

Julian, determined, tried again the next morning, again at the coffee machine, saying it more directly this time, looking Cole right in the eyes as he said it: “Morning, Tooth. What’s news today?” This time, there were witnesses—Julian made sure to wait until Macy and Harvey and a few others were loitering around the press room lobby—so that when Cole began looking around again to see who this elusive Tooth person was, he had the derisive laughter of his colleagues to help guide him back toward the truth.

Despite Tooth’s initial reluctance, his new name stuck like ink to paper, and Julian quickly began moving through the rest of the ranks: “Worm,” that was an easy one, a play on Jack Worman’s name that described a creature which, like Worman, wasn’t especially concerned about personal hygiene; “Harvey the Third” for Harvey Rathbone III, a necessary dig, in Julian’s view, at the inherent pretentiousness of any name that contains Roman numerals; “Shiny” for Larry O’Shaughnessey, which, like all of Julian’s nicknames, just kind of *worked*, on several levels, some of them hard to define. It wasn’t just that you could somewhat hear the word “shiny” within “O’Shaughnessey”; it was that, once you thought about it, Larry, with his loopy brown curls and ruddy bare cheeks and youthful all-Americanism, was sort of . . . well, *shiny*. Shiny, like the rest of Julian’s victims, shouldered his burden like a man. Julian didn’t nickname the women of the press

room. All he could come up with for Claire Ottoman was ``Otto,`` which seemed like a mean thing to do to a generally polite woman, and he ran into similar complications with a few of the other women's names, and he was afraid of Colleen Brenner. Julian also didn't nickname Ron Kruger, something Kruger gently complained about now and then. Kruger had recently warned Julian: ``You know, I'm retiring soon. If you're going to name me, you'd better get on it.`` Julian had smiled politely but silently in response, unable to bring himself to tell Kruger that, in his mind, he was already referring to him as ``Granny.`` Garrick Martin had escaped a re-naming, too, mainly because his name, like his persona, Julian thought, was so generic, so faceless, so completely without any edges that there was no way to attach anything to it. Julian, by nature, usually analyzed and wondered about people, usually found a reason to like or dislike them, one or the other, very quickly, but the vapor-like Garrick Martin was the exception. Julian had no opinion about Garrick, none whatsoever, and the only thing he ever wondered about him was what in the world he was doing here.

Ironically, Julian's most lauded victory was the naming of Senator Stan, which was, if anything, his least innovative creation; the guy's name was Stanley and he was a senator. But the other reporters were awestruck at how the nickname—first uttered by Julian at a televised press conference with the honorable Senator Stanley Makowski, whose initial reaction was to glance around looking for whomever it was that Julian was talking to—had permeated every corner of the Capitol culture, immediately taken to heart by other senators, lobbyists, secretaries, bureaucrats, even the headline writers at their own newspapers. Every time since then that someone uttered the words ``Senator Stan,`` it was a bow to the only black member of the Springfield press corps and another chunk out of the wall of politeness. Julian knew the last granite blocks in the wall had fallen when he asked Colleen one morning, a year after arriving, if he could have a quick look at the single available copy of the day's list of new bill signings, and she advised him that he could go bite himself if he thought she was turning it over one single second before she was good and done with it.

Conversation at the uneven table was covering the usual ground: Which bills would get a vote this year, who would run for which office next year, which lobbyists were sleeping together. Garrick did his best to appear riveted by the subjects, trying not to stare too obviously at Claire's eyebrows. Her eyebrows were again in the pinched and

rigid shape they had been that morning, as the inevitable subject of the Honorable Senator Stanley Makowski arose.

Julian: ``When's the last time you guys talked to him?''

Claire: ``I hadn't seen him for a couple days.''

Worm: ``Last week. He didn't look any sicker than usual.''

Kruger, his white hair as flawlessly combed as if about to go on the air: ``The last time I talked to Stan Makowski was in nineteen-eighty-one. Late January, I think.''

The others: Silence. Garrick, moderately drunk, thought for a moment that Kruger was playing some word game with time, perhaps inspired by the backward clock ticking above their heads.

Harvey: ``Jesus, Ron. You haven't spoken to Makowski for fifteen years?''

Kruger: ``*He* didn't speak to *me*, to put it accurately.''

Claire: ``Because of a story?''

Kruger: ``Oh, yeah. It was a story, all right.''

He sipped his gin, then laid out the story in his clipped, precise anchorman's voice: How the Senator had had an aide, a young girl, twenty-two, working on her law degree. How he wanted to get her placed in a job at the Attorney General's office, but found no positions open. How a position miraculously opened shortly after the Senator asked about it, the result of the sudden firing of one of the staff paralegals. Kruger: ``They just dump him, and this young girl from Makowski's office steps into his job.''

Julian: ``Good story.''

Kruger: ``That's what I'm thinking—good story. So I met the guy's wife—the guy they fired. She had cancer. He took me to her hospital room, and she's laying there, tubes in her, and the guy's telling me about the medical bills, and one of their kids is there, wearing a torn jacket that hadn't been replaced because they didn't have the money anymore. And I'm thinking, `Stan, you lousy sonofabitch, all this for a piece of ass.' ''

Worm: ``Did you bury him?''

Kruger: ``Oh, I buried him. Her, too. Then the other guys jumped in. Lots of stories about Makowski's little plaything, and how she ruined a family.''

Kruger took another sip of his gin, looking straight ahead at the past. Garrick was struck by how obviously and utterly the old man had shifted his gaze to a time and setting that no longer existed, how he sat staring at it as if it were right there on the restaurant

wall next to the coat rack. He recognized, a moment later, that it was the same peering into the past that he watched Mrs. Janovik do every morning, as she told him about her brother Albert.

Kruger: "Only it turns out it wasn't that simple. Turns out the girl was this kind of frumpy, straight-A student who grew up in some coal town, was going to be a lawyer, first one ever in her family. Real simple people. Probably never asked how Makowski came up with this job. Then the stories started rolling. She never knew what hit her."

Garrick: "So what happened?"

Kruger: "She shot herself."

Kruger took a long, loud sip of his drink, the others staring in silence. Claire looked as though her eyebrows might shatter and fall off her head.

Then, Kruger: "No, I'm just kidding. She resigned."

Harvey: "Oh, *Christ*, Ron."

Kruger: "She resigned, and I heard later she dropped out of law school."

Colleen: "Now, wait a minute—just because she's a straight-A student, you think he wasn't shtupping her?"

Shiny: "Oh, Colleen—"

Claire: "I think you're missing the point, Colleen."

Colleen: "The point is, were they doing the deed or weren't they?"

Kruger, shaking his head slowly: "All I know is, when I saw that guy's wife laying there with all those tubes in her, and I saw that little kid—well, the rule book went out the window. It was like what we used to call in the service, an M.O.T."

Juilan: "A mot?"

Kruger: "'Moment of Truth.' It hit me like a brick—the wrong of it was so obvious. There was the woman with all those tubes in her, and there was this little kid—"

The Worm cleared his throat. They had all seen Kruger drunk before, they knew his stages, and it was clear he had just arrived at the Elder Statesman stage, where he would impart upon them the wisdom of his many years. Last time, it had been something about raising children, though among them, only Shiny had any. Most of the reporters took Kruger's drunken monologues quietly, except The Worm, who tended to resent them. Kruger looked like Worm's own father, who had also felt the need to make speeches at him.

Kruger, looking into some far-off teleprompter now: “Let me tell you kids something—There's no place in this business for trying to serve ‘truth.’ Focus on *facts*, and the truth will emerge on its own. You try to cover *truth*, like you'd cover a committee hearing, and you'll lose sight of it every time.”

The others: Silence.

The Worm, dryly: “Yeah, Ron, have another drink.”

Kruger: “Anyway, here's to Senator Stan.”

He lifted his glass, and the others followed, saying: “Senator Stan.”

Kruger, toasting: “He gave good quote.”

Then they moved on to smaller things, except Garrick, who lingered awhile, mulling the words: *Moment of Truth*. It sounded like a Hollywood concoction, or, more to the point, like something a shallow old television reporter might murmur into the camera to try and sound astute. But there was something irresistible about it, the notion of a central truth being revealed in an instant. No truth worth knowing had ever come to Garrick in any way other than slowly, except once, recently, when Mrs. Janovik announced one morning what amounted to her central philosophy of life: “Children should be off-limits.” They had been discussing welfare reform (their morning coffees had veered into much headier areas than tomatoes, ever since Mrs. Janovik had opened up about Poland) and she declared that the whole attempt to reform the welfare system was, in her view, a political sham that should be rejected outright. Garrick was surprised; Mrs. Janovik was old, white and financially comfortable, a combination that, in his experience, was generally associated with more conservative views on subjects like welfare. But his surprise evaporated as she kept talking, and he realized she wasn't talking about U.S. welfare policy at all, but about Albert and Poland. Her small brother being pulled from her arms sixty years earlier and dumped into the black hole of history was the catalyst of her life—that much Garrick had already figured out—and in it she found the yardstick by which to measure all subsequent events around her. Politicians wagging fingers at the welfare system, risking a child's meal in order to get votes, wasn't the same as sending them to concentration camps, but there was a similar poison there, Mrs. Janovik seemed to think. Politicians and soldiers (*and True Believers*, Garrick added, silently) all have their goals, and some of those goals, even the just ones, will necessarily hurt some people,

that was the way of life, but children should be off-limits. If it hurts a child, Mrs. Janovik believed, it was wrong, even if hurting the child wasn't the point of the thing.

The notion seemed to Garrick at once inarguably true and completely unworkable. No war ever fought, no major political decision ever made, didn't have some detrimental effect, major or peripheral, on a child. Change, even positive change, always claimed victims, and not just adult ones. Knowing the ground they were treading, Garrick had gently exhumed the examples of good struggles that had claimed young casualties—the Civil War, the defeat of Germany, the civil rights movement—and wouldn't more children be worse off if those things hadn't happened? But Mrs. Janovik shook her head. Such cruel mathematics could be applied to grown-up lives, but not to those of children. She declared: "Children should be off-limits." Garrick now wondered how Mrs. Janovik would square that with Ron Kruger's revelation: How he came to the same conclusion, seeing a child by his sick mother's bed, deciding that politics had strayed where it didn't belong and someone was going to pay—a Moment of Truth if there ever was one—and the result was a tainted news story with an innocent victim, not exactly the best way to serve Truth. He supposed she would merely repeat the stubborn declaration—*Children should be off-limits*—since it was an axiom she obviously was willing to separate from its consequences.

By eleven-thirty—or five-thirty, depending on how you chose to read the backward clock—the reporters had passed well beyond the fairly drunk stage, and Garrick had Claire, if not where he wanted her, at least pretty much to himself: At a small table two paces away from the main table. The conversation about Senator Stan had branched off into a discussion about ostrich farms, then about agriculture in general, then about technology in general, straying tantalizingly close to Garrick's domain out in the weeds, and finally landing directly at his feet when Shiny had brought up something he had read about the possibility of growing crops on other planets. All heads had turned to Garrick, who said: "Not likely," then, as soberly as possible, explained why. He was just beginning to relish being at the center of camp for a change when the conversation somehow started careening back toward the late Senator Stan. Neither Garrick nor Claire particularly wanted to go there, so Claire asked him some more about the solar system. Somewhere between Jupiter and Saturn, the two of them had casually jettisoned from the mother table.

Claire had, in fact, always had a small curiosity about the night sky, so her interest

in Garrick's galactic tour wasn't entirely contrived, but mostly. She mainly didn't want to sit around for the rest of the evening listening to her fellow political junkies talking about dead ostriches, dead senators or dead anything else. Garrick, whom she had always envied for his coolly analytical mind, something she lacked, had offered a reasonable alternative: The stars. She knew that his main interest in her was more earthly—that didn't take a great deal of analysis on her part—but for now he seemed content to tell her about black holes, and she was content to listen.

Black holes: Former stars, whose gravity has become so intense that the whole structure of the star collapses inward, to an infinitely small but infinitely dense point, the gravity reaching unfathomable levels, sucking in everything around it, even light.

Claire: ``So where does the hole lead to?''

Garrick: `` `Lead to'—Well, it doesn't `lead to' anything, really. It's not that kind of hole. I guess it's not really a *hole* at all. I guess you could think of it more like a—like a magnet, pulling in everything around it.'''

Claire: ``So the things around it—they stick to it?''

Garrick: ``Okay, a magnet is a bad example. It's more like a trash compactor. The things it sucks in become more and compact, and heavier, but the size of the thing keeps getting smaller.'''

Claire: ``It sucks in light?''

Garrick nodded.

Claire: ``How can light get smaller?''

Garrick: ``Okay—the main thing it does with light is to divert it. Into the gravity well. The light reflecting off a thing is all that allows us to see it, so if there's no light in a given area—if it's all being diverted into a fallen star before it can get to us—then nothing around it can be seen. That's why they look like holes. Everything around them is gone. Just gone.'''

Claire, nodding: *Just gone.*

Claire had been twelve when Anna had died. They were seventeen years apart, almost to the day, and Anna seemed less like an older sister than some kind of friendly but distant aunt who came to visit now and then. Claire was learning to walk as Anna was choosing between colleges. Anna married the year Claire turned eleven, a little late for their mother's taste, pushing twenty-nine, but finally married. She settled into a job as an

insurance agent, one which paid not much but offered a good start, a chance for upward mobility, and—one of those little perks no one thinks about—an office close enough to Anna's suburban Philadelphia apartment to allow her to walk home for lunch, thus saving money. It was during one of the trips home for lunch that Anna apparently interrupted a burglar. He hit Anna in the head with something—they never learned what—on his way out the door. The coroner assured Claire's parents that she'd died instantly, though Claire, the skeptic even as a child, wondered about that at the time. She wondered about it more during that murky period early in her career when she routinely had to deal with coroners, one of whom casually acknowledged to her that, yes, he often lied to the relatives about the speed and comfort with which their loved ones had died.

Claire's feelings after Anna's death couldn't accurately be described as grief; she hadn't known her that well. But there was a gnawing emptiness there, almost like hunger, that grew stronger instead of weaker over the years, becoming harder to live with even as her parents gradually learned to live with their grief. Her mother told her once, a few years after Anna's death, that Claire's continued existence was the only reason both her parents hadn't killed themselves, a stark illumination of how different the death was to them than it was to Claire. Something so rash had never entered Claire's mind, then or now—especially now, having seen a few suicide victims and having marveled at how universally undignified they always looked. But still, twenty years later, the emptiness had grown.

Claire often thought that Anna's bad timing that day was the only reason Claire was now a reporter, living and working in Springfield, Illinois, following the comings and goings of a pasty-faced governor and a corrupt Legislature; the only reason she was, at this moment, sitting across a small table from Garrick Martin, listening to his explanation of black holes, which she still didn't quite get, except for the one part: *Just gone*. Claire supposed now that her parents' memory of those first weeks was as if remembering a twisted and hellish nightmare that can't be fully grasped the next morning. It was entirely possible that, among the family, only Claire remembered that time with any clarity, and what Claire mostly remembered were the reporters. Several of them had come to the funeral, standing back from the crowd and watching, and writing, and several more had called the house, which seemed odd to her now; it must have been a slow news week. Relatives cried with her parents, the coroner very possibly lied to them, the police took down information and made no promises, neighbors brought tin-foil-covered food and

whispering tones, all saying predictable and meaningless things, tip-toeing around the vivid image of her sister's damaged corpse, pretending the image wasn't there. Only the reporters asked her parents the question that Claire most wanted answered: *What was she like? Tell us about her.*

Years later, when editors would say: "Don't feel guilty about calling the families, they *want* to talk about it"—an unlikely claim that most reporters assumed to be a just another editors' lie—Claire knew it was true. The day after the funeral, her father talked on the phone for twenty minutes with one reporter, then a few minutes with another, then, after some consideration, put her mother on, who talked for more than half an hour, crying a lot but laughing at one point at the memory of some gradeschool play. Claire remembered her Aunt Julia sitting in the front room furiously composing a letter of complaint to several news organizations about their reporters' abominable intrusions, even as Claire's mother stood in the kitchen, achingly recounting Anna's life to a stranger, telling the stories that Aunt Julia and the others had earlier told her to stop talking about, silent prayer being a more effective and less upsetting way to remember Anna. The next morning, Claire learned from reading the newspaper that her older sister had been a straight-A student all her life, had gone to the Pennsylvania state finals in high school girls' basketball, and liked the Three Stooges, all of which came as news to Claire. (She had also learned from the newspaper that police weren't "optimistic" about finding the killer. Their lack of optimism was justified, as it turned out, the killer never having been found.)

It was only recently that Claire had come to understand that she drifted into journalism in college precisely because, during those frantic weeks in her twelfth year, the only people she saw who appeared to be doing anything useful—the only ones who weren't utterly paralyzed by the subject of her sister's death—were the reporters. But now, as a reporter, Claire found herself increasingly paralyzed by the subject of death. Her first job out of college, at a tiny daily newspaper in southern Pennsylvania, involved, like most first jobs in journalism, coverage of a lot of car accidents, fires, suicides and other deadly topics. She vomited at the sight of her first corpse—a motorcycle accident—but the other reporters and even one cop assured her that was normal, that they all vomited early on, and she got over it. The gloom that settled over her in the subsequent years had less to do with the twisted conditions of the bodies, which she came to hardly notice anymore, than with the fact that, more and more, she saw her sister in every set of glassy

eyes. As she approached and then passed the age at which her sister died, she tried to picture it: This being the end, nothing in front of her, standing at the rim of a black hole. *Just gone.*

After a few years, she got on at the Associated Press in Pittsburg, then the A.P. Philadelphia office, where she started gaining a reputation as a solid general-assignment reporter, one of A.P.'s up-and-comers, which could mean going anywhere in the world, but still the subjects of her stories were, more often than not, formerly alive. She knew other reporters who mostly wrote about the living, and she grew more resentful with every corpse. Her Moment of Truth, to use Ron Kruger's dry, reedy words, finally came during a story about a deaf high school girl who was run down by a drunk driver while crossing the street outside her school. Claire was standing on the sidewalk, talking to one of the girl's friends, trying and failing to keep from looking over at the body among all the cops and equipment, when one of cops asked her to step back. Confused, she complied, then looked down just in time to see the cop scoop up a purple hair barrette off the cement, where Claire's foot had been, and drop it into a clear-plastic evidence bag. By deadline that afternoon, Claire had filed the story and her resignation.

Her editor: "What the hell is this?"

Claire: "I'm sick of being on cop-call, Mary."

Editor: "I told you, as soon as something opens up on the business desk —"

Claire: "I'm not covering another body."

Editor: "Okay, look—before you ruin your career, let me call around. Maybe one of the other bureaus has something."

Government coverage seemed the logical sanctuary for a shell-shocked crime reporter, but Philadelphia City Hall and Pennsylvania Statehouse were the only close options, and no one in any of those chairs was likely to give it up soon. Her editor found something in St. Louis that looked good but would last only a few months, until the bureau chief returned from maternity leave. The A.P. Detroit bureau needed someone, but if anything, the body count there would be higher.

Editor: "The only other thing they've got open right now is the Illinois capitol."

Claire, brightly: "Chicago?"

Editor: "Didn't you take geography? Springfield. I'll keep looking."

Claire: "Any bodies?"

Editor: "Not likely."

Claire: "I'll take it."

Her first look at Springfield brought disappointment. She guessed she had expected grand Antebellum mansions fringed by quaint clapboard cabins or something, and there was a tiny bit of that, but mostly there were boxy government office buildings and bad restaurants and pot-holed streets too small for the traffic when the Legislature was in session. The biggest tourism draw in town was Lincoln's Tomb—of *course*; a friggin' grave. The job was another matter. Claire—who had, in fact, failed geography in school, and had come close to failing social studies—quickly became the best political reporter she knew, mainly by applying the principle that covering politicians wasn't fundamentally any different than covering criminals, except for The Twinge: A strange new sensation, thrilling, almost predatory, almost ... erotic, moving through her groin and stomach in waves as she confronted men of power and watched their arrogance and sanctimony fall away like chunks of dried mud.

She first felt it while writing her first investigative story in Springfield, about the frozen lobsters. She had been nervous about confronting the campaign contributor, about looking into the eyes of a man of power and money and saying: "I'm writing a story that is going to publicly embarrass you and possibly land you in court." But halfway through the conversation, watching the tall, bald contributor's pinstriped armor disintegrate into a dusty mound of excuses and pleas, Claire realized, to her surprise, that she was enjoying it. The Twinge made her breathe harder; by the end of the interview, she could barely sit still. Covering car accidents was never like this. The contributor ended the conversation by saying: "Please don't write this," and she said she was sorry, but this was an abuse of the political system and she had no choice but to write about it, even though she didn't want to. The last part was a lie; she was, in fact, eagerly constructing the lead to her story in her head even as she said it. She felt guilty at first about the enjoyment; it seemed entirely too similar to the enjoyment a cat must feel while batting around a wounded moth prior to killing it (though wounded moths, she reminded herself, didn't subvert the democratic process by trying to bribe public officials with frozen seafood).

Of course, Claire had experienced guilty pleasures before—sexual ones, gastronomic ones, deep-green moments of cruelty or spite that felt unaccountably good—but never had she come across a guilty pleasure that could be wrapped in so fine a cloak

as the First Amendment. The day the frozen-lobster story ran was, to that point, the single most satisfying day of her professional life, and by noon she was plotting out the next of many investigative stories to follow. The Twinge arose anew with each story. It was intensified by the fact that the other reporters clearly resented her for the frequency with which she came up with Something Big, especially Harvey the Third, whose dominance she obviously threatened.

Best of all was the fact that most of her stories involved the living, until lately, anyway. Brad Connor was the first pending-execution story Claire had been saddled with in more than ten years in the business. Although the subject matter, all death, was something that made her instinctively want to run, she was gradually coming to realize now that the whole thing opened up an intriguing new subject in her post-Anna life: Vengeance. Oddly, it wasn't something that she had previously thought about, even early on, watching her parents grieve. But now, after going through the court files on Connor's bloody spree along I-Fifty-Five, she began to wonder where her sister's killer was now, whether he had killed before or again, and whether, by some twist of luck, he might end up strapped to some steel gurney, a court-ordered needle in his arm. She knew Connor wasn't going to turn out to be Anna's killer—this wasn't television, after all—but he clearly was of the same species. Claire didn't know what the coroner told the family of David Randolph, shot through the eye in the shadow of his eighteen-wheeler, but she knew from the file that he hadn't died instantly.

Sitting there in the bar, Garrick Martin's voice somewhere in the background, Claire suddenly realized—*Moment of Truth*—that she had already reached a conclusion, and was merely having trouble admitting it to herself: She wanted to watch Connor die, wanted to watch him strapped down and shaking, tossing his snow-capped head back and forth.

The backward clock was going on one now—or eight—and Garrick had moved from black holes to the big-bang theory. Claire, drunk enough now to be impolite, interrupted him: "You ever cover an execution?"

Garrick: Silence. Then: "Uh—no. I mean, I've covered a couple of the trials, but I haven't been in the chamber."

Claire: "How does Illinois do it?"

Garrick: "Injection."

Claire: “No, I mean the press coverage. Is there a lottery?”

Garrick: “Um, yeah, they draw names. I don't know how many get to go.” Then, smiling: “Planning our vacation, are we?”

Claire: *Just gone.* “Just wondering.”

Chapter Three:

***‘Guns Save Lives!’***

Governor Bell Promotes Tourism

*Alice Falls*

The structural pomp and beauty of the Capitol was answered, almost foot for square foot, by the utilitarian bleakness of the Stratton Office Building, squatting directly in the shadow of the Capitol’s silver dome. Anyone who doubted that government was a weed that never stopped spreading needed only look at the history of official state architecture in Springfield, of which the Stratton Building was the grimmest result. An earlier state Capitol was built in town in the eighteen-thirties, and still stood—an elegant but, by modern standards, miniscule domed limestone building that was now called the Old State Capitol, used in modern times only for tours and a few state offices, and barely big enough for that. The entire House chamber in the old building, the one in which Lincoln served and made his “House Divided” speech, was not much bigger than the marbled men’s restroom on the second floor of the current Capitol. The current Capitol rose in the eighteen-eighties, and more than a century later was still called the “new” Capitol. It was cavernous—more space than was necessary early on—but ultimately not big enough to contain the mutant dandelion that was Illinois state government. Farmer-legislators were gradually replaced by professional ones, who all needed offices and staffs, and the staffs needed offices, and pretty soon other government-funded weeds started springing up around the perimeter of the new Capitol to hold the overflow. The Stratton Building came in the mid-nineteen-fifties, and it looked as though its designers and

builders had gone about their project with one eye scanning the skies for incoming Soviet missiles. It was a massive gray concrete-and-steel slab of a structure, thick and boxy, with small windows, oppressive ceilings, brutal florescent lights, hallways that felt like bunkers. Even the cement erection that was the Springfield Arms was artful by comparison.

Now, under the florescent lights of one of the low-ceilinged committee rooms of the Stratton Building, Tim Flynn sat at a polished wood table, a microphone in front of him, his knit tie choking him, the one dress jacket he owned scratching at the inside crook of his elbow because the shirt underneath was short-sleeved. Below the waist: Blue jeans and gym shoes. By his outfit, he could easily have been mistaken for a reporter. But Tim Flynn was, in fact, a True Believer, as anyone could see from the cardboard sign standing on end next to his chair, which read: ``*Guns Save Lives!*'' Flynn's true belief: That the very notion of a government telling someone he couldn't tuck a handgun into his belt as he dressed in the morning was as fundamentally silly as telling him he couldn't wear a knit tie. Sillier, in fact, there being few if any instances in which a knit tie might protect a person from attack.

Flynn: Age forty-three, a Springfield native, five-and-half feet tall, a wiry build topped with a crew cut, and a jutting jaw that made him appear larger than he was. Like many of the more enthusiastic True Believers, Flynn was no stranger to the inside of the Stratton Building, or to the rest of the state government weeds around Springfield. For much of his adult life he had been around, showing cardboard signs to whatever people of power would look at them. He had become such a familiar part of the political landscape that the Secretary of State's office two years earlier politely but firmly suggested he should register as a lobbyist, lest he inadvertently violate the state's lobbyist disclosure laws. Flynn thought the idea silly—lobbyists wore pinstripe suits and carried briefcases, whereas Flynn spent much of his time in camouflage t-shirts and gym shoes—but he registered anyway, listing as his sole client the National Rifle Association (having had a falling out some years earlier with the weak-willed folks who ran the Illinois State Rifle Association). A short time later, a pinstripe-clad man claiming to be the *real* N.R.A. lobbyist in Springfield confronted Flynn in the Capitol rotunda, making legal threats like some weenie lawyer. Flynn stalked back up to the Secretary of State's office, his gym shoes squeaking on the marble stairs, and changed his disclosure form to read: ``Lobbyist on my own behalf.''

Flynn knew that his neighbors on his block, always looking for ways to tear him down, spent a lot of time whispering over their fences about him and his cardboard signs, snickering at the idea of Crazy Tim Flynn thinking he could be a political player at the Capitol. They would shut up if they could see him at times like this, sitting at the witness table before the House Law committee, a dozen state Representatives facing him, preparing to seek his advice on a bill crucial to the future of the Second Amendment, a stenographer preparing to take down his every word, a packed room of spectators behind him. The weenie N.R.A. lobbyist was in the audience in his pinstriped suit, waiting his turn to speak to the committee. He would have to wait for Flynn. Flynn had hung around the committee clerk's office for two days the previous week, lobbying the young assistant clerk (he *was* a registered lobbyist, after all) to put his witness slip at the top of the stack. The assistant clerk, who wasn't supposed to have those kinds of conversations, ultimately agreed, swayed either by Flynn's persistent arguments about the crashing failure of the bureaucratically corrupt N.R.A. to effectively protect the Constitutional right to bear arms; or by a desire to get Flynn to go away. Flynn suspected it was the latter, which was fine with him. Flynn knew that the reporters, for one, usually achieved their ends within the Capitol culture not by political acumen or persuasive arguments, but rather by getting people to want them to go away.

Flynn looked over at the press box on the far side of the crowded committee room. No television cameras, but it was early yet. So far the only reporters in attendance were Jack Wormer; Zack Carson, the second half of the *Chicago Herald* bureau; and Colleen Brenner, who once asked Flynn if his family tree had any branches on it, which he assumed was an insult. Flynn knew the reporters' relationship with him couldn't accurately be described as friendship; "tolerance" might be a better word. When Flynn hung around the lobby of the press room, drinking coffee and bantering, he always had the feeling they were patiently waiting for him to leave. Of course, the media in general had a reputation of being irrevocably liberal—of holding to a philosophy that, in an earlier and saner time, would have been described as "pinko"—but as far as Flynn could tell, the reporters on floor two-and-a-half didn't hold to any particular philosophy at all. He felt a kinship, even if they didn't. They were, like him, standing on the fringes of the circle of power in the Capitol, looking over the shoulders of the people of power, perhaps feeling a little reflected power themselves, as if sitting in the second row around a campfire, soaking in

just enough of the heat to imagine what it must feel like in the first row. Also, there was the way they dressed: They were among the few elements of the Capitol culture that didn't dress as if they had gold-plated shoe-horns up their asses.

Flynn thought the three reporters in the press box looked ill, and he was right. Colleen and The Worm had been at Norb's Place past one the night before, and Zack Carson showed up just long enough to regret it. Colleen hadn't vomited in fourteen years, since the July afternoon she saw her first corpse (carbon monoxide poisoning) but she came close to vomiting that morning. The danger passed, but the headache remained, a sharp, pulsing one that was made worse by the angry florescent lights of the committee room. The Worm and Zack Carson were nursing somewhat lesser-grade headaches, but were saddled with the added burden of being seated next to Colleen while she was in such a state.

Behind the pain, all three were wondering the same thing: How they might get the phrase "creamy white thighs" printed in their newspapers, thus retrieving the two-hundred dollars apiece they put into the center of the long table at Norb's the night before—a thing they did with flourish and abandon at the time, but which now had them doing mental math and thinking about groceries.

The "creamy white thighs" business had arisen past midnight. Colleen, The Worm and the rest had been watching Ron Kruger sink deeper and deeper into his glass—he was foregoing the pitcher of foamy beer and instead drinking, initially, gins and tonic, and later, just gin—and lamenting the future of the Capitol press corps, being left as it was to the sloppy, reckless, over-educated, lazy, uninspired, spoiled children of modern journalism, several of whom were currently buying his drinks. At one point, the waitress showed up with a roast beef horse shoe and set it down in front of Kruger—*thump*—and they were all forced to watch him devour it, their warnings about cholesterol merely confirming Kruger's view that his tough old profession had been hijacked by New Agers and pansies. Kruger, between bites of horse shoe, said: "Your problem is that you kids today don't have fun with this job the way *we* used to. God, the way things were in that press room. The practical jokes, the whiskey breakfasts, the poker games—"

Cole Smiley, wrinkling his nose: "Whiskey breakfasts?"

Kruger: "Tooth, you haven't lived until you've had a shot of Jack Daniels going into a nine a.m. gang-bang with the governor."

Gang-bang: What the reporters called it when they all interviewed a governor or other prominent person at the same time, physically surrounding the person, thrusting microphones and tape recorders and shouted questions at the person, often without the person's consent. Garrick Martin, for one, didn't consider himself prudish, but he had never become comfortable with the term, the metaphor seeming at times a little too on-point.

Kruger: "Hell, when Jamison was governor, he use to drink *with* us in the morning."

Julian: "Sounds lovely, Ron."

Kruger: "Dint you guys ever see 'The Front Page,' for crissakes? Christ, no one has any cahoonies anymore."

The comment brought smiles and glances around the table, unnoticed by Kruger, who thought for all the world that he was speaking proper Spanish. Kruger had been using the word "cahoonies" since the previous year, when Tooth, who had a tendency to mispronounce words both on and off the air, tried to say the word *cajones* during a discussion in the press room lobby about golf. The word had simply come out wrong—"cahoonies"—drawing guffaws, everyone but Kruger having understood what had happened. Kruger had never heard the word "cajones" or "cahoonies," and when he asked what was so damned funny, Julian explained, straight-faced, that Tooth had used the Spanish word for "balls," while neglecting to mention to Kruger that Tooth had spectacularly mispronounced it. Kruger, thinking he had finally gotten the joke, had been using the word "cahoonies" ever since. The others had begun using it, too, mainly as a means of keeping the joke alive.

Kruger's lament about the lack of cahoonies in the press corps led into a conversation about South America, then about birds, then—inevitably—about ostriches, then back into the subject of the way things had been before most of them were born. Kruger recounted how he had been the only reporter in the press wing to correctly predict the outcome of the Kennedy-Nixon race, though Kruger had been the youngest reporter there; how somber Springfield had become when news of the Kennedy assassination had hit three years later; how Kruger still shuddered at his memories of the Vietnam War, the most dangerous news coverage he had ever been involved in. The Worm, baffled, said: "You covered the war, Ron?" And Kruger explained, haltingly, that, no, he wasn't

physically over there, but things had gotten pretty harrowing around the Statehouse with all those hippies and protesters.

Kruger: "So in 'seventy-one, I'm reporting on the hippies, and this little editor is giving me hell. He doesn't understand their language."

Colleen: "Groovy."

Kruger: "So I decide to slip the word 'beaver' into a story and see if I can get it on the air. Then the other guys start betting on whether I can do it."

Harvey: "Just how does one go about slipping the word 'beaver' into a story?"

Kruger: "Well, it wasn't easy . . ."

That, as near as Colleen could remember through the shroud of pain the next morning, was where the "creamy white thighs" business had started. That young little piece of dessert, Shiny O'Shaughnessey, had been whining, as he increasingly did lately, about his disillusionment with journalism, its lack of purpose, its lack of heart, and the robber-barons who ran United News International, and he clamped onto Kruger's beaver story like hungry mosquito. Shiny: "That's it! We'll have a bet! We'll see who can be the first to sneak something past their night-desk!"

Harvey: "Um, wait a minute, are we still on the 'beaver' subject? 'Cause I'm not ready for a new career —"

Worm, getting excited: "No, no, this is good. We can *do* this!"

Colleen, with an appalled laugh: "I have no goddamn intention of putting the word 'beaver' in my copy!"

Worm: "No, it has to be something more subtle. 'Pulsing hot thighs,' something like that."

Harvey: "That's subtle? Why don't you just make it 'big creamy breasts'?"

Tooth: "How about 'cahoonies'?"

Shiny: "Just 'hot thighs'?"

Kruger: "Too easy. You'll all just write features about barbecuing."

Julian: "White hot thighs?—"

Tooth: "'White hot cahoonies.'"

Colleen, to Shiny: "I want to be clear on this. You want some greater purpose in your career—but you'll settle for getting the words 'creamy white thighs' into print?"

At that, the others went silent and stared at Colleen, revelation in their eyes.

Watching them watching her, she had wondered for a dizzy moment if she had a bug on her head. Then they started laughing and saying the phrase, over and over, passing it around and trying it on like a colorful scarf: ``Creamy white thighs! Creamy white thighs!''

From there, the thing got complicated, though the central premise was simple enough: Fool the anal-retentive, burned-out ex-reporters who worked on newspaper copy desks around the state into allowing a normally unprintable phrase into print. For that purpose, ``creamy white thighs'' was perfect: Vaguely sexual, not the sort of thing that would generally come across a copy editor's desk, but not so overtly out of line that it would necessarily trip the alarms. It would make each editor up the line pause and, if all went well, move on.

The complications involved the ground rules. There were many pathways into a newspaper, many formats—news stories, editorials, columns, features—and some would be easier to corrupt than others. Some, it was agreed, would be *too* easy, like the column format: A stray line in a witty personal column about, say, sunbathing, would be all it would take. So it was agreed that the words must come in a straight-news story, which meant the writer would have to weave it into a real subject in some way that would appear legitimate enough to get past the copy-desk neurotics.

Then there was the question of what to do about the broadcast media. Colleen wanted to bar radio and television from the bet altogether. It was potentially too easy, she argued, for Julian or Tooth or any of the other radio or television reporters to simply slip the three words into their on-air banter with no context, without having to dodge copy editors or leave evidence of the crime in print or otherwise work for it. Television reporters in particular, she argued, said things stupider and less relevant than ``creamy white thighs'' all the time, so there wasn't a level playing field. Tooth laughed good-naturedly when she said that, like he always laughed when she pretended to savage his profession as shallow and stupid, though she always did an astoundingly good job of making it sound like she was dead serious. As Tooth laughed, Colleen responded to his laughter the way she always did: By staring at him silently. As she did, Julian negotiated a complicated agreement with Harvey and The Worm which would allow the participation of radio and television reporters, under strict guidelines, with mediation by Macy, who would be informed the next morning of his mediator status.

The issue of money also got complicated, and expensive. Initially, the bet was twenty-five dollars each, all of it to go to the first one to get “creamy white thighs” into a story. Kruger, however, harangued them for their cowardice and cheapness—in *his* day, you didn’t so much as take a piss for less than fifty bucks, whatever *that* meant—so they upped the bet to one-hundred dollars each. Later, someone—Colleen seemed to remember it was Harvey—remarked idly that, in his case at least, getting caught in a stunt like this would mean suspension and maybe even firing. The Worm agreed that, yes, he would definitely get canned if his editors found out he was trying to slip quasi-obscenities into their family newspaper in order to win a bet, especially since the paper had just run a searing editorial opposing gambling in Illinois. Then someone else—Shiny?—suggested that they should reconsider the thing, since winning the bet could well mean getting fired. The others agreed that, yes, that was something to think about, so they upped the bet again, to two-hundred dollars each, thus giving the eventual winner more of a hedge against unemployment.

It seemed like a good idea at the time, but now, under the florescent lights of the committee room in the hideous Stratton Building, Colleen wondered what in the fucking hell she had been thinking. She had put up money she didn't have, to join a bet she probably couldn't win, and if she did happen to win it, chances were good that Helen would find out and tell her to Get On Her Horse and ride it right out of the profession. At least she had made sure that Garrick the Space Geek, sitting over at the small table trying to crawl down Claire Ottoman's pants, had been yanked into the bet before Norb's had closed. Helen couldn't realistically fire both of them in the middle of a Legislative session.

Colleen was still pondering her predicament when Tim Flynn, sitting at the witness table next to his “Guns Save Lives!” sign, twisted around in his seat to look at the press box and waved, smiling. Colleen, Worm and Zack Carson waved back stiffly, smiles pasted. No one in the press wing was sure how Flynn had come to think of himself as one of them, nor had they figured out how to diplomatically dissuade him of the notion. Zack Carson, smiling flatly and responding to Flynn’s wave by briefly putting up one hand, asked quietly, of no one in particular: “Think he's armed?”

Now the committee chairman—white male, middle-aged, salt-and-pepper hair—flipped the switch on his microphone and tapped the mouthpiece twice, sending two electric thumps pounding down from the ceiling, followed a moment later by the screech

of feedback, like thunder following lightning. In the press box, Colleen stiffened her throat and fought a wave of nausea.

The chairman, into the microphone: "Sorry about that." Then, with a crooked smile: "This is the House Law committee. Anyone in the wrong classroom had better leave now."

The audience responded with a polite titter of laughter, except Colleen, who narrowed her eyes and thought: *Death!*

The chairman: "This is a special hearing on House Bill Forty-Seven. Madam clerk, please read the bill."

The clerk, a small woman with glasses seated next to the Chairman: "House Bill Forty-Seven, an act in relation to firearms, amending the criminal code of Illinois."

Colleen knew, from having read the bill the previous week, that the change it made to the criminal code was exactly one word: The first "The" was changed to an "A." This wasn't uncommon. Frequently, state laws that would intimately affect the lives of millions of Illinois citizens began as "shell" bills, pieces of proposed legislation that proposed to do nothing. The reason: The legislative process adhered to a strict set of deadlines by which bills had to be filed, voted upon in committee, voted upon on the House or Senate floors, sent to the other chamber, and ultimately sent to the governor. But the political process operated on its own clock—one that often made the backward clock at Norb's Place look sensible by comparison. It wasn't unusual that a filing deadline would start gaining on a bill long before its sponsor was politically ready to put in writing the details of what exactly what the bill was supposed to do—for once the "language" was committed, the opponents would start coming out of the Capitol's mahogany woodwork to rip the thing to shreds. It was preferable not to get too specific too early. The problem: Those damned filing deadlines. As a result, hundreds of bills were filed every session which did nothing other than change one word of an existing law. Then the sponsor could amend the real language into the bill at his or her leisure, the amendment deadlines coming later than the bill-filing deadlines. This was the very essence of the legislative process in Springfield: making rules, and then finding ways around them.

The bill at hand was sixty-nine pages long, consisting of sixty-eight pages of the existing, unchanged criminal code, and one page of the code with the "The" stricken through with a dotted line, and the new "A" underlined. Each time a reporter, lobbyist or

anyone else ordered up a copy of the bill from the House bill room, he or she got all sixty-nine. Copies of the bill were currently sitting all over the committee room, a forest of dead trees. Such waste was common at the Capitol, and was particularly egregious as it related to House Bill Forty-Seven, since everyone knew the ultimate, if yet unwritten, goal of the legislation anyway: To allow Illinois citizens to tuck handguns into their belts as they looped their knit ties in the morning.

Chairman: "We'll begin with the sponsor. Representative Homer?"

Representative Homer, youngish, suited, sitting next to Flynn at the witness table: "Thank you Mister Chairman. As most of you know, House Bill Forty-Seven, as amended, would allow law-abiding Illinois citizens to carry concealed handguns." Then, smiling and turning to Flynn: "Rather than making us all endure another speech from a politician, I'd like to turn this over to Tim Flynn, a local Second Amendment-rights advocate and the driving force behind this bill—Tim?"

Flynn glanced over his shoulder to smirk once at the pinstriped N.R.A. lobbyist, then brought his mouth to the microphone and recited the introduction he had practiced all morning at home in his bathroom mirror:

"Ladies and gentlemen of the committee—opponents of this bill will tell you that we shouldn't allow law-abiding citizens to carry guns, though the criminals carry them freely." Then: "They will tell you we shouldn't allow law-abiding citizens to protect themselves, though the criminals don't lack protection." Then: "They will tell you that this bill will turn Illinois into a war zone."

Then, gravely: "Well, to that I say—let the war begin."

That was all that the House Law Committee heard of House Bill Forty-Seven that day, because seconds later, Alice Walden, the replacement for the retired Ron Kruger, short circuited all the lighting in the room, and in the adjacent rooms.

### *'Wonderland'*

Alice Walden: Young, slim, well-dressed, Madison-Avenue pretty, sandy-blonde hair—except her eyebrows, which were jet black—and a figure that could stop a press conference. She was pretty enough that she would have turned the majority of the male

heads in the room, even without having fallen over a lobbyist and knocked out the electricity to the south end of the first floor of the Stratton Building. As it was, having done that, she turned every head in the room.

No one in the committee room, including the three reporters, had ever seen Alice before, and all wondered who she was, especially after the business with the lights. She entered the room the way television reporters frequently did: With a cameraman in tow and a flurry of activity and noise around the two of them. In an age in which the average consumer could go out and, for less than a week's pay, buy a palm-sized video camera, television reporters still used cameras that were so bulky and heavy that they needed to be carried on the shoulder by large cameramen, with equally bulky tripod and lighting attachments carried separately. The cameramen—they were almost always men, big ones—were always poorly dressed, even by journalistic standards, but the accompanying television reporters more than balanced them out on that issue. The television reporters' obsession with fashion, hair and makeup was part of the reason Colleen harbored more vitriol for them than she did for most of the other types of people around her, which was saying something. Anyone who had the time to think so much about clothing wasn't thinking enough. The TV reporters' superficiality in their appearance, Colleen had long ago determined, was more than matched in their falsely sincere, saccharine approach to newsgathering. A few years earlier, Colleen and another group of reporters had been gathered around the hospital bed of an old woman in East St. Louis who was conducting a hunger strike to protest conditions in Haiti. Colleen had begun to ask the first question, about the U.S. government sanctions against Haiti that had been announced that day, but one of the TV reporters cut her off with a wicked *what-the-hell-are-you-doing* glare, then stuck his microphone into the emaciated woman's face, and asked in his sincerest television voice: "Tell us—how do you *feeeel*?"

Colleen's thought at the time: *Death!* But the naked stupidity of the entire television species didn't stop the old starving woman, or all the politicians Colleen dealt with, from catering to the TV reporters' every moronic whim. TV reporters tended to be late for every news event, and, invariably, the people conducting the news event would ask everyone to wait until all the TV cameras showed up before getting started. As far as Colleen knew, no one in the history of news had ever stopped a news event to wait for her or for any other print journalist. Television was king—an in-bred and retarded king, a king

who couldn't string three words together without two of them being vapid clichés, a king who thought preparing for an interview involved cosmetics—but king nonetheless. And people wondered why the kingdom was crumbling.

Alice Walden and her camera-serf entered the committee room from the back of the audience, and began attracting attention even before Alice fell. The tall, gawky cameraman was carrying the bulky camera on his shoulder and, with his free arm, carried a utility belt bristling with light and power. Alice carried the steel tri-pod—four feet long even in its folded-down state, and heavy as a spare tire—and over one of her shoulders was slung a dirty orange extension cord that didn't compliment her tasteful beige business dress-suit in the least. She looked, Colleen thought, like the victim of some faggy French fashion designer gone mad. The thoughts of The Worm and Zack Carson were more charitable, Alice's winding figure being clearly defined even through the distraction of the extension cord.

Alice and her cameraman, in their combined bulk, burst into the room, opening the heavy glass doors with their backs and trying to scurry—that was the only word for it, Colleen thought—through the sea of occupied chairs, bumping their equipment against lobbyists and witnesses, whispering frantic apologies, trying to get the press box as quickly as possible to set up before missing any more of the hearing than they had already missed.

Zack Carson, whispering: "Who is that?" The Worm shook his big head and stared.

By that point, Alice, navigating herself and her tri-pod through the audience, had changed course and tacked back toward the rear wall in order to avoid an especially choppy area in the sea of suits. The cameraman had followed like a boat in tow. Now she came to a narrow passage—two unusually large men had, by chance, seated themselves next to each other—and she prepared to guide her shapely rudder through. The tri-pod wasn't going, though, so she went to raise it above her head, one-handed, but couldn't quite get her elbow to lock into place before the weight dragged it back down, almost beaming one of the fat men. Now Alice shoved the tri-pod upward, toward the overhead florescent lights, determined that the momentum would keep it up there long enough to do the trick. But there turned out to be more momentum than was called for. The momentum carried Alice backward, dirty orange extension cord and all. She glanced off her

cameraman, and down they both went, like dominoes, falling in separate directions. The cameraman flipped over a freshman Senator from Macomb and landed in a heap of denim, metal and glass. Alice landed on a female lobbyist for the hog producers. The woman had seated herself in the wrong committee hearing by mistake, and was just preparing to get up and leave when the beige-clad television journalist landed in her lap. Alice's momentum still hadn't petered out, and both of them, the TV reporter and the hog lobbyist, flipped backward in the chair, legs up, Alice still holding the metal tri-pod sky-ward like a torch that needed to stay lit.

It was the tri-pod, ultimately, that did the damage to the electrical system of the Stratton Building. It crashed into a light-switch cover, shattering the plastic and plunging into the wall beneath, right through a knot of electrical circuits put there at a time when wiring codes were casual. A thick cascade of sparks flew out from the wall and, by the time they landed, shimmering and bouncing, they were the only light in the room. After a moment of dead silence, the gasps and murmuring started rising from the dark, then outright talking, including Colleen's voice, uncharacteristically low, flattened with amazement: "Oh, look. It's Barbara-fucking-Walters."

The first thing Garrick noticed about Alice, as she approached the coffee machine in the press room lobby later that morning: Her eyebrows. Her hair was sandy blonde, definitely natural, yet there were the black eyebrows, standing there on her face like an open secret. He had seen the phenomenon on dark-blonde women before, and twice had seen enough else to know exactly what it meant. In Garrick's eyes, Alice might as well have been standing there with no pants on. The eyebrows were too thin, she obviously plucked, no one was perfect, but still—*black*. Claire had her beat, eyebrows down, in thickness and style, but in total points, she suddenly had competition.

Garrick had just poured himself a cup of coffee when Alice and her ebony eyebrows approached, coffee cup-first. Garrick held up the pot and raised his own eyebrows in silent question.

Alice: "Thank you. Is it any good?"

Garrick, pouring: "No." A malicious lie. The press room coffee was, in fact, not bad, especially in comparison to Mrs. Janovik's coffee, which was, Garrick was certain, the worst he had ever tasted. The problem was a technical one: She used an old stainless

steel percolator with a little glass knob on top, the kind that boiled the half-brewed coffee and sent it seeping again and again back through the grounds. The thing must have been thirty years old. Garrick couldn't remember ever having seen such a contraption on a store shelf, he didn't suppose they even made them anymore, but Mrs. Janovik's was, unfortunately, in perfect working order. Garrick had diplomatically asked her one morning, while choking down the burnt, bitter liquid, where the machine had come from. He had expected some old-lady monologue about a special gift from her late husband or a cherished family possession with a story behind it, but instead she had said: "Sears." After more gentle prodding, it came out that the only reason she still used the thing was that it still worked, and why replace something that still worked? Why, indeed. Even when fresh, the coffee tasted as if was two days old, and it left grounds in the bottom of the cup.

Garrick, to Alice: "I'm Garrick Martin."

Alice: "Alice Walden. I just started at WQNC."

Garrick: "Oh, Kruger's job. Welcome. I'm with the *Peoria Post*."

Alice, nodding: "This is quite a building."

Garrick: "Anyone shown you around yet?"

Alice: "No. I just stopped in at the House Law committee this morning. On that concealed-weapons bill?"

Garrick, nodding: "Oh, yeah. Did they commit news?"

Alice, with a small laugh: "That's pretty good, 'commit news.'" Then, clearing her throat: "Um, no. They just took some testimony and then, um, postponed the vote."

Garrick, deadpan: "Well, I guess you'll just have to leave that grenade launcher at home for now."

Alice laughed again. Then they stood there a moment, cups almost touching, the air heavy with awkward silence, until a little coffee wave broke over the edge of Alice's cup so that they both had to back away from it.

For the rest of the morning, Garrick played Capitol tour guide for Alice, relishing her eyebrows, her figure, her laugh—it was a strangely boisterous thing for such a wispy woman—and relishing the fact that she didn't yet know that Garrick was the least qualified reporter in the press room to be giving anyone a tour. They began in the Senate, where all had learned the morning before of Senator Stan's death. Life was going on. A tall young black man, thin as rain, was standing at this desk on the Senate floor, giving a

monotone(elevated, high-falutin) speech about license-plate fees while his colleagues read their newspapers or whispered to their staff or stared into space. He was Senator Obama, who..... ((something about other black lawmakers distrusting him, ``Hollywood" Hendon, etc.))((get smthing from Mendell's book?

Garrick had stopped by his office to grab his multi-colored jacket on the way out of the press room lobby, carrying it over his arm until they were walking through the Senate door, where he slipped it on when the rules required it and not one moment earlier. Alice, getting her first good look at the jacket, looked again, then said nothing. Harvey the Third and Zack Carson were the only reporters seated in the pressbox, both wearing their own multi-colored jackets.

Garrick, whispering: ``Alice Walden—Harvey, Zack, *Chicago Herald*. Alice is Ron Kruger’s replacement.”

Zack, whispering: ``Welcome.”

Harvey, whispering: ``Nice to meet you.”

Alice, normal voice level: ``Thanks. I’ve just been—” On the senate floor, a dozen heads snapped toward the press box as if on cue. Alice, seeing the reaction, flinched and lowered her voice: ``I’ve just been trying to find my way around.”

Garrick, whispering and motioning out toward the floor: ``Republicans are on the right side, Democrats on the left. Right now they’re on third readings of bills. They’re more formal here than in the House. The men have to wear jackets, for one thing.”

Alice: ``Do the women have to wear anything special?”

Zack, whispering: ``Most of the senators prefer spiked heels and matching whips.”

Alice laughed, too loudly, and heads again snapped toward her. She cut herself off in mid-laugh and cleared her throat.

Garrick let her take in the monotone politics of the Senate floor for as long as he could stand it—his jacket was a cage—then he suggested with a nod that they leave. As Alice walked toward the exit, she caught her right leg on one of the chairs, sending it toppling over with a rattling crash, which was met with the biggest wave of snapped heads yet and a pause in the speech by Senator Obama, who looked over with a frowning brow, then looked back at his notes and pressed on. Alice quickly set the chair right, mouthed an apology toward the glaring senators, and exited. As Garrick began to follow, Harvey the Third grabbed his arm.

Harvey, whispering, with a hint of laughter: "Hear about House Law this morning?"

Garrick looked at the exit where Alice had just walked through, then looked back at Harvey: "She told me nothing happened."

Harvey: "I *bet* she did."

Alice poked her head back in the exit to see where she had lost Garrick, and he followed her out without awaiting further explanation from Harvey, then led her to the House. To get there meant tracing a route back through the two connected corridors behind the Senate; through two doorways; across the sea of suits sloshing around in the central hall on the third floor, most of them lobbyists; ducking into another set of corridors behind the House chambers; and finally to the rear door of the House, the one that led to the pressbox. The flow of the Capitol was like that throughout: Twisting and temperamental, coves and hidden rooms and half-windows and doors and corridors popping up everywhere, as if every time the builders thought they were done, someone had said: "No, wait—let's add one more hallway!" In the boxy, razor-straight interior of the Stratton Building, you could stand at one end of a given floor and see pretty much all there was to see at the other end, but in the Capitol, you were lucky if you could even *find* the other end. It had taken Garrick a month to learn the basic routes he needed, and that wasn't even including bowels of the building, where he almost never went, and which were said to be the most confounding of all.

As Garrick and Alice approached the high oak doors of the House chamber, Alice, still smarting from her introduction to the senators, was expressing surprise at the serenity of the legislative process, which made Garrick smile. His ear, trained to the pitch of floor debate, could faintly hear the serenity of the House, pounding against the inside of the oak door. He knew when they pulled the door open, the serenity would come spilling out and hit them full force in the face, and it did: Representatives yelling across the crowded floor, gesturing, throwing pencils and wads of paper; young, beautiful pages, high school boys and girls, running up and down the aisles, a few lawmakers' balding heads tracking them like radar; staff members casually wandering around, mingling with politicians as if they, too, had been elected for their policies, rather than hired for their ass-kissing ability; lobbyists puffing on cigars, meandering around like they owned the place—which in fact they did—both their cigars and their physical presence on the House floor violating state

law, though none of the one-hundred-eighteen lawmakers witnessing the crime seemed to mind. One of the representatives was giving a speech from his desk, screaming into his microphone, trying to put his voice above the din, and failing. Garrick and Alice, their mouths a breath apart, had to yell to each other to be heard.

Alice, looking around: ``Oh, my god.``

Garrick, smiling: ``Welcome to wonderland, Alice.`` Then, slipping off his multi-colored jacket: ``The House is less concerned than the Senate about decorum.``

Julian and Tooth were the only reporters in the press box and, as Garrick loudly made the introductions over the roar of the House serenity, both their faces hinted at smirks like the one Harvey had displayed minutes earlier. Alice either didn't notice it, or pretended not to. When she turned away, Garrick gave Julian and Tooth a sharp, questioning look. Julian responding by pinwheeling his arms and pretending to fall back into his chair.

Now Garrick and Alice stood shoulder-to-shoulder at the edge of the House floor, in front of the press box, Garrick pointing into the chaos, outlining the scene the way a football fan might stand at the sidelines and explain the organized violence to a novice. Football was, Garrick thought briefly, an apt comparison for the activity on the floor, though not the only metaphor. If you squinted out there, it was also possible to believe you were looking at the pit of a stock exchange, or a nineteen-seventies televised dance floor, or maybe at a street riot: People moving from place to place, gesturing, running, yelling, throwing things. The speaker at the front lectern would occasionally bang his gavel and call for order, which did little other than to provide a brief slowing of the action, like the lull between downs.

Of course, the ultimate metaphor for the House floor, Garrick often thought, was Illinois itself, a vast and chaotic state, divided into different types of humanity from Rockford to Cairo as surely as the House floor was divided Democrat and Republican: Bitter white coal miners scattered lightly around its picturesque but economically desolate southern end; stubborn gray farmers plowing its deadly flat mid-section; a tight, black enclave in the southwest, centered at East St. Louis, as horrid an example of urban rot as America had to offer; hateful white conservatives in an ever-widening ring in the wealthy northeast, second- and third-generation white-flighters to whom ``suburb`` was as much a philosophy as a location; and, holding it all down like a rusty old anchor, Chicago, where

the whole metaphor could be repeated yet again.

As Garrick began explaining the House floor to Alice, another metaphor occurred to him: A zoo. He could be a zoologist pointing to various groups of strange and slightly dangerous animals in cages, explaining their diets (catered chicken today, courtesy of the Manufacturers Association); their mating habits (girlfriends, mistresses, aides, lobbyists, interns, the occasional reporter); and their natural habitats (Republicans to the right side of the room, Democrats on the left).

Garrick, pointing: "The Chicago Democrats are up front. They run the show. Suburban Republicans are on the other side—fiscal conservatives in front, religious fanatics right behind them."

Alice laughed.

Garrick: "Those are the Downstate Democrats in back. Most of them are Republicans: Anti-abortion, anti-welfare, anti-civil rights, pro-gun."

Alice: "So what makes them Democrats?"

Garrick: "The coal miner's union." Then: "Over here is the black caucus. Most are Chicago Democrats, but they don't always get along with the Democratic leadership."

Alice: "Okay, but the Democratic leadership is also from Chicago? —"

Garrick: "Right, but they're white."

Alice: "Race means more than party?"

Garrick, shrugging: "Race means more than anything." That much was indisputable. Illinois' tenuous racial balance was illustrated nowhere as clearly as on the House floor, where a knot of black lawmakers sat like a dark island in a white sea, surrounded first by the whites who made up the other half of Chicago and, beyond that, the whites who made up the rest of the state. The blacks usually allied themselves with the small contingent of Hispanic Chicagoans, and could, on many issues, find common ground with the white Jewish liberals from the city's Gold Coast. But even at that, they still had a whole state of white hayseeds and white coal miners to contend with on their own side of the aisle, to say nothing of the Republican common enemy—all white—on the other side. As the Republican suburbanites looked on, smirking, the Democratic leadership was forever trying to broker peace within its party between the black Chicagoans and the white Downstaters, two cultures which, despite the identical "D's" after their names on the House roster, had as little in common as State Street had with a ratite farm.

At the center of the island of Black Chicago stood Representative Jeremy Rock, a.k.a. The Inmate: Tall, bow-tied, with Malcolm-X glasses, a razor-thin goatee and a head as bald as the Capitol dome. He was as imposing a figure as the House floor had, with a look of raw intelligence tinged with threat, created in part by his resume': He was the only sitting lawmaker in Illinois history with a felony criminal record. It was for gang-related theft in his youth, a laughable portfolio by modern gangland standards, but one that he wore like a badge nonetheless, even bringing it up in his speeches, a reminder to the white enemy on both sides of the aisle (party affiliation didn't impress The Inmate one way or the other) that at least one member of the House knew what the hell he was talking about when debate turned to Illinois' sorry-ass court and prison systems, institutions seething with racism. Some of the black lawmakers had turned culturally white from years in Springfield, white enough that even the most hateful of the white suburban Republicans would, after a few drinks, put arms around them and ooze stories at them as if they were similarly pigmented. None of the whites put arms around The Inmate, though, not even the Jewish Democrats.

Alice, noticing him: ``Who is *that*?''

Garrick: ``Representative Rock—'The Inmate.' He did time in his younger days, for gang stuff.'''

Alice: ``Seriously?''

Garrick, smiling: ``He likes to say this is the second time in his life that he's surrounded by criminals.''' It was, in fact, a line Rock used every chance he got.

The lawmaker attempting to make a speech over the noise was a short, gray man who was shouting with the intensity of a Baptist preacher, his words disappearing to the chaos almost as soon as he put them out there. Garrick and Alice could just make out every fourth or fifth word: ``Outrage—Supreme Court—thugs—Baby John.''' It didn't need further explaining, for either of them. Baby John was the name the media had given to the three-year-old Chicago boy who was the subject of a bitter court fight between his adoptive and biological parents. He had been put up for adoption at birth by his mother, a Ukrainian immigrant who had had a falling out with her husband and had lied to the doctors, telling them the father was dead. A month after the adoptive family brought the child home, the Ukrainian couple reconciled and the father, not dead after all, filed for custody of the child, arguing that, though the mother had given up her parental rights, he

hadn't. The adoptive parents dug in their heels—a deal was a deal—and the courts had been kneading the case ever since. The boy had remained with the adoptive parents through the three years of litigation, but now the Illinois Supreme Court apparently was poised to send the child to the Ukrainians. *Chicago Herald* columnist Bob Brown had taken up the adoptive parents' cause with a barrage of columns, a record string of them as far as anyone could tell, blasting the Ukrainians and the courts in general, and singling out Chief Justice James Tipple in particular for failing to throw out the Ukrainians' case earlier. Brown had made a good old-fashioned newspaper crusade out of the thing. He was the one who started the "Baby John" business, the child's real name being shielded by adoption confidentiality laws. The story was making secretaries around the Capitol cry publicly, but Garrick—inevitably thinking about Mrs. Janovik's brother Albert being herded into a train with other little boys—hadn't been able to get into the spirit of the thing, the comparison making Baby John look to him less tragic than the rest of the world seemed to view him.

Of course, in Garrick's mind, both the little boys in question looked identical: They had blond hair, slight little frames and incomplete blurs where their faces should have been. Mrs. Janovik didn't have any pictures of Albert and, though she described to Garrick his blond hair and tried her best to describe his face—and Garrick had done his best to conjure up what might be a reasonable likeness—there was too little there to work with, and all he could come up with was a generic little-boy face, a blur. Baby John's face, of course, was hidden from public view by court order, and Garrick didn't even know in that case whether the blond hair applied. In that sense, they were, in a way, similar little boys, if only in their anonymity. But there was where the likeness ended. What Garrick distilled from the Bob Brown columns and the rest was a tale of a little boy being tugged at by two competing sets of desperate parents; undebatably, there were far worse fates in the world, and Albert's had been one of them. In any case, all of Bob Brown's sound and fury appeared to be for naught. The consensus in the press room, where bets had been taken, was that the kid would soon be the property of the Ukrainians.

Alice, confused: "I thought this was in the courts. What can the Legislature do about it?"

Garrick: "Nothing."

Alice: "But he's talking like they can do something about it."

Garrick: "They all talk like that. It's an election year." Then, the uninvited thought: *Children should be off-limits.*

They passed Colleen in one of the twisting corridors on the way back to the press room. She smiled at Alice more politely than Garrick had ever seen her do, but stood a good distance from her while introductions were made.

Colleen: "Welcome." Then, to Garrick, the smile dropping away: "We have a gang-bang at the governor's office in five minutes."

Garrick and Alice walked in silence for a minute after that, Garrick unaware of the breakdown in translation, until Alice said dryly: "You know, at my last job, we just had a softball team." Garrick laughed a real laugh at that, not the polite kind that newly introduced people use around each other, and then it occurred to him that Alice had been laughing a real laugh the whole morning. He explained the gang-bang business, then led her to the hallway outside the governor's office, where half the press corps was already waiting, milling outside the high oak door and its brass sign: "Governor John Bell." They smiled and welcomed Alice politely but gave her an unaccountably wide berth.

There in the hallway, they milled, stood, milled some more, talked, milled again. At some point Alice's large cameraman showed up, hauling his burden of a camera and tripod, and he began milling with the two other cameramen, apart from the knot of reporters. More than twenty minutes passed, and Alice began looking at her watch at regular intervals, confused by both the delay and by the other reporters' lack of response to it. Garrick, watching her check her wrist, supposed Alice thought that interviewing the governor involved physically going into his office at an agreed-upon time, shaking hands, saying polite hellos, sitting down in chairs like human beings, asking questions and listening to the answers—it would be a normal thing to think—so he was curious how she would react to the reality of it, which was more like a pre-historic hunting party lying in wait to bring down a mastodon.

The high oak door to the office finally creaked open, and the reporters surged forward, as if sucked toward a fissure in an airplane cabin, then surged back again when they saw that it wasn't the mastodon emerging, but his press secretary, Walter "Circus Boy" Stevens. He carried an armload of press releases titled: "Governor Announces

Tourism Initiative,” which he passed out to the assembled reporters. Circus Boy Stevens: six-foot-five, thin, middle-aged, with horn-rimmed glasses perched upon a permanently weary and humorless face. His nickname was based on nothing more complicated than his freakish height. Julian Marcus initially tried to come up with something more creative—something perhaps based on the word “okay,” which Stevens used at least once in just about every sentence—but Julian ultimately decided to stick to the basics. Unlike the reporters’ nicknames, Circus Boy Stevens’ nickname was never used in his presence. His lack of humor was legendary, which made his cheery nickname that much more appropriate, Julian decided, based upon what he called the “Little John” principle of nicknaming: The best way to get at the truth of the matter was to show the contrast of its exact opposite. As sometimes happens, Circus Boy’s nickname eventually grew a nickname; the reporters often referred to him as “Circus” for short, though, again, never to his face.

Circus, his voice like stone: “Everyone ready? Okay? Out of respect for the family, could we please leave the Makowski thing alone for now, okay? We’ve got some major news on the tourism thing that we’d like to get out. Okay?” The reporters mumbled and nodded in agreement.

A moment later, the door creaked open again. Two large, young men in suits emerged and stood to either side of the door, and all the reporters stepped back, except Alice, who started to step forward, thinking they were going into the office. She stopped when she realized her error, then backed up too quickly, bumping into Tooth’s cameraman.

Now the Governor of Illinois emerged from the doorway and stood among the reporters in the corridor. John Bell: Tall—not as tall as his press secretary but definitely taller than he looked on television, Alice thought, but thinner, with coarse, silver-brown hair, a jutting chin, and the familiar, chiseled face that led the pages of so many newspapers. But now the face held a look Alice had never seen in the footage or campaign posters, a look that cut through her the moment she saw it. Bell hated them, it was instantly clear to Alice; hated them intensely, hated them enough not to even bother disguising the hate when he faced them, it was that stark in his blue-gray eyes. He might as well have stepped out of the office and announced to the assembled reporters: “I hate you all.”

Instead, he said stiffly: “How good to see all of you again. We have some exciting news about our tourism industry —”

That was as far as he got. The reporters surged forward like one multi-legged creature, wrapping itself around Bell and attempting to digest him with thrusting cameras and microphones. They all shouted questions at once, trying to cut each other off, shoving and elbowing the colleagues they had been milling and chatting with seconds earlier. Alice was stunned, but she was the only one. Even the two bodyguards, squirming nervously nearby, eyes darting around the crowd, didn’t appear surprised, and they didn’t move to break up the melee. Bell, encased in the belly of the beast, looked more annoyed than alarmed.

After a moment, one loud voice finally emerged from the jumbled pile of them, and the noise fell away.

Harvey the Third: “Governor, you had quite a falling out with Makowski last week. Do you regret that, now that he’s dead?”

Bell, bristling: “We didn’t have a falling out, and, no, I don’t regret that he’s dead.” Then: “I mean, I *do* regret that he’s dead, I don’t regret the falling-out—I mean the minor argument—that we may have had —”

Circus Boy Stevens, watching from a slight distance, momentarily closed both his eyes.

Bell: “Now, on the brighter side, the new tourism figures show—”

The reporters again cut him off with a barrage of shouted questions.

Tooth: “Governor, what were your last words with Senator Stan—and were they *angry* words?”

Bell: “They weren’t angry words, and you’ll hear everything I have to say about Senator Makowski at the funeral. Right now, I’m here to tell you what this administration is doing to bolster the tourism industry in Illinois —”

More shouted questions. Then, Colleen: “Governor, are you saying you *didn’t* have a falling out with Senator Makowski?”

Bell: “All right, look, I’m done talking about Makowski. If you’ve got any questions about the tourism initiative, I’d love to answer them.”

The reporters: Silence, glancing around at each other.

Then, Alice, calling from the back of the crowd: “Governor Bell, about the

tourism initiative —”

Bell, hopefully, craning to see Alice: “Yes?”

Colleen rolled her eyes.

Alice, glancing down at her notebook: “Governor, the Hotel Association tells me your tourism plan is flawed because it's based on unreliable funding sources, and they might counter with their own proposal. How do you respond?”

At that, there was silence, the other reporters looking at Alice as if they had just noticed her there. Circus glared at her, wide-eyed and irritated.

Bell: Silence. Then: “Well—uh—I wasn't aware of their concerns, but it's certainly—um—their prerogative to join in this debate—and I, uh—welcome their input.”

Circus, stepping forward: “Governor, we have a meeting. That's all, folks.”

The high door opened and Bell and his entourage were sucked in, the reporters pursuing until stopped by oak, shouting questions that would never be answered. The whole thing had lasted roughly one minute, and Alice wondered aloud to Garrick what the point had been. Garrick: “So he could deny he had a fight with Makowski before he died, even though everyone knows he did.” Then, smiling: “And to announce the tourism thing, but you sure scuttled *that* one.”

Alice saw that the other reporters were casting smiling glances at her as well, smiles that were more than the strictly polite ones they had had drawn on their faces earlier. Then Circus Boy Stevens re-emerged from behind the oak door and stalked right up to Alice, not smiling at all. Circus, hissing: “Okay, I don't know who the hell you are, but that was *way* outta line!”

Alice, wide-eyed: “I just asked him a question—”

Circus: “You *sucker*-punched him! Next time you're going to pull something like that, you give me a heads-up first! *Okay?!?*” He turned and stalked back to the door and was gone, leaving Alice wearing the petrified look of someone who suddenly understood that she had committed some major breach of etiquette but wasn't sure what. A moment later she called weakly after Circus Boy, as if a last-ditch defense had just occurred to her: “It was my first gang-bang.” The plea was too late to do anything other than spark a round of laughter from the reporters.

The beast began disassembling itself, the reporters drifting down the hall, several of them pausing along the way to drop their tourism press releases into the polished oak

trash can next to the men's-room door. They were murmuring among themselves, some still casting appreciative smiles at Alice. Colleen, smiling widely, was the only one who said anything to her, which was: "Nice kick in the cahoonies!" A moment later, Garrick and Alice were standing alone by the oak door, Alice still looking shell-shocked and terrified, her thin, black eyebrows straight with worry.

Alice: "I don't think I'm off to a very good start with Mr. Stevens."

Garrick: "Judge me by my enemies'." Then: "You want to have lunch?"

Lunch was a cafeteria-style diner in the basement of the Capitol, a plain, windowless place crowded with short-sleeved bureaucrats. Garrick and Alice loaded their trays with fried chicken and mashed potatoes and clumsily laid out their biographies and resumes' in the way that newly introduced people do when burdened with empty time. Garrick told her about growing up in Peoria; about his early fascination with the stars and how it led him to learn about astronomy at an early age; how he wrote science fiction in high school, enough that he decided he could make a living at it, the next Ray Bradbury; how, upon arriving at college, he told a counselor of this dream of writing; and how, through colossal misunderstanding, he was sent to the college newspaper, where he ended up hanging out for four years, mainly due to that universal constant of physics, inertia. Alice told him about growing up with her grandmother, who wanted her to be a model, something Alice decided would result in not being taken seriously, a terrible fate for an adolescent blonde girl with a brain; how, by college, she decided the surest way to be taken seriously would be to bring people the news—who was taken more seriously than a reporter?—and how, when she showed up at the student newspaper in college, they took one look at her blonde hair and sent her down the hall, to the student television station. Garrick nodded, understanding without being told that it wasn't just her hair, but also her wide and vulnerable eyes, her delicate voice, her flawless makeup, her competent clothing, the undiluted femininity that seeped out of every pore. Newspaper reporters weren't like that, period. He'd have sent her down the hall, too. Alice told him of starting her career at a small television station in Decatur, a half-hour east of Springfield, before being rescued by Ron Kruger's retirement. Garrick listened as much to her voice as her words; the voice had an odd shape to it, like something was hidden in there, leaking out when she laughed but otherwise scrupulously concealed. Like her black eyebrows, it made Garrick want to

see more. Somewhere later in the conversation, Garrick asked her something about Decatur that made it clear he had been left with the impression she had grown up there. She didn't correct him.

Garrick explained the press room hierarchy—Harvey the Third's brutal reign from the throne, Claire Ottoman's growing insurrection—while carefully avoiding any reference to his own humble position as serf. Alice asked him, diplomatically, whether Governor Bell had appeared to be in an unusually bad mood that morning, and Garrick answered plainly that, no, Bell was always like that, the sour look on his face growing naturally from the fact that he despised them all. Garrick: "It was different with Jamison. I don't know if liked us, exactly, but I don't think he hated us as much as Bell does." Then the conversation focused for awhile on "Big Tom" Jamison, Illinois' longest-serving governor, the last act of whose term Garrick had covered, just a few short years ago, though it seemed like another era now that Bell was in office and reporters had become pariahs. Even Garrick felt more relevant under the Jamison Administration: "Then Mister Personality got elected and we all had to start covering tourism."

Alice: "And dead senators."

Garrick saw Claire, wandering through the crowded cafeteria alone, tray in hand.

Garrick: "Yeah, well, they're more honest dead." Then, waving: "There's Claire."

Introductions were made, Claire smiling politely, setting down her tray a seat apart from Garrick and Alice. Garrick knew that female print reporters frequently had a hard time keeping the ice out of their voices when talking to female television reporters—Colleen, for one, seldom bothered to try—so he was impressed at how valiant an effort Claire made. She acted almost sympathetic as she asked Alice how her first day was going. But then there was an awkward silence, heavy with embarrassment from both the women and confusion from Garrick, until Claire broke it, turning to Garrick and saying: "I missed the gang-bang this morning. Did Bell commit news?"

Garrick: "No, but Alice did. Threw the Hotel Association right in his face while he was talking about tourism."

Claire, turning to Alice and grinning widely: "Ooo! Was Circus Boy pissed?"

Alice, tentatively: "Um—yeah, actually, he was."

Claire: "Congratulations."

Alice didn't know what to say to that, so she said: ``Thanks.'`

### *An Ugly World*

Three hours later, Garrick left the Capitol, crossed the parking lot, relinquishing its cars in the late afternoon sun, and approached the Stratton Building. Helen had ordered him to Get On His Horse and find out whether Senator Makowski had any health-care bills pending when he died—a delicious enough morsel of irony, if true, to keep the story of Makowski's death alive a little longer—and Garrick found something that seemed at least partly what was called for. He learned that Makowski's bill, something about medical insurance coverage, was filed in draft form in a staff office in one of the upper corners of the concrete box that was the Stratton Building, waiting there like a kenneled pet whose owner would never arrive to retrieve it. Whatever it would have done in the realm of health care, it would be too late to help the senior Democrat from Aurora.

Garrick had by then finally learned, from Macy, of the morning's events in the House Law committee. Though perturbed at being the last to know as usual, he found the information strangely gratifying. He didn't relish the thought of Alice falling, he wasn't a sadist, but somehow the usual level of intimidation that beautiful women wielded at him seemed that much less potent when he knew the woman in question had crashed ungraciously to the floor in front of a room full of people.

Garrick was mulling this and beginning to open one of the heavy stainless-steel-and-glass doors of the Stratton Building when he was, himself, knocked to the ground. His first wild thought: *Lot of irony floating around today*. The man had been exiting the building as Garrick had been entering. Somewhere in his mind, Garrick registered him coming from the other side of the glass, but there were four doors lined up and no one else in sight, so it seemed a simple enough matter of signaling his intentions toward one door and giving the man his pick of any of the others. However, the man—looking straight ahead but apparently seeing nothing—grabbed the first door he came to, pushed hard and, against three-to-one odds, sent Garrick dropping to the sidewalk.

The man: Mark Dexter, a forty-seven-year-old architect who had come to Springfield that morning to meet quietly with aides to the Governor. He was now walking

back to his car to return to Chicago and explain to his wife, Margaret, that they were going to lose their three-year-old son, after all.

Dexter knew the meeting with the Governor's people was a throw-away effort, his way of doing something, anything, if only so that in the sleepless, regret-filled nights that were approaching, he would at least be free of the regret of not having done everything he could. The Governor's aides, men in suits, explained, gingerly, that the branches of government were separate, that the Governor didn't have any more control over the Illinois Supreme Court than did the Legislature or the columnist Bob Brown or anyone else. Yes, he understood that, he had taken civics in school, Dexter told them, too sharply, but surely the justices would listen to a well-reasoned plea from the Governor. The problem as he saw it, Dexter explained to them, was a simple one of semantics: The word "adopted" was what was causing all the trouble, creating in a people's minds a distinction that didn't actually exist. No one in a sane world would drag a happy toddler crying from his loving parents and send him home with some thuggish stranger merely because the proper forms hadn't been filled out. But toss the word "adopted" into the mix, and suddenly people were willing to accept the unacceptable. If only the Governor could make the justices understand that an adopted son isn't any different than a biological one in any way that matters, not when he's been sleeping within earshot of them since he was two days old, not when they'd changed his diapers and stayed up nights when he had fevers and learned the toddler-language he spoke. The justices of the court must not understand that fact; must be under the mistaken belief that affection is guided by genetics; must not realize that this is fundamentally no different than marching into the homes of any of their children or grandchildren and yanking one of the little ones out, never to be seen again, an unimaginably cruel punishment for the crime of sloppy paperwork. Surely, put in that light, with the persuasive weight of the Governor's voice behind it, such a plea couldn't fail.

The aides, not meeting his eyes, told him they had it on good authority that the court had already voted to uphold the lower court rulings. The opinion was being written by Chief Justice Tipple himself. The Governor's heartfelt opposition notwithstanding, the court was going to return Daniel to his biological father—remove him from his warm blue bedroom in Dexter's wide-lawn ranch-style home on the North Shore, and abandon him to a fat Ukrainian pig who could barely speak English and who lived in a crumbling building

on Chicago's west side, in an area Dexter didn't even like to drive through. Thoughts like that, heavy with hate, left Dexter's mouth dry; he hadn't been raised a bigot, but three years in court, playing tug-of-war over his son, had killed much of what used to be inside him, including tolerance. He found himself praying nightly that the fat Ukrainian and his wife both would die, he didn't care how, before the appeals ran out. Now the appeals had run out, the fat Ukrainian was still alive, and Daniel was going to leave them. The aides' best guess was that the final order would come before the month was out. The words made Dexter's stomach curl into a ball. They might as well have been doctors telling him how long his son had to live.

### HAD HAD HAD

Standing in the doorway of the Stratton Building now, Dexter looked down at the young man sprawled on the sidewalk in front of him, and blinked. The young man was dressed in a threadbare dress shirt, a tie of random design, black gym shoes—he appeared to be a delivery boy of some kind. The thought reminded Dexter that he hadn't eaten since the previous morning. What the delivery boy was doing on the ground was unclear, until he started to get up and cast a look at Dexter that said: *What, no apology?* Only then did Dexter entertain the theory that he was responsible for the scene before him. He accepted the theory instantly, knowing his current state; he had been fielding dirty looks from other walkers and drivers for months, as he stumbled through the world thinking about life without Daniel.

Dexter: "Sorry." Then, genuinely sorry but physically unable to get any other words out, he turned and walked on, feeling the young man's glare pummeling the back of his head.

Across the street, Dexter climbed into his car, pausing to take in the low, hard lines of the Stratton Building one more time. His architect's mind, which had had a tendency to fling irrelevant thoughts at him lately, catalogued it for him: nineteen-fifties, concrete-and-steel frame, the utilitarian style common in governmental structures of the period. An ugly building for an ugly world. He sat behind the wheel a moment, sorting out how he would recount the day's events to Margaret, though none of it mattered. Daniel was leaving. As soon as Dexter's hands stopped shaking enough to drive, he pulled onto

Second Street and headed for the interstate.

Chapter Four:

**Baby John Must Go**

Stoner-Cop Promises Inside Tip

*'Creamy ... White ... Thighs'*

Alice grew up in a place where the syllables were soft as cotton. It was a constant chore for her these days to harden them up, to prevent her vowels from stretching on longer than was customary in this region, to keep her *you*'s from sprouting *all*'s. She had adopted the rest of it fairly quickly after leaving Mississippi and arriving in Illinois three years earlier—the flat soulless scenery, the absurd winters, the chilly distance that people kept, the bland food—but the clipped, dry accent still didn't comfortably fit. She could keep it going all right early in the day, when she was rested and the coffee was flowing: *I* instead of *Ah*; *you* instead of *ye-ew*; *right* instead of *ra-aht*. But the lie—*lah*—got more difficult for her to maintain as the day wore on, like a middle-aged man trying to suck in his gut for eight hours straight. By quitting time, it was all Alice could do to keep the *er*'s from spreading out into *uh*'s.

On the dialect front, she often thought of herself as an impostor, but that was, of course, the nature of television: They were all impostors, staring into the camera and talking with an authority they didn't have, about issues they frequently didn't fully understand, and didn't need to, airtime being too short and precious for long explanations, anyway. Alice understood the limitations of the medium more than most of her co-workers seemed to. There were, in fact, times when she thought herself the only person in television news who understood why their print brethren looked down upon them. She recognized that many television reporters talked in a language consisting of long strings of clichés that seemed to have been pulled unaltered from made-for-TV movies; she had worked for producers, both in Mississippi and Illinois, who never read newspapers, on the

unapologetic premise that they covered too many policy issues and not enough fires; she had once worked with a woman who confided in her that during sweeps-week she often wore v-neck tops and looked for reasons to lean forward in her on-air reports, a strategy that had led to two contract renewals. Alice prided herself on not fitting into those molds of television news—on injecting some degree of thought and honesty into a profession sorely lacking it—but she had drawn the line at honesty in dialect. Dan Rather didn't let his Southern accent lilt all over the airwaves like some high-tech cracker, and she wasn't going to, either.

It was with some sense of irony—something else most of her fellow television reporters lacked—that Alice directed Carl, her cameraman, to frame Lincoln's Tomb as the backdrop for her report on Senator Makowski's funeral. The funeral procession was actually in another part of the huge, rolling cemetery, over a ridge and not even within sight of the Tomb. But the towering white spire, framed by statues of men on horses, with Honest Abe's oversized bronze head in front of it, was too good a picture to pass up. Alice's grandmother would have shaken her head—Lincoln-worship, an affliction that obviously ran rampant in Illinois, wasn't all that common in Mississippi—but television needed pictures, and the film they had taken of Makowski's casket being carried out of the chapel wasn't going to be enough. Carl had been Alice's cameraman and shadow since her arrival in Illinois three years earlier, and he had, without any pomp, made the jump with her from Decatur to Springfield the previous day. He set up the tri-pod, then squinted at the spire, swimming in the morning sun. He said: "Big tomb," an outburst for him. Generally, he spoke in single-word sentences, and then only when answering direct questions.

The funeral, dispersing now, had, in its way, reminded Alice of those parties in college that began as small affairs and that, by midnight, had evolved into something altogether bigger than anyone had expected. Governor Bell, though he had been a political enemy of Makowski in life, had offered to speak, as sign of respect to the family—and, it was clear, as a nod to the voting public, which had perhaps seen things it liked less than a sitting governor delivering a warm eulogy to a nemesis from the opposing party. Bell's presence had drawn the horde of reporters and television cameras. The presence of the reporters and cameras, in turn, had, drawn a tier of lesser politicians—state representatives, fringe candidates, True Believers of every stripe—people who couldn't

always get media attention on their own, and so tended to go wherever the media attention was already focused. The presence of so many reporters and politicians, ultimately, drew the remaining core of general-public gawkers, most of whom had never heard of Makowski before his death.

Alice had worried how she would patch together a story about Makowski, having never met him while he was alive, so she had seated herself near Garrick Martin and the other reporters during the service in hopes of picking up enough information to fill the gaps. Before the service began, they had bantered about a stream of other topics—golf, basketball, the next election, and, unaccountably, the business of ostrich farming—but no Makowski. Only when Governor Bell had taken the lectern and begun the eulogy did the reporters begin whispering their own reminiscences of the Senator from Aurora, and it turned out not to be anything Alice could use in her story.

Bell had put away the mask of hate Alice had seen the previous day, and was again wearing the more familiar face of a stern but compassionate statesman. The Worm, Garrick and the rest had had on pretty much the same bored faces they seemed to wear everywhere, except now their faces were whispering to each other in the back row of the audience.

Bell, into the microphone: “What can we say about Stanley Joseph Makowski—‘Senator Stan’ to those of us who knew and respected him...”

Harvey Rathbone III, whispering: “You believe this crap? Last week, Makowski was ‘an Olympic -class demagogue.’”

The Worm, whispering: “That was his best quality—that and his ability to drink four martinis at lunch and then grope that redheaded page all afternoon while he pretended to go over the bills with her.”

There had been some stifled, knowing laughter at that from the other reporters, except Claire Ottoman, who was sitting nearby looking as if she wished she had sat somewhere else. When Bell’s speech had led into a list of the things for which Makowski would be remembered, The Worm had whispered: “Remember when he brought those two hookers to the inauguration dinner—introduced them as aides?” The reporters: More stifled laughter, especially from Colleen, whose usual acidic demeanor had, somehow, lightened with the presence of a corpse. Claire, hissing: “Jeez, you guys, will you *shut up*?” Alice had watched it all silently, trying to read the signals of this odd group of

Yankees—for she had already deduced that all of them were northerners, unless someone was doing a better job than she of faking it—and wondering, as newcomers to a given social structure always do, how she would ever fit in. At one point, she had caught Garrick looking at her before he looked away. Alice had smiled inwardly. Garrick, for one, was as easy to read as a teleprompter.

Garrick had had trouble sleeping the night before, thinking of Alice. The night had been clear, and he had finally gotten dressed and spent two silent hours with his telescope on the roof of his building, not looking at anything in particular, using the black sky as a canvas for imagination. The stars had shone like her blonde hair, the space between them as black as her eyebrows. What was it about her voice? It was as if something much older than either of them was hidden there, behind the words. The moon was bright enough to cast shadows on the tar-paper roof, and Garrick had studied them idly, imagining Alice drenched in the soft lunar light, dropping her beige dress suit around her ankles and stepping away from it.

Now, with the funeral over, Senator Stan tucked in the ground, Garrick had joined Worm, Claire and a couple others surrounding a State Police spokesman in an open spot on the cemetery lawn, negotiating crowd size. It was one of those rituals that reporters and political spokespeople routinely went through—rituals which, Garrick thought, would cause the public to impeach all its politicians and cancel all its newspaper subscriptions if it ever found out. It was unclear how many people had been on hand for the funeral, with so many milling around the perimeter all morning, coming and going, taking what should have been a mathematical certainty and opening it to debate. The State Police spokesman, whose agency had benefited mightily from Makowski's patronage in the Senate, was insisting there were something like eight-hundred people on hand, a figure that the gathered reporters found to be unacceptable.

Worm: "Give me a break—I bet there weren't four-hundred people here."

Spokesman: "Well, that's just ridiculous. That chapel alone seats three-hundred, and you saw how many people had to stand."

Claire, shaking her head: "There were empty seats in the middle."

Harvey Rathbone III: "I could see saying there were, maybe, four-hundred people here —"

Worm: ``I don't think there were that many --''

Spokesman: ``Which funeral were you people at? I can't believe you can claim there were less than six-hundred people here --''

Julian: ``No way, six-hundred? Four-fifty, *maybe* --''

Spokesman: ``Okay, look, I can see maybe, *maybe* saying there were five-hundred people here, *minimum*.'' At that, the reporters had looked around at each other, considering, then had started nodding their heads and writing in their notebooks. Harvey: ``Okay, five-hundred.''

As Garrick walked to his car, he glimpsed Alice and her cameraman in the distance, doing a stand-up report in front of Lincoln's Tomb, too far away for him to hear what she was saying into the microphone. He imagined her once more, wearing nothing but moonlight. He pulled out his keys, walked to the side-street where he had parked his car, found it, and noticed for the first time that he had parked directly in front of a fire hydrant. He would have had to almost trip over the thing getting out of the car, it was that close. He had, he supposed, been lost in thoughts of Alice, or maybe of Claire, when he had arrived, and had missed it. He looked around the cemetery and saw more State Police officers than he could readily remember having ever seen in one place. He was hurriedly unlocking his door when one of them walked up to him.

Garrick, fumbling with his keys: ``I'm sorry officer, I didn't see the hydrant.''

Officer: ``Too late. I'm taking you in.''

Garrick looked up from his keys, wide-eyed. The officer was taking off his brimmed trooper's hat and smiling broadly, and for a moment, Garrick's mind couldn't make sense of what his eyes were showing him. The officer was wearing the same olive-green trooper's uniform as the other officers posted all over the cemetery, a uniform heavy with shining metal and black leather, a menacing gun on one hip. But someone had pasted a familiar face on top of the uniform, a face that Garrick could envision bobbing down the hallways of Peoria East High School before he could name it.

Then it all came back to him: The call, three years earlier, from a personnel officer, telling Garrick that an applicant to the State Police academy, one Ben Hartley, had listed him as a character reference. How well had Garrick known him in high school? What was he like then? Did he drink? Smoke pot? Any problems with the law that might not have shown up in the background check? Any personality issues they should know about?

Hartley: ``How are you, Garrick?''

Garrick: ``Ben?'' Then, laughing stupidly: ``Oh my God, Ben! Look at you!''

Hartley, stepping back to show the uniform: ``Not too shabby, huh?''

As they talked, Garrick kept trying to reconcile the scene in front of him, and failing, like someone whose eyes refused to adjust to the dark. In Garrick's high school, with its tightly structured society divided into categories like ``preppy,'' ``jock,'' ``brain,'' ``loser,'' and ``nerd,'' Ben Hartley had been chief ``doper.'' The personnel officer's question to Garrick about pot had drawn a smile and a lie. Garrick himself had drifted between the different territories of high school society like a lost diplomat, never fully out nor fully in with any of them, and he had gotten to know Hartley during a rebellious-punk phase late in his junior year. Hartley at that time was as rigidly uniformed as now, but then the uniform consisted of tattered jeans, combat boots, t-shirts, old, oversized flannel shirts hanging out everywhere, hair spilling wildly past his shoulders, a light, fuzzy shadow of a mustache over his lip and a cigarette constantly in hand. Hartley and his friends—and, for a time, Garrick—hung out behind the football field, a territory the dopers controlled and called, simply, ``The Bleachers,'' which was actually on a sidewalk *behind* the bleachers. Conversation had revolved around the rock band Led Zeppelin, which girls in school were the hottest, which teachers were the most lame, and the general concept—expressed in the broken, inarticulate language of teenagers—that authority in all its forms was illegitimate and corrupt. Garrick at the time hadn't bought into that part of it. He had let his hair grow and had, uncomfortably, taken up a brief cigarette habit, but he had still harbored a secret faith in authority, though he wouldn't have admitted it to the other dopers. Hartley, on the other hand, had been as close to a genuine anti-establishment radical as a city like 1980s Peoria had to offer. And now, here they stood: Hartley in his buzz-cut and olive-green uniform, gun on his hip, the epitome of governmental authority; and Garrick, who had decided in four years of watching government at work that its authority was, in fact, illegitimate and corrupt.

Garrick: ``How's Denise?''

Hartley: ``Great, great. The baby's doing great.''

Garrick: ``Great. What are you doing down here? You on funeral duty?''

Hartley: ``Me and half the force. Seems Makowski took good care of my boss at budget time.''

Garrick noticed, surprised, his own apprehension at the uniform, the gun, the authority, even wearing the familiar face that it did. The human impulse to fear the uniform, he marveled, was a strong one, when even a loud-mouthed dooper like Ben Hartley could instill it just by pinning on a badge. Garrick smiled and took comfort in a stray memory of a reverent pronouncement Hartley used to make regularly at The Bleachers, between puffs of his cigarette: *Zeppelin will be remembered with Mozart!*

Garrick: "Congratulations on the job. I'm really happy for you."

Hartley: "I sure owe you one for that, Garrick."

Garrick: "No, no—"

Hartley: "No, really. Having a reporter as a reference—man, that moved things."

Garrick: "Well, I just forgot to mention to them about The Bleachers."

Both laughed. Then Hartley dropped his voice a notch, and said: "I think I might be able to return the favor."

Garrick: "Well, if I had any tickets, I'd let you fix them—"

Hartley: "I'm serious. There's some stories out there—about that Supreme Court judge who's taking all the heat because they're going to send that kid to his real dad? Judge Temple?"

Garrick: "Tipple." For about the hundredth time, Garrick marveled at how unaccountably one isolated incident could become national news. The columnist Bob Brown's obsession notwithstanding, the Baby John story was looking more and more to Garrick like an overblown custody dispute, the kind of thing that went on in adoptions and divorces all the time. Garrick knew his callousness, if that's what it was, had been fed lately by Mrs. Janovik's increasingly frequent monologues about that genuine tragedy, Albert, and the un-lived life he had had in front of him. Since Mrs. Janovik had started opening up to Garrick about Poland and the Nazis, the subject hadn't been exhausted, as Garrick had thought it might, but instead had been increasingly flooding their morning conversations, like water gushing faster and faster through an ever-widening hole in a dam. Garrick had no idea how much water was back there, he supposed maybe there was no limit to it, but he hoped not; his mornings had a darkness to them lately, and he found himself coming to work feeling exhausted. Mrs. Janovik's focus lately had been the fact that, as far as she knew, no photograph of Albert existed, anywhere. Over the burnt coffee the previous Monday morning, she had looked over at Garrick with an expression of self-

annoyance, as if suddenly realizing a fact that should have been obvious all along, and said: ``When I die, there will be no one alive who ever saw his face.''

Hartley was saying: ``Yeah, Judge Tipple. There's some kind of skeleton in this guy's closet, it's real close to coming out.''

Garrick, struggling to look more interested than he was: ``What kind of skeleton?''

Hartley: ``I don't have all the details yet.''. Then, looking around: ``Why don't you call me?''

Hartley fished out a State Police business card, the notion of such a thing making Garrick smile again. Garrick looked at it, nodded, then put it in his shirt pocket.

Hartley: ``I owe you one. I want to make good.''

Garrick, shrugging: ``If you insist.''

They stood a moment longer, the obvious topics of conversation exhausted, awkward silence descending. Hartley looked at Garrick's car and nodded officially: ``You *will* have to move that.''

Garrick, fishing again for his keys: ``Oh, yeah --''

### ***The Birth of a Story***

A news story was a living thing. It was conceived, its parents being some combination of reporters, politicians, True Believers, and random chance. There was a pregnancy, the development of the story. Usually the pregnancy was a matter of common knowledge, as obvious as the bulge on a mother-to-be. In most cases, everyone on the press floor knew when a given story was about to arrive—the story of Senator Stan's funeral, for example, two days in the making. But then there were those hidden pregnancies, the ones that only the mother and maybe the mother's editors knew about, until the story was born, fully developed and screaming at the world. Such surprise births were a joy to the mother, and a jealous curse to everyone else. The birth announcement was generally made on the morning radio news shows.

Garrick turned on his radio with one blind swipe as he stumbled into his bathroom, eyes mostly closed, still more asleep than awake. He had dreamt of being back in high

school, hanging out at The Bleachers. Ben Hartley had shown up, a teenager again, with the long hair and the attitude, except now he had a big gun strapped to his side. He had pulled out the big gun, waved it in the air and pronounced: *Zeppelin will be remembered with Mozart!*

Garrick hadn't seen Alice for the rest of the day after Makowski's funeral, but he, The Worm and Macy had caught her report on the small television in the corner of the press room lobby late that afternoon, as they were all starting to walk out the door. Television was essentially photography, of course, but Garrick often thought it had the effect of an older form of art. It made people look like paintings of themselves: All the shapes and colors were there, but it was a representation rather than a duplication, the image always too wide or narrow, too bright or dull, lacking life in some vague but fundamental way. The little TV in the corner was old, and had a resolution problem that made Alice's hair and skin look lighter than it actually was, which had the effect of highlighting the stark contrast of her black eyebrows. They had looked as if someone had drawn them on the television screen in black marker. The spire of Lincoln's Tomb rose from one shoulder.

Alice, on TV: "As Makowski was laid to rest near Lincoln's Tomb, party leaders weren't saying who they will appoint to complete his term. For now, the focus is on remembering a man who was a legend in Illinois politics."

Watching Alice's report, Garrick had thought, fleetingly: *There!* The word "legend" had had a funny stretch to it, as if she had inserted an extra vowel somewhere, a partial notion he had been getting again and again talking with her for the past two days, a notion he had been unable to follow to completion. Then the thought was gone.

On the television, the image had cut back to the anchorwoman, sitting next to what had become a familiar logo on the program: A scale of justice with a baby's rattle in one of the two pans, the words "Baby John" scrawled under it in unsteady child-like writing, in a material that was supposed to look like crayon. The logo had been popping up each time the station did a story about the Chicago adoption controversy. Television's capacity for trivializing serious topics, for trying to find cuteness in places where anyone could see it didn't exist, was a favorite rant of Colleen's, and the scale-and-rattle logo was the thing that had been sparking her diatribes lately. Garrick had been glad she wasn't there so he wouldn't have to listen to it. The anchorwoman: "In other news, controversy continues

over the toddler known as Baby John. The Illinois Supreme Court is expected to announce this week whether it will stand by an earlier ruling that the three-year-old Chicago child must be turned over to biological parents he has never seen ...’

Watching the report that afternoon, Garrick had replayed Ben Hartley’s whispered words: *That Supreme Court judge who’s taking all the heat because they’re going to send that kid to his real dad? Judge Temple? There’s some kind of skeleton in this guy’s closet.* If Garrick had had a dime for every time a low-ranking state employee had claimed to have a hot story, playing Deep Throat to Garrick’s Bob Woodward, he wouldn’t be rich but he certainly would have enough to buy the whole pressroom a horse shoe dinner. Waving news under a reporter’s nose was one way a low-ranking state employee could feel not quite so low, because it commanded a level of attention usually reserved for more important people. The problem was, there were reasons some people were low-ranking and others weren’t, and most of it had to do with ownership of that precious commodity, information. It was like a law of nature, a political version of water finding its own level: People who knew things didn’t tell, and those who told generally didn’t really know. Garrick didn’t suppose he would ever hear another word about Ben Hartley’s big tip.

Garrick had been walking out the glass-and-wood press room doors when he had heard The Worm remark idly: ‘‘Why is Harvey’s door closed?’’ Garrick had given the issue two seconds’ thought before deciding there was nothing that could be done for it. Now, standing in his bathroom the next morning, staring at himself, half-awake, in the mirror, slathering on shaving cream and listening to the tinny female voice rising from the radio, Worm’s question came back to him. A moment later, the story was born, wriggling and cooing.

Announcer: ‘‘... Veteran state Senator Stanley Makowski was laid to rest in Springfield’s Oak Ridge Cemetery yesterday, after dying early Monday of an apparent heart attack at age sixty-nine. Governor John Bell told the five-hundred mourners that the Aurora Democrat should be remembered for his tenacity and commitment to his district. . . . Makowski’s Senate seat will be filled today by Aurora family activist Glenda Crawford, according to a story in this morning’s *Chicago Herald*. . . . Turning to weather, sunny today ...’’

Garrick had been dragging the yellow plastic razor down his chin, and he winced with pain at the mention of the *Herald*. He stood a moment, looking at his sorry

reflection, blood spreading into the white foam under his bottom lip. Then he flung the razor into the sink.

It wasn't a huge story by any standards—it was, in fact, nothing more than an advance leak on a Senate appointment that would have been announced to everyone later that day anyway, the cheapest kind of exclusive—but that wasn't the point. The story had Harvey Rathbone III's name on it, was going out on the airwaves and the morning wire services that way: "... according to a story in the *Chicago Herald*," the words thumping a nose at newsroom editors all over the state, editors who would want to know where the hell their own Statehouse reporters had been. There were, as always, recriminations flung around the Statehouse phone lines all morning. Shiny O'Shaughnessey and Julian Marcus each had, by nine a.m., called Patricia Foote, the chief flack for the Senate Democratic leadership, to let her know they felt hurt and betrayed, and to hint that her betrayal could have ramifications on their future coverage. Maybe they weren't all that interested in covering the appointment of this new senator now; maybe they had better things to do, like checking out that persistent rumor of a sex-harassment investigation pending against the Finance Committee chairman, a ranking Democrat. Foote—a blunt-spoken southwest-side Chicagoan who used the word "damn" in the same saturating manner that Circus Boy Stevens used the phrase "okay"—had, of course, denied being the source of the leak. Damned if she knew where it came from, probably the damned Republican leadership, everyone knew they leaked like the damned Titanic. Maybe it was the damned governor himself, she theorized. No one believed that—the governor's office, the enemy camp, probably hadn't even known about the appointment—but Julian had called Circus Boy Stephens anyway, mainly because he wanted someone else to yell at. Circus had suggested Julian chalk this up as another example of just how treacherous and untrustworthy the Senate Democrats really were, okay, and by the way, was he interested in some exclusive information about the governor's tourism initiative? Around nine-thirty, Sean Lovett had made the mistake of wandering into the press room lobby, where The Worm had pounced: Had the Lieutenant Governor's office known? Were *they* the leak? It was a silly allegation and Worm knew it—the Lieutenant Governor was the last to know everything—but Worm was in a bloody mood and Lovett had provided a convenient victim.

While The Worm and the others were spreading around sound and fury that would

ultimately signify nothing, Claire Ottoman was around the corner in her office, quietly working her phones, calmly letting senators and top aides throughout the Capitol know that the Associated Press in general, and she in particular, was as pissed off as a rabid dog—the biggest rabid dog on the planet, let's not forget—and that the A.P. national desk in New York was seriously thinking about ordering a major new investigation into the campaign finances, perks, and sex lives of the Illinois State Senate. Oddly persistent, that rumor about the Finance Committee chairman. By ten a.m., she had secured two tips on yet-to-filed legislation, a promise from the assistant majority leader to have an advance peek at the next state budget, and partial confirmation of a pending indictment against a low-level State Public Health employee for bribery. Then she sipped her coffee, deciding she had armed herself with enough to deflect her editor's anger.

Garrick, twenty steps down the hall, didn't have that luxury. The phone rang, Helen's ring, before his butt hit the chair. Helen's voice, coolly: "Congratulations. I see you and Colleen have been bending over for Harvey Rathbone again."

Garrick, wishing for once that Colleen had arrived at work before him: "I don't know where it came from, Helen. Goddamned Senate Democrats, they just love the *Herald*. They love their editorials."

Silence.

Garrick: "They don't like *our* editorials. I mean, they're mad at us half the time."

Long silence.

Garrick, his voice rising: "I mean, Christ, how are we supposed to get these people to talk to us if our editorial writers are always pissing them off?"

The conversation had gone worse even than Garrick had predicted—Helen had announced after three minutes that she would have to call him back later, she was fluttering too much to continue the discussion—so he had taken his coffee cup and meandered to the lobby, where Worm, Larry O'Shaughnessey and Macy were sitting. Worm, having scared off Lovett and finding no other enemies to pummel, was working on Macy, who, as a state employee, was the next best thing. Macy was impervious to it, reading his paper.

Worm: "You could put a monkey in *Herald* office and he'd get scoops. They don't even have to work for it. The Senate Democrats love their editorials. What is it with you government employees? You don't know the difference between a news story and an

editorial?”

Macy, not looking up from his paper: “Feeling a big footprint on our hind-quarters today, are we?”

Shiny idly asked whether anyone knew anything about Glenda Crawford, the woman who was, according to the *Herald’s* exclusive, going to replace the late Senator Stan later that day. The story said she had organized a petition drive to get a park built and had founded a neighborhood-watch program that was becoming a model for the rest of the state, and had become a local authority on the issue of protecting and promoting concept of the family. Shiny, a family man himself, expressed admiration at that. Worm called him Pollyanna, and dismissed Crawford as a soccer-mom who couldn’t be counted upon to give good quote.

The debate over the issue of where the story came from continued at lunch at the Capitol cafeteria. Around the table: Garrick; Alice, whom he had caught again at the coffee machine and invited; Tooth, who had overheard the invitation and, failing to appreciate the dynamics of it, had invited himself to join them; and Julian, whom Tooth invited along as they crossed paths near the brass railing on the second floor. Garrick picked at his roast beef sandwich and wondered why he hadn’t just made an announcement over the damned intercom.

Tooth was in a jovial mood despite their common ass-kicking that morning, his toothy television grin on full display: “I think the Governor’s office did it.”

Julian: “Bell? He’d rather yank out his own eyeballs than give anything to the *Herald*.”

Tooth: “That’s just what everyone would think, so he’s safe.” Then, smiling, pleased with himself: “Makes sense, right?”

Julian: “About as much as one of your stories.”

Garrick: “I think it was Johnston.”

Tooth: “Oh, c’mon ...”

Garrick: “No, think about it—Johnston ticked off the *Herald* last month with that stuff about Daley, he wants to make up, so he tells Harvey about the soccer-mom.”

Julian, as Johnston: “That’s *Shenator* Shoccer-Mom to you, bub.”

Alice, looking across the room: “Isn’t that the gun guy?”

Tim Flynn was holding his tray of food out in front of him, drifting through the roomful of crowded tables like a ship navigating a field of icebergs. Garrick, Julian and Tooth looked once, then diverted their eyes, trying to avoid a collision, but it was too late. Flynn had sighted them, had signaled—a wide, enthusiastic smile and a wave of a one hand, which had almost caused his tray to tip—and was steaming their way. A moment later, he was on top of them.

Flynn: “Hey, my favorite reporters! Mind if I sit down?” Then, sitting: “You guys want a scoop?”

Julian, deadpan: “Of what?”

Garrick, motioning introductions: “Alice Walden, Tim Flynn.”

Flynn, to Alice: “Hi. Glad you weren’t injured the other day.” Then, to the others: “I thought you guys’d like to know, House Bill Forty-Seven is going to pass. I counted the votes.”

Tooth: “What do you mean ‘counted the votes?’”

Flynn, grinning: “I polled both chambers, and the math is there—I’ve got enough votes to confidently predict that, by this time next year, you guys will all be armed.”

Flynn smiled broadly again and stuck a forkful of mashed potatoes into his mouth, as Garrick and Julian exchanged a glance. Math didn’t work that way at the Capitol, something the reporters understood but Flynn clearly didn’t. The handful of lawmakers who controlled the House leadership had hinted from the beginning that they weren’t going to risk letting the gun bill go to a floor vote, because many of their members, especially the Downstaters, would be politically obligated to vote yes, despite knowing in their hearts that their *yes* votes would turn Illinois into a war zone. Representative Clemens in particular had been publicly stroking his hayseed constituents with speeches about the right to bear arms, while quietly imploring the House leadership not to bring that godforsaken bill to the floor. In Springfield, two plus two didn’t necessarily equal four—not when four was, for whatever reason, an unacceptable answer. Watching Flynn sitting there, smugly recounting his version of math, Garrick decided to let it go. Julian couldn’t: “So, um—How did the House leadership score on this poll of yours?”

Flynn: “Those guys? Cripes, they’re all against it. But I’m telling you, they’re outnumbered. Boy, are they going to be surprised when this thing goes.”

Julian: “Oh, yeah, Tim, they’re just going to be stunned.” Julian was enjoying

himself, but Garrick felt a pang of pity for Flynn. Potentially homicidal gun nut or not, there was something touching about Flynn's utter faith in what he thought was the democratic process. Outnumbered, indeed.

Garrick: "Tim, the leaders are the only votes that matter. If they want it dead, it's dead."

Flynn: "You don't understand—the math is on my side. I've got the votes. You can't argue with math."

Garrick, giving up: "Right."

### ***Blue Room***

When the citizens of Illinois watched Governor Bell or their senators or state political candidates give televised press conferences from the Capitol, the setting they saw on their TV screens was a polished wood lectern set up in front of a velvety, navy blue curtain. The backs of reporters' heads were lined up before the lectern, the heads occasionally asking questions of whoever was at the microphone. On TV, it looked like an almost elegant backdrop, but that was because television technology, for as far as it had come, still couldn't generally convey the difference between polished dark wood and cheap plywood with a false-grain veneer; the difference between a silky velvet curtain and a threadbare polyester one. Even the view of the backs of the reporters' heads was a televised lie—a lie of omission, as the reporters' mode of dress was largely hidden by the backs of the chairs and therefore not visible to the viewing public. Since the people at the lectern usually wore tasteful suits and matching ties, it was easy for viewers to imagine that the reporters in the audience were dressed pretty much the same way.

The Blue Room, as everyone called it, was connected to one of the long, spidery corridors spoking out from the press room lobby. The veneered-plywood lectern was set up at the front of the room. The main entrance to the room was through a door behind the lectern, surrounded by a yellowing wall, scarred by some long-ago unfinished re-wiring project, the whole mess hidden by the blue polyester curtain during televised news conferences but otherwise open to the room. At the back was an elevated platform for television cameras, and a few rows of state-issued metal-and-plastic chairs for the

reporters. Like most movie sets—for that’s ultimately what it was, the real news generally being conveyed around the Capitol through press releases, private interviews and other off-camera methods—the Blue Room looked much larger on television than it really was. The few rows of seats that the viewing audience saw weren’t just the little sample that they appeared to be, but were in fact all the seats in the room. The result: The reporters had to cram shoulder-to-shoulder into the narrow rows, or stand at the sides. For politicians, this provided the advantage of making even a sparsely attended press conference appear, to the home viewing audience, to be a packed house—which, in turn, conveyed the impression that something of grave importance was going on, otherwise why would all those reporters be packed in there like that?

Glenda Crawford, who knew none of this, stood at the lectern and looked out at the empty seats and wondered why the room was so small. It never looked this small on television, and she should know, having spent years paying particularly close attention to Springfield news coverage from her Aurora home. And what was with that wall? What a mess. And they couldn’t get a better curtain than that to put behind a sparkling new Senator conducting her first press conference? Was this, she wondered, what her taxes had been going to all these years, shoddy, unkempt rooms like this? Clearly she had arrived in state government just in time. She made a mental note to look up the maintenance budget for the Capitol as soon as she was settled in. She turned to Senator Johnston and his young aide, both standing nearby, and said: “Wow, small room.”

Johnston: “Make-sh it look crowded. You ready?”

It was the job of Macy, sitting at his desk a few paces down the hall from the Blue Room, to let the reporters know when a press conference, gravely important or not, was about to begin. Johnston stuck his head out into the hallway and nodded, and Macy picked up his microphone and turned it on, sending the familiar electric *thump* throughout floor two-and-a-half. In the Blue Room, Crawford and Johnston and the young aide looked up at the ceiling, as did the reporters scattered around in their cubbyhole offices nearby.

Macy, through the intercom: “Attention. Attention. The press conference with Senator Soccer-Mom—I mean, Senator Crawford—will begin immediately in the Blue Room. Repeating ...”

Crawford could hear faint laughter ringing from a few distant cubbyholes. A moment later, as reporters began filing into the Blue Room, some still chuckling, she

leaned close to Johnston and whispered: `` `Soccer-mom'? What's *that* all about?''

Johnston: ``Theesh people are alwaysh trying to be cute. Jusht let it go.''

Crawford, reddening: ``I'm going to say something to that man.''

Johnston: ``Don't.''

Crawford: ``I'm a *senator!*''

Johnston: ``Hee'sh guild.''

Crawford, still red, watched the young men and women file into the room and take their seats. These were, she supposed, the reporters—who else would they be?—but that conclusion didn't fit with the way they were dressed. She wondered briefly if it was some kind of holiday she didn't know about. Within a minute, a dozen reporters had parked themselves in the metal-and-plastic chairs, not a full house, but enough to make it look packed to the home viewing audience. Three television cameramen, including Alice's silent one, stood on the platform at the back of the room fiddling with their massive cameras.

Garrick sat near the middle of the room, next to The Worm, whose anger that morning at the *Chicago Herald* scoop had mutated into anger at Chicagoans in general. It was a recurring routine from The Worm, whose personality knew no moderation: He was never mildly anything, but always was intensely excited, sad, intrigued or, as today, irritated. A note on the cork board in the press room lobby had announced that the state Supreme Court decision on the Baby John case would be released the following morning, an event that was going to draw the Chicago media down to Springfield like flies to a carcass. The Worm held the opinion that Chicago reporters were loud, rude, sloppy, and completely lacking in anything that resembled professionalism. Most of the occupants of floor two-and-a-half of the Capitol held a similar view of their northern brethren, with whom they crossed paths a few times a year, but The Worm held the view more strongly than most. The Worm, pondering it: ``Christ, I hate it when they come here. Fricken animals.''

Garrick, making little attempt to appear interested: ``Right.''

Worm: ``Always yelling, shoving.''

Garrick: ``Right.''

Worm: ``Worming in on our stories. Pestering our sources.''

He paused, looking for another grievance. Then: ``Making fun of our restaurants.''

It was a weak point, that last one. Even Springfield's most vehement defenders wouldn't choose that battle, the city's restaurant scene being unaccountably bad for a place that catered so heavily to tourists, out-of-town politicians and others who relied solely on restaurants for sustenance. The problem was both quantity and quality: There were only a handful of local restaurants that weren't links in soulless national chains, and most were bad ones by just about every criterion. Springfield food, even the horse shoe, was numbingly bland, the kind of food that requires more salt than is wise. Service was poor, not just at any one particular restaurant, but at all of them, as if the problem wasn't one of isolated management issues but an encompassing culture of slowness and surliness. Garrick had learned not to expect any meal at any restaurant to arrive in less than twenty-five minutes—he never complained anymore until it hit thirty—and his standards had eroded to the point that moderately warm food was warm enough. He knew better than to complain in any but the most egregious circumstances. One waitress had once flung Garrick's credit card back at him, as if it were a frisbee, after she lost a dispute over the check, leaving a little scar over his eye that he still wore; another had strongly implied he was a closet homosexual when he complained about something gritty floating in a bowl of soup. Garrick agreed wholeheartedly about the Chicagoans' utter lack of grace and value on most fronts, but if The Worm was going to rise to the defense of Springfield's restaurants, he was going to rise alone.

Garrick, to Worm: ``*You* make fun of our restaurants all the time.''

Worm, jabbing a finger: ``That's different!''

Senator Johnston, at the lectern: ``We ready? Good afternoon folk-sh. You know who I am. I'm here to present to you our newest shenator, who will complete the term of the late Shtan Makowshki. Glenda Crawford is a homemaker, community activisht and, I think you will find, one of the sharpest thinker-sh ever to grace-sh this chamber.''

Then, stepping aside, with flourish: ``*Shenator* Glenda Crawford.''

Johnston and the young aide clapped as Crawford positioned herself at the microphone. The reporters didn't clap or otherwise react, but stared silently, as if watching the scene on television.

Crawford, smiling: *How rude!* ``Good afternoon, and thank you, thank you very much. To my new friends in the media, it's good to meet all of you, I'm looking forward to working with you.''

A calculated pause. Then, with a calculated smile: ``I thought we

could start our relationship with an agreement: You don't misquote *me*, and I won't lie to *you*."

Johnston and the young aide chuckled dutifully. The reporters continued staring in icy silence. One looked at her watch.

Crawford, again turning red: "Well—um—with Senator Johnston's help, I'm pleased to announce I've crafted my first bill. Senate Bill One-Sixteen addresses an issue that, as a parent, is close to my heart: playground safety." Crawford paused—she wasn't sure, but she thought she saw several of the reporters roll their eyes—then: "Um—this bill will require that any playground which is built or maintained using state funds must be inspected by a committee made up of local parents. I have copies of the provisions here, and I'd be glad to take your questions."

Garrick didn't expect any questions—he knew everyone in the room had decided the bill wasn't worth a story before Crawford had finished the sentence—but The Worm suddenly called out: "Who pays for this?"

Crawford: "Um—well, we don't see that there's going to be any real expense to it —"

Worm: "You're mandating a new inspection process, there's going to be an administrative expense. Who pays for it?" Garrick glanced over at him. It was unlikely The Worm was planning to write a story about this, meaning the confrontation was purely gratuitous. Worm clearly was in an even bloodier mood than Garrick had thought.

Crawford, red for the third time: "The issue of funding hasn't yet been addressed."

The Worm, his voice full of allegation: "So you'll probably have to set up a new revenue stream? Maybe a 'swing-set tax'?"

Johnston, leaning in front of Crawford urgently, hands forward: "Wait a minute, no one shed anything about a new tax —"

Worm: "Senator, are there any conflict-of-interest provisions in here? I mean, what's to keep the playground developers from paying off the parents of this 'committee' with free swing-sets or something?" Garrick stifled a grin and thought: *A swing-set conspiracy!*

Crawford, looking hurt: "I'm sure they wouldn't do that."

Worm: "Senator, won't this bill leave the parents who inspect these things open to

lawsuits if a kid gets hurt on the playground?”

Crawford, red as wine, opened her mouth, then closed it, then opened it again. Then she said, weakly: “Um—well, there, um, are a few details that, uh, I’m still trying to work out . . .”

Despite Worm’s theater, the press conference had yielded nothing that could be bent into a news story, and Garrick was walking under the Mural and down the marble stairs toward home by four. Mary Dickens, the Springfield lobbyist for the American Civil Liberties Association, was walking up the stairs, looking weary as always. Garrick smiled and put up a hand. Dickens was, technically, a True Believer, and therefore suspect, but Garrick had developed a grudging respect for her, largely because, in a culture where no one’s principles seemed to be any more lasting than the latest political fad, Dickens and her organization had remained steadfastly committed to its general position against anything it viewed as infringing on the Constitutional rights of the individual. The result: The ACLA had few friends in either party in the Capitol, the Constitution being an inconvenient impediment to most causes.

Garrick: “You missed Senator Soccer-Mom’s debut.”

Dickens, with a small laugh: “Oh, Christ, is *that* what we’re calling her?” Then: “Did she commit news?”

Garrick, shaking his head: “She wants to make America safe for swing-sets.”

Dickens stifled a sigh. She didn’t know what the swing-set comment meant, but it sounded like something to which the ACLA might potentially have to be opposed. It seemed to Dickens she spent her life these days opposing ideas that sounded nice but had some nagging Constitutional flaw, generally having to do with its proponents trying to censure, sue, jail or otherwise silence anyone who didn’t obediently fall in line with their nice ideas.

Dickens was old enough to remember when the Bad Guys were all old, white conservatives, intent on using the law as a hammer against anyone who disagreed with them, and the Good Guys were youngish liberals who held to Voltaire’s axiom: “I disapprove of what you say, but I’ll defend to the death your right to say it.” Now, it seemed, there *were* no Good Guys. The conservatives had gotten even more intent on quashing dissent, and the young liberals had adopted their strategy, if not their beliefs. The

people Dickens used to be able to count upon to back the ACLA's philosophy of free and unfettered debate—the New Agers, the Mother Earth-ers, the intellectuals, the free-thinkers—had, at some point, decided the best way to spread their enlightened notions was to prevent the other guy from spreading his. The new axiom: "I disapprove of what you say—so stop it, or I'll sue." By the cusp of the Millennium, Dickens, an unapologetic liberal for twenty-five years, found herself fighting not just racists, sexists, homophobes, pro-lifers, religious zealots and corporate bullies, but now feminists, gays, pro-choicers, atheists, naturists and vegetarians. The vegetarians were the worst. A contingent of them three years earlier had tried to pass legislation that would restrict public advertising of meat, putting it in the same category as tobacco. The veges were appalled when the ACLA, supposedly a liberal organization, came out against their enlightened idea. Dickens couldn't make them understand that it wasn't because of any great love of meat on her part—oh, a chicken sandwich now and then, maybe a horseshoe if she was feeling ambitious—but because, after fighting so hard to protect the rights of such controversial artists as, say, Robert Mapplethorpe, the ACLA couldn't very well turn around and support a ban on pictures of hamburgers. It had been the wrong thing to say; it turned out several of the veges were committed Mapplethorpe enthusiasts, and they demanded to know what the hell she thought she was getting at with such a correlation. The morning after the meat-advertising ban died in committee, Dickens had arrived at her small downtown office to find her front stoop covered with something that looked like blood, but turned out to be tomato juice.

Not long after that, Dickens had begun entertaining the idea, for the first time in her career, of joining some pampering law firm, abandoning a cause that had become thankless. The idea had grown until, in the past two months, she had actually interviewed with two firms and was, at the moment she encountered Garrick on the marble stairs, mulling an offer. She felt unclean about the thing, but it was a feeling she was learning to live with. She wasn't the one, she had told herself lately, who had decided to advance liberalism by scuttling its core foundation of free speech and expression; she wasn't the one who had tainted noble ends with poison means. Legal intimidation, banned words, laws against images—those were supposed to be the weapons of the Right, the McCarthyists and the Nixonians and the Reaganites. The fact that liberals had now adopted that tainted arsenal was, Dickens thought, the worst part. In a small but

undeniable way, the Bad Guys had won.

Dickens: “Swing-sets, huh? Is this something I’m going to have to deal with?”

Garrick: “Not likely—no bans, just a lot of new rules. And she kept her shirt on.”

They both laughed. Neither of them had been in the Blue Room on that legendary day two years earlier, when five members of the Winnetka Lactation Resource Council had stood at the front lectern and dropped their tops in a show of unity for breastfeeding, but the story had been repeated so often in such detail by so many people that even those who weren’t there could recite it as if by first-hand memory.

To Dickens, the Lactators were perhaps the ultimate example of liberalism’s wild, off-course journey these days. They had announced one spring that the Lactation Movement had reached such a glorious pitch that it was no longer enough to merely promote breastfeeding as a healthful and natural way of life; it was time to go after the corporate scum who were robbing children of their rightful nutrients by pushing that insidious poison, packaged infant formula. The Lactators wanted legislation banning sales of infant formula in Illinois, except in cases where a doctor—or midwife—could certify that there was some legitimate medical reason a mother couldn’t provide what nature had intended. The chief Lactator, a surprisingly tiny woman in every respect, had declared: “Bottle-feeding is today’s child abuse.”

Dickens had sighed and released a statement declaring the ALCA in opposition to the ban, as it interfered with parental rights to raise children as they saw fit. Two of the Lactators had cornered her in the Capitol cafeteria the next day, suggesting strongly that she had perhaps missed their point and that, as a woman, she should reconsider. Dickens had countered that, as an American, she thought they should stop worrying so much about what kind of nipple other parents were putting in their kids’ mouths and mind their own damned business for a change. It was, again, the wrong thing to say—the Lactators went off like gunpowder, lambasting her loudly as a Neanderthal and a traitor to her gender, someone who had obviously been bottle-fed—but the child-abuse comment had been gnawing at her. As a young lawyer in a public defender’s office right out of law school, Dickens had seen a few cases of genuine child abuse, including one in which a three-year-old boy had been held upside down against a wall by his ankles and beaten to death by his mother’s boyfriend, and she was having trouble fathoming the comparison.

Soon after, the Lactators had conducted their now-legendary news conference in

the Blue Room to officially unveil their legislation. Only a few reporters had shown up, the rest having dismissed the event as non-news, a decision they would regret. The five Lactators had laid out the specifics of the proposed baby-formula-ban in sleepy detail, then the tiny chief Lactator had launched into a long, impassioned speech about how the major problem was that male-dominated society had come to think of breasts as sexual things, something nature had never intended, and that the proper goal was to arrive at a world where mothers could go around top-free, feeding their babies and toddlers and five- and six-year-olds at will without even drawing attention. Several of the reporters had just been thinking: *Yeah, right*, when the Lactators commenced to dramatize their point. The chief Lactator yanked her top down around her waist with casual speed, and the other four—after a moment's hesitation in which they weighed loyalty against modesty—followed suit. Before anyone had had time to register what was happening, there they stood: Ten breasts. The chief Lactator had then declared: “*This—is life.*” The press conference had continued for another five minutes, the Lactators calmly outlining their legislation as if they were standing there fully clothed, but none of the reporters took any more notes. Even Colleen Brenner, seated in the audience, had been struck silent, according to witnesses.

Garrick continued down the marble stairs and Mary Dickens continued up, and before she disappeared, Garrick paused, turned and called up to her: “The Supreme Court is ruling on Baby John tomorrow. You guys have a position?” Dickens sighed. Yes, they had a position, one based on hard principle, keeping in mind the Constitutional long view, not abandoning the spirit of civil liberties to convenience or emotion or some cause-du-jour—a position, in other words, that was going to once again piss off a lot of folks who thought they remembered when the ACLA were the Good Guys, standing up for the Constitutional rights of women and gays and performance artists, and why were they suddenly defending the Constitutional rights of the wrong people? Dickens, reciting from memory the fax she had received from her Washington headquarters that morning, said flatly: “The ACLA feels deeply for this little boy and his adoptive parents, but believes it would be a damaging precedent to sever a biological parent’s rights based on sentiment rather than law.”

Garrick, translating: “You think they should send him back.”

Dickens: “We think they have to. The father’s parental rights were never legally

revoked. You can't have the state going around keeping people from their kids without due process.''

Garrick, with a small smile: ``Boy, are *you* guys going to be popular.''' Dickens nodded wearily, turned and climbed the stairs until she was gone.

Over bad coffee with Mrs. Janovik the next morning, the topic was another child, Albert. Mrs. Janovik had awoken unable to remember what her little brother had looked like. The crisis had passed, after she had jumped out of bed and frantically paced the floor for a few moments, Albert's ruddy little face finally coming back to her. But, she confided in Garrick, the thing had shaken her deeply. Albert, robbed of his life so young, now existed only in her. It was bad enough that he only had as long to exist as she lived, but now there was the possibility he wouldn't exist even that long, not if her old brain kept forgetting what he looked like. How horrible, she lamented, to be not only dead, but forgotten.

Mrs. Janovik: ``How old are you, Garrick?''

Garrick: ``Thirty-four.''

Mrs. Janovik, nodding, businesslike, as if going over a ledger: ``Well, that'll give him another forty or fifty years of having his *name* remembered, at least.''

It was under that cloud that Garrick milled with other reporters later that day in a tight marbled hallway of the Illinois Supreme Court Building, an understated three-story white stone structure across the street from the Capitol, waiting to hear Baby John's fate. The Chicago television media were, as advertised, there in force, a testament to the depth and seriousness of their profession, Garrick thought. So far that year, the Legislature had passed three new taxes or tax increases, had approved a major utility deregulation package that would directly affect hundreds of thousands of Illinois residents, had debated changes in health insurance regulations that would affect virtually all twelve-million residents of the state, and had once again opened that Pandora's box that was the ratite controversy—and the Chicagoans had willfully ignored every minute of it, finally deciding their state Capitol was newsworthy only when the subject was a single little boy and the possibility that he would be dragged from home in front of their humming cameras, the best film since last week's fire. Garrick counted seven out-of-towners who clearly were television reporters, in addition to a few others whose media were unclear, and a gaggle of tall cameramen he

didn't know, plus a dozen familiar faces.

One of them was The Worm, whose face was, at the moment, scowling toward the Chicagoans and muttering: "God, look how they're dressed. Fifty-dollar haircuts—look at those shoes." Then, in nasally caricature: "'Oh, we're from Chi-*caa*-go, we cover Mayor *Daa*-ley, look at our *shooes*!'" Then, mumbling darkly: "Probably complaining about breakfast right now."

Garrick: "Give it a rest, will ya?" Worm's acid mood was unjustified, given that morning's events in the press room, which should have been enough to keep him happy for a week.

A few of them had been drinking coffee and watching the minutes tick by on the wall when Harvey Rathbone III had walked in, exuberantly slapped that morning's copy of the *Chicago Herald* on the counter, and declared: "Macy, show me the money!" Macy had smiled and said: "Are we talking thighs?"

No one else had smiled. It would have been just perfect, wouldn't it, for Harvey Rathbone III—the highest-paid reporter on the floor, the one with all the prestige, the one who was always asked to do the talk shows, the one to whom the Senate Democrats leaked like a colander—*just perfect* for him to take home their money? The money at that moment sat in a white envelope in a drawer in Macy's desk, locked tight, friendship and trust going only so far. The "creamy white thighs" business had put Garrick in the position of having to ask Mrs. Janovik for a week's extension on the rent, something that had made him wish momentarily that they hadn't become friends, since he felt it a tax on their friendship—though Mrs. Janovik had merely poured him more of the pungent coffee and nodded absently, thinking of Albert. Harvey's declaration of victory had been like a kick in the gut to Garrick, and the others there also looked as if they had been kicked.

Colleen had said to Harvey, eyes narrowed: "There is no goddamned way you did this already."

Harvey: "Read it and weep." Then he had spread the paper out on the counter and stepped back to let the others in. They had all leaned in and peered at the front page, hesitantly, as if it might explode.

Worm: "Which story?"

Harvey: "All of them."

Colleen: "Cut the crap, Harvey. Where the hell is it?"

Garrick had noticed immediately the top headline on the page: “Creamy New Twist On Fire-Fighting,” followed by a sub-head about the invention of a new kind of foam for putting out chemical fires. It was one-third of a victory at best, and Garrick wondered if Harvey was joking.

Then he noticed, with a start, another headline further down on the page: “Thighs Healthiest Part Of Chicken - Expert.”

Garrick thought: *Surely not ...*

Macy, confused: “I see ‘creamy.’ But ...

Shiny: “I’m not seeing any ‘creamy white thighs’ here.”

Then Harvey had cleared them away with waved arms, and jabbed a finger at the first words in each of three headlines, one after the other. The middle one, which Garrick hadn’t initially caught, read: “White Supremacist Standoff Ends.” Now it came together, the pattern suddenly so clear that he couldn’t fathom how he had missed it. The three headlines were arranged in such a way that the oversized words “Creamy ... White ... Thighs” were lined up vertically down the page.

After a moment of stunned silence, Shiny had said softly: “I’ll be darned.” Then Colleen had said, less softly: “All right, Harvey, give me just one small fucking break, *this* shit doesn’t count!” Still, there it was. Before Garrick could stop himself, he had asked: “How did you do this?” his voice entirely too full of respect. He couldn’t help it. Barring incredible coincidence, Harvey the Third had somehow caused one of the nation’s largest newspapers to splash the answer to their stupid bet across its front page in bold, black words, an achievement that would have involved compromising not just a copy editor or two, but the entire night-desk of the paper. It was, if anything, an accomplishment more impressive than the goal as it had been established by the wager, and Garrick wondered momentarily if Harvey was going to demand more money.

Colleen, not nearly as impressed, was lobbying hard for the victory to be declared null. After some prodding, it had come out—from Zack Carson, keeping a safe distance—that Harvey’s coup had been achieved by paying seventy dollars to a mid-level copy editor who had his fingers in both the story placement and headline writing—not any real power, just enough influence to gently suggest to the night editor that that creamy-foam story belonged at the top of the page, people love those science stories, and this chicken-thigh report was sure going to whip up the nutrition debate, and they might be accused of being

racist if they ignore that white supremacist story, that definitely belonged on Page One. Harvey had argued there was nothing in the rules that prohibited bribery; Colleen had scoffed, adding that it wasn't just the bribery but the word placement: "The words hafta be *together*, rectum-head!" Harvey had countered that that, too, was nowhere in the rules. He had shrugged and said: "Hey, this was the bet. If you thought the words had to be together, you should have put that in the rules."

Colleen: "Oh, *horse* shit! Suppose I just wrote three separate stories with one of the words in each one—you think *that* would count?"

Harvey: "The bet was 'creamy white thighs' and that's what it says." Then, to Macy: "I want that envelope."

Colleen: "Macy, you touch that envelope and I swear I'll shove a stapler up your ass."

Worm: "We need a ruling on this."

Harvey, starting to lose it: "What ruling? There are the words right there!"

Garrick, watching Harvey become increasingly agitated at the assault on his victory, had wondered why he hadn't just kept it simple. Any copyeditor who could be compromised enough to corrupt the whole front page of a newspaper certainly could have found a way to quietly slip three little words into one little story, in which case Harvey's victory wouldn't have been debatable.

In high school, during Garrick's brief "jock" stage, he had once watched the school's top sprinter lose the regional championship because, twenty feet from the finish line, with no one near him, he had turned to the crowd, tried to make a big "thumbs up" sign with both arms, and in the process threw himself off-balance and went tumbling to the asphalt as the other runners swerved around him. Garrick had thought of the runner as Harvey's victory had come tumbling down. Macy had studied the front page quietly, everyone watching, then had handed Harvey the paper and declared: "This page says a lot of things. It doesn't, however, say 'creamy white thighs.' Sorry." Harvey had continued pleading his case, but Macy wasn't budging, and the rest of them had walked away quietly, except Colleen, who had walked away chuckling loudly.

The incident had buoyed everyone's mood—there was nothing like watching Harvey Rathbone III lose one for once to brighten a morning—but now Worm's mood was sinking again, watching the Chicagoans and their fancy shoes in the hallway of the

Supreme Court building. Garrick was relieved when Alice appeared, blonde hair shining, black eyebrows arching, though he was surprised that Colleen appeared with her. Alice looked pale and shaken; Garrick supposed they had walked over from the Capitol Building together, talking.

Alice, to Garrick: ``Any word?'' Garrick shook his head, too casually, and thought he saw suggestion in Alice's stare before she looked away and began going through her notebook.

He was still wondering if it had been his imagination when a short, dark man, apparently a clerk, popped out of one of the high oak doors, carrying an armload of white papers. The gathered reporters surged toward him as if part of some natural phenomenon involving magnetics. The clerk backed up against the door, wide-eyed, then began quickly passing handfuls of the papers forward, almost throwing them, like chunks of meat to advancing dogs. He was clearly a civilian, someone not used to being surrounded by a snarling pack of media, and he seemed to believe that if he could rid himself of the stack of papers quickly enough, it might create a diversion and allow escape.

He was wrong. The Chicago television reporters, having ventured into the wilderness for a story and not about to be appeased by anything as flimsy as written words on paper, pinned the clerk to the wall with their lights, held their microphones to his throat, and demanded, almost in unison: ``Are you Justice Tipple?'' A few paces away, Colleen shook her head in awe at the question, and Garrick and The Worm both smirked, The Worm making a noise to go with his smirk. Alice smirked, too, though she had been privately pondering the same question.

The clerk, trying not to show fear: ``No.'' Then, pleadingly: ``These are copies of the opinion!''

The Chicago television reporters reluctantly released their prey and began focusing on their small trophies, the white pieces of paper. Of course they had, out of unavoidable necessity, dealt with written words on paper before, they knew what to do with them, but there was something wrong with these particular press releases: There were too long, for one thing, about a zillion pages each, held together with oversized staples. And there were no colorful designs or slogans around the borders, just plain black type, and entirely too much of it. And they didn't explain themselves on the top of the first page in big, bold, italicized letters, as press releases always did. They said neither, ``*Baby John Must Go,*''

nor, *“Baby John Can Stay,”* though one of those two statements clearly should have been there. Instead—what the hell was this?—they had some kind of case number there, and a *“so-and-so-versus-so-and-so”* that didn’t mention Baby John at all, and then a lot of legal language about court cases that appeared to have nothing whatsoever to do with Baby John. The Chicago television reporters looked around at each other, each initially pretending to understand fully what was on the pages, lest it turned out that all the others understood, then gradually getting mad as it became clear some kind of mistake had been made. One of them said out loud, to no one in particular: *“Awright, I wanna talk to Tipple, and I mean now!”*

Meanwhile, Garrick, Colleen and The Worm had immediately flipped to the last page of the stapled pages, to the last line, which said, as they had expected: *“Judgment Affirmed.” Baby John must go.*

Garrick was still smirking at the notion that the chief justice of the Illinois Supreme Court would actually wander right into their midst, when he did just that. He wore no robe, just a suit, and Garrick didn’t recognize him at first—he had seen the man in person maybe three times in his life, always from a distance—but a moment later, it came to him. The stooped, gray man with the frowning eyes, emerging from the men’s room down the hall, was Tipple. His hands were held slightly out in front of him, as if they had just been washed.

When Tipple saw the pack of reporters he stopped dead, and Garrick could see he was considering strategy: Going back into the men’s room was out of the question, just one exit; can’t get to his office, the pack was too close to the door; maybe the clerk’s office, halfway up the hall. Tipple had the collective cluelessness of the Chicago television reporters working in his favor—two of them looked up from the baffling white pages in their hands, glanced at the gray man in the suit, apparently dismissed him as a clerk or something, then went back to their puzzle—but Garrick, Colleen and The Worm were moving slowly in his direction, stepping lightly as cats, trying not to scare him off or to alert the Chicagoans. They had him. Tipple took one more wistful look at the door to the clerk’s office, then, apparently ruling out a lurching sprint as being too undignified for a man of his station, squared his shoulders to the three advancing reporters and faced his fate.

The Worm got there first and said, almost in a whisper: *“Your honor, could you*

explain the reasoning behind...?’ That was as far as he got. One of the Chicago reporters had caught the scent of something, looked up, and saw the three local yokels stalking toward the clerk in the suit. Hey, maybe he wasn’t a clerk at all! A moment later, the sound of the stampede, dozens of dress shoes clicking on marble, echoed off the paneled walls and ceilings of the corridor.

Tipple was engulfed. Artificial light washed over him, microphones jabbed at him, shouted questions whizzed around him like stones. Garrick, who had been standing half an arm’s length from the judge, was squeezed back by the crowd, finally expelled from it altogether, like the bones of some rodent spit out by a snake. Tipple was curtly saying something in response to the shouted questions, but new volleys of shouted questions were obscuring his answers.

Garrick, holding out his recorder, tried to squeeze back into the mass of heads and arms, once, twice, three times, but was spit back out each time. Tipple was still talking, disjointed pieces of his voice swirling around in the noise. In desperation, Garrick tried an unlikely strategy, tapping a tall cameraman on the shoulder and saying politely: ‘‘Excuse me, could I—?’’

The cameraman, looking up briefly from his eyepiece: ‘‘Forget it.’’

Garrick turned around, saw Colleen standing there with folded arms, and put out his hands and shrugged his shoulders. Colleen stood and kept her arms folded a moment longer, then walked over to Garrick, snatched the tape recorder out of his hand as if he had no right to it, and said: ‘‘You’re pathetic.’’ Then she stepped up to the tall cameraman—practically cuddled up to him, Garrick thought, and was she pressing her right breast against his side?—and the cameramen looked over at her, a better look on his face than the one he had given Garrick, and said: ‘‘Hi.’’

Colleen: ‘‘Hi. Are you live?’’

The cameraman, with a little smile: ‘‘Sure am.’’ After looking at her a moment longer—a look that said: *We’ll talk later*—he went back to his eyepiece. As Garrick watched, Colleen casually produced a tube of lipstick and twisted it—Tipple’s voice was still floating around somewhere inside the belly of the crowd, the story was bleeding to death in front of them, was this any time to fix her makeup?—and she reached around in front of the cameraman’s camera. Half a second later, the cameraman lunged backward out of the crowd as if thrown, grabbed the front of his camera and began wiping furiously

at the lens, panic and a look of betrayed hurt on his face. Garrick caught a glimpse of pasty red on the curved glass of the lens, as Colleen plunged into the hole the cameraman's exit had produced.

Colleen found the judge where she had expected him, encased in the middle of the cocoon of reporters, his face the color of faded asphalt. It wasn't the face of most politicians, Colleen thought; the usual, whorish eagerness to please was completely absent. He looked as if a bunch of unwelcome guests had barged into his home, and that his own sense of decorum, something his boorish guests so clearly lacked, was all that was keeping him from throwing them out. The look produced a quick flash of anger in Colleen: This was a public figure with a tax-funded salary, someone who was supposed to show some deference or at least fear to reporters, and who the fuck did he think he was looking at them as if they had no right to surround him? She would have enjoyed her anger more if her allies had been less ridiculous. The Chicago television reporters' questions were still flying, with one or another occasionally hitting its mark, all of them making it clear they had only the vaguest grasp of the story they were about to report to the entire nation.

As Colleen thrust the recorder toward the center, one of the reporters was asking: "Your honor, you've accused columnist Bob Brown of 'journalistic terrorism.' Could you elaborate?"

Tipple: "Mr. Brown has been using his column to harass this court."

Another reporter: "Why do you think Bob Brown is trying to hassle you?"

Tipple: Dead stare. Then, aridly: "Harass. Not 'hassle.' Harass."

A female TV reporter: "Judge, to this child, the adoptive parents are mommy and daddy." Then, with enough feeling to make Colleen wonder if the woman's contract was up for renewal: "Doesn't that *mean* anything to you?"

Tipple looked as if someone had spoken to him in a foreign language. He answered, in a tone that made it clear he wasn't sure he understood the question: "The biological father's rights had never been properly severed. Technically, he never lost custody to begin with."

Now it was the Chicago reporters who were trying to decipher a foreign language. *Custody?* said their faces. Is the dad in jail for some reason? Severed? *Severed?* Just what kind of case are we talking about here? Did he mean to suggest something disfiguring happened to the biological father while in jail? They looked around at each other. Were

they missing the real story here? Tipple, who a moment earlier had looked uncomfortable with the noise, now looked uncomfortable with the silence, as the TV reporters continued puzzling over the string of foreign language he had thrown at them. After a moment, apparently believing it would clear things up, Tipple said: "Look, the mere fact that a person is able to improperly keep a child for an extended period of time doesn't mean he has the right to permanent custody. If that was the case, any lonely parent could just ..." He paused, searching for an example. Then: "...Could just snatch a baby from a grocery cart, and then claim legal custody if he could only hold onto the child long enough."

By that point, two suited guards who had been trying to work their way to the center of the knot of media finally arrived there, wedging themselves between Tipple and the reporters. One of them put up his arms and said: "That's all, folks." That wasn't all, as far as the reporters were concerned, and they continued hurling questions toward Tipple, but the two guards had him and they weren't relinquishing him. They pressed against one wall of the media cocoon, burst through it and out, and, with shouted questions still plummeting all around them, disappeared through one of the high doors. A few of the reporters winged a few more questions at the door, as if to knock it open, then began disbanding. Colleen walked back to Garrick and smacked the tape recorder into his chest, hard.

Garrick, after recovering: "Did you get him?"

Colleen: "What a prick that guy is." Then: "You're going to Chicago."

On the way out of the building, they passed one of the Chicago television reporters, a well-lipsticked brunette, who was doing a standup report off to one side of the paneled corridor, purring into the camera: "... here at the Illinois Supreme Court building, where Chief Justice James Tipple has just compared child adoption to, quote, 'Snatching babies from grocery carts ...' "

### *A Blur for a Face*

Garrick flipped through the opinion as he walked back to the press room with the others, looking up from the white pages occasionally to watch Alice walk. The court order used long, winding strings of words to announce that Baby John's life as he knew it would

end in two days, when the biological father, accompanied by the Cook County sheriff's department, would arrive at the Chicago home of the adoptive parents to take physical custody of his son. If there was a single, consistent truth in politics that Garrick had discovered, it was that for every person's misfortune, there was some resulting benefit for someone else, and this was no exception. Because of Baby John's approaching trauma—which was, after all, *news*, no way around that—Garrick and others on floor two-and-a-half would soon be taking the kind of junket for which they often attacked the politicians. The transfer of Baby John from his old life to his new would, according to the court order, take place at nine in the morning, too early for any of the Capitol reporters' editors to reasonably expect them to be there to witness it without having woken up in Chicago. So, there being no other choice, Garrick and others from the press room would be forced to temporarily abandon their daily Springfield routines, pile into cars, drive up Interstate Fifty-Five, check into Chicago hotel rooms, eat in Chicago restaurants—a dinner and a breakfast, anyway, and probably a couple lunches—drink Chicago beer, maybe even listen to some Chicago music, all at the expense of their respective newspapers. No way around it. Walking up the marble stairs and under the Mural with the other reporters, Garrick was already picturing what he knew would be the best part for him, better than the meals or the beer: The moment when he would check into the hotel, walking by the other guests, his small overnight bag slung over one shoulder, his portable computer slung over the other, his tie loosened, looking busy, weary, a reporter on assignment, an important enough assignment to require a hotel room—this was news, dammit, never mind the expense, that was the philosophy of the news business—and telling the clerk his reservations were under “The *Peoria Post*.” Or maybe he would just say, “The *Post*”—sounded better. There had been a few such trips before, very few, few enough that he could remember them each in quick succession. And the hotels were never the best ones—“never mind the expense” wasn't actually the philosophy of the news business—but still he was always struck by how much the trips made him keenly feel the myth of his profession, how they allowed him to wrap himself in the myth for a few days. It was a better fit than the reality.

In the press room that afternoon, all phone lines were aimed north, at Chicago, the callers comparing prices and making reservations. After some negotiation with Helen—who was fluttering at the expense of Garrick's first choice, in the heart of the downtown

Loop, and was pushing instead for a suburban budget motel that would have put him forty-five minutes outside Chicago—Garrick had managed to get approval for a little hotel on the south side, not the best neighborhood, but at least a real hotel in a real city. Couldn't very well feel the myth staying at some cookie-cutter motel chain in Schaumburg.

He had just hung up from Helen when the phone rang again.

A woman's voice: "Is this Garrick Martin?"

"This is Garrick."

The woman: "Mr. Martin, I'm calling from St. James Hospital. You are acquainted with Rose Janovik?"

Garrick: *So that's her first name.* "I know Mrs. Janovik. Is something wrong?"

The woman: "I'm sorry to have to call like this, Mr. Martin. Mrs. Janovik listed you as the person to contact in case of an emergency? She was just brought into the emergency room. We believe she's had a stroke."

For a dizzy moment, Garrick couldn't remember what Mrs. Janovik looked like. He thought of Albert, a little boy with a blur for a face.

Garrick: "Um." *When I die . . .* "Is she dead?"

The woman: "No, no. The doctors are with her now."

Garrick: . . . *there will be no one alive . . .* "Is she, um—is she talking?"

The woman: "Mr. Martin, I think you should come over. We're still not sure of her prognosis."

Garrick: . . . *who ever saw his face.* "I'll be there in ten minutes."

Alice was in the lobby pouring a cup of coffee as Garrick walked toward the glass-and-wood doors. She smiled, and he stopped, trying to look natural. He felt as if he might vomit.

Alice: "You're going to Chicago tomorrow?"

Garrick: *Chicago? Chicago . . .* "Yeah. You?"

Alice: "Oh, I'll be there." Suggestion in her voice, and something more—stretched vowels, a soft shape to the words. Garrick stared at her a moment, as if maybe some trace of the words might still be floating around her face, so he could study them closer. Then, there it was: *Ah'll be they-ah.* A Southern accent, clear as a March moon, how the hell had he ever missed it? How did one pick up a Southern accent growing up in

Decatur, Illinois? Isn't that where she said she grew up? Come to think of it, did she ever actually say where she was from? Why would she hide it? Funny, he thought, how we carry our histories like handbags, sometimes displaying them, sometimes hiding them, sometimes losing them.

*There will be no one alive who ever saw his face.* Garrick blinked hard and turned without another word and walked through the glass-and-wood doors, and under the Mural, and down the marble stairs, gripping the iron handrail and playing the words over and over in his mind, dumbly watching them form: *There will be no one alive who ever saw his face . . .*

Chapter Five:

**Ukrainian Child-Stealer**

**Versus Lunatic Mom**

'Greatest Show on Earth'

*Chicagoans Bet on Thighs*

CHICAGO—The brown squirrel looked as if it was performing some elaborate circus act, Garrick thought. It pranced along the black power line, first in one direction, then the other, then back, momentarily flipping upside down each time it turned, its tail fluttering like a fat feather. It had been up there ten minutes, on the same span of wire, running back and forth, barking at the crowd below, demanding that the crowd watch—*See it here, the greatest show on earth!*—but Garrick appeared to be the only one watching. They were a tough audience, the reporters, cameramen, cops and gawkers—at least a thousand people altogether, by Garrick's estimate, maybe more—most of them busy looking at the sharp, trim brick house to one side of them, or scanning the nearby street to the other side, or looking at each other, or looking at their watches, or squinting idly into the morning sun climbing over the vast steel-blue lake on the horizon. It was a wider, greener, more serene setting than Garrick had imagined a city like Chicago could

offer, and seemed to be an entirely different city from the one in which he had spent three hours unable to sleep the night before for all the wailing sirens passing in the gray streets below.

Of course, different neighborhoods were different worlds here: There was the world in which the *Peoria Post* could afford a hotel room—a box of a room with wafer-thin carpet and walls and plastic cups wrapped in cellophane—and then there was the world of the Dexter family, a good distance north, obviously a world that involved plenty of money. Garrick looked at the low brick house, framed by its wide lawn and its nearby lake and the hard, rising shapes of downtown Chicago in the hazy distance, and wondered why he hadn't chosen some profession that would have allowed at least the possibility of such a place. Reporters never lived in places like this, nor did astronomers. Dexter was an architect, wasn't that what someone had said? The subject of architecture made Garrick think of Mrs. Janovik, as just about every subject had for the previous day and a half—one of her neglectful sons was an architect, she had mentioned once or twice, though he didn't think it was the son he had met in the hospital room.

The brown squirrel was standing in the center of the span of wire barking down at the crowd now, getting mad—Why weren't they watching? Garrick squinted up at it, as if to be polite.

Garrick could hear The Worm, a few yards away, explaining to John Tulley, one of the army of Chicago reporters they had met the night before and had dragged into the "thigh" bet, how a horse shoe was constructed: "You ladle the cheese over the meat, and then mound the french fries on top of that."

Tulley, patiently reciting: "Meat, bread, cheese, french fries."

Worm: "No, no—bread, meat, cheese, fries. If you put the cheese right on the bread it would get soggy."

Garrick knew for a fact The Worm loathed horse shoes, hated the very concept of them—he had a thing about mixing together different types of food—but now here he was, Mr. Horse Shoe, laying out the culinary delights of Springfield for Tulley. The Worm had been at it since the previous night, even before they had all walked into Billy Goat's Tavern, looking and feeling like wide-eyed tourists. Of course, they had all been to Chicago more times than any of them could count, but the difference from Springfield was so stark that it was hard to resist the urge to look up. Harvey Rathbone III—who had

never lived anywhere near Chicago in his life and who had, in fact, not spent very much time there even after moving into the *Herald* bureau—was playing the weary tour guide, amused at the hayseed Springfieldians with their necks craned toward the tops of the buildings, acting as if he walked in the shadows of these buildings all the time, instead of living and working under the same Downstate sun that shone on the rest of them.

Billy Goat's Tavern was legendary among newspaper reporters around the country, a basement bar, as old, dark and grungy as Chicago journalism itself. A small group of the Chicago reporters were holding down a table under a row of hanging portraits of notable local journalists, many of them with the symbol ``-30-'' engraved under their smiling faces, the old-time copyediting symbol that meant: ``End of story.'' There was Ben Hecht—``-30-''—and Mike Royko—``-30-''—and Bob Brown, who had no number below his chin as yet. Worm's monologue about the virtues of Springfield had begun as an annoyed response to Harvey, then had taken on its own life and purpose after they had walked into the bar to find it infested with *Herald* reporters and *Sun-Times* reporters and other arrogant Chicagoans. Most of them knew Harvey by voice rather than sight, but a few, including Tulley, had recognized him and waved him over, hayseeds in tow. Tulley, slightly drunk, wearing a loosened tie that worked and a short, stylish haircut, had risen, a bottle in one hand, to greet Harvey with the other: ``Harvey! Welcome back to civilization!'' As The Worm stood looking dark over the comment, introductions drifted back and forth. When Harvey got to Alice, Tulley had pointed, as if suddenly placing her, and said: ``You're the one who fell.''

Alice's presence, and Claire's, normally would have had given Garrick the dilemma of who to look at, who to talk to, where to sit—though he supposed neither of them saw any dilemma—but he hadn't paid any attention to the issue this time, his mind on Mrs. Janovik. Replaying their disjointed conversation in the hospital room, as he had dozens of times already, he had sat where he sat, which was with Claire next to him and Alice across from him. He had been remembering her son, not the architect but the other one, as the banter had risen around him.

Tulley: ``Must be pretty slow in Springfield without old Jamison around.''

Julian: ``*Really* slow. Bell couldn't commit news if his life depended on it.''

Harvey: ``Thank god for the I-Fifty-Five killer.''

Martha, a young, competently dressed feature writer: ``Anyone here in the lottery

to cover that execution?”

Garrick noticed that Claire had looked around the table.

Harvey: “They’re really going to do this Baby John thing?”

Mark, a city hall reporter: “Nine a.m., the kid goes. Gonna be a damned circus.”

Alice: “God, that grill smells great.”

Tulley: “Best cheeseburgers in the world.”

The Worm, darkly: “Bet you can’t get a horse shoe here.”

Martha: “Oh, is that that drink with vodka and pomegranate juice?”

At some point, two others had pulled up to the table: A white, thirty-something radio reporter introduced as Carla, and a middle-aged black man named Jack Wilson, an editor for the Chicago Defender. Carla had smiled coolly and said: “So these are the Springfieldians,” and Jack Wilson had bent over, peeked under the table, and remarked: “Their thighs don’t look all that creamy.” The Worm, Julian, Claire and the rest—even Garrick, looking up from the latest replay of the hospital room conversation with Mrs. Janovik—had all turned their heads in unison toward Harvey, who had responded by casually taking a sip of his beer and acting as if he didn’t stand accused.

The hour had grown late and the drinkers had grown drunk and cozy, despite half of them being strangers. It was a process that Garrick had been through many times but which felt different this time. He felt as if he had been watching the whole scene from a distance, as if he wasn’t part of it. In fact, he had hardly said a word all night. Those who knew him had started dropping looks and comments at him about it; those who didn’t know him assumed him to be arrogant, or slow. Both Claire and Alice had given him long, questioning looks at various points in the evening, Claire finally giving up; Alice continued to look at regular intervals, her thin, dark eyebrows full of patience. Garrick had supposed his silence was some combination of apathy and paralysis, and he had known he should come out of it, put Mrs. Janovik away, for a few hours at least, and join the living, but he couldn’t. Every time he had tried to look interested in the conversation, his mind fell back to the Springfield hospital room.

Mrs. Janovik had been asleep when Garrick had arrived there. The fact that she had written his name on her emergency forms—something he hadn’t know about—was the only reason they had let him in. A short, female doctor with an indeterminate foreign accent had asked how they knew each other, and Garrick had lied, only because the truth

seemed too complicated, and inadequate: *She's my landlady, we have coffee every morning, she's been telling me her whole life story for two years, and letting me use her roof, and I'm supposed to remember her dead little brother for her after she dies, though I don't really know what he looks like ...* Instead, he had said: ``She's a friend of the family.'' Her prognosis, the short doctor had said, was unclear. When the stroke hit, she had been in her apartment, apparently standing, and when she had fallen, she had been lucky enough to knock over a glass mixing bowl, which had shattered loudly. The young couple in the small apartment next to hers had called through the door for about five minutes before deciding the sound of shattering glass followed by silence was worth a call to the police. The officers had knocked on doors and windows and, finding them all locked, had finally jimmed the door open. Mrs. Janovik lay in the doorway between the kitchen and the living room, shattered green glass spread around her on the brown linoleum. The doctor had said the breaking of the glass bowl had probably saved her life—she lived alone, and who knew when anyone would have found her? Garrick had thought: *It would have been the next time I stopped by for coffee,* but he had said nothing.

Remembering it in the bar, Garrick had been dropping in and out of the conversation around him. Tulley had turned out to be something of a philosopher about the newspaper business in general, and the Baby John story in particular. There had been some suggestion that the media frenzy on the story—particularly the columns of Bob Brown, aimed squarely at Chief Justice Tipple and bordering on incitement to riot—had gotten out of hand, and that perhaps their profession had a responsibility to step back from the fire, but Tulley wouldn't hear of it: ``The way I see it, we're basically in the delivery business. We have customers, we deliver information to them, just like a restaurant delivers a pizza—'' That had spawned a round of scoffs and laughter around the table.

Worm: ``Does this information have anchovies on it?''

Tulley: ``—Now, if someone wants to take that pizza and throw it against the wall and make a big mess with it after the pizza man delivers it, is that something the pizza man has to concern himself with? No. What they do with the information I give them is their business. If someone takes the news I give them about Baby John, and uses it to crucify old Judge Tipple, that's not my concern.''

Shiny: ``You don't think you have any responsibility at all for the consequences of the stories you write?''

Tulley: "My responsibility is to the facts. If the facts cause problems, so be it."

Carla, brooding: "That poor little boy. Tipple deserves to be crucified."

Harvey, raising a glass: "Hear, hear!" and several of the others laughed and clinked glasses, a dozen reporters toasting the crucifixion of a judge. Garrick had looked up with a start. He had been replaying Mrs. Janovik's first words to him in the hospital room—she had awoken suddenly while he was sitting next to her, looked at him, and said: "Is it time for the wedding?"—and he wasn't clear on why they were clinking glasses. Then Tulley said: "Whatever happens, it's going coast-to-coast. I heard this morning CNN's going to be there live. *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, all of 'em."

Tulley took a sip of his beer, then added, as if in afterthought: "Of course, they all have bureaus here, anyway." That was followed by a long lull in conversation, like a runner stopping to breathe, then The Worm said to Tulley, drunken accusation in his voice: "What's that supposed to mean?" and Garrick, Shiny and Julian passed around a glance.

Tulley: "What's what supposed to mean?"

Worm: "'They all have bureaus here, anyway.' Is that like saying, 'Oh, they sure wouldn't have any bureaus in Springfield?'"

Tulley: "CNN has a bureau in Springfield?"

Worm: "No, but Chicago isn't the center of the universe, y'know!"

Shiny: "Worm ..."

Worm: "No, no, I know the thinking here. If it happens in Chicago it's *neeeewwws*"—the word stretched out almost beyond recognition—"and if it happens downstate, it's *shit!*"

Tulley, evenly: "The fact is, we have a lot more people up here to make news. Things are busier, more hectic." Then, with a gently teasing smile, as if trying to make peace, but not really: "We don't have time for games like this 'creamy thigh' business of yours."

Worm: "Or maybe you just don't have the cahoonies!"

Tulley had stared at The Worm, aware he had been challenged in some way—*cahoonies?*—but not sure how. Then Tulley had smiled again, sarcastically this time, and said: "What, are you inviting us into the bet?"

The Worm, goading: "If you got the money, c'mon in. Two-hundred bucks."

Tulley: ``And the bet is *what?*''

Worm: ```Creamy white thighs,' whoever gets it in print first wins. Straight news only, no features or columns.'''

Harvey, solemnly: ``And the words have to be together.'''

Tulley had looked around the table for consensus from the other Chicagoans and, finding none, had shaken his head: ``No copyeditor in his right mind is going to let that in.'''

The Worm, pouncing: ``Oh, so *now* you're going to claim Chicago has copyeditors in their right minds!''

Carla, boldly: ``I'm in.''' She might as well have lit a firecracker in the center of the table. Tulley had stared at her, looking vaguely betrayed. Then he had turned back to The Worm, studied him a moment, and said: ``I'm in, too.''' The gates open, the other Chicagoans had poured through. A few of them had had to walk over the automatic-teller machine by the door, but most of them just produced the appropriate cash from wallets and purses. Garrick had been briefly bothered by how many of them appeared to have that kind of money on them. If he had more than ten dollars in his pocket at any given time, it felt heavy all day.

The brown squirrel on the power line was silent now, sitting and flipping its tail down at the audience, resting between acts. Garrick looked down from it to the crowd around him, bristling with big cameras and microphones. Several loose knots of protesters were milling in groups about fifty yards up the block, kept separate from the reporters and the Dexters' property by yellow police tape. The police officers lining the curb looked nervous, as if there were more people here than they had expected, and Garrick thought they must have been naive to have expected any less. The surrender of Baby John had drawn reporters from all over the country, and Garrick supposed it made sense: It wasn't every day that a kid was scheduled in advance to be removed from his family in public. Some of the cameramen, having nothing better to do as they awaited the arrival of the Ukrainian biological parents, took some footage of the protesters, who had been standing around sipping coffee from white foam cups but who perked up when the cameras came on, and managed to look angry and loud for a few minutes. The bulk of the protesters were supporters of the adoptive family, judging from the signs they carried: ``Leave John Alone,''' and ``Home Is Where The Heart Is.''' A few others carried signs that designated

them as backers of the Ukrainians—“Blood Is Thicker Than Lawyers,” said one—but it was a rare view, and those protesters looked vastly outnumbered and somewhat embarrassed. By the cusp of the Millennium, it seemed, the nation had seen enough of the injustices, small and large, that biological parents were capable of inflicting upon their own children, and the result had been a rethinking of the unquestioned sanctity of biological parenthood. *Home Is Where The Heart Is*, said the nation, and if the best home, the one in which small children weren’t to be hurt or neglected, happened to be with people other than their biological parents, so be it. The gray old judge who headed the Illinois Supreme Court hadn’t seen it that way—his shopping-cart analogy had been slung all over the nation’s airwaves for two days, to the point that his office had put out a rare written statement trying to clarify what he had meant by the comment, which had only led to additional criticism that now he was backtracking on his views—and Tipple’s name figured prominently in several of the protesters’ signs. The columnist Bob Brown had casually crossed a line in that morning’s *Herald*, referring to Tipple as “evil,” which Garrick figured must be a first for a sitting supreme court justice, but by that point there had been so much hyperbole for so long over the thing that no one else seemed to have noticed the milestone. As Garrick listened to the pieces of conversation drifting around the crowd of reporters, he thought he caught the starch of a British accent.

Claire was standing on the other side of the crowd, talking to two police officers and taking notes, her magnificent eyebrows furrowed in concentration. Garrick fought the urge to drift into her line of sight. They had reached their own milestone of sorts the night before, after leaving Billy Goat’s Tavern, finding a new level of closeness as they walked along the lake with the Chicago skyline behind them, and he didn’t want to ruin it now by sauntering up and talking about the weather.

As midnight had passed, they had left the bar, and Tulley and some of the other Chicagoans had joined the Springfield reporters at the lake. Garrick and Claire had, without planning it, taken a separate walk along the rocky shore. Garrick’s silence all night had been an issue of consternation with everyone, and Claire hadn’t been very talkative, either, and it wasn’t shaping up to be a great conversation. They had both walked silently, looking at the skyline, the razor-straight horizon over the lake, the black water sloshing below them, the stars, partly obscured by the lights of the city. Claire had pointed to one, and had said: “That’s Venus. My dad taught me how to find it. It’s the

only star I can name.” Garrick had thought to correct her—*Venus is a planet*—but he had said nothing. About ten steps later, Claire had turned to him and said suddenly, Mrs. Janovik-like: “Did you know I had a sister who was murdered?”

Garrick had again said nothing, this time out of shock. What was it about him, he wondered, that made people want to tell him about their murdered relatives? A few steps later, he managed to say: “I didn’t know that,” sounding less like he was talking than clearing his throat. Then the whole story had come out, Claire telling it stiffly, as if reading off cue cards: The marriage, the little apartment, the job that had allowed Anna to go home for lunch, the coroner’s gentle explanation, the funeral, the newspaper stories.

There had been more walking and silence after that—what did one say? Garrick wondered—then Claire had said: “I didn’t know her very well. But I knew what Kruger was talking about that night. You know, ‘Moment of Truth’? It’s like you wake up one morning and realize the world isn’t the rational place you thought it was.”

That part Garrick understood. For him, the world had stopped being a rational place not long after Mrs. Janovik had started talking about Albert a year earlier, though he hadn’t realized how much the story had affected him until he had seen her lying in the hospital bed, eyes closed, a monitor beeping nearby. Looking at her, he had realized, all at once, that he had spent months trying to reconcile the story of Albert with the world he saw around him every day, and failing. The small children who crossed his path were usually tourists, school kids walking through the Capitol in meandering lines, chattering like squirrels, popping their chewing gum, slapping their gym shoes on the marble floors, oblivious to their teachers’ monologues about the three branches of government, oblivious to any issue beyond the small dramas and comedies of the moment. It was inconceivably that there could be a world in which such children could find themselves dragged to their dooms by armed soldiers, yet there had been Albert, waiting by the pungent coffee every morning to remind Garrick that, yes, such a world existed, separated from his own world only by time, and not that much of it. Mrs. Janovik had said: “Children should be off-limits,” and looking at her in the hospital bed, Garrick had understood all at once how true that was—yes, completely off-limits, no exceptions, to hell with rational arguments about the tide of history. He had looked at the oval shape of her old head and thought: *Albert’s in there*, the last picture of his face locked away in a vault that was now damaged, perhaps beyond repair, with no way to open it.

It wasn't long after Garrick had arrived in the hospital room that Mrs. Janovik's eyes had popped open and she had asked, inexplicably, about the wedding. Her own wedding, in memory? Garrick's, in the future? Albert's, in her dreams? She didn't precede or follow the question with any explanation. Then she had looked around the hospital room, trying to figure out where she was, then had studied Garrick's face. She had finally smiled weakly, and said: "Oh, hi dear," making it clear to Garrick that she didn't remember his name—she had always called him by his name. Still, the recognition was in her voice, and Garrick had smiled back and asked how she felt, and they had talked about how nice a room it was.

After more silence, in which a decision was made, Garrick had leaned forward and spoken to her in a guilty whisper, knowing it was wrong to test her as if testing a lock, knowing it was selfish of him to check on the status of Albert when the issue at hand was the status of Mrs. Janovik, but unable to stop himself: "Mrs. Janovik, tell me about your brother."

Mrs. Janovik: "Oh, hi Garrick."

Garrick, smiling: "Yes, it's Garrick. Mrs. Janovik, can you tell me about Albert?"

Mrs. Janovik: Confused silence. Then: "I can't seem to remember where I put the coffee pot, Michael. Could you find it?"

Garrick had no idea who Michael was. He couldn't remember what the names of her two sons were, but he was certain neither of them was Michael. A moment later, one of the sons had walked in—Garrick recognized him immediately from a family portrait he had seen every morning on a small table in the front entryway of Mrs. Janovik's apartment—and had looked at Garrick with something like accusation in his stare. Garrick had stood up quickly, trying to wipe the guilt off his face. He had momentarily considered trying to explain what he had been whispering to her about—"Well, you see, I was trying to determine if she still remembers what your dead uncle looks like ..."—then he had decided against it and had introduced himself as casually as possible: "I'm one of her tenants," a fraction of the story.

The son, a surprisingly old-looking man with graying hair thinning on top, had, after a moment, dismissed the question of who Garrick was or what he was doing there, and had focused on his mother, who was now staring at him as if trying to remember his name. Mrs. Janovik then had smiled politely at her son, like one would smile at a stranger.

Her son had stared back with a look of profound worry. Garrick had suddenly felt like an intruder. He said goodbye and, without getting any response from either of them, started out the door. He had been halfway out when the son had suddenly looked up from his mother and said: “Are you the one she has coffee with?”

Garrick, after sifting through the question for implication: “Yeah.”

The son: “You’re the one who goes on the roof?”

Garrick: “Um—yeah.”

The son: “That’ll have to stop. It’s causing leaks. She didn’t want to tell you.”

Garrick had told Claire none of this as they walked along the lake, her talking about her dead sister, him listening. After she had finished telling him about Anna, and silence had again descended, he had felt both opportunity and obligation to open up to her, and he had actually opened his mouth to say it: *I go into my landlady’s apartment every morning, we have coffee and talk about life, death, politics, religion, the past, the future, the stars and planets, and her brother Albert, who was killed by the Nazis in Poland when he was six—children should be off-limits, by the way—and she’s the only person I ever talk to about things that seem to matter, my connection to the world outside the Mural, and I might very well be the only person she ever talks to about anything, and now we can’t talk anymore and I miss her and Albert so much I feel like crying, but how do you tell anyone about your landlady being sick, doesn’t that just invite shrugs?* But he hadn’t said any of it. Feeling unworthy, like someone who hadn’t held up his end of a contract, he had just nodded and gasped at the appropriate times during the story of Anna, a story he had no right to hear, as he wasn’t unveiling his own. A sister who wasn’t close and a landlady who was—surely the irony alone allowed a way into the conversation, but Garrick had again been unable to start it and had finally given up. Instead, he had just answered the story of Anna with: “I’m sorry,” which was true, if inadequate. Claire hadn’t appeared to be expecting anything more from him—the point had clearly been the telling—and when they rejoined the others, she had given him a smile that said, *Thanks*, and maybe a tiny bit more, or maybe he was imagining that part.

***Mrs. Janovik And The Moon***

He definitely hadn't been imagining the look on Alice's face when he and Claire had returned to the group: Amused jealousy was the only way to describe it, a half-smile and a flash of the eyes that said they could talk about this infraction later. With the look, Garrick had thought again about the vision of Alice standing naked on Mrs. Janovik's roof, but then the imagined memory had dissolved into a real one: The night Mrs. Janovik had joined Garrick on the roof to see what all the fuss was about with the telescope.

He had been trying to talk her into it for months. She had kept saying: "No, no, I can barely see things right in front of me," but she had finally relented. It was a clear night, and Garrick had had high hopes for giving her a good glimpse of Mars. He could see it through the telescope as clearly as he ever had—the variations of orange and red light, edged by shadow, the lighter shade on top of the sphere, where the ice cap was, a solid ball in space—but all Mrs. Janovik had been able to get from it was a blurry ring of white. Garrick had asked: "Do you see the orange? That's the sun reflecting off the red dust on the surface." Mrs. Janovik, peering into the telescope with one eye scrunched tightly shut, had answered: "I think I've lost it."

After twenty minutes, Garrick had failed to show her Mars, the easiest thing to show someone, aside from the moon, and what would be the point of that? The moon, though only three-quarters full, had been as bright as an early sun, its craters and shadows clearly visible to the naked eye, as visible as they were going to get. But Garrick, in desperation, had focused the telescope there anyway, landing on a spot near the equinox, where the sunlight skidded sideways off the surface, the shadows stretching like chewing gum, stretching like Alice's vowels, so that the rocky texture stood out in bright contrasts of light and dark. Then he had stepped aside and motioned Mrs. Janovik to the eyepiece, and she had stooped, squinted into it, and gasped: "Oh! Oh, look at that!" She had kept looking, changing eyes, glancing up at the sky, then back down into the telescope, until the moon had crawled out of position. Then Garrick had lined it up again, and she had looked some more, her awe not diminishing. She wasn't just being polite, Garrick had been certain of that; the awe was real, a strange fact, considering she wasn't seeing anything that hadn't been plainly in front of her face almost every night for more than seventy years. The next morning at coffee he had asked her about it: "You can see most of the craters without a telescope. Did it really look that different to you?" She had thought about it, then answered: "You know, I guess I just never looked at it like a solid

thing before. It was always just part of the scenery. That was the first time I looked at it as its own thing.”

At the Chicago lake front the night before, things had broken up around two a.m., and Garrick had still been thinking of Mrs. Janovik and the moon when he, Alice and Tulley had climbed into a cab together. Tulley was giving a drunken tour as the cab careened down Michigan Avenue, pointing out stores and calling out their names, even though Garrick and Alice could read the names on the signs. At one point, Alice had given Garrick a look he took as amusement—she was smirking at him about their drunken host, he thought, and he smirked back—and it was only much later, too late, that he had re-examined the look on her face, in memory, and saw the invitation there. It was also later, in his dark hotel room, alone, listening to the sirens, that he had understood why she had paused so long before climbing out of the cab when it had arrived at her hotel. At the time, Garrick had thought briefly that perhaps they had arrived at the wrong hotel, why else would she just sit there like that for so long with the cab’s door open? After pausing a little longer, she had said good night and disappeared into the brick and glass lobby, leaving Garrick and Tulley in the cab, Tulley giving a Garrick a *what-the-hell’s-the-matter-with-you* look that Garrick understood only later. Even Tulley, in his drunken state, had seen what Garrick had so completely missed, and now, standing in the sun-drenched crowd in front of the low brick house, under the showoff squirrel, Garrick deeply regretted having failed to see what had been as obvious as the moon. He had passed Alice in the crowd earlier that morning, they had said hi and laughed about Tulley, and Garrick had come away feeling forgiven, but still.

The brown squirrel was back at it now, barking at the crowd and dancing on the wire, still unnoticed by all but Garrick, who was starting to get bored with the show himself. He could see Claire in one corner of the crowd, still talking with the cop, and Alice in another corner, with her tall, silent cameraman shadowing her as always, and The Worm nearby, still assaulting Tulley with a verbal travelogue of Springfield cuisine and culture. Scanning the crowd, Garrick could see the rest of the Springfieldians as well—Larry O’Shaughnessey, Julian, Harvey Rathbone III—all standing in separate areas, as if consciously avoiding the urge to congregate, congregation being something that small-townners did with each other when they found themselves in big cities, not the image they wanted to project to their Chicago colleagues, or to the *New York Times* guy—Martin

Cobble, someone had said his name was, in a whisper. Cobble was congregating alone at the edge of the crowd, frowning, gray-templed, wearing the kind of serious, conservative suit and tie one would have expected from a lawyer or a businessman, certainly not from a journalist, but of course the *New York Times* was, within the world of journalism, a world of its own. If Garrick could just barely smell the campfire, and a lot of other reporters could see it in the distance, and some, like Claire and Harvey Rathbone III, could feel its warmth on their faces, people like Cobble were stoking the thing. Cobble and his Times colleagues lived and worked in a world as different from that of other journalists as the politicians they covered, a fact everyone understood, and which accounted for Cobble's isolation now, standing alone, looking as if he belonged that way. Garrick looked at him and tried to work up the enthusiasm to imagine his life—he didn't believe he had ever met a *New York Times* reporter before, or even seen one—but it seemed an empty exercise. There was ambition somewhere inside him, and he could usually tap it if he tried, but today the effort seemed to outweigh its potential rewards. So he's the *New York Times* guy—so what? He had once tried to explain to Mrs. Janovik the status of the Times, its unique role in journalism and the world, and she had listened patiently and then shrugged and said: "I've never seen it." That was true of most people in the country, Garrick had explained, but that wasn't really the point—though now it seemed more on point than it had then.

Now the crowd started squirming at one end, the end near the street. Garrick, somewhere deep in the heart of the mass, could see necks craning and people maneuvering around each other, all looking in the same direction, and a moment later, he saw what they were looking at: A plain, green van, with two police motorcycles riding in front of it and a police car behind it. The van pulled up to the curb and stopped, and a thick-faced man with straight hair peered out the passenger window at the crowd, his eyes wide. Garrick recognized him immediately as the biological father, the Ukrainian, who had been caught on film months earlier walking into one of the many court hearings that would decide the future of his son. The film held limited news value—it was just a Ukrainian walking toward a court room, surrounded by suited lawyers, and disappearing through heavy wood doors—but it was all the TV stations had, so they had replayed it for months, every time they did a story about Baby John. It had been a sore point for the Illinois television news industry that no clear film of Baby John's adoptive parents had ever been captured in

three years of court proceedings; the Dexters had always come and gone from court amid an impenetrable shield of lawyers.

Now all heads turned away from the van and toward the house, as if the crowd was watching a tennis match. Dozens of big cameras targeted the front door, through which a half-dozen people were emerging. Three were in police uniforms, a fourth was clearly a lawyer, but the remaining two—both women, older—were a mystery. Both appeared too old to be Mrs. Dexter. The small group stopped just outside the door and, a moment later, a man appeared. Garrick, twenty yards away and looking through the thick crowd, thought for a moment that he recognized the man, was sure of it, in fact, even as he decided there was no way that was possible. Then the man turned, and a woman appeared, a red-haired, late-thirty-something woman who looked as haunted as Garrick had ever seen any woman look, even Mrs. Janovik on her worst mornings of remembering Albert. The woman held a small, blond boy in her arms—Baby John! Who else could it be?—and the woman and the child both looked out over the crowd, him curious, her gaunt. They all stood there like statues for a moment, long enough for Garrick to get a good look at the boy for the first time; no public picture of him had previously existed, anywhere, as far as anyone knew, though that was now being remedied with a vengeance. Watching him there, Garrick wondered at the power of notoriety: After hearing about Baby John for so long, it was strange, almost surreal, to see him like this, as a three-dimensional child rather than an issue, the same feeling he had had when he had seen President Clinton in person at a speech in Champaign the year before, a feeling that said, stupidly: “Hey, look at that, he’s a real person!”

The man gently touched the woman’s elbow and brought her out of her petrified state. She squeezed the boy tightly to her, then slowly descended the steps, with the man—Mr. Dexter, apparently—walking next to her, both of them surrounded first by the little group that had emerged with them and, beyond that, by the much larger group that had been covering their front yard all morning. The larger group had been remarkably calm, almost frozen, when the mother and child had emerged—the power of notoriety, Garrick supposed—but then the spell fell away all at once, and the crowd came alive as a squirming, thrashing thing, shouting, shoving, flashing lights, rippling in the center where the mother and child and their entourage moved through it like a fish slipping through water, toward the green van where the Ukrainian waited with the little boy’s future.

Garrick shoved through a knot of photographers and toward the Dexters, determined not to be expelled from the crowd. He needed to be there, within sight, when the child went from one set of arms to another. For all the high drama at play, there actually wouldn't be much to write about—biological father takes boy home, end of story—and he would need to pad it with plenty of what his editors called “color”: Descriptions of the scene, little gems of detail that made it clear the reporter was there, in the front row of the campfire. Garrick couldn't get to the Dexters—the reporters directly around him were walking backward slowly, matching the couple step-for-step, and weren't about to break ranks—but he did manage to get into their path, between the house and the van, where he could anchor himself and wait for them to come to him. A television cameraman bumped against him from behind, trying to establish a position where his camera could catch the approaching entourage. He looked pleadingly at Garrick, and Garrick took great pleasure in staring frigidly back and saying loudly, above the noise: “Forget it.”

Garrick turned away from the cameraman just as the entourage hit him head-on. He tried to stay standing as the dense, moving core of people swirled by him, reminding him of a childhood visit to the ocean in which he had spent a happy afternoon trying to stand against advancing walls of saltwater. Now, as then, he foundered, slipping to one side, almost falling, as an especially dense knot of cameramen—damned cameramen!—crashed by him, walking backward. Garrick pushed back, angrily, and for a brief moment, broke inside the cocoon, face-to-face with the man from the house, presumably Mr. Dexter. In that moment, both Garrick and Mr. Dexter froze and looked at each other, nose-to-nose, recognition flashing between them, like the pop of a blown fuse, then disappearing into a whiff of ozone. Garrick knew him but couldn't place him; he thought, for some reason, of the butt-ugly Stratton Building in Springfield, but the memory wouldn't unfurl any further. As Mr. Dexter was swept away in the wave of reporters, he took a last, twisting look toward Garrick, a look that said: “*What the hell are you doing here?*” Then the wave moved away broke against the green van.

The Ukrainian was climbing clumsily out of the van as the Dexters arrived, the top of Baby John's blond head bobbing a few inches above the scene. Garrick, having fallen out of the wave, pushed as close as he could, getting to within ten yards but still unable to see anything except small pieces of the child and his two sets of parents through the forest of cameras and reporters. He moved to one side, then the other, then found a spot behind

several conveniently short reporters who had coincidentally congregated in one area, their collective lack of height creating a little notch in the crowd that gave Garrick a clear line of sight to the Dexters and the Ukrainian and the child, or at least of their heads.

Uniformed police officers were thick around them now, pushing the reporters back as the couple and the Ukrainian talked quietly to each other amid the chaos, their expressions dry as dust, with Baby John looking on, his curiosity having given way to nervousness at the crowd, a shadow of panic spreading across his face. Garrick saw it, even from his distance, and found himself picturing being in the child's place, a child on his mother's hip, surrounded by police officers and reporters, not understanding the maelstrom swirling around him but being vaguely aware of his own position at the center of it. He supposed the size and sound of it alone would have caused him to start crying, and then Baby John did just that. It was a weak, tentative crying, out of confusion, and it came just as Mrs. Dexter, her face gaunt and zombie-like, had been handing the child to the Ukrainian. Upon hearing the little cry, she tried to pull him back, as if by instinct, but he had been halfway into the Ukrainian's arms, and for a moment they both stood like that, pulling the child between them, a metaphor for their whole story.

Then the Ukrainian let go and looked demandingly at the nearby police officers, as Mrs. Dexter hugged the child tightly and began crying in sharp, hard sobs. Mr. Dexter was talking into her ear, motioning gently, trying to calm her, but she was only getting less calm. Garrick, watching through the notch in the crowd, felt his stomach shrink. The two police officers stepped toward the couple as if to do something, but then, unsure of what to do, stepped back again and looked pleadingly at Mr. Dexter. Mr. Dexter was already easing the child away from his wife, who tugged back at him once, then let go and folded her arms, looking away, as the Ukrainian hoisted up the boy, then she turned and lunged. Her husband caught of the brunt of it with the back of his shoulder, jutting out one arm like a tollgate, then trying to wrap the other around her. The Ukrainian, holding the weeping boy in against him, twisted away from her, his eyes on her, expecting the worst. The boy made one tentative reach with one arm toward Mrs. Dexter, and that's when she abandoned her remaining front of civility, seemingly by conscious choice. She screamed: "Danny! Danny!" and thrashed against her husband, and tore her arm away from a police officer who had tried to grab it, and then glanced off another officer and half-fell to the ground, still shrieking: "Danny!" The Ukrainian, meanwhile, was hurriedly putting the

weeping child into the van, shaken by the attack, surrounded by lawyers and cops who were trying to form a wall between him and Mrs. Dexter. The cameramen, caught between two of the best moments of film they had ever seen and unable to decide which one to capture, were trying to capture both, swinging their big cameras back and forth madly between the hysterical mother and the Ukrainian child-stealer.

Garrick, watching it all, became aware that his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn't seem to close it. With Mrs. Dexter in his ears, he kept his eyes on the boy's blond hair, which was all he could see from behind the seat where the child sat, inside the van. Garrick watched until the van door slid shut—*thump!*—and the van began to pull away, to the music of Mrs. Dexter's ever-rising screams. She was on the ground now, and the noise of the crowd had risen with her screams. Garrick was oblivious to it all, watching the van get smaller, and imagining the rest of the scene from where the boy sat: The inside of a strange car, strange men in suits and uniforms around him, the strange Ukrainian talking to him, trying to soothe him, the arrival at a strange house, the tour of a strange bedroom, the offering of strange toys, and, inevitably, bedtime, looking at a strange ceiling in the dark, with plenty of time and silence in which his child's mind could try to grasp his dilemma, time to theorize about where his mother was, and about why he was here. His theories, Garrick knew, wouldn't be anywhere near the mark, centering perhaps on ghouls and dark magic. His theories wouldn't have anything to do with adoption law or court precedent or legislative intent—or of a Supreme Court Justice who couldn't see beyond any of it, who had viewed the blond boy as a legal issue rather than a blond boy, who apparently had never entertained the notion that children should be off-limits.

Garrick could picture Tipple's gray face glowering in the marble halls of Springfield, where he was today, probably having moved onto the next case, the next legal quandary, not bothering to watch the explosion from the bomb he had planted in these lives. Mrs. Dexter was still on the ground, crying violently, her husband kneeling over her. With the green van gone, the cameramen's dilemma had disappeared, and all lenses were now pointed down, at the woman on the ground. Garrick thought again that his stomach might come up. He turned and walked out of the mass of people, tucking his notebook into his back pocket and hoping the spectators wouldn't know he was a reporter, wouldn't know that he had even the most minor role in this outrage. Hartley, the doper in uniform, had said: *There's some real skeletons in this Tipple guy's closet*, and Garrick

wondered what skeletons could be more terrifying than the ones Baby John was confronting right now. He imagined wildly how Chief Justice James D. Tipple would like to be strapped into a carseat—or perhaps herded into a boxcar—and shipped away from the life he knew, with a rousing sendoff, something along the lines of: *Children should be off-limits, you gray old sonofabitch!*

Garrick looked up to see the brown squirrel scurry to the end of the wire and over the pole, then crouch, preparing to leap into a nearby tree. Off to report the whole incident to the other squirrels, no doubt. When Garrick looked back down, a hot tear dropped out of one eye, startling him, and then another fell from the other eye. He wiped them both clean, but they filled again, instantly. His chest was thick with anger, sleek and powerful and seeking a target. *There's some real skeletons in this Tipple guy's closet.* No shit. He walked quickly down the block, away from the crowd, toward his car, wiping wet fury from his eyes with every few steps. Overhead, the brown squirrel leapt, tail spinning, and caught the underside of a thin branch. It bobbed there for a moment like a cork in water, then righted itself, barked triumphantly at the crowd below, and disappeared into the tree.

Chapter Six:

### **Crimes Against History**

'Shiny' O'Shaughnessey Finds Something Big

*'Tipple Fled Police!'*

HILLSBORO, Ill.—On the morning of August 4, 1856, attorney Abraham Lincoln walked into the Montgomery County Court House in Hillsboro, stalked into the county clerk's office, dropped his big leather satchel on the countertop, pulled out a single wrinkled page covered with large and hurried writing, and said to the short, bald clerk: "File this."

The clerk, a man Lincoln had met many times but whose name he never could remember, smiled widely and said: "Morning, Mr. Lincoln. How was your journey?" The

journey had been horrible, as always. Lincoln's back and crotch hurt from two days of bouncing on the horse. He smelled like a horse himself, his clothes having been drenched through with sweat and dried and drenched again, over and over. A low-hanging branch had caught him across the face just south of Springfield and had left a raw purple welt on his bare cheek. The short, bald man continued to smile at him, seemingly waiting for something. A joke or a story, no doubt, Lincoln thought darkly. A few instances of launching into frenetic stories after too much hard cider and now everyone expected him to sit around spewing out clever thoughts all the time, spinning tales like Homer, even on hot, humid mornings when he had been riding all night and was hungry and late for court. The short, bald man likely had woken up in a bed that morning, probably with a woman next to him, perhaps had had the opportunity for a wash, almost certainly had eaten breakfast—all things Lincoln had not done lately—and he wasn't getting a damned story. Lincoln pushed the piece of paper forward on the counter, and repeated: ``File this.''

The short, bald man did file it, in a small, wooden drawer under the counter. Two months later, the contents of the drawer were dumped into a larger drawer on the far side of the room and, the following winter, into a crate that was carried to the basement vault of the courthouse, with several other boxes of papers, to make room in the clerk's office for stacks of firewood.

The piece of paper was still there four years later, pressed between the other papers in the corner of the basement vault, when Lincoln made his farewell speech in Springfield, secretly hoping he'd never see the place again, and boarded the train for Washington. The piece of paper was still there through the four bloody years of the Civil War, and it didn't move on the day Lincoln was shot to death in Washington. As the rest of the Nineteenth Century unfolded—the disastrous Grant Administration, the Teapot Dome scandal, the newspaper campaign to declare war on Spain—the piece of paper remained where it had been put, Lincoln's hurried signature sealed tight among the other papers. It remained there, untouched, during the celebration of the turn of the new century, and then through World War One. During the Depression, a courthouse employee stacked two other boxes on top of it. The piece of paper was still there, under the stack, when Nazi soldiers stormed into an apartment building in Poland and abducted a blond six-year-old boy named Albert, beating away his screaming sister. It sat there during a remodeling project in the courthouse in 1956, a project that was supposed to include

clearing out and repainting the inside of the basement vault, but which ran out of money before that part could be done. The piece of paper was still there on the day Illinois Governor Otto Kerner went to jail, and on the day Illinois Governor Dan Walker went to jail, and on the day Thomas R. Jamison was sworn into the governor's office. The paper sat there as Big Tom Jamison's administration ended fourteen years later, the longest administration in the state's history, and it was still there when a little-known former lawmaker named John Bell became governor, promising to make Illinois a tourism Mecca. By the brittle January night when a Pekin police officer pulled over Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple for speeding, the first act in the scandal that would mesmerize the state and momentarily catch the attention of the nation, the piece of paper hadn't moved a centimeter.

By the cusp of the Millennium, the piece of paper had sat, unmoving, for almost one-hundred fifty years, until the April morning when Bill Penn carefully lifted out the contents of the crate, blew away a century-and-a-half of dust, flipped through several old deeds and case files with his cotton-gloved hand, stopped at the page of large and hurried writing, squinted at it, held it up to the bare lightbulb over his head, squinted again, and breathed: ``Holy *shit!*''

Penn and the other researchers in Springfield had been scouring the state's courthouses for four years, looking through every box and drawer and file cabinet that contained even the remotest possibility of holding documents from Lincoln's Illinois legal career. There had already been two expeditions through the Hillsboro courthouse, enough that Penn had wondered all morning why they had sent him for a third. The last thing he had expected to find was what he was looking for: any Lincoln document, let alone the best-preserved Lincoln document he had ever seen. The stacks of paper pressing tightly against it had preserved it as well as any feat of science could. It could have been written yesterday for the shape it was in.

Penn stared at it stupidly for a full minute, a scrap of paper that last saw light when slavery was legal. Then he thought: *Light. Oh shit, light!* The harsh light from the bare bulb was pummeling the sheet of paper, and Penn pictured the devastating chemical reaction already beginning to build within the fibrous structure of the page. He quickly tucked the page into one of the big envelopes he had brought with him, then tucked the envelope into his document file and closed it.

A moment later—he couldn't stop himself—he opened the document file, opened the envelope, pulled out the scrap of paper and stared at it again. Abraham Lincoln had written it himself: ``*A. Lincoln*,'' said the signature. Even through the cotton glove, Penn could feel the rough fiber of the page, its small weight on his fingers, a connection to Lincoln, a three-dimensional thing that had been in Lincoln's hands, had commanded Lincoln's attention—if only long enough for him to scratch out three-dozen words—and now was in Penn's hands, commanding far more of his attention than Lincoln likely ever gave it.

Of course, he had seen documents before written by Lincoln, dozens of them, even touched a few of them, though always wearing the damned cotton gloves to protect the pages from human skin, which was, to hear Oliver and the other anal-retentive project editors put it, oozing with fluids more corrosive than battery acid. Some of the pages he had touched through the gloves had had intact signatures, those sweeping, graceful ``*A. Lincolns*,'' though more had contained neat, rectangular incisions where the signatures should have been, thoughtless little crimes against history, some committed right after Lincoln's death, others more recently. No razor had ever touched this page, though. It looked as though *nothing* had touched this page, not even air, since Lincoln had breathed. No original document Penn had ever held nor even seen had looked like this one: Firm, unblemished, utterly clean. The paper alone would be worth something in this shape, Penn thought, even if the Great Emancipator hadn't scrawled across it in dark gray ink.

Then he stopped the thought and forced himself to picture another one: Walking into the office in Springfield, calling Debbie O'Shaughnessey and his other colleagues around him, opening the envelope, gently lifting the sacred page for all to see, hearing their gasps. A much better thought, that one.

Penn had spent a week unable to sleep after the winter day, six months earlier, in the attic of the state archives, when he had stepped away from the other researchers and had quietly slipped into his briefcase a faded, crumbling page from an 1847 murder trial handled by one of Lincoln's partners. It was a document none of his colleagues had known existed, not a direct Lincoln document, not a notable case, not in particularly good shape—nothing going for it at all, except one-hundred fifty years of empty time piled on the page. No one had missed it. Why would they? The thing was historically worthless, the kind of document that would draw oohs and ahhs from the stupid masses but bored stares

from trained historians. An amateur historian in New York had paid Penn two-thousand dollars for it because amateur historians with money were like that: part of the stupid masses, believing that age alone equaled value, not understanding that Penn, a professional historian, would never sell a document that was actually of any historic value, would never betray his profession like that.

The same had held true for the second one he had sold, the partial notes from the Stephen Douglas speech, unsigned but clearly in Douglas' own hand, another crumbling and historically unimportant scrap of paper—though that conclusion had taken a bit more self-convincing on Penn's part. There had been a passage in the notes, apparently never spoken, that seemed to indicate that Douglas believed a decade before the Civil War that civil war was "inevitable, and necessary," a piece of information that perhaps would have had some bearing on the way historians viewed the 1860 presidential race between Lincoln and Douglas. But probably not, Penn had told himself. Douglas had probably just wandered off subject, scrawled without thinking, and why would that be historically important when he had never uttered such a thought out loud? The scrap of paper had been harder to sell—there had been raised eyebrows and questions from the first two prospective buyers—and when Penn had finally found a dealer who would accept his vague explanations of where it had come from, he had been forced to accept fifty-six hundred for it, far less than it was probably worth, but enough to make a dent in one of his credit cards.

The credit cards were at fault, really—the credit cards and the miserly bastards who ran the Illinois Department of Historic Preservation. Penn held a PhD in history and a reputation as a capable and thorough historian and researcher, and for that they paid him \$29,600 a year, half what his brother in Detroit made for screwing tires onto cars at a factory. Oliver had refused Penn's repeated requests for raises, blaming the agency, saying his hands were tied, suggesting that Penn should have known going in that he had chosen a profession that wasn't going to make him rich. He didn't need to be rich, but he didn't see any reason why he had to live like a starving artist. He was a highly educated professional in an important line of work, someone who should be able to dress like he wasn't impoverished, someone who should be able to climb into a car that wasn't humiliating, was that so much to ask?

The credit card companies didn't think so. They had spent years offering him card

after card: ten-thousand dollar limit, twenty-thousand dollar limit, thirty-thousand dollar limit. What kind of a moron offers a thirty-thousand dollar credit card to someone who doesn't gross that much in a year, Penn had wondered, but he had accepted the offers anyway. Just because he had them didn't mean he had to use them, but better to have them, right? He had used them, a little at first, small shopping sprees, mostly for clothes, to make himself feel better about his salary, then bigger and more frequent shopping sprees as he became more and more depressed about the money. Then there was the occasional credit card cash advance when he was a little short before payday—and he was short more and more, the minimum card payments cutting further and further into his already paltry budget.

Then had come the July day when he had fallen in love with the red convertible in the lot on the way to work. He could picture himself in it, the wind in his hair, feeling like the professional he was, letting the wind blow away his worry about the debt, and the dealer said he could picture him in it, too. It was amazing how low the dealer could get the monthly payments, if only there was a little more up front—Penn's rusty old Toyota wasn't going to do it. Did he have any cash? Penn had thought hard, squinting into the morning sun, then had looked at the candy-red hood and said: "I can get some."

After that, the mathematics had become an ever-rising spiral: Most of his paycheck went to making the minimum credit card payments, leaving him with nothing for groceries, so he increasingly paid for food with plastic, which drove the minimum card payments ever higher. The previous month he had taken an afternoon to go through the bills and add them up, something he had been avoiding, and found that the credit card debt alone, not including the car, was just over forty-six thousand dollars—*forty-six thousand!*—and it was continuing to creep up despite the two-thousand dollars he sent them every month.

Penn's stomach tightened every time he let himself think of it: *Forty-six thousand dollars!* That morning, as most mornings, he had found new credit card offers in his mailbox and he had flipped through them, looking for someplace to move the debt. It was no longer a question of the interest rates—he had moved the debt so many times to so many new cards that he was more or less permanently paying low introductory rates, a good deal except for the fact that the balances still never went down. But each time he moved a balance from one card to another, there would be a hitch in payment schedules—

he would time it to make sure there was—that would give him a month off from the payment, just enough time to get out from under the wave before it crashed. He had looked into a bank loan, but only got as far as the loan officer's secretary before deciding against it. There was little hope he would be approved, and the humiliation of having to tell anyone he owed his credit cards forty-six thousand dollars—*forty-six thousand!*—seemed somehow worse than the debt itself.

He looked down at the single page in his gloved hand: *A. Lincoln*, it said calmly, a comforting message from the past. It was benevolent handwriting, and Penn pictured Lincoln scrawling it, perhaps chatting benevolently with the courthouse employees as he did. Penn pulled off one of his gloves with a dull, cottony snap—*fuck Oliver*—and gently ran the tips of two bare fingers along the signature. The paper felt textured, rough, nothing like the smooth, characterless paper of today. The ink lay in graceful loops and streaks of gray and black on the page; two little oval sprays of ink sat just right of the signature, where Lincoln's quill had snagged. Penn thought the scrap of paper was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

Then another thought arose. After resisting the thought for as long as he could, he let it in: This thing was worth a fortune. Okay, not a *fortune*, not millions, not even six figures—not in the covert manner in which Penn would have to sell it—but certainly worth forty-six thousand dollars—*forty-six thousand!*—which would be enough to stop the wave.

Penn breathed deep and thought of his colleagues. What would Oliver think? What would Debbie O'Shaughnessey, the warm and curvy redhead who shared his small, windowless office, think of him, sitting here in a courthouse vault contemplating a premeditated crime against history? How many times had they all sat around together, Penn included, shaking their heads in disgust at the thievery and greed of past historians? Debbie's inevitable judgment of him made it hard to breathe. But then, *she* didn't owe forty-six thousand dollars to a dozen credit card companies scattered around the East Coast.

He continued staring at the scrap of paper. It really was historically worthless, wasn't it? Nothing but some obscure motion in some obscure suit, nothing that professional historians should care about. Why not let some greedy amateur pay through the nose for it, to put it under glass in his personal library and impress his pretentious

friends? People like that deserve to be ripped off.

*Forty-six thousand dollars.* Penn let the figure come up in his mind again, unsuppressed: *Forty-six thousand dollars.* Then he slipped the page back into the big envelope and into his briefcase, carried the briefcase out to his red convertible, put the top down—it was a little cool for it, but he needed the air—and merged onto I-Fifty-Five north toward Springfield, concentrating on breathing. The envelope would fit in the box of old clothes in the top corner of his bedroom closet. Then it was a matter of who to call. There was the fat, bearded dealer in Chicago, the one with the lisp and the prissy eyeglasses who had twice called the project to offer to help out with their budget, in exchange for just a few of their less-important documents. Oliver had coolly turned him away both times, suggesting the second time that he not call back, that history wasn't for sale, but then Oliver, too, didn't owe anyone forty-six thousand dollars.

Two weeks later, after enduring a long stretch of something like paralysis, Penn spent a tense morning in his small windowless office unable to work, glancing now and then at Debbie O'Shaughnessey's curving figure in the seat behind him, moving papers around, drinking coffee without tasting it, convincing himself. Then he went home for lunch and made the call.

The lisping dealer said: "I'm lissstening," and said little else as Penn laid out what he had, carefully avoiding the question of why he had it. It would have been the first question out of any reputable historian's mouth, and when the dealer didn't ask it, Penn felt both relief and panic. He was really going to buy it, then? *Yesss*, said the fat dealer: "I'll have to sssee it first, of courssse." Of course. How about tomorrow? The dealer: "I open at ssseven."

Penn returned to his small, windowless office, said hello to Debbie O'Shaughnessey and, feeling the need to fill the air with sound, mentioned casually that he might take some vacation time and go to Chicago, hadn't been there in awhile. Debbie said she hadn't been there in awhile, either, though her husband Larry was just there this morning, covering the story of that poor little adopted boy for United News International. Debbie: "What time is it? Oh, he's probably getting back into town right now."

### *How Cats Feel*

In fact, Larry ``Shiny`` O'Shaughnessey had been back on floor two-and-a-half of the Capitol for ten minutes, standing in the press room lobby, listening to The Worm grill Macy about why Garrick Martin's door was closed. After the taking of Baby John, the reporters' cars had all headed south on I-Fifty-Five, and Garrick had arrived back in Springfield ahead of everyone else. By the time everyone else had walked into the press room, Garrick's office was inexplicably sealed.

The Worm, wide-eyed: ``Why would he close it?``

Macy, reading his paper, shook his head, a shake that said: *I don't know, or care.*

Worm: ``We're all working on the same damned story, right?``

Macy shrugged.

Worm: ``So why would he close it?``

Macy continued to read.

Harvey Rathbone III appeared in the lobby, his mouth tight at the edges. He demanded of those gathered: ``Did you see Garrick's door?``

Shiny: ``It's been closed since we got back.``

Harvey, to Macy: ``What's he working on?``

Macy, turning a page: ``I don't know. Or care.``

Inside Garrick's cubbyhole office, behind the closed door, Garrick stood with his phone pinched between his shoulder and his ear, on hold with the State Police. He had been planning the conversation in his mind during the whole three hours of the drive south, plotting strategy for every turn the conversation might take, but now he could remember none of the careful plans. Planned conversation sounded planned, anyway; he would just ask the question and demand the answer. He held Ben Hartley's business card in one hand, thumbing at a corner of it; a State Police business card, who ever heard of such a thing? He had been relieved to find Colleen missing from the office when he had arrived—he hadn't known how he might deal with her upon his arrival, casual conversation being unimaginable right now. The image of Baby John wriggling and crying softly as they put him in the van kept popping up in his mind again and again, like some maniacal jack-in-the-box that wouldn't stay down; he kept picturing Judge Tipple's gray,

glowering face in the crowd on the Dexters' front lawn, though he hadn't been there. The corner of Hartley's State Police business card was soft and linty from being rubbed. Listening to the empty space on the phone, Garrick tried to sit, then stood again. The sitting made the violence in his stomach worse.

Hartley's voice, on the phone: "This is officer Hartley."

Garrick: "Ben—Garrick Martin. We have to talk about the judge." He winced; too much, too quick.

Hartley's voice, startled: "Garrick—" Then, quietly: "Look, there's a lot of heat on this Tipple thing right now —"

Without being able to see him in his uniform, Garrick pictured him as the young Hartley, with the hair and the attitude. It made it easier to press the demand: "What did he do, Ben?"

Hartley's voice: "Garrick, I *really* can't —"

Garrick: "Dammit, Ben, you said you owed me one, now do you or don't you?"

Hartley was silent. Then, almost whispering: "Yeah, I do."

Garrick: "Then tell me what the sonofabitch did." He wanted to edit it as soon as it came out; the strategy had explicitly barred words like "sonofabitch," lest the prey sense anger and shy from it.

Hartley, whispering: "Let me get on another line."

More empty space in the phone. Then a click, followed by Hartley's voice: "Okay."

Garrick: "Okay. What did he do?"

Hartley's voice: "I don't know the whole story. All I know is, he got stopped in Pekin last winter, for speeding —"

Garrick, suddenly dizzy with a second flash of anger: "*That's* your big tip? A *speeding* ticket?"

Hartley's voice: "No, it wasn't just speeding. They brought him in. In handcuffs."

Garrick: "Handcuffs?"

Hartley's voice: "Handcuffs. They don't do that just for speeding."

Garrick: "Was he drunk?"

Hartley's voice: "I don't know."

Garrick: "What does the arrest report say?"

Hartley's voice: "That's just it—everyone's saying there's no arrest report, no file, like it never happened." Then, with finality: "The whole thing's a mystery."

There was something behind his words, Garrick was sure of it. Ben had never been able to bluff well, even in high school, where bluffing was an honored art form. He knew.

Garrick: "Ben, what did they arrest him for?"

Silence. Then, desperately: "Jesus, Garrick, if this ever gets back to me—"

Garrick: "It won't."

Hartley's voice: "I'm not kiddin', man! I got a *baby* at home—" He was scared, and it made Garrick calm for the first time in hours.

Garrick: "Ben, you're safe, you're never named. I promise."

Silence.

Garrick: "What did he do, Ben?"

Hartley's voice, almost inaudibly: "He took off."

Now Garrick was silent, puzzling over the words, and before he could stop himself, he said the first stupid thing that came into his mind: "He took *what* off?"

Hartley's voice: "During the traffic stop—he drove off while the officer was writing him up. That's what everyone's saying. They had to call in backups to stop him again."

Garrick felt a strange, predatory twinge moving downward through his stomach. It was almost sexual.

Garrick: "Wait a minute. You mean the cop stops him, they're both stopped, and then—Tipple just *leaves*?"

Hartley's voice: "Leaves in a *hurry*, is what I heard."

Garrick, still feeling the Twinge rising in his gut: *This must be how cats feel*. Then, slowly, savoring it: "A Supreme Court justice evaded arrest?"

Hartley's voice: "That's what I heard. Oh god Garrick if this thing gets back to me—"

Garrick: "It won't." He sat. Then: "Let's start from the beginning."

The Twinge clung to Garrick for the rest of the afternoon, as he compiled the story from Hartley, then found the Peoria police officer Hartley told him to call, on strict orders not to tell where he got his name. The officer hadn't been at the traffic stop, but had talked to several other officers who were on the duty right after the shifts of the Peoria

officers who had assisted the Pekin officers who had arrested the judge. The Peoria officer was silent for fifteen seconds after Garrick told him who he was and what he wanted. The officer spoke, whispering, after he had secured the promise that his name wouldn't be used. In a secret-source-voice—the confidential, self-important voice people always switched to when feeding information to reporters, a voice that was a creation of Hollywood, Garrick supposed—the officer confirmed Hartley's story and provided more details, though the whole account was, as far as Garrick could tell, fourth, maybe fifth hand.

Garrick: "Was he drunk?"

The officer: "Seems pretty obvious, or he wouldn't have run."

Garrick: "But do you *know* that he was drunk?"

The officer paused. Then: "No."

Garrick: "You don't know which Pekin cop it was?"

The officer: "No. But there's only six of them."

Garrick reached four of them. Two hung up on him without a word, the third hung up after saying: "Oh, Jesus," and the fourth politely explained that he had no idea what Garrick was talking about and, besides, he had been off duty that night. After calls to several circuit clerk's offices and two state's attorneys in the area, Garrick was confident no charges had been filed anywhere.

Then came the call to Tipple's office. As Garrick dialed, the Twinge prancing on the nape of his neck, he plotted his opening. He would immediately ask about the traffic stop, the attempted escape, the arrest. He still hadn't been able to confirm there was alcohol involved, though it seemed likely from the rest of the details, and after briefly considering a bluff—"Oh, and I also know about the d.u.i., your honor"—he decided he would simply ask him if he was drunk: "*Were you drunk, judge?*"

The Twinge purred languidly and kneaded its claws along Garrick's spine as Tipple's line rang.

A middle-aged woman's voice: "Chief Justice Tipple's office, this is Martha." It was the icy-stiff voice of so many secretaries of powerful officials in Springfield, though to call one "secretary" would be as socially unacceptable as calling one "babe" or "dame." They were "special assistants," or "administrative liaisons," or some other combination of words that vaguely implied a policy-making role that didn't actually exist. They were

closer to the campfire than any reporter could ever hope to get, and they spoke in a universal, special-assistant tone that constantly reminded reporters of that fact: *“You want him, you have to get by me,”* said the tone: *“I’m not just a secretary; I have power.”* The fact that they had achieved their power merely through their typing and phone skills was irrelevant; they were there, practically sitting on the crackling logs of the fire, staring out into the dark at the reporters in the second and third rows.

Garrick: *“This is Garrick Martin at the Peoria Post. Is the Chief Justice available?”*

The woman’s voice: *“I’m sorry, he’s not.”* Then, with finality: *“May I take a message?”*

Garrick: *“It’s important that I talk to him today. Will he be in?”*

The woman’s voice: *“I’m sorry, the Chief Justice will be out of the office the rest of the day. I’m his administrative assistant, may I help you?”*

Garrick: *Was he drunk?* *“Is there any way I can reach him? It’s important.”*

The woman’s voice: *“I’m sorry, Mr. Martin, the Chief Justice has a very busy schedule today. The best I can do is take a message.”*

Garrick: *“I’m writing a story for tomorrow’s paper that involves the Chief Justice, and I think he’s going to want to comment on it.”*

The woman’s voice: *“And the story is about what?”*

Garrick: *Fat chance, dear.* *“I’d rather discuss that with the Chief Justice. Doesn’t he have a cell phone?”*

The woman’s voice, tinged now with vengeance: *“I can’t give that number out.”*

Garrick: *“Can’t you call him?”*

The woman’s voice: *“I’m not going to interrupt him unless it’s an emergency.”* Silence. Then, as if suddenly overcome with mercy: *“I can give you his voice mail, though.”*

Garrick: *How big of you.* *“That’ll be fine, thanks.”*

A click, a few moments of silence, and then the same woman’s voice was back, this time shrouded in the tinny shell of a voice-mail recording: *“You have reached the voice mail of Chief Justice James D. Tipple. At the tone, please leave a message.”*

Garrick: *Do you piss for him, too?*

*Beep.*

Garrick: “Your Honor, this is Garrick Martin at the *Peoria Post*, calling for a comment on a story we’re running tomorrow”—the Twinge dug in its claws, back arched—“about your arrest last January.”

Garrick let the words hang there, the tape humming patiently. Then he left the number and time and hung up. He sat silently for a moment, imagining the judge listening to the message—“about your arrest last January”—then he realized, startled, that he felt the stirrings of an erection, something he’d never before felt in connection with a news story. He banished it, cleared his throat and leaned forward to his computer keyboard. He was surprised at how easily the words spilled out. A moment later, on the screen:

*By Garrick Martin*

*Peoria Post State Capital Bureau*

*SPRINGFIELD—The Chief Justice of the Illinois Supreme Court was arrested last January after fleeing police during a traffic stop near Pekin, the Peoria Post has learned.*

*The Peoria Post has learned.* It was with something like regret that Garrick realized he had never written the words before. He marveled again at how much the story felt like the first discovery of sex. The unruly erection still threatened to bloom.

*Sources familiar with the incident say Chief Justice James D. Tipple—author of a controversial opinion that led to Wednesday’s forced removal of the adopted toddler known as Baby John—was arrested and brought in handcuffs to the Pekin Police Department the night of Jan. 19, after driving away from a police officer who had stopped him for speeding.*

Garrick stopped typing and read the two paragraphs again, then a third time. Why did the words look so alive? His words had never looked like this before. He couldn’t stop reading them, it seemed; the words were like potato chips, salty and delicate, enticing him to stand at the bowl and eat to illness. *The Peoria Post has learned.* He read the living words one more time, then pressed ahead with the story, the erection straining uncomfortably inside his pants.

It was Julian Marcus' caucasian-sounding voice that made the birth-announcement for Garrick's story the next morning, an announcement Julian clearly would rather not have been making. Garrick, still in the throes of the dream that had wracked him half the night, could hear Julian's maternal resentment even through the tinny buzz of the cheap clock radio, which came alive while Julian was in mid-sentence: "... streets were clogged with protestors as the Chicago toddler was removed from the only home he has ever known. In a related story, Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple, who wrote the 'Baby John' decision, fled from police during a traffic stop last January, and was later arrested, according to a copyrighted report in today's *Peoria Post* ...". No question about it—Julian had moved just a little too quickly through the words "*Peoria Post*," as if they had tasted bad and he had wanted to get them out of his mouth. Garrick opened his eyes and smiled at his bedroom ceiling.

An hour later, Garrick stood in his small kitchen, buttering toast and watching a local morning news show on the television through the living-room doorway. An overly attractive television anchorwoman was sitting under the crayon-and-scale "Baby John" logo that Colleen Brenner hated so much, and was saying: "... The *Post* reported that no charges were filed against Tipple, despite the seriousness of the incident, raising the question of whether there was undue influence ...". Garrick had never heard one of his stories reported on television before and it surprised him how much it felt like a firm and undebatable validation of his work. It was an unexpected sensation, considering the commonly held view among Garrick and his fellow print reporters that there was little that was valid about television journalism. Yet the story sounded even more impressive and important splayed across the television screen than it had looked on his computer the night before.

Garrick leaned against the counter, toast in hand, and prepared to spend a few moments enjoying the sensation, but he was distracted. He remembered now that he had dreamt in the night about Albert—or about a generically blond-haired boy he assumed to be Albert—and about trying to protect the boy from a giant bird that was trying to pick him up. Strangely, the memory of it came back to him only now, awake for an hour and taking his first bite of toast. They were in a grassy, weedy field, maybe the one in the Mural, but with a lot of small peaks and valleys in the land, which was a good thing,

because the bird was swooping at them every few moments and the small valleys were the only shelter they had. They ran from one valley to the other, crouching, Garrick dragging the boy along with one arm and flailing the other arm upward at the swooping bird. He remembered realizing, in the dream, that he was going to fail, that the bird was going to take the boy no matter what he did, and he remembered deciding that, at least, he would make sure everyone saw that he had tried to stop it (he had some kind of audience, it seemed). Mrs. Janovik would be proud of him for trying to stop the bird, even if he failed, the dreaming Garrick had decided, and then he had gone dramatically about the business of failing. He would make it look good. Now, awake, the shallowness of his ambition embarrassed him. He tried to move on quickly from the memory of the dream, to leave it behind and not stand there analyzing it like some flaky New-Age True Believer, but the analysis was hard to ignore. On his living room television now, the overly attractive anchorwoman was saying, with scripted emotion: ``... there is no word yet on how Baby John is adjusting to his new home,’’ and Garrick thought, darkly: *How do you think he’s adjusting, you ditz?*

Walking out his apartment door and down the steps, Garrick finally put the dream away and concentrated on enjoying the anticipation of the day. He remembered being young and sitting in bed on Christmas morning, before sunrise, anticipating what was downstairs, enjoying the anticipation, feeling that the anticipation was almost better than anything that could be inside the garish wrapping, almost wanting the anticipation to continue; that’s what it felt like, having written the story that was leading the state’s radio and television news broadcasts this morning. *According to a story in today’s Peoria Post*, the radio and television announcers had said, and would be saying all day. The words would crawl across Garrick’s computer screen, glowing ants, when he called up the Associated Press version of his story, which was, at this moment, being sent out to thousands of computer screens in hundreds of newsrooms throughout Illinois and the surrounding states. *According to a story in today’s Peoria Post*. On floor two-and-a-half, they would all see the words on their computer screens, Harvey and Worm and Shiny and the rest, and they would grimace and wait tensely for their phones to ring, angry editors at the other end. Claire would see the words. That was almost the best part. Garrick had Claire’s friendship, and he occasionally thought he had, maybe, a little of her affection, but he had never felt he had her professional respect; that wasn’t, apparently, something she

doled out as easily as friendship or affection. That was something that had to be earned, and Garrick hadn't earned it, not before now.

Strangely, Garrick realized as he walked down the stairs that he wasn't particularly anticipating what Alice might think of the story; Alice, who clearly was willing to give him her affection and maybe more, and whose affection—and maybe more—he thought he'd like to have. Walking down the stairs now, Garrick surprised himself with the stray thought that he and Alice were going to sleep together, probably soon. It was a presumptuous thought, he knew, considering that so far all she'd given him were smiles and looks, but he thought now that, yes, they would probably, definitely sleep together. It was a prediction he could make with as much certainty as the prediction that, say, his car would start when he climbed into it this morning: not a prediction that was absolutely, infinitely certain, not a prediction as inevitable and unchanging as the orbit of a planet or the speed of light, but a prediction that was relatively reliable barring improbable unforeseen circumstance. Of *course* his car would start this morning, no reason to think it wouldn't; of *course* he and Alice would sleep together. Why wouldn't they? He would see what was below those thin black eyebrows, and soon. That, too, was something to anticipate, but not as much, it seemed right now, as the anticipation of knowing that Claire was going to read his story and wish she had written it.

Garrick paused at Mrs. Janovik's apartment door and made a mental note to visit her in the hospital that day. He hadn't had time to visit her in the two days of working on the story. What would she have thought of it? In all their talks she had never shown more than a bare minimum of polite interest in Garrick's profession, seldom asking him about it, which he had always thought unusual, given her age. Older people tended to be more enamored of journalism than younger ones, he knew, more attuned to the myth. His own grandparents had acted as if their grandson was Walter Cronkite from the time he had started piddling at his college newspaper. Yet Mrs. Janovik, as sharp as she was on current affairs, had never seemed especially impressed that Garrick made his living reporting on them. Her lack of awe had never offended him. He understood that her conversational interests were about bigger things, like the nature of humanity and the causes of evil in the world and the proposition that children should be off limits, and about smaller things, like garden tomatoes. Journalism wasn't equipped to address either life's big fundamental issues nor its small and telling moments; its jurisdiction was somewhere in

between, in a narrow universe of things big enough to be called ``news'' but small enough to be explained in ten inches of printed type. It was a universe that simply didn't command much of Mrs. Janovik's interest, as she was always looking above or below it. Garrick -- who had suspected even before meeting Mrs. Janovik that he was in a disposable profession undeserving of the awe that it was usually afforded -- was happy to oblige her lack of awe and spend a few hours a week as a civilian. But there were times like this, when he had produced something that he thought had risen above the noise, that he wished it was easier to whip out a copy of the newspaper and show it to her. Maybe he'd bring one to the hospital.

Garrick's story wriggled and cooed at him through the rest of the morning, first through his car radio on the four-minute drive to the Capitol (Female announcer: ``Reacting to the *Peoria Post* story, a spokesman for Governor Bell this morning said the governor is very concerned about, quote, `judges who misinterpret the law while breaking it.' ''); then from the front steps of the Supreme Court building on Second Street, where a vaguely familiar television cameraman pointed a camera at a vaguely familiar male television reporter talking into a microphone, and where Garrick slowed down near the curb long enough to hear through his open car window: ``... Tipple has been unavailable for comment ...''; and then in the front entryway of the Capitol, where the lobbyists, state employees and tourists were standing around holding open copies of the *Peoria Post* and buzzing to one another. One woman, apparently a bureaucrat on a cigarette break, to another: ``I knew that guy was crooked; I *knew* it!''

Garrick, silently but eagerly taking it all in, caught sight of the banner headline they had put on his story on the front of one of the papers being held open, and he was relieved: *Tipple Fled Police*, it said, and then the sub-head: *But No Charges Filed Against 'Baby John' Judge*. Not great, Garrick thought, but it could have been so much worse. In terms of consistent competence and overall mental and emotional stability, headline writers were better than photographers, but not by much; the Tipple story was just complicated enough, Garrick had worried that morning, to have stretched their competence to the limit. He had had premonitions of bold, black words that missed the point of the story (*'Baby John' Judge Stopped For Speeding*) or that made assumptions the story couldn't prove (*'Baby John' Judge Used Influence To Escape Charges*) or that were arranged in some unfortunate, potentially lawsuit-worthy way (*'Baby John'*

*Snatched From Home; Judge Arrested*). It wouldn't have been unthinkable. More times than Garrick could remember, he had watched his written words, generally not bright and shining things to begin with, become sullied and tarnished by headlines that were lifeless, or confusing, or just plain wrong. It seemed unfathomable to him that someone whose only responsibility was to read other peoples' news stories and then write a few words to accurately describe them could routinely fail to do that, but they seemed to fail all the time. Of course, it was Garrick's name under the headlines, not the headline writer's; no one outside the newspaper business understood that the reporters didn't write the headlines, so their mistakes were *his* mistakes. Garrick had once spent a week apologizing to sources throughout the Capitol after a headline writer had become hopelessly confused at a story Garrick had filed about a Senate committee investigating child pornography, and had topped it with a headline which seemed to indicate that the senators themselves were under investigation.

At the news stand under the main marble stairway in the Capitol rotunda, where they sold candy and cigarettes and a dozen different newspapers from around the state, Garrick surveyed the stacks of newsprint. There was a tall stack of *Springfield Register-Journals* with the banner headline over the Worm's byline: *Chicago Baby Sent To Natural Parents*; a tall stack of *Decatur Courier-Review & Intelligencers* (*Toddler Goes Unwillingly To New Home*); a tall stack of *Chicago Sun-Timeses*, treating the story with its usual subtlety (*BABY JOHN DELIVERED!—But Not Without Complications*); and a tall stack of *Chicago Herald*s, its famous mast-head bluely touting the lead story By Harvey Rathbone III: *Toddler Heads For New Home, Amid Chaos*. Every newspaper stack displayed an identical page-one photo—the toddler and his adoptive mother hysterically reaching for one another while uniformed deputies pulled them apart—and every story, Garrick already knew, gave essentially the same information, all of which the whole nation had seen live on television the night before. The *Peoria Post*, and only the *Peoria Post*, contained something new and different, Garrick reminded himself, basking in it: *Tipple Fled Police*.

There wasn't a stack of *Peoria Posts*, there was just one copy, and it was tattered so badly that the front-page photo of the mother and child was almost completely obscured. Garrick picked up it, looked at the torn and wrinkled page, and smiled tightly. *By Garrick Martin*, it said; that part was still readable. The vendor, a balding man with a

red-gray beard, looked at Garrick looking at the tattered newspaper, and said: ``Sorry, last one.’’

Garrick, evenly: ``That’s fine. I’ll take it.’’

Up to the second floor; past a clot of lobbyists standing by the brass rail, their expensive noses tucked inside their copies of the *Peoria Post*; up the curved and uneven marble stairs to floor two-and-a-half; under the Mural; and then Garrick was looking through the wood-and-glass doors of the press room, his stomach floating on a layer of warm anticipation. He could see them in there, through the glass—Worm, Shiny, Zack Carson, Julian Marcus, a few others—the vanquished ones, standing around with their coffee, grumbling to each other about the injustice of this life, steeping in their defeat. Garrick Martin knew that the topic of conversation was Garrick Martin. He paused a moment at the top of the uneven marble stairs, tasting the moment, not wanting it to end, not wanting the garish wrapping to be gone from it. He looked up. The Mural appeared especially bright and colorful this morning, and seemed to have more people in it than usual, though that was, of course, impossible; Garrick supposed he was just noticing more of them, seeing the bigger picture for the first time. Never mind the woman sitting off in the weeds with the baby; the men standing in the middle of the camp, the ones doing the talking, the ones everyone else in the picture was listening to—they were the point of this particular piece of art, weren’t they? Garrick saw that the sky in the mural was streaked with cloud-filtered sunlight that clearly, exquisitely announced morning, something he had never noticed in four years of looking at it.

Garrick pushed through the wood-and-glass doors and stepped into the yawning silence of the press room lobby. Whatever conversation Worm, Shiny and the rest had been having (as if he didn’t know!) suddenly ceased, and now they stood silently, not looking at Garrick but not particularly looking away from him, either; looking mainly at their coffee cups, being torturously casual about studying the black liquid that quivered there. Garrick fought the urge to smile. How many times had he stood there like that, examining the surface of his coffee as Harvey or Claire of some other bright star had streaked by, making him feel dim? Harvey and Claire weren’t there now, but that was okay, Garrick would eventually see them, and they would eventually have to react—or significantly *fail* to react—to seeing him; it was something to look forward to, something to save for later. For now, it was enough to watch the others strenuously not reacting.

Only Macy, who had no respect for other people's traumas, showed any outward reaction at all to Garrick's entry into the press room lobby. Macy's reaction was to say, loudly: "Garrick, I hope you walked here; you might not want to drive in this state for awhile." Garrick laughed, and Macy laughed, and Worm, Shiny and Julian were forced to smile stiffly and blow little bursts of air through their noses, looking resentfully at Macy for having compelled them, against their will, to react to Garrick's arrival. They looked like severely wounded men who had been suddenly dragged to their feet and ordered to march.

As slowly and languidly as he reasonably could, Garrick grabbed his coffee mug off the underside of the counter, filled it, nodded good-mornings to the assembled wounded reporters, and walked toward his cubbyhole office. The door was locked, and Colleen was nowhere in sight, which was fine with him. He wanted the moment to himself. He opened the office, stepped in, pulled out his chair, sat, sipped his coffee once and spread the tattered copy of the *Peoria Post* in front of him. He didn't read the story—he knew every word of it, could have recited it line by line—but he just looked at it the way a person might look at art, taking in the staggered gray blocks of copy, the italic grace of the byline, the sharp edges of the photo, all framed in bold, black words: *Tipple Fled Police*. Out in the lobby, the low murmur of resentful conversation resumed. Garrick sipped his coffee, and felt it slide warmly down his throat, and thought that the moment was maybe the best one he'd ever tasted.

Across the hall, in the larger cubbyhole office of the *Chicago Herald*, Harvey Rathbone III also sipped his coffee, but it didn't taste like Garrick's. Harvey's coffee was bitter and wretched this morning, though it had come from the same pot. Harvey's coffee mocked him. Harvey had been kicked in the stomach, hard, by the birth announcement over his clock radio that morning of the *Peoria Post* story. After hearing it, he had begun his day feeling like he was ending it, had showered without enthusiasm, had eaten his breakfast without tasting it. He had arrived to work early—before Macy, even—for the specific purpose of not having to meet the eyes of any of his co-workers before he could get into his office and close the door.

It was unfair, of course, that Harvey alone should have to be particularly burdened with shame at having been beat on the story when, in fact, they had *all* been beat, but that

was the burden of being the top reporter on floor two-and-a-half, he supposed. Shiny and Worm and, especially, Garrick Martin, got beat all the time—Harvey should know, he was usually the one doing the beating—but none of them apparently felt they had to slink quietly into their chairs and hide behind their coffee mugs when that happened. They expected Harvey to beat them, and others expected it, too, so when Harvey did beat them, it was merely routine confirmation of the natural order of things. Gazelles don't hunt lions. They could get beat and then stand around all morning in plain sight, grumbling about having gotten beat, and no one would think much worse of them than they had before. Yet on the rare morning that one of them happens to stumble first into a big story, all eyes turn immediately and demandingly to Harvey, twinkling with delight at the thought of a gazelle bringing down a lion.

The worst part was that it was Garrick Martin who had beat him. It was bad enough that during the past three years Claire Ottoman, Miss Eyebrows, was in a dead tie with Harvey in terms of the number of exclusive stories broken (Harvey had been keeping count more meticulously than he would ever have admitted to anyone), and that Julian Marcus and Colleen Brenner had lately taken to breaking the occasional story ahead of Harvey, and that even Worm, that slug, had gotten the liquor-tax story before Harvey. And now Garrick Martin—*Garrick Martin?*—had broken the biggest story since the frozen lobsters? Just how far out of whack was the natural order of things going to go?

Harvey tapped at his computer and called up his address book and found the number for Gary McGruder—the first of his many sources in state government who would have some explaining to do this morning for having let Harvey get beat on the Tipple story—and then he sipped his bitter coffee again and stroked his beard, which was something he did when he wanted to remind himself of who he was. His beard was slightly long and stringy, slightly academic-looking, the kind of beard that announces nonchalance on the part of its wearer. People who wore beards like this one didn't have to be particularly worried about fashion trends or grooming; their work was too important for such trivialities. Harvey Rathbone III reminded himself that he had risen from the lowest ranks of journalism—the *Carbondale Sun* state Capitol bureau, the *Decatur Courier-Review & Intelligencer* state Capitol bureau—and had pulled himself up through talent and hard work, and now sat in the big chair at the *Chicago Herald's* state Capitol bureau. Sixth largest newspaper in America. Bureaus in Moscow, Tokyo, London. A massive reporting

staff heavy with Ivy Leaguers. Yes, Harvey had been beat; and yes, Harvey's shrill and unstable editor, Marilyn Davies, would soon be calling to demand explanations; and yes, Harvey himself would be demanding explanations from the hapless sources throughout Illinois state government who had let him down. But this all was, ultimately, a small setback in an otherwise stellar career. A week from now, Harvey would still be in the big chair, and no one would even recall that Garrick Martin—*Garrick Martin?*—had written this damned story.

Harvey sipped his coffee one more time (amazing how bad it tasted this morning) and dialed McGruder's number. McGruder was one of those people whose job, on paper, didn't look like much—a largely clerical position in the records division of the bureau of the budget under the governor's office—but who, like those administrative assistants and secretaries and committee clerks and Macy and others throughout Springfield, had been in the system long enough to develop knowledge and connections that were wholly out of proportion with his job description. Harvey had met him some years earlier while researching a story about low-level state employees who had secured double-pensions by jumping jobs within state government. McGruder had been one of them, and he had been plainly terrified when Harvey had called and asked for a comment, telling him his name was going to be in the *Chicago Herald* the next morning. The man had literally cried, giving Harvey a little moment of that strange, almost predatory, almost—sexual?—feeling he sometimes got when people in government begged him for mercy (something he never granted them). He had had no intention of granting mercy to McGruder, but fate and the sociopaths who ran the *Herald's* copydesk had other plans. Harvey's story had gotten too long, and McGruder's case was the least egregious of the dozen or so that Harvey had depicted, so some razor-happy copyeditor had cut out every reference to McGruder to save space. Harvey had been furious upon reading the gutted story the next morning, until McGruder had called, gushing gratitude that his name had been kept out of it. Harvey, seeing a chance to salvage something out of the lost pieces of his story, had said: "Well, you seemed okay, I didn't want to do that to you. Maybe we can talk again?"

McGruder had since been the seed that had grown a dozen of Harvey's best stories over the years. The impetus for their relationship—McGruder's mistaken belief that Harvey had purposefully spared him from public humiliation—was no longer the point. McGruder had paid back the perceived favor many-fold, and still he kept talking. He

seemed to know people everywhere, and to hear everything. As happens, he had grown into his job as secret source, had come to see it as his responsibility to leak information that could get him fired if he was ever caught. Harvey dealt with lots of people like that, people who routinely put their jobs on the line in order to whisper a few words to a reporter, people who went out of their way to do that, again and again. Harvey couldn't honestly say he understood it; he certainly wouldn't risk *his* job so that someone else in some other line of work could advance his own career. There was a mind-set among government whistle-blowers, a similar mind-set, Harvey supposed, to those people who get arrested for scaling skyscrapers.

He dialed the number and McGruder answered: ``Bureau of the budget.''

Harvey: ``Biggest damn story of the year and I get beat.''

McGruder was silent a moment, his way of confirming that he understood who it was on the other end of the line. Then: ``Jeez, helluva story, huh?''

Harvey: ``Yeah, helluva story. Where *were* we on this, McGruder?''

McGruder's voice: ``Don't say my name!'' Harvey rolled his eyes. It was a matter of faith among people like McGruder that their superiors in the murky upper heights of state government were listening in on their phone calls—though that theory didn't explain how people like McGruder could so routinely get away with talking to people like Harvey from their state desk phones. Harvey had learned over the years that most people, both in and out of government, generally believed that government was rife with conspiracies against average citizens. Harvey, like most reporters, knew, categorically, that this wasn't the case—not because he had any illusions about the ethics of elected leaders, but because he knew how hapless and incompetent they all were. To conspire takes intelligence and cooperation among the conspirators, and if there were two things that the upper heights of state government very notably didn't have, they were intelligence and cooperation. The egos at that level of government would, in themselves, preclude conspiracy; who would be in charge of it? Harvey doubted that any two high-level officials in this state could conspire to screw in a light bulb, let alone set up the darkly omnipresent network of citizen surveillance and covert activity that most people seemed to assume existed just outside plain sight.

Harvey: ``I got my ass kicked. I thought you had friends in the state police. I guess you've just completely forgotten that you owe me one?''

McGruder's voice: "I can't know every time someone gets arrested. What, am I your only source?"

Harvey, impatient: "Can you get me anything on this traffic stop that the Post didn't get?"

McGruder's voice: "I don't know. I got some feelers out. Sounds to me like it was just a speeding ticket, though—"

Harvey: "Oh, bullshit! You got a Supreme Court justice running from the cops, that's a major fucking story!"

McGruder's voice: "I'll look into it."

Harvey: "I need this one, McGruder." He winced as soon as he said the name.

McGruder's voice: "Harvey!"

Harvey: "Sorry."

The other line rang.

Harvey: "That's my editor, calling to ask why I got my ass kicked."

McGruder's voice: "I said I'd look into it, all right? Just don't say my name!"

Harvey punched the other line without saying goodbye. He answered it wearily, like a prisoner being led to the cell and no longer caring: "*Chicago Herald*, Rathbone."

Marilyn's voice: "Where the hell *were* we on this Tipple thing?"

Harvey: "Hi, Marilyn."

Marilyn's voice: "Have you seen the *Peoria Post*? You got your ass kicked!"

Harvey: "The *Post* story is bullshit, Marilyn. All they got on him was a goddamned speeding ticket." The story, of course, wasn't bullshit; in fact, Harvey saying the story was bullshit was bullshit, and he knew it, and he supposed Marilyn knew it, too. But what else was he going to say? *Yes, Marilyn, I got my ass kicked by Garrick Martin?*

Marilyn's voice: "Bullshit." Then: "I want us owning this thing by tomorrow, Harvey. I mean it."

Four hours later, Harvey Rathbone III was standing alone in the windowless, tunnel-like stair landing behind the Senate Bill Room on the east side of the Capitol, between the third and fourth floors, waiting. He stood uncomfortably, his arms folded and his butt against the metal hand rail, studying the black-and-white diamond pattern on the linoleum floor and wondering why they couldn't have done this in the relative luxury of his

office. Because McGruder had insisted they do it in a seldom-used stairwell tucked away within the infinite web of hallways and stairways that made up so much of the Capitol, that's why. McGruder, intent for some damned reason on regaining his stature as Harvey's best and most reliable secret source, had called back later in the day, whispering his secret-source whisper: "I've got a friend. He has some information you want. About the judge. Meet him in the stairwell in one hour." Harvey had again rolled his eyes at the telephone. Of course, there were about a thousand stairwells in the Capitol, but he knew which one McGruder meant. He had met McGruder and friends of McGruder there before. There was no reason McGruder's friend couldn't have just come to Harvey's office on floor two-and-a-half, but McGruder, like most of the public, believed that reporters needed to gather their information from whispering voices in dark, secret places, instead of just doing it in an office or over a telephone like everyone else. What made them think reporters liked standing around in dank empty corridors, their butts leaning painfully against metal hand rails, when they had perfectly good chairs back in their offices? Too many movies, Harvey supposed.

After a few more minutes of standing, he began counting the diamonds on the linoleum. He was above one-hundred when a short, balding man with a stringy mustache and a short-sleeve dress shirt with no tie stepped onto the landing from the third-floor doorway. The two men faced each other silently for a moment, each making sure the other wasn't just someone randomly passing through on the stairwell. Harvey, feeling foolish about standing there staring at a stranger in a dingy stairwell, finally said: "You're McGruder's friend?"

The man, looking around furtively: "You're not supposed to say his name."

Harvey: "Sorry." Then: "What've you got?"

The man: "My brother-in-law's on the Pekin police force."

Harvey, after a moment: "He's actually in the department?"

The man nodded.

Harvey: "Was he there the night they stopped the judge?"

The man: "No. But he was on the next morning, and he heard about everything.

All the arguing, the threats. The breathalyzer."

Harvey: *Threats?* "Breathalyzer? So he was drunk?"

The man: "Soused."

Harvey: "What was the reading?"

The man: "I couldn't get that. But he was soused, believe me. Everyone was talking about how it took all four of Pekin's squad cars to stop him.

Harvey: "Jesus." Then: "Why was there no arrest report?"

The man: "Why do you *think* there was no arrest report?" The man said it slowly, in a tone that made it clear he couldn't believe Harvey had asked such a stupid question. Of *course* a judge couldn't, under any circumstances, actually end up with an arrest report on file, the man's tone said; of *course* government was rife with dark conspiracies. How could you even think otherwise?

Harvey let it go, and said: "So he's stopped the first time, and—what, he just drives off?"

The man: "He had it out with the officer first. Flashed his court i.d. at him. Asked if he knew who he was."

Harvey: "What you mean, 'if he knew who he was'?"

The man: "He looks this cop in the eye while they're stopped, and he says"—the man now narrowed his eyes and brought icy-calm threat to his voice—"Do you know who I am?"

*Do you know who I am?* Harvey stared silently for a moment, mentally examining the words. Something about the words was even better than the drunk-driving issue. *Do you know who I am?* It was a conspiracy-theorist's dream come true. He noticed, startled, that he felt the early warmth of an erection in his pants. *Do you know who I am?* What a headline that would make!

And that's exactly what the bold, black words across the top of the *Chicago Herald* said the next morning when the paper arrived on Harvey's doorstep: 'Do You Know Who I Am?' Under that: Judge Was Drunk; Threatened Cops. And under that, the byline: *By Harvey Rathbone III*. A photo of Tipple's scowling face floated next to the words. Harvey, sipping his delicious coffee at his kitchen table, stared at the face—the dead gray hair, the angry lines in the skin, the cold and arrogant eyes—and he felt again like the victorious predator that he was. The prey had been brought down; the natural order of things had been restored.

### *Writing Writing Writing*

Garrick, too, stared at the picture of Tipple on the front page of the *Chicago Herald* that morning. Then he tucked the paper under his arm, dug a quarter and a dime from the pocket of his khaki trousers, handed the coins to the red-bearded vendor, stepped toward the marble stairs, and said mildly, under his breath: “Shit.” He said it because he thought he should, but his heart wasn’t in it. So his moment was over; so Harvey the Third had snatched away his story like a superior basketball player snatching away the ball, just like anyone could have predicted he would. Garrick found that the development didn’t sting as much as he thought it should have. Yes, he wished he’d had the stuff about the drunk driving and the judge’s threat to the cop—“Do you know who I am?”; Christ, that part was almost better than the drunk driving!—but Garrick could tell already, barely an hour into his morning, that it wasn’t going to haunt him all day, even when Helen called, inevitably, to flutter at him. It was still, in a way, Garrick’s story, and always would be. That the mighty *Chicago Herald’s* front page would be occupied stealing away a story that Garrick had started was a perverse sort of compliment, wasn’t it? Didn’t this validate the importance of Garrick’s story, when you really thought about it?

No, it was more than that. The dream—that was the reason he was failing this morning to agonize as much as he knew he should about having his story stolen. The dream of the giant bird and Albert, or Baby John or whoever that blond boy in the dream was supposed to be, had returned for the second night in a row, and for the second night in a row Garrick had been disturbed by his own self-serving and ineffective performance. Stepping under the Mural and into the press room lobby, he looked at the baby in the woman’s lap, sitting in the weeds behind the teepee, and was annoyed to catch himself vowing, mentally, that he would do better the next time the dream came.

The following morning, the press room lobby was packed with strange reporters. Garrick stepped into the room, looked around, and breathed out. There were probably thirty of them, counting the cameramen. Garrick recognized one or two of them from the night at the bar in Chicago. They were standing around, looking at the floors and ceilings, drinking the coffee and looking pleased with it (the quality of the press room coffee tended to surprise newcomers who had already been subjected to Springfield’s

restaurants) and generally acting like people act when forced to wait long periods of time in unfamiliar settings. They were well-dressed—even the jeans worn by the cameramen were nicer than the jeans generally found on the cameramen around here—and they had good haircuts. Garrick thought, for the second time this morning: *Shit*. It made no sense that they had all tramped down here that very morning just because of Harvey's story; there must be more.

Macy, who could be hennish when strangers packed his press room lobby, was weaving among them, picking up empty foam coffee cups, wiping stray spills and looking annoyed. One of the well-dressed Chicagoans, apparently trying to blend in with what he thought was local custom, casually scooted himself up onto the counter and sat there flipping through his notebook, his feet dangling, until Macy looked at him and said, icily: "Comfortable?" The Chicagoan reddened, and was scooting back down just as Garrick approached Macy, looking around and raising his eyebrows as if to say: *What the hell?*

Macy, relieved to see a familiar face: "Senator Soccer-Mom is here in ten minutes. Guess what for?"

Fifteen minutes later, all of the occupants of floor two-and-a-half, along with the larger flock of Chicagoans who had landed gracelessly in their midst that morning, packed into the Blue Room. There were twice as many reporters as there were chairs, so they lined up against the three walls facing the polyester blue curtain, shoulder-to-shoulder, camera-to-camera. It was, truly, a packed room when Senator Glenda Crawford arrived, surrounded by aides. It was so crowded she could barely make her way to the lectern. She smiled, and thought: *This is more like it*.

Crawford's first week as a senator had been laden with indignities. The three bills she had introduced—including the playground-inspection bill, which she considered crucial—were all sitting in the Senate Rules Committee, the place where bills went to die, someone had sympathetically told her. It had taken her two days to get a meeting with the committee co-chair—her, a Senator!—and then he had blown off her problem, telling her everyone had bills dying in Rules, there were simply too many bills to get all of them to the floor, and that maybe she should start by getting onto someone else's bill as a co-sponsor. Meantime, apparently, these playgrounds were just going to inspect themselves! The Senate leadership, after leaving her homeless for days, had finally assigned her a cracker-box office in the god-awful Stratton Building, when what she had been

envisioning was a cozy but classy, high-ceilinged office in the Capitol, maybe something off the rotunda like Senator Berman or Senator Shaw had, something with dark wood. There was no wood in Crawford's office, not a scrap of it, and she could practically touch the fluorescent lights in her ceiling, that's how low it was. Seniority, they had told her. Even the reporters got offices in the Capitol—the reporters, who had smirked at her that first day, had made her feel like a high-school freshman, had all but thrown pennies at her. Yet, her panicked aides had warned her, she was obliged to smile and nod and do all she could to win over those smirking reporters. One aide had even suggested she host a media luncheon, "with alcohol, definitely," but the others had nixed the idea, saying the reporters might view it as a sign of weakness, something she didn't dare show. Listening to the aides' ruminations about how to win over the reporters, Crawford had shaken her head. How far had Illinois politics sunk, she had wondered, when Senators had to grovel for respect from people who couldn't dress themselves properly?

The Tipple thing had been Crawford's own idea, which said something about the abilities of her high-priced political aides, she thought. Of course, she hadn't initially viewed it as a political endeavor; it had been an idea borne of the true maternal anger she had felt at watching on television as that little boy had been ripped from the arms of the woman who had raised him since birth. Watching it, feeling warm tears well in her eyes, she had thought: *That damned court, they ought to be impeached.* But you couldn't impeach judges for their rulings, could you? (No, you couldn't; she had looked it up.) Then the next morning had been that story in the *Peoria Post*, about the chief justice, Tipple, the one who had written the Baby John ruling, running from the police last winter. And then had been followed by *Chicago Herald* story, saying Tipple had been drunk when he ran, and that he had looked the officer in the eye before running and had said: "Do you know who I am?" That part, Crawford thought, was almost worse than the drunk driving, confirming as it did every dark suspicion that the public already held about people of power (*people like me*, she had thought, with a little mental smile). Even when she had announced to her aides that morning what she was going to do—"I'm going to call for his impeachment"—she hadn't been considering the political ramifications of the thing. She had been thinking as a mother, not a Senator.

Still, Crawford thought now, looking around the packed Blue Room, the political ramifications were apparently real, something her aides had understood well before she

had. Her aides had been moping for days about how badly her Springfield debut had gone and had been thrashing around for some way for her to make a splash in the media, the swingset-inspection thing having failed abysmally. She had expected resistance to the impeachment idea, admonitions from her aides about the separation of powers and the sanctity of judicial independence and so forth, but instead the aides had stared around at each other, revelation rising in their eyes. One of them had actually smiled hungrily, then had quickly dropped the smile. Yes, they had finally said, that was it, she should call for Tipple's impeachment. For violating the law and showing disrespect for his office, of course, not for making an unpopular ruling in an adoption case. A ruling so unpopular that the American public was at this very moment looking up from their sports pages and game shows to shout obscenities toward Springfield, Illinois. The public—which understood nothing about the separation of powers or the sanctity of judicial independence or much of anything else that couldn't be summarized in a thirty-minute sit-com plot—that public wanted Chief Justice James D. Tipple's head for taking a child from its mother on their television screens. The public didn't understand that you couldn't, shouldn't, impeach a judge for an unpopular ruling, the aides had reminded her, talking slowly. Even a really, *really* unpopular ruling like this one. So it was important to understand that she was calling for his impeachment because he violated the law when he ran from the police during that traffic stop, they had told her. Not because of his really, really, *really* unpopular Baby John ruling. Heartless and misguided and positively *evil* as that ruling was. Before they had even finished the morning staff meeting, one of the aides had begun calling all the reporters he knew in Chicago, saying things like: "You might want to get down here. It's about the 'Baby John' judge."

And now here they were, gathered before her like a congregation in the pews, murmuring softly among themselves and waiting to record her words and present them to the entire state and beyond. Crawford stifled a smile once more, cleared her throat, then leaned into the microphone and said: "Good morning." And all the murmuring stopped and the brutal television lights snapped on and the reporters propped up their pens on their notebooks and looked at her, waiting. This was, truly, more like it.

Crawford: "I know you have deadlines, so I'll make this brief." One of the reporters actually wrote *that* down! It was all Crawford could do keep her mouth straight. "You are all aware of the situation regarding Chief Justice James Tipple." They

were writing furiously. "We have reports that the Chief Justice drove drunk, then used his position to threaten a police officer who pulled him over, then tried to evade arrest." Writing writing writing. "And there remains the question of why he apparently wasn't charged with anything." Flipping pages in their notebooks and writing some more. "We still have a lot to sort out here, but it is clear that something is very, very wrong in the Illinois Supreme Court."

She paused and let them catch up, watching them writing -- writing writing writing -- until all the writing petered off and stopped like the last drops from a faucet. Then they looked up from their notebooks at her, the Senator, waiting for her next words.

Crawford: "The last time an Illinois Supreme Court justice faced an impeachment hearing, Abraham Lincoln was his attorney. Yes, it's a rare thing to remove a sitting justice. But when called for, it is perhaps the most important function we have: to ensure that our highest guardians of law and truth are, themselves, law-abiding and truthful."

Writing writing writing.

Crawford, watching them writing: *This is more like it.* "Driving drunk, evading arrest, and using one's position to intimidate officers of the law isn't behavior we can tolerate from the highest judge in our land. So, reluctantly, I am calling today for the impeachment of Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple, on charges of official misconduct." Pause. "I'll be happy to answer any questions."

Jack Wormer, seated in the second row, his goatee adorned with what appeared to be potato-chip crumbs, put up a hand and said: "Senator Crawford." That's all he was able to say. As if ignited by a fuse, the rest of the reporters exploded with questions, shouting the questions over each other, standing and leaning around each other trying to get their questions in front of each other. A question hand-grenade had exploded in Crawford's face, throwing a thousand little pieces of questions at her at once. She couldn't choose which one to answer—oh the burdens of being a Senator—so she waited patiently for one question to rise above of scattered mess of them.

One did, after a moment. As the Worm looked on darkly, one of the better-dressed Chicago invaders said loudly: "Senator, is this announcement connected to Judge Tipple's ruling in the Baby John case?"

Crawford: "Absolutely not. I would never suggest impeaching a judge because of a ruling he made -- however horrible, heartless and wrong that ruling might be."

Worm, his hand up again: “Senator Crawford --” Then he was obliterated by another question grenade. It was the Chicagoan who had earlier been sitting on the press room countertop, legs hanging like a five-year-old, who finally rose above the aftershock and said: “Senator, will you be on the impeachment committee?”

Crawford: “Unfortunately, the state constitution gives the *House* the authority to hold impeachment hearings, not the Senate.” She had looked it up. “But believe me, I’ll be in the front row of the audience, representing that little boy.”

Worm: “Senator Crawford --”

Then another question grenade. And another Chicagoan: “Senator, how long will the hearings last?” A stupid question from a stupid person from a stupid place, thought Worm, but of course he couldn’t say it, seeing as he was apparently not allowed to say *anything* anymore. By the time the press conference was over and the reporters were streaming back into the press room, Worm had begun six questions and hadn’t finished one, and now he was looking for blood, preferably Chicago blood. How dare they? How *dare* they mosey down here like a troupe of pinstriped circus performers, take over the press room lobby, drink all the good coffee, sit on all the countertops, take all the chairs in the Blue Room and then, just to punctuate the point that they’re God’s gift to journalism, use up all the questions in the news conference? Like there’s no way a Springfield rube could possibly have had an important question! They had been looking at him like he was getting in their way! Like *he* was the one sitting on countertops and interrupting people and breathing air that wasn’t rightfully his! It was as if they had come into Worm’s house, smiled and said good morning and then dropped their pants and happily pissed on his carpet! It was *worse* than that, in fact (Worm’s carpet being in pretty sorry shape to start with); this wasn’t something as inconsequential as his home. This -- *this* -- was his workplace, his territory, his Beat, and they had acted like he had no right to it! They were from Chi-*caaa*-go, and that, apparently, meant their notebooks were thicker than everyone else’s!

Worm was hovering near the coffee machine, steeping in these and other dark thoughts, when one of the Chicagoans—a TV talking head, to boot—approached him to ask where the men’s room was, as if Worm was working the information booth in some redneck tourist trap. Worm: “This hall, first door on the right.” A spiteful lie; that was, in fact, the women’s room, and Worm sent him there with the express hope that he would

step into it and suffer some degree of embarrassment. But, unpredictably enough, it turned out the Chicagoan could read. He looked at the *Women* sign, studied it a moment, then gave Worm a confused and slightly wary look before wandering off in search of a correctly gendered door.

By eleven a.m., every office door on floor two-and-a-half was closed, though the reporters behind them were tapping essentially the same story into their plastic keyboards: *Senator calls for first impeachment of an Illinois Supreme Court justice since the Lincoln era*. There was an unprecedented enormity to the story and no one was quite sure how to treat it in terms of their office doors, so a few reporters closed them just to be on the safe side, which of led to a barrage of retaliatory door-closings. Macy looked around from his perch behind the front counter and marveled silently that this was probably what the place looked like on the weekends, when no eyes were here to see it -- a thought that gave him an existential and oddly eerie feeling and sent him lunging back to the well-grounded normalcy of his crossword puzzle.

At one point, Sean Lovett came up for air from the stifling deadness of the lieutenant governor's office, feeling empty with his new life and looking for some familiar faces to banter with, but finding only more stifling deadness. It was apt metaphor, he thought, that the reporters' doors were all closed to him, as their world had been closed to him for some time. Had any door been open he could have wandered through it and had a seat, no matter how busy the reporter inside seemed to be, and no one would have thought it rude; but it would have been an undebatable breach of decorum for him to rap on any closed door without some reason beyond the desire to stand around and banter, so he didn't. He and Macy talked a little -- about the pending impeachment, about Debbie O'Shaughnessey's shape, about the weather—but you couldn't get a good banter going with just two people and Lovett soon gave up and left, feeling emptier than he had when he'd arrived.

By the next afternoon, the news about Big Tom Jamison had arrived in the press room: The former governor of Illinois, now a graying private attorney in Chicago but still a towering political figure both figuratively and literally (he was six-four), would represent state Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple against the impeachment charges. Like

so much of the news that arrived in Springfield, it came not through a printed press release or a loudspeaker announcement or any other official means, but rather by a kind of mysterious osmosis that no one later would be able to trace to its source. It often happened that way with the biggest stories on floor two-and-a-half. Someone in the press room (and no one later would be able to pinpoint whom) would say something small at the coffee machine or the drinking fountain or the bulletin board, something like: "Hear about Jamison?" Someone else—again, unidentifiable in hindsight—would answer: "Yeah. Of course." But that someone would be lying. That someone, unwilling to admit that he or she had *not*, in fact, heard about Jamison—and in fact had no idea what the first someone was talking about—would rush back to his or her office in a panic, certain that he or she was the only person in the press room unaware of whatever piece of news was floating around. He or she would leave his or her office door open (to avoid raising suspicion) and would quietly work the phones, demanding to disembodied sources in an urgent whisper: "What the fuck is going on with Jamison? Running for president? Cancer? Indicted? *What?*" The questions would be aimless and widespread, a shotgun spray of telephone calls, until one finally would hit the target. Someone, somewhere, would finally respond: "Jamison? Yeah, he's going to represent that 'Baby John' judge that they're trying to impeach. Jeez, how'd you hear about that already?" The reporter, in the know at last, would then saunter out to the press room lobby for a celebratory cup of coffee, and would say casually to whomever was standing around: "Hear about Jamison?" And the others would nod casually, and then bolt back to their offices in a panic, and the whole process would repeat itself.

For Garrick and the other reporters who had been around during any part of the Jamison years, the news of his return brought an oddly gastronomic anticipation. Jamison had been as prominent a political figure as Illinois had produced in the past half-century, the last of the state's national political power brokers, a perennial mention for vice-president and an occasional mention for president, but what he mostly was to the reporters on floor two-and-a-half during those years was a vital food source. Jamison had figured out early that the way to reporters' hearts and minds was through their stomachs, which worked out well for him because food was the last remaining form of political goodwill in which reporters still allowed themselves to openly indulge. Journalists who would never consider accepting a ten-dollar pen or a twenty-dollar game ticket from a politician

wouldn't pause at devouring a fifty-dollar meal, because it was a less obvious, less quantifiable form of bribery, and because it left no evidence. During his fourteen years in office, Jamison fed the reporters like a doting mother at every opportunity, inviting them to the Governor's Mansion for rich entrees on glassy china, sending meals to the press room in steaming foil pans, catering late-night committee meetings where reporters were being held hostage by protracted political debate. It was the rare reporter who, trapped in a Human Services Subcommittee meeting approaching midnight, going on eight hours with no food except what was available in the Capitol vending machines, could resist stuffed shells or barbecued chicken or roast beef swimming in juice, laid out languidly like a lover; it was the rare reporter who didn't let him- or herself be seduced. There were all kinds of ways to explain it to themselves: *If I refuse to eat, it would be considered rude and could hurt my relationship with the Governor's staff*, for example; and, *I need to socialize with these people so I can gain access so I can do my job*; and, *Hey, it's just food, I'm way too ethical to be bribed by mere food, so why go hungry?* Also, it wasn't tax money paying for the food, it was Jamison's campaign fund, which was somewhat better, if still problematic (especially when the reporters, looking later over Jamison's campaign records for evidence of shenanigans, would come across uncomfortably familiar dates and descriptions of catering expenditures, next to phrases like, "Purpose: Media relations"). It perhaps would have been hard for anyone to draw a line directly between the steaming pans of fried chicken wafting through the press room during those years, and Jamison's stature as the most popular governor in Illinois history—surely there was more to it than that—but anyone with a nose who was around during those years had to wonder.

By eight that night, Garrick had filed his story and was dialing the newsroom in Peoria, his jaw clenched. It was late enough that the regular day editors were gone, meaning he had to deal directly with the copydesk. It was common knowledge that all copyeditors were anal retentive and emotionally unstable. Garrick disliked dealing with them more than just about any element except photographers.

Male voice: "Copy desk, Whitman."

"Garrick Martin. Did you get the Jamison stuff?"

Whitman's voice: "Yeah, is this all you got on that?"

Garrick: "A former governor defending a supreme court judge against

impeachment isn't enough for you?"

Whitman's voice: "You know an A.P. reporter named"—pause—"Claire Ottoman?"

Garrick: Silence. Then: "Yeah, I know Claire."

Whitman's voice: "That's good, because she just kicked your ass. A.P.'s moving a story that says some state technician found pornography in Tipple's computer."

Garrick: "Pornography?"

Whitman's voice: "He was apparently pulling the stuff off the Internet, right there in the Supreme Court chambers. Pretty racy pictures, according to the story."

Garrick: "Oh, come on, this guy's almost seventy! Why would he -- ?"

Whitman's voice: "I'm sixty-two. You wanna go any further down this path?"

Garrick exhaled patiently, then said: "All right, add the porn stuff and give AP a credit line. Anything else?"

Whitman's voice: "Yeah, I changed some of your wording on the stuff about Glenda Crawford. I'm not sure it's appropriate to call a Senator's thighs 'creamy' . . ."

By eight-fifteen, Garrick was walking toward the Blue Room, where a case of beer was being consumed—in willful defiance of regulations regarding alcohol on State Capitol premises—by whatever reporters were finished with their stories. It wasn't an unprecedented event, but not a common one either; Garrick seemed to remember a similar gathering three years earlier, after a bitter late-night Senate deadlock on the state budget, and another one on an election night the year before that, when the Republicans briefly seized control of the House. Someone, or several someones, had decided the Tipple story rose to those standards and had snuck the case past the Capitol doormen. If he squinted, Garrick could view the event as a victory party in his honor—Tipple was his story, after all, no matter how many times Harvey and Claire updated it with new dirt—but he almost skipped it anyway. What tipped the scales and sent him into the Blue Room was the thought of Mrs. Janovik, propped up on pillows in her hospital bed, polite but vacant smile on her face. He hadn't visited her since returning from Chicago, he'd been too busy with the story, but he was no longer busy and if he went home and stared at his walls he'd have no excuse to give himself for not going. The day in the hospital, she'd looked like a picture of herself, like something on television, a correctly proportioned image but with

nothing behind it. And she'd looked like just one person, where before, Garrick was starting to realize, there had always been two. Garrick was starting to realize that the grieving he'd done since then—for that's what the dreams and the stomachache and the haziness that had surrounded him had been, grief, he was starting to realize—was for Albert, a blurry-face boy who seemed dead for the first time. Whenever he thought of visiting Mrs. Janovik, it was like the thought of attending a funeral.

Worm, Julian, Alice and others already were chipping at the block of beer in the Blue Room, seated at scattered points among the rows of blue plastic chairs, when Garrick arrived. He appeared through the blue polyester curtain as Alice was in mid-sip.

Julian, seeing Garrick: ``It's the giant-killer!''

Macy: ``To the giant-killer!'' And they all held their beer cans aloft.

Garrick the Giant-Killer smiled dutifully, waved to the gathered masses, seated himself strategically across from Alice and popped a beer. It couldn't have been better timing, Alice arriving in their universe just as Garrick had become its brightest star. Best of all, he knew, was that she had no way of knowing how rare it was—beyond rare, unprecedented—that Garrick would break the story that everyone was now chasing, and would be for weeks to come. Tipple's scrap with the police had popped up on the A.P. national wire that morning, and word had spread through floor two-and-a-half that afternoon that CNN had given a mention to it—only about a half-breath's worth of mention, but still. Garrick's story was now, officially, national news. Yes, Harvey's drunk-driving bit was pretty good and, yes, Claire's computer porn angle certainly would get some attention, but it was all icing on the cake Garrick had baked. How it must have looked to Alice, not knowing that Garrick was usually the one sweeping up the crumbs of other people's stories, thinking perhaps that this was how it always worked, Garrick breaking the big ones and slackers like Harvey and Claire limping after him. He almost wished the others gathered around the case of beer would knock off the fanfare, lest they draw attention to the rarity of the event.

Garrick took a swig of the lukewarm, foamy beer just as Claire emerged from behind the polyester curtain. She stood there a moment taking in the scene, giving Garrick an opportunity to marvel, for about the millionth time, at the erotic perfection of those dark, arching eyebrows. Macy, never entirely off-duty, announced her arrival: ``Ladies and gentlemen, put away your hard-drives, it's the computer porn patrol!'' Claire bowed to

the applause, then took a beer from Julian, popped it open and sat in one of the blue chairs. As she sat, Garrick thought he saw her cast an appraising glance at he and Alice, sitting across from each other, but he had to admit to himself that he had been looking for that and might have imagined it. Alice, on the other hand, was definitely appraising Claire, as she always seemed to do whenever they were in a room together. Garrick wondered momentarily if Alice knew about him and Claire—then he reminded himself that there wasn't a him and Claire, just a him.

Now Garrick the Giant-Killer watched in resignation as the conversation veered away from his story, to Claire's. This was predictable, he told himself, sympathetically. His story may have been the first and, from a legal standpoint, the most relevant, but her story was about sex, which made up a lot of lost ground. If there was a single constant in the staid world of political journalism, it was that stories about official abuse of authority would never under circumstances outshine a story about computer pornography, no matter how many giants Garrick killed.

Julian: ``Okay, Claire, show us—*how* were they posed?''

The room laughed, then laughed again as Worm leaned back in his chair and flung his legs open.

Larry ``Shiny'' O'Shaughnessey, to Claire, innocently: ``So, what was he doing with this stuff?'' He had meant, where was he keeping the pictures, but he knew how it sounded before he finished the sentence. Worm made a gesture with his right hand that sent the room into third round of laughter. Shiny O'Shaughnessey turned red.

At that moment, the governor's lanky press secretary materialized from behind the polyester curtain and surveyed the scene with disapproval in his face, though no more so than usual, Garrick decided after a moment. Circus Boy Stevens, dryly, to the room: ``I thought I might find you in here, celebrating the triumphant return of Tom Jamison.'' Then, his gaze settling on the case of beer: ``In a state office. You know that's illegal?''

Julian, to the room: ``Hey, I was trying to remember this the other day—*who* was it that gave seventy-two million dollars worth of state contracts to campaign contributors last year? Worm, was that you?''

Circus Boy, ignoring the allegation: ``I just dropped by to remind everyone about the governor's media luncheon next week. I thought you might still be a little interested in having lunch with the most important politician in the state.''

Macy, deadpan: ``Mayor Daley's going to be there?''

Circus Boy: Silent stare.

Worm, to Circus: ``Hey, how come the Bell just has a *lunch*? Jamison used to do a media *dinner*.'' Then, to the others: ``Remember that year he did the steak and ribs on the grill?'' And the room immediately filled with hungry, thirsty accounts of the Jamison years, accounts of steak and ribs at the mansion and pies and cookies set up on the press room front counter at any excuse and hot, greasy h'ordvours brought back to reporters' desks on napkins -- ``Remember those little fried cheese-and-ham things?'' Worm offered, dreamily -- and of course liquor: wine, scotch, much better beer than they were currently drinking (the rules then, as now, prohibited consumption of alcoholic beverages on state governmental property, but blind adherence to unreasonable rules -- a hallmark of the Bell Administration -- wasn't so in vogue with his predecessor). Those three little words, *Big Tom Jamison*, brought a Pavlovian response from the Capitol press corps even now, three years after his parting. Circus Boy Stevens stood silently and watched them salivate, wondering darkly about the age-old political connundrum of style versus substance.

Julian, to Circus: ``So Bell's going to show us the door right after lunch, right? Jamison used to have us in the mansion half the night.''

Worm, with rising outrage: ``How come Bell doesn't do steak and ribs on the grill?''

Circus Boy, turning to leave: ``Lemon chicken, take it or leave it.''

Alice then watched in silent amusement for the next hour as the reporters who had been there recounted their memories of the Jamison Administration, memories that seemed to revolve, unaccountably, around food. Halfway through it, she found herself getting hungry. Looking around, she said to no one in particular: ``You should have a vending machine on this floor.''' Garrick, she noticed, nodded politely at the suggestion, but the others all moved right on to the apparently unresolved issue of what kind of meat that was in the stir-fry that Jamison's staff served up on the last late night of the final state budget debate of his tenure three years earlier. Julian was sure it was duck; Worm was just as certain that it was pork, an obvious error which Julian attributed to Worm's lack of culinary experience. Julian told Worm, matter-of-factly: ``You never eat anything that isn't served in cardboard. You wouldn't know duck if it bit you in the ass.''' The gathered reporters were loudly mulling that mental image when Alice noticed the young, awkwardly

cute one they called Shiny opening his third beer, not laughing with the others but apparently brooding. She fought to urge to smile and pat his hand. Some faces just can't carry a brood, she marveled, and she wondered what could be upsetting the young man so much.

Larry "Shiny" O'Shaughnessey was, in fact, wondering if he would ever have sex again. It had been three days since Debbie had rolled away from him in their bed and said: "I'm tired," in a tone that left no misunderstanding about her real message, which was: *I'm so angry at you right now that I just might never have sex with you again.* Out of bed, the unspoken messages had been equally clear: *I'm never cooking for you again; I'm never watching TV with you again; I'm never responding to anything you say with anything other than a one-word answer again; I'm never looking at you again.* Larry "Shiny" O'Shaughnessey had become anything but shiny in his wife's eyes; he had become tarnished. And all because he had finally, *finally*, found a story that lived up to what he believed journalism was supposed to be all about: Righting wrongs.

The wrong, in this case, was one that he'd have thought Debbie of all people would have liked to see righted. She had been near tears when she had told him about her co-worker and the Lincoln document. The police had interviewed her and her colleagues, except of course the thief—Bill Penn, her officemate, whom Larry had met once at a staff picnic and about whom he had formed not a single opinion—and had stressed that they could talk to no one about it. She had been so upset about the theft that Larry had assumed there was no way she'd be able to carry out the police request that she go about her work and act the way she always acted toward Penn and not do or say anything that might tip him off to the fact that they knew he had committed a crime against history. Larry had actually suggested she call in sick rather than go in there and let the thief see the look on her face. But she had gone in anyway and had somehow managed to act natural around the thief, to engage in the usual small talk with him. Which was a lot more than Larry was getting these days.

The cold spell had begun shortly after Debbie had told him about the theft. She had been upset from the minute she'd arrived home from work, fuming and shaking her head and saying: "I can't believe he'd do it. I can't *believe* he'd do it!" What Penn had done, she had told Larry, was to take a court document written by Lincoln, one he had found in

a courthouse vault down in Hillsboro, and attempt to sell it to an antique dealer in Chicago. The dealer had contacted police, telling them Penn still had the document with him, in his Springfield apartment. The police, intimidated at the unfamiliar notion of arresting someone with an education, wanted to be extra careful about this one, wanted to make sure all the proper interviews and evidence were in place before they got the search warrant and arrived at Penn's apartment. An aide from the Governor's office had met with the cops to express the Governor's wish that this one be done properly and that the document be recovered, as it would likely become news.

And that was where Larry's marital problems had begun -- because he, too, had concluded that this would likely become news. That was part of what had bothered Debbie so much, the bad publicity that would soon surround the Lincoln project, which until that point could do no wrong in the eyes of the media. The project made news every time a new Lincoln document was discovered and was frequently on front pages all over the state and had been on the front page of *The New York Times* twice. Lincoln was the closest thing that secular America had to a deity, an American god, and there was insatiable public interest in anything Lincoln ever wrote, right down to meaningless, barely legible memos scratched off to fellow attorneys while He was practicing law in Springfield. All of this obsession, Debbie had lamented, would only make the story bigger when it finally came out: *Illinois historic researcher embezzles priceless document written by Lincoln Himself! A crime against history!* The project's platinum image would be sullied on a national level. There was even talk that funding would suffer.

All of which made Larry wonder, increasingly, just how the story was going to come out, and just whose byline was going to be on it. After listening to Debbie's fuming and holding her to calm her down, Larry had said: "So, um ... how many people know about this?"

Debbie: "Just a few people at work, Governor's office, state's attorney, a few others."

Larry: "Any reporters know?"

Debbie: "God, no, are you kidding?" She had burrowed back into his chest for a good thirty seconds before the implication had dawned on her. Then, quietly: "Larry, don't even think it."

But how could he not think it? *Someone* was going to break the story, right? It

wasn't like a state employee could steal a priceless public document and get arrested and get tried and convicted and sent to prison all without anyone in the media noticing. It was only a matter of when, and who. The when would have to be after the arrest, of course, but the who was wide open. Why shouldn't it be Larry? Why should Harvey the Third and Claire Ottoman and the rest get all the big stories? He knew how they viewed him -- "Shiny"—and, okay, there were worse nicknames, but certainly there were better ones. The nickname spoke to their condescension toward him, to their view of him as a new penny. They acted toward him as if he was—he almost couldn't bring himself to think it—*cute*. Not cute as in attractive, but cute like a puppy, and worthy of being taken just about as seriously. Claire Ottoman and the other women of the press room shamed him with motherly smiles every time he tried to banter with them -- Colleen Brenner actually *baby-talked* to him! -- while the men of the press room freely and openly ogled his wife (Did they think he didn't *notice*?!). It wouldn't have occurred to any of them that Larry "Shiny" O'Shaughnessey, the young new cute puppy of the press room, might actually be a serious journalist like the rest of them.

He had some stories brewing that he hoped would change all that (the rumors of the stripper hired by the Senate, for one, which none of the other reporters seemed to be interested in pursuing, for some reason), but none as potentially respect-worthy as a story about a crime against history. A state researcher discovering and then stealing a court document written by Lincoln and attempting to secretly sell it—it was perfect! It had betrayal of public trust, it had big money, it had hints of a shadowy black market trading in scraps of priceless academia, a peek at a world more interesting than the world most newspaper readers inhabited. And, of course, it had Lincoln. Lincoln Himself. Hearing the story, Larry felt almost angry on behalf of the Great Emancipator, as if the theft constituted some kind of blight on the man's memory, as if using Honest Abe's name to make a thief rich was worse than the theft itself. Readers and viewers would feel it, too; Lincoln had that effect on people. This one would make *The New York Times* and CNN and the weekly national news magazines. This one would put Larry O'Shaughnessey's byline in front of a nation of people who wouldn't know that his nickname was "Shiny."

Debbie didn't understand the condescension of the reporters or Colleen Brenner's baby-talk or the importance of getting Something Big. She knew about Larry's nickname but she didn't know about the little wound that it carved in Larry's pride. All she knew

was that she had talked to him about a bad situation at work, and he was suddenly embracing it as if it was a news story. She had said: "Larry, you're not thinking of *writing* about this?"

He had answered, after a moment: "Well, it's just—um—I mean . . . y'know."

Debbie: "I told you this because I needed to talk about it. Larry, you can't *write* about this."

Larry: "*Somebody's* going to write about it. It's not like no one's going to notice \_"

Debbie: "I don't believe this."

Larry: "--when the guy gets arrested."

Debbie: "I'll get fired. Do you understand that I'll get fired?"

Larry: "They won't know where it came from."

Debbie, incredulously: "They *won't know where it came from?!?*"

Larry, desperately: "I'll—I'll confirm it--"

Debbie: "How will they *not know where it came from?!?*"

Larry: "--with other sources, I'll get others at the agency to talk about it--"

Debbie, with a bitter laugh: "Oh, let's see, Debbie's *husband* broke the story? Gee, I wonder *where it came from?!?*"

Larry, getting angry: "What am I supposed to do? Just watch someone else break it?"

Debbie: "Yes, Larry, yes that's *exactly* what you're supposed to do! I trusted you. I thought I was more important to you than your damned job!"

That's what did it: her dismissal of his damned job, as if he didn't get enough of that from his colleagues. He was Shiny O'Shaughnessey, the cute new penny of the press room, put there for the amusement of others, certainly not put there to compete for Something Big. They all knew it; even his wife knew it.

Larry: "So I'm just supposed to sit here and not do my job, right?" Seething now: "That's what you want me to do? Just pretend I'm not a reporter? Just let my competitors piss all over me, that's what you want? Well, thanks a lot!"

She had stared at him for a moment, her look of hurt slowly giving way to a look of nothing. Her face stone, she had said: "Do whatever you want, Larry." Which turned out to be the most she would say to him at one time for the next three days.

Larry had pressed ahead with the story anyway, figuring his sex life would eventually return but a story like this might never come his way again. He had started by arranging a meeting with the P.I.O. for the Illinois Historic Preservation Agency, not telling him why he wanted to talk, just asking for a few minutes. The P.I.O., whose days consisted mainly of writing press releases about new museum exhibits, had sounded thrilled at the request and had told Larry that he could drop by any time, immediately if he wanted.

P.I.O.: Public Information Officer, the people hired by state agencies to handle people like Larry. On paper, their job was to provide information to reporters, though the reporters knew the P.I.O.s' real purpose was to *stop* information from being disseminated, or, if that wasn't possible, to spin it so that it was going in the right direction when it did come out. There was, Larry thought, a cynical symmetry to it, public money being used to hire people whose job was to prevent too much public information from getting to the public. This particular P.I.O. was a pudgy, dough-faced man with a stylish haircut who, Larry had heard somewhere, had once been a St. Louis television reporter. Larry had wondered upon meeting him whether the man's pudginess was a recent development that had perhaps ended his TV journalism career. The thought made Larry feel better about his own dying profession. Newspaper reporters might be losing customers to television, they might not have the celebrity or style or salaries of TV reporters, but at least they never got fired for turning pudgy.

The pudgy P.I.O. had greeted Larry at the door of his windowless eight-by-eight-foot office in the Old State Capitol, shaking his hand and telling him that he had read his work and liked it. Larry had assumed this to be a lie—he had seldom written anything that would leave such a mark and, in any case, wire-service reporters generally didn't get bylines unless the story was something special (a story such as, say, a Lincoln-related crime against history)—but he let it go. They had made small talk for a few minutes, Larry carefully avoiding the topic of spouses, as it could lead to the uncomfortable issue of where his wife worked. Her office was, in fact, two floors below that of the pudgy P.I.O., though Larry didn't suppose the man had any reason to know that.

After looking for a graceful segue into the subject of the stolen Lincoln document, and finding none, and sensing that the small-talk was petering out, Larry had finally just laid the issue on the man's immaculate desk: ``So—I understand you folks are looking for

a piece of paper?" Larry had then watched in wonder as the blood had drained from the P.I.O.'s pudgy face. It was confirmation, as good as anything verbal or written: The man knew exactly what he was talking about.

P.I.O.: "Um—what are you talking about?"

Larry: "Look, I'm not going to blow your case, okay? I just want the exclusive when it happens."

P.I.O.: Silence. Then: "Where did this come from?"

Larry: "Does it matter?"

After recovering from the initial shock of exposure—and securing the promise of an off-the-record conversation—the P.I.O. had warmed up again, telling Larry how the agency was about to score a major victory against antiquities theft and how it was going to score a major Lincoln document in the process. He clearly had been thrilled at the opportunity to talk about something he hadn't been previously able to discuss. He couldn't say more, not without talking to his superiors, he had said, and Larry had offered to stand outside the office while the man made some phone calls. The P.I.O. had called him back into the office ten minutes later.

P.I.O.: "Okay, some ground rules. No story until after the arrest. Not even a hint of it."

Larry: "Agreed."

P.I.O.: "The agency's role in the bust gets prominent play."

Larry, nodding: "It'll be in the second graph."

P.I.O.: "And—um—we get to read the story before it goes out." He had tried to bluff his way through that one, acting as if it was a minor point.

Larry, shaking his head: "That's a deal-breaker and you know it."

P.I.O.: "Look, my bosses are nervous about —"

Larry: "Tell you what. Maybe we should just drop this arrangement and I'll get the story another way. By chatting with some of the guy's co-workers, maybe? Asking around his office?"

P.I.O.: Dark stare. Then: "Fine. No advanced reading. But I'm trusting you not to fuck us on this, okay?"

The ground rules established, the P.I.O. had become enthusiastic about the thing. He had suddenly started talking in a manner that had reminded Larry of police shows on

television. The P.I.O. had said the “perp”—“That’s short for ‘perpetrator,’ ” he had explained, helpfully—had tried to make the “drop” in Chicago, but his “contact” had “turned” on him. Larry had smiled politely through the monologue, understanding that these were the words of a man who didn’t normally get to use words like that, a man whose words normally were in the form of bureaucratic press releases like the ones that were always fermenting, unread, in Larry’s wastepaper basket; a man who would likely continue churning out such disposable work product every day from now until his state pension kicked in. For such a man to be even marginally involved in anything that allowed the use of words like “perp” was, Larry supposed, the high point of his professional life.

Now, in the Blue Room, listening to his older colleagues drone on about a generous old governor Larry had never met, he settled back in his blue plastic chair, took a small swallow from his beer can. The beer was warm (warmer than Debbie these days, he thought spitefully, another brood forming on his face) but neither the warm beer nor Debbie’s recent coldness—nor the annoyance of having to listen to the other reporters drone on about landmark meals eaten before his time—could erase the anticipation he felt. He looked at his watch: Seven-thirty, about an hour left before he was to meet the pudgy P.I.O. and the police, to accompany them to the perp’s apartment. The U.N.I. night desk had already been alerted that a late story would be coming. By this time tomorrow, everyone currently sitting in the Blue Room, cluelessly sipping their warm beer, would be talking about it.

By nine-thirty p.m., the beer was gone and the reporters were drifting from the Blue Room like fumes. Garrick watched the process helplessly, trying to stall it, suggesting half-heartedly: “Hey, maybe we should take this to Norbs? . . .” He was picturing the blank walls at home and the yawning silence from Mrs. Janovik’s empty apartment downstairs. As he pictured it, he poked his tongue at his cold-sore, a painful little wound he couldn’t stop testing.

Worm, leaving: “School-night, Garrick. When did you get so sociable, anyway?”

Garrick caught a departing smile from Claire and managed to return it. In that moment, he chided himself for not having told her about Mrs. Janovik and Albert when he’d had the chance. He felt like he would give anything to have told her about that, if only so he wouldn’t have this feeling that he was harboring some heavy secret from the

world for no good reason. He didn't know how he'd explain his paralysis—*See, there's this boy who's been dead for sixty years* -- but he wished he had tried. He watched Claire sway through the door behind the blue polyester curtain and then she and the moment were gone.

Garrick looked away from the door to discover Alice was still sitting across from him, staring silently at him and smiling warmly. He felt his face go red; there was no way she could have missed his riveted gaze at Claire's departing figure, but now her face made no judgments at him for it. Her smile was a curious one. He noticed the way her thin black eyebrows leveled off when she smiled like that, molded into a straight line by her creased brow. He suddenly felt an almost irresistible urge to reach out to her face and run his fingers along them; his hand actually moved toward her face, before he stopped it. What would she do? he wondered. Somehow, he was sure she wouldn't do anything drastic; there was the possibility she would sit there, smiling curiously, as he ran his fingers slowly over her straight black eyebrows. The thought sent a weird little thrill through his stomach.

Then all at once and for no reason that he could fathom, he saw Mrs. Janovik's confused old face again. Her eyebrows were brown and wispy, something he'd never particularly noticed when he was with her in her kitchen but which now he saw clear as day in his mental image of her face. And for one panicked moment -- again, for no reason he could fathom -- he thought he might suddenly start sobbing right there in the Blue Room. He actually felt the sob creeping up his throat. He breathed deep to stave it off.

*I'm losing my mind*, Garrick thought, as matter-of-factly as if he'd noted the time.

### ***Provenanssse***

One hour later, in a small apartment in a red-brick building across town from the Capitol, Bill Penn wet his pants. Not a lot, not even enough to leave more than a dime-sized circle of darkness on the front of his jeans. But pant-wetting was pant-wetting and he had definitely done it.

The impetus for the pant-wetting had been the low, bass voice coming through his door. There had been a knock, official-sounding. Penn had risen from the couch—he had

been staring at a music video on TV with the sound muted, which for some reason had always helped him think, something he had been doing a lot of lately -- and he had walked over to the door and said: ``Who is it?'' He had asked it with hesitancy, as he didn't know his neighbors and he hadn't ordered a pizza. He couldn't fathom who might be at his door.

Then the deep, bass voice had said: ``State Police. Please open the door, sir.'' The voice was one of those low, resonating ones that doesn't produce sound so much as vibration. In the dizzy moment that followed the deep voice, Penn imagined he had actually seen the door quiver with the words, though he knew that was impossible. And then he realized he had wet his pants, just a little.

Penn: ``Just a minute, please.'' He stepped quickly to the kitchen, grabbed a napkin out of the little oak napkin-holder on his countertop (a gift from mom?) and dabbed at the wet spot on his jeans. He was low on napkins, he noticed. And straws. He had sensitive teeth so he liked to have straws around, and he was down to just a dozen or so in the little glass straw canister. (That one was definitely a gift from mom, he remembered; yes, she had bought him a whole bunch of kitchen stuff a couple years back, to help him make his little apartment more livable. The apartment outside of which a bass-voiced man from the Illinois State Police was currently standing, waiting). Also, there were toast crumbs on the stove, even though the toaster was clear across the room. Penn made a face. What was up with that?

The officer knocked again, and again vibrated his voice through the door: ``Sir?''

Penn swiped once more at the spot on his jeans, and pulled his shirt down over it. That wouldn't stain, right? He dropped the napkin into the plastic trashcan (he had bought the trashcan himself, no involvement from mom that he remembered), then he stepped toward the door.

Then he stopped. He let down the shielding thoughts of napkin holders and toast crumbs and stared at the door and allowed himself to consider what was behind it. He clenched his groin muscles as he did, just in case. He noticed for the first time that his stomach felt like it weighed a hundred pounds.

The bass voice: ``Sir, I have search warrant. I have to insist you open this door now.''

Penn, calling: ``Sure. One moment.''

Remarkable how calm his voice was, he marveled, for someone whose life was over.

Behind the calm, he noticed, numbly, was icy terror and, behind that, anger. The fat, bearded antique dealer with the lisp, the Chicagoan, had really done it after all. There was no other explanation for the voice currently vibrating through Penn's door.

He should have known it would end this way because it had been a disaster from the start, beginning with the trip to Chicago days earlier. It had rained, so he had been forced to put the top up on the red convertible, which always reminded him how small the thing really was and which, in turn, made him feel even worse about the money he'd spent on it. The rain had ruined the drive, and he had really needed a relaxing drive right then, having just been informed by a collection agency in Newark, New Jersey, that he was on their shit-list—the first of many shit-list letters he knew were flowing his way now, as the forty-six thousand dollars (*forty-six thousand!*) began to wash over him. He had exhausted every bill-juggling trick he knew, had sold everything he could realistically sell (except the TV; he needed those silent music videos more than ever these days), had applied and re-applied for every new credit card and short-term loan he could find, and still the wave was crashing.

Financial salvation was tucked inside the briefcase in the passenger seat next to him—his own little Emancipation Proclamation, signed by Lincoln Himself, declaring Penn free from his credit cards—but the universe wasn't going to make it easy to cash it in. Traffic had been unaccountably bad, the whole damned highway system had seemed to be under construction, he couldn't get a decent station on the radio. Plus, one of his windshield wipers had a nick in it that was laying a thin, sharp line of water right across his view, a small annoyance but one that had him obsessing by the time he hit the interstate. The universe—having apparently consulted with Penn's conscience—had conspired against him, trying to keep him out of Chicago. His conscience, long since beaten down and abandoned, had refused to entirely die and instead had lain there through the whole trip, moaning and coughing. A little headache had started mewing in his ear around Bloomington, and by Kankakee it was roaring at him.

The fat dealer's place wasn't the charming storefront antique shop Penn had imagined, but more like a warehouse—a dreary, windowless wood-and-aluminum building just off an industrial park on the city's south side, in a desolate gray area of abandoned factories and unkempt parking lots and a few sorry-looking apartment buildings. Certainly not the kind of area that would be expected to produce a lot of history buffs. Penn's

conscience had sputtered desperately at him as he had pulled up to the warehouse, asking him if he really, *really* thought this was where the pristine Lincoln document belonged, in some kind of distribution hub for a history-collectors' black market. *Crimes against history! Crimes against history!* bleated Penn's conscience. He kicked it, hard, before stepping out of the red convertible and stalking deliberately toward the warehouse, the rain spitting hatefully at him.

Inside, the fat, bearded dealer had sat at a cluttered desk and examined the sheet of paper with a magnifying glass while Penn had taken in the contents of the warehouse: rows of crumbling, age-darkened furniture—chairs, tables, bed posts—boxes full of dusty books and papers in clear plastic coverings, framed paintings stacked a dozen deep against walls, clothes hangers displaying old army uniforms, a collectors' Wal-Mart. All stolen? Even the wood-encased television set with the tiny screen and the missing cord? Even the stacked blue-glass bowls and the chipped glass faux-Tiffany lamp shades and the smudged smoking pipes that still bore the teethmarks of their long-dead owners? No, Penn had concluded, most of this stuff wouldn't have merited theft. This wasn't history, or even "Americana"; this was junk. He had brought the Great Emancipator to a junk pile and was about to abandon Him there. For money. Forty-six-thousand dollars, or as close to it as he could get. Penn had stared at a plastic doll with matted blonde hair and a missing arm, and he wondered idly how it might affect the negotiations should he suddenly vomit.

The fat dealer had finally looked up from the page and said: "I'm conssserned about the provenanssse."

Penn: "I told you on the phone, the provenance is unclear. That happens sometimes."

Fat dealer: "It would be easssier to sssell if we knew its hissstory."

Penn, flushing: "Look at the thing! You're going to tell me you doubt that's Him?"

Fat dealer: "I'm just sssaying."

Penn had looked wildly around the warehouse, suddenly angry at his own stupidity. Of all the things he had envisioned potentially going wrong with the plan, the one he hadn't counted on was that a shady, disreputable antique (junk) dealer would try to cheat him on the price. *Go figure!* Penn glanced to his left, at a rusting bicycle with a missing pedal and, incredibly, a price tag hanging from the handlebar, and thought:

*Provenance, my ass!*

Fat dealer: ``Sso, what did you have in mind?``

Penn: Silence. Then, almost in a whisper: ``Fifty thousand.``

Fat dealer: ``That'sss not going to happen.``

Now, standing in his kitchen, the tiny urine stain drying on his pants, the bass-voiced state police officer hovering outside his door, Penn mentally re-examined what had come next, moment by moment: The fat dealer's offer of ten-thousand dollars; Penn's sudden belief that he might faint then and there, allowing the fat dealer to make off with the paper for no price at all (not that ten-thousand dollars was really much better than no price at all); Penn's forced laugh of incredulity, something he had hoped would spur the fat dealer to start ratcheting the price upward but which had, instead, merely caused the fat dealer to smile helpfully.

Fat dealer: ``Maybe I could do better for you if I knew the provenanssse.``

Penn, gripping the edge of the desk for support while trying to look casual about it: ``I already told you, I can't say where it came from. I got it from this family I know. They don't have its history. It is what it is.``

Fat dealer: ``How about I call the ssstate archivesss, let them have a look?`` He had paused significantly before adding: ``Maybe they could help usss figure out where it came from.``

Penn had studied the fat dealer's face, looking for threat behind the wispy beard, but had found only the small, helpful smile. Blackmail, then? He had almost asked the question plainly—*Are you blackmailing me, you fat, thieving faggot?*—but instead he had decided it was time to find a graceful exit.

Penn: ``Tell you what, let me do some research. I'll—um—I'll talk to the family who sold it to me. Maybe I can get more information.`` Pause. Then: ``Unless you think you can come up a little.``

Fat dealer: ``Ten-thousssand is a fair price, I think.`` Pause. Then: ``Who iss that family, anyway? Maybe if I knew more about them? –``

Penn: ``Oh, just, um, just some people I know.``

Fat dealer: ``Mmm-hmmm.`` Then: ``Are they connected with the ssstate by any chanssse?``

The fat dealer had glanced at the phone on his desk, then had glanced back at

Penn, still wearing the same helpful smile. That had sealed it. Penn, no longer having to wonder whether he was being blackmailed, had made the decision in half a breath: ten-thousand dollars it is. It would hold off the wave for a little while, long enough to sell the red convertible and move into a cheaper apartment, long enough to swallow his pride and beg the bank for a loan, long enough to get a night job. The debt, that looming, snarling monster that had haunted his life, suddenly looked like a stuffed toy next to the specter of a criminal charge. Ten-thousand will be just fine thank you very much, you fat, thieving, blackmailing faggot.

He had opened his mouth to accept the offer, but then he had glanced down at the desk, at the page. *A. Lincoln*, said the signature. A comforting message from the past, from a man Penn felt like maybe he knew, just a little. And now he was going to leave him in a junk pile, next to the doll with the missing arm and the bicycle with the missing pedal. For money. And not nearly enough of it. If there was anything worse than a crime against history, Penn had mused in that moment, it was a virtually profitless crime against history.

Could he walk away from even the inadequate offer of money? The very thought of it had cheered him momentarily, the idea of refusing to sell the piece of paper to this man. He had tried to remember the last time he had done something right, the last time he had felt good about himself, and he couldn't come up with a single memory, but he felt good about the idea of not selling *A. Lincoln* to the fat dealer. In fact, for the briefest of moments, he had believed that he wouldn't do it even for fifty-thousand, even for one-hundred thousand, not for anything. The belief had felt so good that he had purposefully stopped himself from examining it too closely, lest it crumble like old paper in his fingers.

Penn had looked once more around the warehouse, confirming for himself that it was worst place he had ever seen, and then he had looked back at the fat dealer. Even as he had opened his mouth to speak, he had thought there was some chance that the words *I accept* would come out and deflate his new-found self-respect.

What had come out instead was: "Fuck you." Then he had scooped up the page, turned, walked out without another word, settled lightly into the red convertible and headed back toward I-Fifty-Five, feeling like a freed slave.

But now a different kind of slavery knocked at Penn's apartment door. The officer's bass voice vibrated once more, full of official-sounding impatience: "Mr. Penn, if you don't open this door, we're going to break it."

Penn, still marveling at his own calmness, walked to the bedroom, pulled the box of clothes off the top shelf of his closet, set it on the bed, lifted out the large envelope and extracted the page. *A. Lincoln*, it greeted him. Then Penn reached back into the box and came up with a plastic blue cigarette lighter, purchased and placed there for exactly this eventuality.

He sat on the edge of the bed, the page in one hand, the blue lighter in the other. His bedspread was a gray and white one with a geometric pattern of lines and triangles, another gift from mom. How would he explain this to her? Even without the evidence, they had the testimony of the fat dealer; there would be, if not a conviction, at least an arrest and probably a trial. *Mom, it's Bill, yeah I'm fine, hey listen could you come over to the police station, silly misunderstanding here, they seem to think I've committed a crime against history.* But without *A. Lincoln* around to testify against him, they would have that much more trouble proving it.

Penn looked once more at the page, the graceful loops of gray and black. The hand that wrote this wrote the Gettysburg Address and the Emancipation Proclamation; the hand that wrote this was one of the most beloved in human history, not just in the United States but around the world. For years Penn had watched the tourists shuffle somberly through Lincoln's home on Eighth Street and through his tomb out at the cemetery north of town, whispering, awestruck, in German, French, Japanese. What was it about Lincoln? he had often wondered. Why were so many people drawn to Him like the faithful to a shrine? He had only been a human, after all, and a flawed one at that, as Penn and the other researchers who had catalogued his legal career well knew. As an attorney, Lincoln had represented slave owners and ruthless land barons and guilty-as-sin murderers and the corporate scum of the Nineteenth-Century railroad industry. Lincoln, that noble symbol of honesty, had routinely lied in court like any other scheming lawyer. He wasn't God, the opinions of countless Springfield tourists notwithstanding.

So why was Penn hesitating? The sheet of paper was just a sheet of paper, written by a human, a minor document in an old legal case, and damning evidence in a new one: *The People vs. Bill Penn*, accused trafficking in stolen antiquities. The sheet of paper, once his ticket to financial freedom, was now a ticket to prison, Penn reminded himself. The bass-voiced policeman outside his door would take the sheet of paper and put it in an evidence bag, and after the trial, both Penn and the sheet of paper would be tucked away,

the paper in a museum, Penn in a cell.

So why was he hesitating? Because this was the ultimate crime against history, to destroy it? Because this paper was the closest he had come to knowing history personally? Because what he held in his hand wasn't just paper and ink but a little slice of truth, a connection to a time and place and person who made Penn believe there was some higher purpose in life? Because some part of him thought that if Lincoln could sacrifice his life for America's freedom, Penn could sacrifice his freedom for Lincoln?

Prison. Penn turned the word over in his head. Steel bars, metal cots, criminal roommates. Shame. Prison.

In the other room, three more sharp thumps rang through Penn's door, followed by the police officer's vibrating voice: "Mr. Penn, this is your final warning. Open this door."

Penn stared at the page. *A. Lincoln*, it said.

*Fuck you*, Penn answered, and he flicked the flame to life.

Larry "Shiny" O'Shaughnessey smelled it as soon as they kicked the door open: the acrid, brittle odor of paper burning. It was what the pudgy P.I.O. had been afraid of, that the perp would attempt to destroy the evidence if they knocked on the door. The P.I.O. had been imploring the two state police officers not to take any chances, to bash in the door without warning and charge into the apartment and seize the document before it could come to harm. He had been pacing like a tightly wound toy and insistently saying things like: "If the perp knows we're here, it's over!" And: "Element of surprise—that's the key!" And: "Your governor's watching this one, boys!" But the two officers weren't approaching the operation with the level of seriousness that the P.I.O. believed it deserved. The older officer, the only one who would speak to Larry and the P.I.O., had patiently explained that bashing of doors was a tactic generally reserved for cases that involved guns and/or drugs, not old pieces of paper, and that the P.I.O. should calm down. The younger officer—who was so completely ignoring the presence of the two civilians that Larry had twice had to scurry out of his path to avoid being walked into—had smirked and remarked to his partner: "Let's just hope he doesn't have an eraser."

Now the smirk was on the other cheek, Larry mused to himself. That clearly was burning paper they smelled, the instant the younger officer's foot opened the door. The

four of them stood there in the splintered doorway for a moment, looking at each other and taking in the dry scent of burning evidence. For the first time, a shadow of concern crossed the older officer's face.

There was no one in the living room. The posse proceeded immediately into the bedroom, where Bill Penn sat on the edge of his bed, a piece of burning paper fluttering in his hand.

The younger officer was on him in a heartbeat, pinning him to the bed with one arm and, with his free hand, thumping at the flames. The pudgy P.I.O. let out a sound somewhere between a yelp and a groan and then barked: ``Don't rip it! Don't rip it!''

Larry noticed that the older officer was examining the floor and looking confused. Larry followed his gaze, then shared his confusion: The thin brown carpet was littered with blackened pieces of paper, dozens of them, quivering and falling to ash. Had there been more than one document? Larry wondered. Had there been dozens? Because there were definitely dozens of burned sheets of paper scattered around their ankles. Somewhere in the back of his mind, Larry thought: *Dozens of historic documents destroyed! Huge story!* Then he felt a stab of guilt for thinking it.

Larry saw one of the quivering, burned pieces of paper that still had some white on it, and he bent down and picked it up. It was a few inches of the corner of one piece of paper, and it didn't look historic at all. Printed on it were a few lines of type—he made out Sears and Target and some dollar amounts—and an address to a bank in Delaware. Larry squinted. He recognized this, but he was having trouble understanding why it was on a floor among ashes that were supposed to be the remnants of burned historic documents. The older officer had found another partly intact piece of paper, and was staring at it and reaching the same conclusion.

Older officer: ``It's—it's a credit card bill.''

The younger officer, having finally put out the flames, looked at what was left of the page in his hand, and said: ``This, too.''

Then he looked at the pudgy P.I.O. and spoke directly to him for the first time: ``What the *fuck* is this?''

The P.I.O. opened his mouth as if to talk, then closed it again and shrugged, wide-eyed and confused. They all looked at Bill Penn, the perp, who was staring silently at nothing and was clearly going to be of no help.

It was Larry who finally saw the piece of paper sitting on the nightstand. He

stepped toward it and gazed down at it, holding his breath. A few inches were gone from the lower right corner, the edge blackened, remnants of a recent flame that had been snuffed out before it could reach the signature. The signature: *A. Lincoln*.

Larry was aware he needed to breathe now, but he had trouble making himself do it. Breathing seemed like such a disrespectful thing to do in the presence of such a sacred relic. Lincoln Himself had written this and signed it, and here it was right in front of Larry like it was any other piece of paper. Before he could stop himself, he reached for it and touched it, running his two middle fingers along the signature. The paper felt rough and pulpy, weighty, substantial. The signature was a burst of loops and swirls that spelled greatness. Larry imagined Lincoln signing it, perhaps chatting amiably with the court workers as he did, maybe offering a story or a joke, enlightening them on his way to enlightening the world. *A. Lincoln*. Lincoln Himself.

Larry was still imagining Lincoln with the quill when the P.I.O. body-slammed him into the bed, putting himself between Larry and the sacred page. The P.I.O.: “Don’t touch it! What the hell’s the matter with you?!” Then he put his pudgy hands down on the nightstand, on either side of the piece of paper, leaned his pudgy body over it like a mother hen protecting an egg, and froze like that. Larry, flushing and picking himself up off the bed, wondered if the guy planned to stand there like that until the state archives staff could be sent over in the morning, or what. Apparently so. The P.I.O. remained there, leaning over the page, saying, frantically, to all in earshot: “Don’t touch it! Just stay back from it! Don’t touch it!”

The younger officer glanced disinterestedly at the piece of paper, then smirked (Larry wondered momentarily whether the man owned any other facial expression), then proceeded to handcuff the perp, who was still staring at nothing. The older officer said: “You have the right to remain silent,” and Bill Penn clearly was going to do just that.

Larry glanced once more at the page—*A. Lincoln*—and stamped the memory of it for safe keeping, a high point in his life that he would tell his grandchildren about. Then he turned to Bill Penn as they led him out in handcuffs.

Larry: “Mr. Penn, I’m with United News International, I’m writing a story about this. Would you like to comment on—” Larry paused; how did one ask a thief why he stole?

He never finished the question. The two officers were moving Penn toward the

door, stepping through the fluttering ashes of the credit card bills, when Penn turned to Larry, smiled a strangely calm smile, and said: ``I'm free. I'm free.''

Chapter Seven:

**Garrick the Giant-Killer**

Legendary Former Governor

Returns to Defend Evil Judge

*Lunch is served*

The planet Venus is enveloped by thickly layered clouds that hide its violent, lava-choked surface from the rest of the universe. The tops of the yellow-white clouds brightly reflect sunlight back out into space, creating a star-like luminance when viewed from Springfield, Illinois. Venus that night was as bright as Garrick had ever seen it. It hung like a Christmas bulb outside his bedroom window, shimmering, mocking the other points of light around it. How fitting, he thought, that men throughout history had ascribed female characteristics to it. Of course, it was an inanimate sphere of matter, neither male nor female; but its peaceful and radiant outward cloak, the mystery of its tumultuous inner landscape, even its name, announced femaleness: Venus, Goddess of Love. Venus de Milo. He thought of Claire: *It's the only star I can name*—an understandable mistake. It was as bright tonight as a fiery little sun in the black prairie sky.

Alice, shifting warmly against Garrick's side, noticed it just as he was noticing it. She lifted her head a few inches off his chest to peer across the room at the window, then said: ``Jeez, that's a bright one. What *is* that?''

Garrick: ``Venus.''

Alice: ``Why is it so bright?'' It came out *braa-t*.

Garrick: ``It's covered with these clouds. They reflect light.''

Alice paused, as if unsure how to answer that, then she finally answered: ``Cool.''

She laid her head back down, her blonde hair spilling across Garrick's collarbone and

settling under his chin, tickling it. He pulled her closer and let his gaze rise to the ceiling. He felt warmth and peace, a cocoon of post-sex peacefulness, but he also felt annoyance with himself: How could this really have been the first time in almost a year? Maybe promiscuity is the lie of bachelorhood, he theorized, gazing at the ceiling; maybe all unattached men—at least all those who aren't inclined to prowl bars—can measure their sex lives by the seasons. The sex this night had been a sort of watershed, the first time in this apartment. In the few other opportunities there had been since living here, he had always steered things to other locations. He realized only now, with Venus shining in his ear, that concern about what Mrs. Janovik might hear was the reason he'd never attempted to bring a woman back here before.

Garrick tensed at the thought of Mrs. Janovik, tensed at his current setting—lying naked in bed with a naked colleague curled up next to him—as if perhaps there was something in the lease against this, though he was certain that wasn't the case. His tension, he knew, sprung not from the sex but from the whole issue of Mrs. Janovik, who at that moment lay in a hospital bed across town, perhaps wondering why one of her few (only?) friends in the world had neglected to visit again. Or perhaps not. She had been only half coherent when Garrick had gone there, as he kept reminding himself now; she might not notice his absence any more than she had seemed to notice his presence for much of the time he'd been there. Still he was aggravated with himself for slipping back into his obsession with her. For awhile, earlier, at the height of it, with Alice's warm breath washing across his ear and her legs wrapped around his like vines around a tree, he had forgotten about his stricken old landlady and her gray old horrors from the past, and her dead brother. In the insane throes of sex he'd felt sane for the first time in days, if only because he hadn't been thinking -- just as he hadn't been thinking while in the throes of writing the big story, not really thinking, not about any issue more complicated than punctuation. Then, too, he had felt the rush of this little part of life and had gladly let it divert him for awhile from the bigger shadow of death that Mrs. Janovik had come to personify. Garrick amused himself now with the stray thought that both the writing and the sex had occasioned erections, and both had lasted not nearly long enough. In both cases, Mrs. Janovik's image had waited at the end of the ride. The writing had ended, and now the sex had ended and he and Alice were lying here talking—just about Venus so far, but other subjects could certainly come up—and thinking and talking hadn't been

comfortable activities for Garrick lately.

Earlier in the night, after leaving the beer-can-strewn Blue Room, they had settled into a corner table at Norb's, Garrick taking care to sit with his back to the backward clock. He knew he'd be unable to resist glancing at the stupid thing frequently if it were in his view, which of course would be rude. The place was half-packed with the usual politicians and staffers, something Garrick had initially noted with no more interest than one would note that there were liquor bottles behind the bar. If Garrick were Harvey or Claire, he had thought as they arrived, he wouldn't have been able to sit and have a beer in this place without staffers and lawmakers dropping by the table every five minutes to banter, that's how plugged in Harvey and Claire were. So there were advantages to his mediocrity and anonymity after all, Garrick had mused silently: No one here would necessarily even recognize him as a reporter, let alone feel the need to come over and try to score some points with him while he was busy trying to score with Alice.

*Garrick, did you really think that just now?*, he'd chided himself there in the bar, smiling suddenly at his own uncharacteristic crassness. Alice, seeing the smile and knowing nothing about its origin, had smiled back, the same warm, receptive smile she'd been giving him, it seemed, ever since she'd arrived in Springfield. Then it had occurred to Garrick for the first time that Alice had kept herself in his vicinity more or less constantly since the morning they'd first met at the coffee machine in the press room. The thought had sparked another little smile from him. So unaccustomed was he to being pursued that he'd not recognized her as a pursuer until that moment. She had smiled again and said, with mock anger: "Why do you keep smiling?" It came out *smah-ling*.

Garrick, pretending not to notice the stray vowels: "I don't know. It's been a long couple days. I guess I've gone a little loopy."

Alice, laughing: "'Loopy'? That's what I like about you, Garrick. No one else I know uses words like 'loopy.'"

In the bar, they'd scimped together what little common history they had and used it to build a conversation, talking about the other reporters in the press room and the politicians they covered and the Tipple story. The beer from the Blue Room had lubricated the discourse, along with the new beers in front of them. Soon, Alice's vowels were sprawling all over the place, something she apparently hadn't noticed but which Garrick very much had. *Histories like handbags*, he'd reminded himself, but had said nothing.

Whatever her reason for the subterfuge, he'd decided, he hadn't yet been given permission to go there.

Then they had talked about the Story of the Day, the impending return of former Illinois Governor Tom Jamison. Alice, relaxed and unguarded, had said: "Jamison was a really big deal, wasn't he? I mean, I even remember hearing about him on the news sometimes when I was growing up."

Garrick, with deliberate innocence: "Why *wouldn't* you have heard of him, growing up in Decatur, Illinois?" He had watched her face go still and had resisted the urge to grin at her sudden panic. *Busted!* he'd thought.

Alice: "Oh, I—um—I mean . . ." She'd reddened, then said: "Well, I didn't actually grow up in Decatur. I'm sorry, did you think I grew up there? No, no. I, um, I grew up out of state." Then she'd added, with an odd little shrug: "In Mississippi."

Maybe it was the alcohol or the intimacy of the small table, or the tortured and clumsy way she'd shrugged when she'd said it, but Garrick had suddenly felt an overwhelming affection for her. She was sitting there, still red, still trying too hard to act casual, still not meeting his eyes. How tortured we can be by demons that no one else even notices, Garrick had thought, and then he'd thought of his own demon, Mrs. Janovik. Why did the whole subject of her and her injury and her long-dead brother terrify him so much?, he had wondered in that moment. Why did he view her as a deep, heavy secret, when the story of their friendship would at most elicit bored nods from any listener?

*Maybe she's my southern accent,* Garrick had thought.

Then he had leaned toward Alice over the small table, forcing her to look at him. He'd smiled understandingly, knowingly, the way he'd wished someone had smiled at him lately, and he'd said, quietly: "Why do you hide your accent, Alice?"

She'd looked down for a moment, then met his eyes. The look of forced casualness was gone from her face now and she let him see there the crushing gravity of the topic. She'd said gravely, almost in a whisper: "Because I don't want you to think I'm stupid."

They had locked eyes silently and Garrick had said, carefully, without a trace of levity: "I don't think you're stupid. I think you're beautiful." He'd paused, watching her panicky eyes dart around the room again before she'd put them back on his with obvious effort. Then he'd said: "And I think your accent is beautiful. It's like a beautiful birthmark

that you keep trying to hide. When what you should be doing is displaying it to the world.” He’d paused once more before adding: “And to me.”

Then, before he’d thought at all about what he was doing, Garrick had realized he was reaching across the table for her face with his right hand. He’d brought it up slowly, making sure she saw it coming, giving her plenty of opportunity to back away from it, to give some signal that he should stop. She didn’t. She’d idly watched his hand approach her face, curiosity but not a trace of alarm in her eyes. Then she’d turned her eyes back to his and gazed, patiently, inviting his hand to continue its slow journey toward her face. She hadn’t flinched when he’d touched the top of her left eyebrow with the tip of his ring finger, and she hadn’t closed her eye or moved it at all as he’d slowly traced the finger along its gentle black arc. When he’d brought his hand back down and settled back in his chair and waited for some reaction, she hadn’t demanded explanation, verbally or in any other way. Instead, she’d smiled a small, serious smile, unmistakable in its message. Garrick had smiled back, feeling the warmth building in his groin.

It was at that moment that state Representative Chester McDaniels, a Kankakee Republican who was known for his undying loyalty to the casino riverboat industry and his habit of wearing turtlenecks instead of ties, had appeared over their table and had said: “You’re Garrick Martin, aren’t you? From the *Peoria Post*?”

Garrick had reluctantly broken off from his silent stare with Alice and had slowly directed his stare instead at the man in the navy blue turtleneck, and had said: “Yes.” A big, squinting smile had spread across Garrick’s face as he’d said it, a smile that both Alice and Representative McDaniels had mistaken for unusually warm politeness, but which was in fact a smile of deep, bitter irony. Behind the smile Garrick had thought: *I can’t fucking believe this*. Four years of professional anonymity; four years of having lawmakers breeze past him without apparently seeing him—or, worse, of seeing him and deciding he wasn’t worth stopping for—as he’d tried to corner them for interviews in the Capitol hallways; four years of having the governor’s bodyguards eye him because they weren’t sure who he was, of having to show his press pass to the guards who staffed the Capitol doors, though he’d passed them a thousand times. Four years of watching Harvey and (more recently) Claire bask in recognition and fear every time they walked into a roomful of politicians, while Garrick had had to re-introduce himself to legislators each time he talked to them—with some, he’d lost count of how many times he’d re-introduced himself—explaining

each time where he worked (‘‘The Post, ma’am. No, no, *Peoria Post*. Um, yes, ma’am, it is a daily . . .’’). Four years of waiting for someone, *anyone*, to walk up to him and say, with some degree of respect: ‘‘You’re Garrick Martin, aren’t you?’’ And now it had finally happened—just in time to shatter another unprecedented moment he’d long waited for, the opening moment of seduction from a startlingly beautiful woman who, for reasons about which he still wasn’t clear, was inviting him to bed with her eyes. Or at least had been before the interruption. With any luck at all, Garrick had thought dryly to himself behind his tight, thin smile, these two moments of realized fantasy will manage to ruin each other, to cancel each other out like opposing penalties in a football game, and then I get to go home without the professional respect *or* the woman. If life had a laugh-track, Garrick had decided, it would have been erupting right then from the dark, smoky recesses of Norb’s.

Representative McDaniels, looking a little like a blue turtle with a man’s head, had said: ‘‘I just wanted to congratulate you on the Tipple story. You wouldn’t believe how many calls I’ve gotten about that guy from my constituents.’’

Garrick: ‘‘Oh. Uh. Thank you.’’ He didn’t know how the man could stand having so much fabric around his neck. It was all Garrick could do to keep his ties reasonably tight while sitting in the Senate press box.

Representative McDaniels: ‘‘I mean it. You really hit a nerve out there. That was a fine piece of work.’’

Garrick had been getting ready to say again, ‘‘Thank you,’’ because he didn’t know what else to say. Then he had glanced briefly at Alice, who was watching the exchange with patience and—amusement?—and he had decided another ‘‘thank you’’ wouldn’t cut it. He’d thought: *What would Harvey or Claire do?* They’d banter, they’d talk the language of the political insiders, they’d maybe even use the exchange to get another story. The beer had loosened Garrick up just enough to make him believe he could do all of that just as well as they did. Trying hard to act oblivious to his one-woman audience, Garrick had looked Representative McTurtle in the eye, had affected his best political-insider smirk, and had said: ‘‘Well, you know, even a Supreme Court justice can only get away with so much. So what do you think is going to happen with the impeachment?’’

Representative McDaniels, rapid-fire: ‘‘I think the guy’s dead in the water.

Running from the cops, shit, that ain't gonna play on Main. And the bit with the boy is going to really skew the numbers, you know. Bob Brown's going to be having this guy seven ways to Sunday every morning, I don't care how many Tom Jamisons you bring to the table. I don't think the subcommittee is going to take more'n a week to pitch it to the Senate floor, and then we're talkin' slam-dunk."

Garrick had nodded knowingly, the way he'd imagined Harvey or Claire would nod, trying desperately not to let on that McTurtle had utterly lost him right after "dead in the water." God, why can't these people just speak English, he'd thought. Flustered, trying not to let his eyes dart to Alice sitting there in his peripheral vision, Garrick had nodded once more and had said: "Well. Hmm. Yeah, I think you're right. Dead in the water."

McDaniels: "Oh yeah. Ain't no Chinaman going to fix *this* one for 'im." And Garrick had nodded again, wondering what the hell China had to do with it.

After telling Garrick once more what a fine story he'd thought it was, McDaniels finally had left. Garrick had turned back to Alice, expecting the moment to have been gone. It wasn't. Her amused smile had remained, as had the invitation in her eyes, both tucked under the umbrella of her thin black eyebrows, waiting patiently for him.

Garrick, hesitantly: "Do you want to . . . um . . . do you want to go?"

Alice, still smiling: "Let's."

The rest of the evening had run on its own momentum, which was a good thing because Garrick had been sharply aware of his ineptitude at moving it along. They had walked out, without discussing where there were walking to, and had climbed into Garrick's car and pulled out onto Capitol Avenue without discussing where they were driving, and had pulled up to the curb in front of Garrick's apartment building, sitting on its flat, sparsely-developed swath of land away from the city's lights, without discussing why they were there. They'd talked a little, but not about the obvious subject at hand. Just inside the front lobby, Garrick had stared hard enough at Mrs. Janovik's door to confuse Alice into pausing there, thinking it was his apartment.

Garrick: "No, no—I'm upstairs. This one's—um—my landlady." Then, with a shrug: "She's not home right now." Then, a moment later, pointlessly: "She's—um—she's a pretty good landlady." *Wow, you're really seducing her, Romeo!*, he'd thought, barely resisting the urge to roll his eyes at his own incompetence. But Alice had only

nodded at his monologue, as if not noticing its awkwardness, and she'd stepped toward the stairs.

Things had gone better later, in his bed, though there, too, she'd had to initially take charge. Halfway through, he'd finally taken over, right around the moment he'd managed to mentally banish Mrs. Janovik, whose dark, still door had been looming in his mind. It had got him thinking about the green glass bowl that used to sit on the small chopping block in the kitchen, the one they'd said had shattered when she'd fallen, and the image of the bowl had, for some reason, been causing problems. As he'd searched for mental images with which to squeeze out the bowl, he'd found himself thinking about The Story—Ben the Cop's tip, the huge Page One headline, his message on Tipple's machine (*'about your arrest last January'*), the sold-out newspaper vendor under the Capitol's main stairway. It worked. An unwelcomed image of Baby John reaching for his adoptive mother had popped up and had had the wrong effect, and he'd quickly changed channels, focusing again on the story and the story's splash. The montage had done the trick, bringing as clear a change as a car shifting into high gear. Alice, noticing it instantly, had appeared glad to let him steer. Later, toward the end, looking for the opposite effect, for some way to slow the ride and postpone its inevitable conclusion, he'd purposefully, vividly pictured the woman in the Mural, holding the baby—the helpless baby, its utter reliance and vulnerability common to all babies in all of human history—and it had blunted his pulse bought him the minutes he'd needed. Afterward he'd been relieved, in a vaguely ethical way, that he'd rejected his first idea for a cooling strategy, which had been to picture—to the extent that he could—Albert.

Now, lying there under the wispy light of Venus, Garrick felt pressed to begin the post-sex conversation—it was important to him not to be the kind of man who would fail to rise to that responsibility—but it wasn't coming easily to him. He wondered again, as he had many times in the days since Mrs. Janovik's stroke and the taking of Baby John (for the two events that had become oddly linked in his mind), why it was that he suddenly seemed so inept at so common a thing as conversation. The effort it took to talk had been almost insurmountable lately.

Alice solved the problem, by saying: *'So, when's the last time you saw Jamison?'*

Garrick, grateful for the help: *'About a year ago. He was at a rally for one of my senators.'*

Alice: ``Funny how worked up everyone is about him coming back. You'd think he was some kind of royalty.''

Garrick: ``Just in comparison to Bell.''

Alice laughed, startling Garrick, who hadn't considered it a joke.

Alice: ``What was he like as governor? Was it fun to cover him?''

Garrick, feeling an oddly sudden little pang of hunger: ``It was different. Everything seemed—'' He paused, looking for the right word. Then: ``Bigger.''

In fact, Garrick had spent much of that day recalling his brief time chronicling the ``Big Tom'' Jamison Administration, remembering how much bigger it had seemed. Part of it was the political attention Jamison had garnered—he'd made national news about once a week in those days, it seemed, while Governor John Bell now was so rarely mentioned in the press outside of Illinois that on those rare occasions that it did happen, his office generally sent out a press release to call attention to it. Garrick couldn't have said Jamison was an unusually brilliant or even effective politician; like most, he'd had his victories and his failures, and Garrick had written about both. But there had been an intangible political largeness to him—not greatness, necessarily, but largeness—that was notably absent from the Capitol today.

It was a tricky thing to define, political largeness—a thing whose existence could be confirmed with time and distance, but could be easily missed close up and in the moment. Garrick remembered an old reporter at the Post once telling him how he'd met President Clinton years ago, long before he'd become nationally prominent, and how even then, he'd noticed that aura of destiny that some politicians seem to have, that indefinable but undebatably real presence that marks some people as mileposts in the mostly anonymous highway of history. Garrick had been skeptical. He had supposed that the old man was merely seeing it that way in hindsight, having the whole story at his disposal. After all, what could possibly be interesting about saying: ``I met Bill Clinton before he hit it big, and I didn't notice one damned thing about him''?

Garrick himself had said something much like that recently, and had turned out to be stunningly wrong—turned out to have missed what was, apparently, political largeness right in front of him. That winter, he had met one of the herd of presidential candidates then traipsing through the Capitol rotunda for photo-ops in Lincoln's hometown, and he had come away shaking his head at what he'd concluded was the complete lack of

anything special there. He'd even remarked to Worm, as they'd climbed the marble stairs back to the press room, on the man's pedestrian lack of presidential glow: ``*That guy? No way.*'' That guy was George W. Bush, now the presumptive Republican presidential nominee and, if the polls were to be believed, the nation's next president. Garrick had since regretted having spoken his clearly naïve impression aloud to Worm, who now was apt to bring it up any time he was attempting to make the point that Garrick didn't necessarily know what he was talking about. Which was often.

But having gotten to know Jamison, a little, and having sensed that largeness, Garrick knew that it was, in fact, possible to identify that aura. The fact that Jamison had that aura and yet hadn't ultimately risen to the surface of the tide of history only confirmed the aura's realness; Garrick couldn't have been adjusting his memory to fit some later proof of historical greatness. For whatever reason, the historical greatness hadn't ultimately gelled. But there was little doubt in Garrick's mind that he'd once had a close look at the raw ingredients for it.

These weren't thoughts he could hope to express to Alice now, he realized, not when even small-talk had become so daunting, so he didn't try. Instead, he said: ``Yeah, everything seemed bigger then. And we ate better.''

It was one of those comments that one thinks to question only later, and it was six hours later before Alice thought: *We ate better?* A little smile, half a mouth long, bent her lips as she pondered the randomness of the statement. Garrick wasn't there to see the smile—Alice had arrived at the morning event in front of Governor Bell's office to find instead, among the gathered reporters, Garrick's office-mate, the short, stocky woman with the unpleasant demeanor—which had freed her to silently ponder his odd comment and the rest of his odd self. *What an odd, odd man you are, Garrick Martin*, she thought. Standing in front of the high oak door of the governor's office now, other reporters standing around her, waiting, as they clearly spent much of their time doing, Alice wondered, not for the first time, what it was that intrigued her so about this odd man with the skinny neck and the prematurely graying hair and the unfortunate wardrobe. It was the right word, *intrigued*. Alice was aware that she wasn't in love with this odd man, that he wasn't her future, and she'd been aware of that even as she'd climbed the stairs to his apartment. She merely found him intriguing, in a *what's going on here?* kind of way. To

sleep with a man for such an ambiguous reason was unusual for her—unprecedented, in fact. She could count her number of previous lovers on one hand, with a couple of fingers left over, and every previous one had been, at the time, The One. She felt a little pang of something (guilt?) even as it occurred to her that she probably wasn't finished exploring her intrigue with this odd man. Her grandmother wouldn't approve of it, her standing here pondering, in such a matter-of-fact way, how she had slept with, and probably would again sleep with, a man who wasn't The One, but for just how long was one supposed to conduct one's sex life to the standards of one's grandmother?

As Alice pondered the thought, Carl, her tall, silent cameraman, pondered her half-smile, and sighed inwardly, then scooted his heavy tripod and camera a few inches over on the marble floor to better frame the door from which Governor Bell was expected to emerge at any moment. Carl was in love with Alice—badly in love, hopelessly in love, so far gone that he could barely get out one or two coherent words at a time in her presence. For three years he'd waited, more or less silently, for her to figure out how in love he was with her (for him to say it, or anything like it, would have been impossible), but she apparently had not the slightest notion of it, even after he'd followed her from Decatur to Springfield. The torment of waiting and hoping was made both better and worse by the duties of his job, which were primarily to spend almost every day of his life staring at the woman he loved and framing her in his lens and holding her gaze like that, again and again and again.

Alice's smile and Carl's torment both were interrupted by the creaking of the high oak door. Walter "Circus Boy" Stevens emerged, so tall and thin that he seemed to teeter. He glanced around at the assembled reporters, nodded, said: "Okay, ready? Okay? Okay," and then disappeared back through the doorway. Almost instantaneously, John Bell emerged from the same spot. The motion and timing was such that it looked to Alice as if some magical transformation had occurred, one that had involved Circus Boy suddenly shrinking by six inches and morphing into—*poof!*—the Governor of Illinois, and she smiled again.

No one else was smiling, least of all Governor Bell. Alice could see on his face the now-familiar mask of contempt, the hateful scowl that never seemed to show up on the video footage but was as obvious as a festering pimple when she saw him in person. My, but he hated them. "Thanks for coming," he said, hatefully. "I'm pleased to announce

that we have reached an agreement with the Hotel Association that should clear the way for our new tourism initiative . . . ” Alice marveled, again, at the way the reporters cocooned in so closely around him that he could barely move—more closely than Alice would ever have allowed a group of people to press in around *her*, even people she *didn't* especially hate. On the part of the reporters, the purpose of the cocoon seemed less a matter of professional necessity than some kind of dark philosophical imperative; it was as if giving him even a few feet of breathing room would be giving up too much.

As Bell spoke, Alice, scribbling in her notebook, became aware that Circus Boy was staring right at her, staring demandingly, as if to say, *You had your fun with the problem, Missy, now you'd better give equal time to the solution.* She scribbled more intently, to emphasize to him that she was, in fact, planning to give proper attention to the story. But moments later, the story became irrelevant. Someone (Alice, later, wouldn't be able to pinpoint whom) yelled: “Hey, it's Jamison!” cutting Governor Bell off in mid-sentence. Alice swung her head around the marbled hallway, in concert with every other head in the group, looking for him.

There was no missing him. Thomas Robert Jamison stood at the far end of the marbled hallway, all six-feet-four-inches of him, dressed in dark, rich gray, handing his briefcase to one of several men in suits who stood solicitously around him like a royal court. Alice knew his height exactly—six-four—because several of the newspaper reporters' stories that day had noted his height, and had noted that it was the same as Abraham Lincoln's height had been, and *then* had noted, as if it all meant something when put together, that the last Illinois Supreme Court justice to face impeachment had hired Lincoln as his defense counsel.

Now Thomas R. Jamison, former governor of Illinois, defense counsel for Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple—facing the first impeachment complaint against a sitting justice in Illinois in more than one-hundred fifty years—glanced at the knot of reporters up the hall, and smiled. The smile shot immediately into Alice's lower gut and settled there like an uncomfortably heavy meal. Did one of the newspaper stories say that he was seventy-one years old? Impossible, Alice concluded, though she couldn't have said why; certainly he had the antique-parchment skin and the colorless gray eyes and the thin brittle hair of a seventy-one-year-old, all the physical features one would expect, it wasn't like he “looked young” in any sense of the phrase. But wasn't a seventy-one-year-

old man, by definition, fragile and vulnerable? That was the problem: Despite the physical signs of age, the man towering over the other end of the hall looked like whatever the exact opposite of fragile and vulnerable might be—and he looked a *hell* of a lot taller than six-four, Alice thought, feeling vaguely betrayed by her new colleagues; he looked taller even than the freakishly tall “Circus Boy” Stevens, who was said to be six-five. Alice had been amused that morning, reading the newspaper stories about Jamison’s historic tenure and Jamison’s return to Springfield and Jamison’s height, amused at the deity-like deference that these generally cynical and sneering reporters were giving to this particular retired politician, but she wasn’t amused now that she was looking at him. Was she really expected to interview this man? she thought, randomly, as if the sheer size and presence of him made such an encounter obviously untenable. He looked at that moment like the biggest man that Alice had ever seen in her life.

So taken aback was Alice by the new reality that was standing at the other end of the hall that she failed to notice at first that all of her colleagues were now moving quickly toward him, away from her, all in one mass. The mass of reporters was halfway down the hall before Alice realized what was happening, and now it was too late for her to gracefully let herself be whisked along with them. Even Alice’s plainly lovestruck cameraman had bolted with the crowd, apparently believing his true love was right behind him. Governor Bell, encased just seconds earlier in the belly of the beast, had been regurgitated and abandoned, and now stood unmolested on the marble floor, uncrowded, uninterviewed, no one pressing in around him, no one jabbing microphones in his face. Bell, who had looked annoyed moments earlier at being encased, now looked to Alice to be *more* annoyed—as well as something else—insulted? hurt?—at having been set free. The beast had unceremoniously released him and was now hungrily wrapping itself around his political predecessor at the other end of the hall. Only Bell’s tall press secretary and his stocky body guard remained standing with the incumbent Governor of Illinois—they, and a blonde television reporter who was at this moment weighing her professional responsibility to follow the story toward which all of her competitors were stampeding, against a Southern upbringing that made her hesitant to further embarrass the gentleman by completing the abandonment of him.

Circus Boy Stevens ended her dilemma by glancing at his watch in exaggerated fashion and saying importantly: “Governor, we have a meeting.” He rushed Bell back

through the high oaken doorway as if it were he, rather than the reporters, who had decided the interview was over. Alice, still respecting her upbringing, waited until the door closed behind them before she sprinted ungracefully toward the far end of the hall, where Thomas R. Jamison's wry gray smile hung a good foot above the heads of the reporters who were pressed in around him.

The wry gray smile was saying, wryly, in a voice so deep and full that it sounded to Alice as if it was miked, though it wasn't: `` . . . I'm glad to see you folks are still so enthusiastic about your jobs.'' The assembled reporters laughed amiably. Alice had heard them laugh at politicians many times in her short tenure here, but she hadn't previously heard them laugh *with* one. As she studied the scene, she noted another rarity as well: The knot of reporters wasn't pressed in directly against Jamison's body, physically restricting his movements, as was so clearly the custom here; there was a buffer-zone of empty space around the towering man, a good three or four feet of it, as if they were all standing behind an invisible police-line. Even the confrontational one with the oily goatee, the one they called Worm (*why does he allow them to do that?*, Alice thought, each time she heard it), was unaccountably giving the man more room than was normally yielded.

The Worm, standing at the inner cusp of the circle and holding his small recorder at an upward angle: ``Governor, what's your strategy for Justice Tipple's defense?''

Jamison: ``My immediate strategy, Mr. Worman, will be to hit Norb's for a horseshoe. I can't find one damned place in Chicago that has them.''

The reporters: Laughter.

Alice, feeling the need to confront this oddly intimidating figure head-on, struggled to concoct a question, any question. She couldn't come up with a single one. Her voice seemed to be trying to hide from the big man.

Zack Carson: ``Governor, are you worried that all the publicity over this thing will prevent a fair hearing?''

Jamison: ``Last time I checked, Mr. Carson, it was the *Legislature* that decides whether a judge should be impeached.'' Then, ratcheting up the smile: ``Though, personally, of course, I think it should be *you* guys.''

More laughter. Alice realized her mouth was so dry that she'd likely be unable to ask a question even if her mind wasn't refusing to formulate one.

Colleen Brenner, her voice reserved—almost cowed—in a way Alice wouldn't

have thought possible: “Governor, what has Justice Tipple told you about the incident?”

Jamison: “Hi, Colleen, how are you? I’m glad you asked me that. Justice Tipple and I had a long talk over dinner last night about this whole misunderstanding . . .”

It went on for another few minutes, Alice uncomfortably aware the whole time of how utterly unable she seemed to bring forth words, any words, in the presence of this big man. It ended with Jamison smiling and saying something about being late for a meeting, and, bizarrely, that alone had caused the beast to unwrap from its prey and allow him to leave, which was yet another first in Alice’s brief experience here. Several of the reporters had even thanked him, effusively, for answering their questions, though when Alice replayed the exchange in her head, it seemed to her that he hadn’t actually answered a single one. The conversation left in Jamison’s wake, among the reporters as they disassembled, was unprecedented as well: None of the judgment and sneering and cruel impersonations she had seen arise in the wake of Governor Bell or Senator Crawford or any of the others. The reporters disassembled quietly, saying little. A few of them mentioned they were hungry.

Alice wasn’t especially hungry, until she stepped into the lobby of the press room on floor two-and-a-half a few hours later and smelled, and then saw, the Italian beef. The low wide table just inside the press room door, the table that usually held stacks of press releases, now held instead several large, deep, loosely covered foil pans. Steam played around the edges of the foil lids, teasing, beckoning, daring passersby to lift the lids and look inside. Zack Carson was doing just that—peeking under the foil of one of the pans—as Alice stepped into the lobby. Shiny O’Shaughnessey was standing nearby, ostensibly studying a press release on the cork announcement board, but keeping his peripheral vision on events unfolding at the foil-covered table. The one they called The Worm walked in just as Zack Carson lifted the lid completely, to expose a wet dark landscape of hot sliced beef, peppers, onions, stewing in oily, aromatic sauce. Zack Carson gazed into the pan, the steam and scent hitting him full force in the face. Shiny continued staring while pretending not to. Worm stared openly and lustily, and then reached over to another of the pans and peeled back the foil and uncovered a mountain of thick, warm chunks of crusty French bread, already sliced and separated and waiting to be filled. Alice had just been thinking, *potato chips would go good with this*, when Zack Carson opened another

of the pans to expose a bounty of delicate chips, big and salty and crisp and curling at the edges.

Alice, her mouth watering now, looked up from the table to find the lobby had filled, the reporters streaming in from their cubbyhole offices. Some loitered by the bulletin board or the coffee machine, pretending to have come in for some reason other than to investigate the scent of sweet peppers and spiced beef now wafting through the press room, pretending to be just grabbing another cup of coffee or studying the board for the next press conference, then glancing over at the table with manufactured expressions of surprise: *Oh, what's this?* Julian Marcus and Harvey Rathbone III and Shiny O'Shaughnessey slowly, coyly loitered their way toward the table, their faces full of false disinterest. Others—Colleen Brenner, Claire Ottoman, and especially Worm—skipped the pretense and stepped right up and took paper plates from a stack of them next to the foil pans and scooped up the food as if from their own tables at home.

Alice, deciding she preferred the honesty of the latter approach, stepped into the hastily formed line and grabbed a paper plate and a plastic fork, and wondered at the lack of expected discussion surrounding her. There was some murmured small-talk—someone said: “Jamison looks good,” and someone else wondered aloud what Jamison was charging Justice Tipple for his defense, and still another voice pondered what Jamison’s legal strategy would be—but no one addressed the question that seemed to Alice to be the one most immediately at hand: *Where the hell did all this food come from?* They all seemed to know, and they seemed to not want to discuss it, and, Alice quickly realized, she didn’t want to discuss it, either. She just wanted to eat.

Minutes later, walking back through one of the spidery hallways to her cubbyhole office, one hand balancing the paper plate, the other holding the hot dripping sandwich aloft over it, her mouth crammed with the first overly large bite of the wet, oily, peppery, steaming beef, Alice found Garrick waiting by her doorway.

*Of course*, she thought, chewing frantically.

Alice had learned well most of her grandmother’s painstaking lessons about how to live in a civilized manner in this uncivilized world, but she’d never quite taken to heart the part about civilized eating. Her appetite tended to have a savage will of its own. She could remain civilized enough in the presence of others, eating slowly, elegantly, if people were watching, but that was as much of an act as her flat on-camera dialect, and she shed

it just as quickly when alone. When she fed her appetite privately, it was generally in the urgent, no-nonsense way a person might feed a growling, snapping animal. So, *of course*, it made perfect sense that this odd, odd man with whom Alice was still intrigued—this man who had last seen her stumbling around half-naked in the pre-dawn darkness of his room that very morning, hopping on one foot while trying to pull her pants back on, bumping into things—that this man would now materialize right before her, as if by magic, just as she was trying to down a fist-sized hunk of hot greasy meat with all the grace and elegance of a snake working its gullet around some fat squirming fish.

Alice chewed, and swallowed hard, then held up her index finger in a *just a moment* gesture, then swallowed again. Garrick had been drifting around the hallway near her office, affecting that busy-but-aimless look that people have when they're waiting around but don't want to appear to be waiting around. But now he just stood and looked and smiled his calm, amused smile, which, Alice was starting to realize, seemed to show up on his face every time she was in an awkward position (which seemed to be often, lately). What, was he some kind of sadist? It was the same amused look he'd worn the previous night at the bar, when he'd busted her on her phony Midwestern accent. Now, as then, the look was infused with just enough affection that she could let it pass, so she did. Finally finding her voice, she said: "Hey," then she winced inwardly. *Hey*. It seemed an inadequate way to pick up last night's fleshly conversation, and she hoped he would come up with something better.

Garrick, still smiling: "Hey."

Alice, feeling the need to say something more significant: "You look like the cat that ate the canary." She winced again, visibly this time, as soon as she said it. A cliché. From the blonde television reporter. *Of course*.

Garrick was still smiling, and now it was a pregnant smile, a smile that strained to produce words. Eventually, it did: "I have to ask you something," he said.

### ***Judge Typo***

Alice's first wild thought when he said it: *Oh my god he's going to propose*. Something about the gravity in his voice made her so certain of it that she started mentally

plotting her escape before he even moved onto the next sentence (which, as it turned out, was: “My parents are in town, we’re having dinner, would you join us?”). Now, lying mostly naked next to him on the thin burgundy carpeting of the floor of the press box in the darkened, empty Senate chamber, Alice smiled at her own presumptuousness—sensing an imminent marriage proposal from a virtual stranger, just like that, just because of the night before—but of course it wasn’t presumptuousness at all, but upbringing. Even now, past the cusp of the Millennium, a century-and-a-half after The War, generations beyond the Biblical backwoods darkness of her heritage, Alice still harbored, somewhere in her synapses, the faint notion that a night of reckless passion might logically lead to a morning-after proposal of marriage. Oh, how her upbringing rose up and goosed her sometimes!

She looked over at him. He was on his back, eyes closed, his face toward the high ornate ceiling of the vast Senate chamber, the ceiling’s sculptured landscape and images of angels blowing trumpets, barely visible in the dark. She could just make out the brass sign by the door: *Gentlemen Shall Wear Jacket and Tie at All Times in the Senate Chamber*. Garrick wore only a small, satisfied smile.

Alice smiled, and whispered: “When you said today that you had to ask me something, I thought for a second you were about to propose.”

Garrick’s eyes remained closed, but his smile widened. He said, in a creaky whisper: “Boy, you *are* from the South.”

Alice supposed his small satisfied smile was the result of their christening of the Senate chamber (“I am so totally *not* wearing my jacket and tie!” Garrick had whispered defiantly when they’d arrived in the darkened room, kissing and quietly laughing and tugging at one another’s clothes), and she was partly right, but only partly. The truth was, Garrick was at that moment working hard to keep the small, satisfied smile balanced precariously there on his face, as he had been for days. It was a new kind of smile for him, one that had started forming on the morning that his story had sent its ripples around the state (*Tipple Fled Police!*) and it felt so utterly good that he had since gone to great mental lengths to maintain it. He had figured out that the smile tended to falter when he thought about Mrs. Janovik, lying there alone in her hospital room, that paralyzing image that had made it necessary for Alice to all but drag him up the stairs by his shaggy, prematurely graying hair the previous night. The smile had been steadily becoming more

stable (Alice in particular had helped stabilize it more than she knew—twice, now), but the smile was still frail and easily disturbed, and Garrick was becoming adept at quickly switching his mental channels in order to protect it, switching them as if with a television remote, *click click click*. Garrick still hadn't visited Mrs. Janovik since his return from Chicago. He'd meant to, several times, but each time he found himself thinking about Albert, a boy with a blur for a face, being dragged away, crying, by soldiers—*click*—and then about another boy, his tear-stained face clearly visible now, being dragged away by the Illinois State Police—*click*—and by a fat Ukrainian—*click*—and sometimes he would think of the bird in the dream swooping down on the baby—*click click*—and suddenly he would decide that his visit to Mrs. Janovik, her confused old damaged head confined to a hospital bed, just wasn't going to work out right now—*click*—too many other things going on right now, maybe later, maybe tomorrow. The smile started tipping each time he thought about her, but then he would switch channels and think about The Story (*TIPPLE! FLED! POLICE!*) and about all the noses of the Capitol tucked inside The Story, and about Claire and Harvey the Third and everyone else on floor two-and-a-half lurching after The Story, and about beer cans held aloft toasting The Story (*‘To the giant-killer!’*) and about Representative McTurtle giving his smirking political-insider assessment of The Story (*‘Dead in the water!’*) and then Garrick would feel the swelling in his pants—what the hell was *that* all about?—and before long he'd be smiling.

What was helping him keep the smile going tonight was the timing of his parents' visit, a perfect storm of timing. His mother had called the apartment that morning, not long after Alice had left. Garrick had just been making the bed, something he'd not done in months but now suddenly felt the need to do (as if to promote the possibility that his life was turning some kind of corner that would require made beds in his future). His mother, who'd always had a tendency to convey information that was both overly detailed and fundamentally incomplete, told him they had ended up staying at his Aunt Mary's, on a pullout couch, instead of diving through, because his father had eaten too much meatloaf and was too sleepy to drive, and since that meant they were already going to miss Jerry Stewart's retirement luncheon anyway, they weren't in so much of a hurry to get back to Peoria now, so they might just take I-Fifty-Five up instead of I-Fifty-Seven and stop by Springfield and say hi and have dinner, if Garrick was free. Garrick didn't know who Jerry Stewart was or what he was retiring from. He vaguely remembered an Aunt Mary from

somewhere, but he had no idea where she lived and he hadn't known his parents were visiting her, let alone that they were driving back through his area. No matter. He had quickly distilled the central point—was he free for dinner?—and then the smile was there. What timing! What a perfect storm! His story, *The Story*, had flooded the statewide media all week, had made several national appearances, and was still blowing around out there, a new revelation every day, day after day—*Tipple Fled Police! Tipple Was Drunk! Tipple Downloaded Porn! Tipple Said To The Cop, 'Do You Know Who I AM?'* (Oh! That last one was, in some ways, the best one of all!). True, all the follow-up stories were being written by Garrick's competitors now—every reporter in the state, it seemed, was all over the thing—but each new story was, in the end, just another deposit into an account Garrick had opened.

Garrick had wondered a few times why his parents, reading their son's name on the huge story that was all over the *Peoria Post's* front page these past few days, hadn't called to say something, and now he knew why: They'd been at Aunt Mary's (wherever the hell *that* was), and so hadn't been reading their *Peoria Post*. All the better. Unless Aunt Mary lived in a cave, Garrick's parents would have heard about the story from other news sources (it was *everywhere!*) and now when they asked Garrick over dinner the question they always asked—“So, what kinds of articles are you working on?”—this time his answer wouldn't be the mumbled generalities with which he usually responded. This time it would instead be something like: “Well, you know that Supreme Court judge you've been hearing about every time you turn on a TV or open a newspaper? The one they're getting ready to impeach? . . . ”

Garrick's parents' timing had been made all the more perfect by the Alice factor. Garrick's mother no longer badgered him the way she used to about his scant romantic prospects (Garrick's younger brother Andrew and his new wife and baby had dropped by Peoria to visit his parents early the previous fall, and at last report they had not yet left, and the situation had apparently cured Garrick's mother of her obsession with Garrick's marital status), but even now, pushing thirty-five, Garrick still felt that adolescent urge to impress his parents in the romantic-prospects area. Alice was, undebatably, the most impressive-looking woman they'd ever seen paired with their son. Garrick had noted it immediately in their eyes when he'd introduced them to his lovely, shapely, smiling, charming, fashionably dressed, competently made-up, head-turning blonde date: *What is*

this *all about?* asked their eyes. Even the little stumble Alice had taken as they'd exited the car at the restaurant hadn't ruined the effect (though it had put Garrick on alert for the rest of the evening, wondering if it would be the first of a string of badly timed pratfalls, which he knew already from his brief experience with her was entirely possible). All in all, his parents' visit couldn't have worked out better if Garrick had scripted it: In the past week, their son had broken the biggest story in the state, had landed the hottest woman in the press room, and now was taking a break from his busy and obviously successful life to treat his folks to dinner. Oh, what *timing!*

Dinner had been at a small storefront restaurant on the north side, a place Garrick had suggested though he'd never eaten there—had suggested, in truth, *because* he'd never eaten there. Like most Springfield residents, Garrick's on-going quest for a good local restaurant to which to bring visitors was a quest defined mostly by the process of elimination. It was clear from the moment they walked in that the restaurant was aiming at some theme vaguely involving 1920s Americana—photos of flappers and Model T's hanging on the walls, tinny phonograph music crooning from the ceiling, an old-fashioned Coca-Cola soda fountain at the bar—but it was all crammed inside what appeared to be a former Chinese restaurant, with angry little dragons decorating the upper wallpaper border and curly-finned goldfish carved into the wooden legs of the black-lacquered tables. Garrick thought it a disjointed motif even before he opened the menu to discover the dishes were mostly Italian.

Garrick's mother, as they were seated: ``So, Alice, you're a reporter, too?''

Alice, nodding and presenting a television-perfect smile: ``I work for the Decatur TV station. I just started on the Capitol beat. Garrick's been showing me the ropes.'' She shot Garrick a sideways glance that made him momentarily stop breathing.

Garrick's mother, suddenly animated: ``Oh, how *interesting!* So you're actually one of those reporters on *television?*'' Garrick started breathing again, his mouth tightening at the edges. The public's unaccountable reverence for television journalism was a source of bewilderment to Garrick and other print reporters. There was an assumption among the public that TV reporters were the *real* reporters; that *news* was, by definition, that information coming out of one's television set; that newspapers existed mainly as augmentation, a quaint nod to the past but largely irrelevant when it came to conveying important information in modern times. Most reporters, including most

television reporters, knew that this commonly held view was an upside-down version of reality. In fact, most of the real reporting that went on out there, from Springfield to Chicago to Washington, was conducted by newspaper reporters, serious men and women who talked at length to sources and burrowed into documents and did the research and wrote the sentences and checked the spelling. What Garrick's parents and the rest of the news-consuming public saw on their television screens was, more often than not, a pale and distorted echo of those newspaper stories, presented by attractive, well-dressed people who looked more serious than they actually were and who didn't necessarily understand all that they read in the newspaper, but could glean from it enough to fill sixty seconds of airtime with what sounded like thoughtful and authoritative reporting. The better television reporters (and Garrick had seen promising indications that Alice was among them) were defined mostly by their ability to clearly summarize the newspaper stories they had stolen, and not make them wrong in the process. Cole ``Tooth'' Smiley, on the other hand, had thoughtfully and authoritatively butchered so many newspaper stories on the air that Garrick and the other newspaper reporters from whom he stole were generally grateful that he passed them off as his own work.

Garrick's mother, to Alice: ``That must be *so* exciting! Your parents must be proud.''

Alice, with shrug of forced, tormented casualness that Garrick was starting to recognize: ``Oh, I, um—I never knew my parents. My grandmother raised me.''

Garrick's mother: ``Well, then—your *grandmother* must be proud. What have you been working on? I bet you've done some great stories about that awful Judge Typo?''

Garrick's father, who had been glancing in confusion between the Italian entrees on the menu and the angry dragons in the wallpaper, suddenly dropped into the conversation at the mention of Judge Typo. He said: ``Oh, that story makes me *so mad!* Did you know they're trying to impeach that Judge Typo, and now Tom Jamison is *defending* him?''

Garrick's mother: ``She knows, Mike. She's been covering that story.''

Alice: ``Actually, it's `Judge Tipple' . . . ''

Garrick's father, leaning forward: ``*You* uncovered that story about that child-abuse judge, Alice?''

Garrick's mother, wide-eyed: ``What's that, Alice? *You* uncovered that story? Oh,

*my*, how proud your grandmother must be!”

Garrick, caught off guard and with a mouthful of ice water, was suddenly panicked, realizing his perfect storm was about to miss its target. It was *his* story, The Story, and the stakes were higher than ever now that it was clear his parents had, in fact, heard about it—not heard enough to get the judge’s name right or to get anywhere near the correct details (‘‘*child-abuse judge*’’?), but enough to make them *so mad*—and now their fury and outrage, the perfect storm that was rightly Garrick’s, was drifting right by him and settling over Alice. How did one change the wind-direction of a conversation? How did one say: ‘‘*I’m* the one who broke the story, Dad. *Me*. Not her. *Me*,’’ without it sounding like—well, like *that*? Just then Alice, bless her Southern heart, said, lightly: ‘‘Oh, *I* didn’t break the story. That was Garrick. *He* uncovered the thing. Everyone else in the media has been chasing it ever since.’’ Garrick could have kissed her. Both his parents were staring at him now, as if seeing something for the first time. *Garrick the Giant-Killer!* said their stares.

The best part was that he hadn’t even had to bring up the subject—it had already been sitting right there, in the front row of their consciousness, which spoke volumes about just how big The Story really was. Garrick, more acutely aware than most reporters of the cultural isolation of his profession, had learned that his parents were a barometer into the real world, that vast, mysterious place where people sipped their news instead of immersing themselves in it. Garrick’s parents were what editors called ‘‘civilians’’; they were Helen Heston’s fabled ‘‘Joe Six-Pack’’ (though neither of them drank much). They were the kinds of people whose utter indifference to the latest breathless speculation about this Springfield committee hearing or that stray comment from the Governor could keep a reporter well-grounded. That was, Garrick supposed, the reason that his fellow reporters tended to avoid interacting with civilians; being well-grounded, most of them would agree, was an overrated goal.

That was too bad, because many of them could have used the humbling lesson that Garrick got during each conversation with his parents. Looking through the window they provided, Garrick had come to realize that, for most of the news-consuming public, the political world was an oddly inverted structure, with a Midwestern state Capitol situated pretty close to the bottom of it. The higher and further-removed a level of government was from a reader, it seemed, the more knowledge and interest the reader had in that level

of government—with the corresponding effect that they had little knowledge or interest in the local levels of government that were most directly in their faces, in their wallets, in their bedrooms. Members of the news-consuming public, as personified by Garrick’s parents, often had a notion of who their Congressman was, could usually name both their U.S. Senators, and invariably knew enough about the President to qualify as a stalker—his views, his history, his personality, his family, his health issues, his pets, what foods he liked, his physical location on most days—but most of them would be hard-pressed to come up with the name of their own local state legislator. Garrick knew, from years of mind-numbing reporting he’d had to do on state budgets, state taxes, state regulatory issues, that those legislators had far more direct impact on the lives of their constituents than did Presidents or Congressmen. The never-ending epic being filmed in Washington was big, bold, riveting, sweeping, and, in terms of immediate impact on the everyday lives of most people, irrelevant. The temper-stoking national debates over abortion, evolution, flag-burning, even war, didn’t generally affect the life of the average Illinoisan the way a ten-cent increase on the state tollway did. Yet Garrick’s parents and the rest of the news-consuming public merely grumbled, paid the toll, and kept arguing about flag-burning. They were, it seemed to Garrick, standing at the base of a very large tree, faces turned upward, obsessing about that ruckus going on up there in the top branches, not even noticing the fire-ants crawling around the base of the trunk and up into their pants.

All of which made his parents’ apparent obsession with Springfield’s unfolding judicial scandal all the more telling. Such attention to the topic, from civilians, sanctified it as *news*, much more so than any pronouncement Garrick could make. Reporters, Garrick knew, were the last people who could give a reasoned, sober assessment of what story was important news, because the answer was always going to be: “Whatever story I’ve been writing lately.” Civilians were more discriminating. If a story was spawning fury and outrage from Garrick’s parents, it meant the story had, in fact, spawned a gathering storm of fury and outrage in the world outside the Mural.

Of course, Garrick’s parents also were typical in their inability to accurately decipher most of the political stories that caught their attention, even those stories that had tapped their fury and outrage. They weren’t stupid; they were just civilians, too busy with real life to go through every plodding detail of every news story every day, so what they ended up with was just enough knowledge to be dangerous. Garrick had seen it

before, hearing them discuss much simpler stories than this one and seeing how thoroughly wrong they often got it—not just the details, but the whole thrust of the thing—with Garrick’s father generally growing furious about some outrageous and unacceptable aspect of the story which, in fact, didn’t really exist; and Garrick’s mother repeatedly correcting Garrick on details of the story that he’d learned from covering it first-hand, but which clashed with information that her friends at her book club had heard somewhere or that she thought she’d seen on the television news reports (because, heaven knows, *those* are never wrong).

And those were the simple stories. The story of Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple’s brush with the law should have been simple, too, because the formal allegations, as spelled out in the newly filed bill of impeachment that very day, were simple—drunk driving, evading arrest, abuse of authority—but there was a complicated nuance there that Garrick, and the other reporters, and Senator Soccer-Mom and everyone else involved seemed to be willfully *not* acknowledging. Garrick knew, even as they leaned on it as the underlying foundation for the whole thing. Garrick understood—at some level that he didn’t like to examine too closely—what the central allegation really was: Tipple had ordered a baby dragged, crying, from its home. Garrick’s parents and the rest of the world had watched in horror through their television screens. And someone was going to pay. You couldn’t impeach a judge for his rulings—couldn’t, shouldn’t, wouldn’t, everyone in the House and the Senate and the Governor’s office and the press room agreed, nodding somberly at the constitutional solidity of the axiom—but if a judge, who happens to have made a ruling that was callous, hurtful, just plain evil, happens to also do something technically deserving of impeachment (‘‘Do you know who I AM?’’ he told the cop, remember), well, then, why in the hell *wouldn’t* you convene an impeachment committee, and just as soon as humanly possible? It was a strict-constructionist approach to a crucifixion—hey, *technically*, the guy did something impeachable, so we’re not crucifying him for his callous, hurtful, evil, horrible ruling, though he certainly deserves crucifixion and more for that alone—and it was an approach that required a lot of compartmentalization. Even Garrick—who was starting to wonder if his unwelcome little psychological souvenir from the Chicago melee, the dream of the bird, was ever going to stop shadowing his nights—even Garrick felt the need to remind himself frequently that his story, *The Story*, was a relatively simple and perfectly legitimate

story about a judge who broke the law on the side of a highway. In another, somewhat hidden compartment was the truth of the matter: You're not allowed to punish a judge for devastating a little boy's life, for forgetting that children should be off-limits, for giving you bad dreams. So you take whatever hammer is available to you—a traffic stop? Okay. I guess that'll work—and you swing it like hell, and you hope the result is something that approaches justice.

Garrick's parents, it was quickly apparent there in the restaurant, weren't struggling with complex nuances or constitutional axioms or mental compartmentalization. Being busy civilians, they had gathered up a random and incomplete collection of the pieces of the Tipple controversy—a crying boy on their television screen, a judge's glowering face in their newspaper, a menacing *“Do you know who I AM?”* written in bold, black words—and they had fitted the pieces together as best they could, and had come up with a Frankenstein version the story. Garrick's father: *“What's Tom Jamison thinking, anyway? Four times I voted for that guy—four times!—and now he's defending a child abuser?”*

Garrick: *“That's, um, that's not exactly what Tipple is accused of, Dad . . .”*

Garrick's mother: *“What I don't understand is how that one judge got so much power, to take away that little boy. Has anyone investigated why he was allowed to do that?”*

Garrick: *“Um. It wasn't just Tipple, Mom, it was the whole Supreme Court.”*

Garrick's mother, searching her memory and slowly shaking her head: *“Nnn-no, I don't think so, dear.”*

Garrick's father, growing furious: *“You know what's going to happen, don't you? These guys all stick together. That judge is going to get off, and he's going to go right back out there and abuse another kid!”*

The rest of the dinner conversation, all about Baby John and Judge Typo and outrage and fury, had progressed in a similarly disjointed way. And the food had been late, and cold, and bland, and the waitress rude, and the bill outlandish. And it had been one of the more satisfying nights of Garrick's life. The startling beauty of Garrick's date had been the unspoken topic throughout, and The Story, Garrick's story, had been the spoken topic—and who cared how completely jumbled the thing had become in his parents' minds, what, were they supposed to be court stenographers or something?—and by ten p.m.

Garrick was anxiously trying to move the evening to a conclusion, wanting to end it while it was still perfect, believing it couldn't get any better.

He was wrong. The four of them had been standing and pushing in their chairs and preparing to leave when two well-dressed couples from the other side of the room, walking toward the exit, veered off path and headed for their table. Garrick had been peripherally aware of them over there, but he hadn't looked at them closely, and it was only now, as they were approaching, that he recognized at the head of the group State Representative Harry Clemens, patron saint of the ratites.

Representative Clemens: ``Excuse me—aren't you Garrick Martin? . . . ''

The Senate chamber had been Garrick's idea. After the goodbyes to Garrick's parents outside the restaurant, he and Alice had sat in the car, talking, Garrick trying to read her, pondering the right balance between assertiveness and presumptuousness. As usual, he was over-thinking it. Finally she leaned forward as he was in the middle of some meandering sentence and, with something like frustration, kissed him, hard. He'd started the car after that, and driven toward his apartment, but turned off a few blocks early and headed instead toward the Capitol. Its silver dome, illuminated by spotlights surrounding it, was visible from almost everywhere in town. Alice, seeing it up ahead, looked quizzically at Garrick, who responded to the look by saying: ``I don't think you've had a proper tour of the Senate chamber.''

The guards stationed at the front entrance had waved Alice by, having already started to recognize her, then they had checked Garrick's press pass and let him by as well. Then it had been a simple matter of climbing the uneven marble stairs, under the Mural and toward the press room—Garrick had stepped inside just long enough to turn on the lights in the lobby, to make it look good for any guard who happened by—then he had led her quickly and quietly up one more half-flight to the Senate, its lush burgundy velvet and gold leaf and deep polished wood ensconced in darkness and silence. The brass sign over the pressbox—*Gentlemen Shall Wear Jacket And Tie At All Times In The Senate Chamber*—had caused them to stifle laughter as he began kissing her and touching her and tugging at her blouse. She had responded immediately, enthusiastically, breathlessly, and he knew what she was thinking—that bringing her here, like this, was spontaneous, outrageous, wild, a new side to him and one she was more than ready to see—and he had

let her think it, seeing no point in providing the more accurate explanation: All evening he'd been trying to chart in his mind a safe path from dinner with his parents to passion with Alice, a path that didn't wind past the crippling sight of Mrs. Janovik's dark and silent doorway, and this had simply seemed a logical solution.

Once they were there, Alice had clearly noticed, and clearly appreciated, his command of the situation. She'd likely concluded (he supposed) that the previous night's uneven performance had been the aberration, and tonight's competence the norm. Again—as with so many happy misconceptions lately—he let her think it. How would he even begin to explain the disquieting nonsequitur that was the truth of the matter? How would he explain the Twinge? *Well, you see, this political story that I broke, the biggest political story west of Washington right now—The Story—is garnering the kind of political attention and respect that I'm not used to, and I'll be darned if it isn't affecting me in some pretty apolitical ways . . .*

Afterward, they lay on the thin burgundy carpeting, whispering, laughing quietly, enjoying their conspiracy. They laughed about Garrick's parents and about Judge Typo, and about the angry dragons in the wallpaper at the restaurant, and about Representative Ratite's gushing assessment of Garrick's story. They laughed about "creamy white thighs"—Garrick tickled hers as he said it—and about Harvey the Third's failed attempt to win the bet, and about Governor Bell's cool blue hatred of all of them, and about Governor Jamison's height (though Alice found herself a little uneasy at that part even as they laughed), and about Tim Flynn's cardboard gun signs, and about just what an awful human being Colleen Brenner really was.

Then they stared silently at the darkened, ornate high ceiling—what little they could see of it—Alice thinking to ask him about Claire Ottoman, but then deciding not to go there, and Garrick thinking to ask her about Mississippi, but then deciding not to go there. Each of them, squinting up at the vague, barely visible shapes of bugle-blowing angels in the gilded darkness above, silently and simultaneously mused at the irony of how clear and close and touchable the planet Venus had looked that very morning, and how utterly distant and unclear and untouchable now were the ceiling-angels barely forty feet above their heads, but neither of them thought the irony of it would be understood outside their own minds, so that, too, was left unsaid.

When one of them finally spoke again, it was Garrick, his mind losing its balance

and falling briefly off its beam and into Mrs. Janovik's silent doorway and Albert's blurry face and a young boy reaching for his mother and a van door slamming. Before he could pick his mind back up and balance it again, he whispered: ``Have you ever had a `moment of truth'?'` Alice smiled, mistaking it for a timely compliment, one that didn't need answering. She turned the appreciative smile on him briefly and then lay against his chest, silently, as he looked up at a ceiling he could barely see and wondered what ceiling Baby John was looking at tonight.

Chapter Eight:

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*Doing What You're Told*

One warm wet April day in 1969, Stuart Weinberg—a young, newly graduated attorney who had started as an aide to Chicago Alderman Ben Erwin just days before Erwin had choked to death on a halibut sandwich in a downtown tavern—was summoned to the fifth floor of City Hall. He went to the room that the caller had told him to go to, and discovered there a dozen men, including, seated among them as if he was just anyone else, Mayor Richard J. Daley. Weinberg started to stammer his greetings, when the men cut him off and told him why he was there: His dead boss, Alderman Erwin, needed to be replaced, immediately. Weinberg, believing his life had finally started, began stammering anew, stammering thanks and promises of diligence, when they cut him off again: They were replacing Alderman Erwin with State Representative Jerry Feigenholtz, and so now they needed someone to replace Feigenholtz in the Illinois House. Weinberg didn't stammer anything after that, but merely nodded quietly and breathed deeply. What else could he do? He didn't bother asking why someone with more seniority in the party hadn't been chosen instead, because that was clearly the whole point: Those with more seniority had a say in where they wanted to go, and who the hell wanted to go to Springfield? Feigenholtz had been down in the wilderness for five years, he had more than earned a

promotion from the Legislature to the City Council. Erwin's halibut sandwich had provided the opening, and now Weinberg needed to be on the train to Springfield the next day. Desperate to show what a good soldier he could be, Weinberg looked the Mayor right in the eye and said, evenly: "You can count on me, Yer'onor." Daley, moving toward the door, mumbled in response: "Yeah, yeah, just keep an eye on the fuckin' nigger delegation, would'ja?"

That was the thing about the Legislature these days: They were out of control, the new black legislators from the west side and the new hippie-lover legislators from the north side and the pain-in-the-ass reformer legislators from Hyde Park, totally out of control ever since all that horseshit at the Convention the previous summer. They called themselves Democrats, but that was more horseshit, because Democrats, first and foremost, did what they were told, and these uppity blacks and wannabe-hippies and do-gooder Ralph Nader types who were coming up through the ranks lately were doing whatever the fuck they wanted once they arrived down there in the sticks. State government had never been viewed as much more than a distant precinct anyway, but now it was a distant precinct that needed to be dealt with. Daley needed an emissary (one of the men told Weinberg after Daley left the room), a young, liberal-talking, do-gooder type who could communicate with these crazy young fucks who were getting themselves elected to the Legislature these days, someone to remind them that they were Democrats, and what that meant in terms of doing what they were told. He didn't say they needed a Jew, but that part was pretty clear—who these days but a young, well-educated, reasonable-sounding, non-threatening Jew could cross all the various chasms of race and generation and ideology and hairstyle that now dotted the political landscape of the party like so many pot-holes?

So it was that Stu Weinberg, who had been physically outside the municipal boundaries of Chicago maybe two dozen times in his life, found himself recast as a reluctant state legislator and half-time Springfield resident. The Prairie Capital had proven to be every bit as hickish and devoid of life as he'd feared—the food alone was enough to make a guy want to jump off a building, if only there'd been one high enough—but he quickly understood why Daley's people had wanted a young, earnest Jew in this particular seat at this particular time. Having learned his politics around the homogenous, lockstep ranks of the City Council, Weinberg had been stunned by the political chaos that reigned

among the so-called Democrats in the Legislature: The blacks pushing uppity civil rights bills and community development initiatives that would drain money from Chicago's cut of the state budget; the hippie-lovers making filibuster floor speeches about the war and sounding just like those long-haired Chicago Eight cocksuckers who'd caused all the trouble at the Convention; the do-gooders whining about their sanctimonious political reform agenda, which was basically an endless series of *Fuck Daley* bills. Everyone doing whatever they wanted, no one doing what they were told. They all were, indeed, out of control—and that wasn't even getting into the Downstate Democrats, a new species to Weinberg, who found them indistinguishable from Republicans in every way that mattered.

Daley's people had clearly known what they were doing when they'd sent him down here, Weinberg soon realized. The blacks and the hippies and the do-gooders and the downstaters didn't trust him, exactly, but they didn't *distrust* him as much as they might have. He was one of Daley's Guys, and that didn't endear him to a lot of them, but he was also a young, earnest, well-educated, non-threatening Jew who, it seemed, could talk to everyone and not piss anyone off, a rare quality these days.

Technically, Weinberg had become the State Representative for the Eleventh Legislative District, just north of downtown Chicago, a neighborhood where he'd never lived and still didn't (he'd been told to rent an empty eight-by-eight-foot storage room in an abandoned building there, the State Election Code's pesky residency requirements being what they were). His real constituency was the fifth floor of City Hall, and for the first few years he served his constituency without fail. Crossing the chasms on the House floor, he became adept at passing the legislation City Hall needed to get its share of the state pie and then some, the bonding bills and the housing bills and the supplementary budget appropriations. He became equally adept at derailing the pain-in-the-ass reform bills, taking the hippies and the blacks and the do-gooders aside in the back of the chamber and reasonably explaining the problems with those bills, reminding them what City Hall could do for the streets and parks and sidewalks in their districts if only they would be reasonable, reminding them that they were Democrats. When all else failed, when they couldn't be made to see reason, Weinberg was also adept at lacing unfriendly legislation with ``poison pills'': last-minute amendments he would slip into the legislation at just the right time, in just the right manner, making the legislation so unacceptable that few if any legislators could vote for it. A bill that had started out its life as, say, a noble attempt to

impose restrictions on campaign contributions, might, by the time State Representative Stuart Weinberg's deft hands got through with it, suddenly include provisions to lower the statewide speed limit to thirty miles per hour, or to impose a crushing new tax on telephone usage, or to outlaw ownership of cats. No legislator wanted to have to explain a vote like that to the folks back home; even the most annoyingly earnest do-gooder didn't want campaign contribution limits *that* badly. Before long, even the bill's co-sponsors would be jumping ship. Weinberg tried to refrain, whenever possible, from using poison pills—the sponsors invariably went ape-shit, and the time and effort it took to rebuild those bridges afterward was exhausting—but in the end, business was business. Weinberg wasn't in Springfield to make friends; he was in Springfield to do what he was told.

Still, as the years ground by, he grew more bold about doing not just what he was told, but also what he thought he should do, for the people of the Eleventh Legislative district and for the wider populace of the state. And what he thought he should do, more and more, were some of the same things that the blacks and the hippies and the do-gooders thought he should do: backing the community development bills, the welfare bills, the reform bills, and swallowing hard and backing the taxes necessary to pay for it all. Weinberg had come of age, politically, around City Hall, where the central driving philosophy could best summed up by three words—*give me mine*—but he'd come of age before that in a gentle and thoughtful Jewish household that had as its core values some notions that melded nicely with what was today called liberalism—notions having to do with taking the side of the undefended, of steering the bounty of society toward those who most needed it, of standing up to bigots and bullies. As sometimes happens, the dormant lessons of Stu Weinberg's youth began spouting like long-forgotten seeds right around the time his political career was offering fertile new ground.

It went mostly unnoticed on the fifth floor of City Hall at first, the occasional Weinberg bill down in Springfield to increase state funding to some domestic abuse shelter, or to alter the criminal code to make it easier for poor defendants to get legal help, or to establish tutoring programs in the poorest schools. Do-gooder bills were fine now and then, maybe even helpful for public relations these days, went the thinking on the fifth floor, as long as you weren't shitting where you sleep. So there was no problem, really, until the morning that a group of black and Hispanic legislators cornered Weinberg in the coat-room behind the chamber and asked him to add his now-formidable political voice to

a bill that would post independent election observers in Cook County to ensure that votes from the minority precincts weren't being manipulated by You-Know-Who. Weinberg nodded thoughtfully and promised to think about it, not actually planning to—Election observers, in Cook County, *sheesh*, he might as well just divert a whole sewer line right into Daley's bedroom!—but then he was greeted on the floor by Representative Parker, another of Daley's Guys (and one of the more unsavory ones, Weinberg had been thinking lately), who'd seen Weinberg back there talking, the only white face in a coat-room full of black and brown ones. Parker said, only half-kidding: ``What, Stu, are ya' turnin' *injun* on us?''

That did it. Some old, hidden cable in Weinberg's inner works snapped that morning. By that afternoon he was the chief co-sponsor of House Bill Three-Ninety-Four, establishing independent poll monitors in Cook County as if it was some kind of dicey third-world dictatorship that needed United Nations intervention—The *Fuck Daley* Act of 1975—and Stu Weinberg was finished on the fifth floor. He figured they would come after him in the spring primary, and they did, with everything: phony campaign fliers that had him proudly announcing to property owners in his district a plan to tax them into the Stone Age; his yard signs disappearing every night, no matter how many times his dwindling battalion of campaign workers replaced them; a front-page expose' in the *Herald* raising questions about his early residency in his own district, complete with copies of the old lease to the storage room in the abandoned building, leaked by unnamed sources, as if he didn't know. His major donors evaporated, leaving him with just the five- and ten-dollar contributions from the earnest but generally not well-heeled do-gooders out there who had come to admire his bold liberal stance against The Machine, which was currently grinding him up like so much sausage. He'd never previously faced an election opponent, not once in seven years of primaries and general elections, but now he faced three of them—two of whom were named Weinberg, a brazen old trick designed to confuse the living hell out of the voters, a trick that Weinberg (the real Weinberg) knew from personal experience might well work.

But, somehow, the real Weinberg survived the onslaught and was re-elected—no one was more surprised than he was—and he had just been settling in for a long, lonely term as an unaffiliated, unconnected, prodigal Democrat when the news barreled through the state like a December blizzard: Daley was gone. Leave it to Daley to drop dead during

a routine checkup at his doctor's office, neat and clean, totally in control, right to the end.

The Dark Ages followed, the years of drift and aimlessness in the political universe, mayor after non-Daley mayor taking the helm in Chicago, fumbling around with the gears of power that had run so smoothly before and which now just bumped and lurched and screeched along. With such chaos wracking Chicago, there wasn't even the pretense of keeping a thumb on Springfield. In the Legislature now, no one at all did what they were told because there was no one doing the telling. Gradually, without Daley's towering figure blotting out the sun, leadership was able to spout in places it hadn't before. Big Tom Jamison became governor right around the time that being governor meant something again, while Stu Weinberg grew comfortably into his role as elder statesman, grizzled survivor of the old Machine, graying Liberal Lion of the House. Weinberg worked with Jamison, despite the fact that he was a damned Republican, because that's how you got things done, and Weinberg now was nothing if not someone who could get things done. By the time Daley's son became Mayor, prompting widespread giddy anticipation and numb fear that The Machine was back, Weinberg felt neither anticipation nor fear. He didn't have to. His first meeting with Richie Daley—*Richie!*—established the order of things nicely enough: The new Mayor talked softly to Weinberg and smiled solicitously and showed the appropriate deference, and Weinberg glowered and grumbled and studied his fingernails like the unflappable old warrior he had become. "My father had nothing but respect for you," the younger Daley lied. Weinberg responded with a pursed-lipped glare. The only thing he'd heard from the fifth floor after that was the occasional humble request for help in passing the kind of left-of-center legislation that City Hall needed to pull in the black lawmakers and the reformers and the former hippies that Daley was now courting like a lovestruck suitor.

The decades flowed by, the ideological waters of the Prairie Capitol rising and falling like the tide, liberals in and then out and then in again and now out again, each new wave of them offering high ideals that soon melted like sandcastles, then retreating before the voters' anger, then rushing back up on shore as soon as the voters' short memory permitted it. Conservatives bobbed to the surface when the voters grew grumpy about their money, then submerged and lay waiting in the deep when the voters grew nervous about their rights, then bobbed back up again when the voters forgot what had scared them. State Representative Stuart Weinberg stood like a craggy sea-battered rock through

it all. The older he got, the less he congregated with any of the various blocs of lawmakers—the latter-day liberals in the House were a weak, whiny strain who seemed to Weinberg to be always on the verge of apologizing for their liberalism, and congregating with conservatives was, of course, out of the question. His reticence only enhanced his stature: He was old Stu Weinberg, one of the original Daley's Guys, the Liberal Lion of the House, a curmudgeonly, cantankerous, shriveled old fart of a lawmaker who still instilled fear in the right-wingers and bigots and bullies and sexists and corporate coddlers and gun nuts whose lives he could make miserable with a few well-executed parliamentary moves against this bill or that resolution. Senator Stanley Makowski's recent passing had added another title to Weinberg's long trailing list of them: longest-serving current member of the Legislature. By the cusp of the Millennium, Weinberg had survived more primary and general elections than some of the younger lawmakers had had birthdays. He was far past having to do what he was told by anyone, even by his own constituents, who seemed content to let their gray old legend of a legislator tell *them* what he was going to do.

What he did mostly, in the final stretch of a career he had begun as a political peacemaker, was to settle old scores. Not against individual legislators *per se*—most of his old enemies were retired or dead—but against the ideas and ideologies that had lined up against him over the years on the other side of one political battlefield after another. He gleefully tormented the House's ever-growing bloc of hateful suburban Republicans now whenever he could, tripping up their racist, classist, anti-labor, anti-government agenda with shaming floor speeches coupled with devastating behind-the-scenes procedural maneuvers. He kept pressure, public and private, on leaders in both parties to ratchet up funding for what used to be called welfare, the state's poor still being poor despite modern attempts to dress up their plight with palatable new words. He viewed every bill that touched even tangentially on the issue of women's rights as a new call to arms against the sexists, a long-delayed regrouping after the E.R.A. showdowns of the 'seventies, re-fighting that lost war again and again like some deranged ex-Confederate general unwilling to accept defeat.

And he fought the gun nuts—unstable right-wing wannabe commandos who gave not a flying fuck about nine of the ten amendments, focusing all their time, energy and meager intellect on just the second one, the least important one, and then willfully misinterpreting it. Weinberg's district wasn't especially crime-ridden, and he seldom

personally thought about guns one way or the other, but gun *activists* were another matter. They seemed, more than most other True Believers, to harbor not just the worst views about their own issue, but the worst of most other issues as well. In Weinberg's vast political experience, there was no such thing as a pro-gun activist who wasn't also an intolerant, anti-government, anti-urban, anti-enlightenment, anti-choice, right-wing bigot. Every time Weinberg, in committee debate, faced down some twangy, red-faced Republicrat from Marion or Benton or Carbondale over a welfare bill or a defendants'-rights bill or an appropriations-for-the-arts bill, he knew that that twangy Republicrat would likely be in the next committee down the hall at some point, arguing in favor of allowing people to carry around more firepower than they had brainpower. Weinberg took down gun nuts whenever he could; more often than not, taking down a gun nut would kill several birds with one stone.

Gun nuts were very much on Stu Weinberg's mind on this warm wet April day early in the new Millennium, as he sat at his desk on the left side of the House chamber, the same desk he'd occupied for almost forty years now. Session would start in less than an hour, but there were few other lawmakers seated yet; most of them were downstairs in Room 112, the Capitol's biggest committee room, to watch the start of the Tipple impeachment hearings. Weinberg had the cavernous House chamber mostly to himself. He sat back in his high-backed leather seat, feet propped on the mahogany, a relaxed, oddly spry pose for a weathered, withered, white-haired man. It was a pose he'd struck almost daily during four decades of sessions, a pose that pissed off the fussier members of the House, which he supposed was why he persisted in doing it. Perched on his lap was the inch-thick ream of white paper that was House Bill Forty-Seven. The same bill was more easily perused in electronic form on the laptop computer on his desk, but Weinberg, not a Luddite in most ways, still preferred to hold proposed law in his hands—especially when it was proposed law that he intended to wrestle to the ground and pin and vanquish.

Weinberg was on page twelve, reading at a brisk, steady pace, studying its provisions, its structure, its language, and most of all, its ideological underpinnings, though that part didn't take all that much study to figure out. "An act in relation to firearms, amending the criminal code of Illinois," announced the heading, innocuously, followed by sixty-nine pages of equally innocuous-sounding legislative language which,

taken together, was anything but innocuous. Weinberg shook his head slowly as he read. Where did these people come from? Attempting to allow any crazed ya-hoo to walk around in public with a loaded gun tucked inside his clothes—going *out of their* way to change state law to allow that! As if the lack of hidden weaponry on the streets was some kind of urgent societal problem that needed a remedy! Who in the *hell* were these people? But he knew very well who they were: blustery bigots, anti-government fanatics, red-faced Republicrats. The enemy, the one that had stared across the political battlefield at him, in one form or another, decade after decade, aiming, shooting, and aiming again.

Weinberg let a small smile rise on his lips; he was almost enjoying the anticipation of it, the floor debate on House Bill Forty-Seven that would come later today, an anticipation and enjoyment he'd not felt in awhile. He was ready. He'd survived the Daleys, and the Nixonians and the Reaganities and Tom Jamison—he'd outmaneuvered and out-legislated and outlasted them all, and they were a hell of a lot more formidable than the twangy sun-baked gun nuts who had concocted House Bill Forty-Seven.

***'Do You Know Who I AM?'***

Two floors below Weinberg's comfortable solitude, several hundred people sat and stood crammed into Room 112, the Capitol's biggest committee room, which currently seemed to those inside it to be smaller than it had ever been. Larry ``Shiny'' O'Shaughnessey, in particular, acutely felt the relative smallness of the room, as he sat pressed in so closely to the reporters and the lobbyists and the bureaucrats and the many onlookers that he wondered how he was going to even maneuver his pen against his notebook once the hearing started. Larry had been severely claustrophobic as a child—a car ride of more than a few minutes was enough to close the walls on him back then—and extended waits in close, cramped settings like this one still could start them creeping in. He was beginning to realize how much of this new job of his was going to be spent in close, cramped, crowded settings. The seat of state government, the building that had looked so endlessly cavernous to him on that first wide-eyed day, had turned out not to be nearly cavernous enough to comfortably contain all the various forms of governing that went on inside it—particularly when that governing involved the biggest impeachment

proceeding in more than a century. Larry was especially apprehensive at the moment about the oversized buttons everyone around him was wearing, their big, round, sneering message blaring from hundreds of lapels and blouses: ``*Do You Know Who I AM?*'' They were held to the lapels and blouses by large, sharp pins which, in such a close, cramped room, were inadvertent stabbings waiting to happen, it seemed to Larry.

The crowded room might not have bothered him so much had he been in a better mood, but he'd been, for a week now, in the worst mood he could remember. Debbie still hadn't forgiven him, in bed or out of it, for writing the story of the stolen Lincoln document—he'd given up attempting even to kiss her goodbye as he left for work in the mornings—and the story had landed with such a thud that it was hard to convince himself it was worth the cold nights. True, it had gone out over the national wire and had been published in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* and God only knew how many other newspapers, and CNN and the national networks had mentioned it on the air—all the things Larry had hoped for his story from the start—but for all its exposure around the country, it was close to invisible in the press room, the audience whose reaction Larry had been most anticipating. Bad timing was the culprit; Larry's smart, nuanced tale about a crime against history had given off its delicate little sparks just as the slow-motion explosion that was the Tipple impeachment had begun engulfing the Capitol and everyone in it. The sweeping blast from Garrick Martin's atomic bomb of a story had pretty thoroughly obliterated any trace of Larry's Antebellum firecracker.

Adding insult to it all was the apparent fact that Larry had so utterly miscalculated the press room hierarchy, calling into question his professional instincts. In Larry's short time there, he hadn't previously identified Garrick Martin as one of the star reporters. In fact, truth be told, Larry had completely bought into the clueless-dork act that was obviously the guy's front; he had actually fallen for it, pegging Garrick as being near the bottom of the press room pecking order, a politically naïve view that Larry now was very glad he'd never thought to express out loud. The evidence of Garrick Martin's shrewd capability as a journalist was all around Larry in the sardine environs of Room 212 now, perched on all those deadly lapel pins: ``*Do You Know Who I AM?*''

The big round buttons had started springing up around the Capitol like colorful mushrooms a few days earlier. Larry had first noticed them pinned to the blouses of two thirty-something women as they walked through the rotunda with a small group of kids,

who also had the buttons pinned to their shirts. The buttons were blue with white letters around the circumference, forming the words “*Do you know who--*,” and bigger red letters finishing the question: “*I AM?*” Larry had assumed it to be part of some self-esteem-building exercise for the kids or something, until he’d started seeing the buttons on all kinds of other people as well: tourists, janitors, concession workers, even legislators as they washed their hands in the big marbled men’s bathroom on the second floor. He soon discovered that the buttons were being sold at the concession stand under the main staircase in the Capitol, and at a few of the window-front shops downtown, and at some of the bars, including Norb’s Place, although the origin of the buttons was (as so much around the Capitol seemed to be) impossible to determine. They were just there. After days of trying to figure out what their white-and-red message meant, Larry had finally swallowed his professional pride and asked the balding Capitol vendor with the red-gray beard. The man had given him the contemptuous look of one in the know toward one who isn’t, and then said: “You know—that prick judge who stole the kid? Justice Tribble?”

*Of course*, thought Larry: *Tipple*. It had already engulfed Larry’s big Lincoln story, this oddly nerve-touching scandal about the gray old judge and his fateful traffic stop and his impending impeachment and his heartless ruling in the Baby John case. The buttons suddenly made sense. “*Do you know who I AM?*” Tipple had allegedly demanded of the cop, which was almost the best part of the story, Larry thought. Someone else had obviously agreed. What kind of cynical jerk thinks to put *that* on a button—just *that*—and then sells them around the Capitol for a buck each as the impeachment hearing is getting ready to start? An *ingenious* jerk, thought Larry, judging from the hundreds of buttons he’d seen on lapels around the Capitol.

Among the so-adorned lapels was that of Senator Glenda Crawford, who was seated with the Ad Hoc Joint Impeachment Committee, on the other side of the shiny dark-wood half-wall that cut off one end of Room 112. The wall was four feet tall with a foot-wide flat top that gave it the look of a long narrow countertop, behind which sat the Committee, and Crawford, and a few House staffers and aides, scattered amid the raised rows of built-in desks and high-backed polished leather chairs of the committee seating area. Some committee members and staffers on that side of the room sat comfortably, and though there were plenty of empty high-backed leather chairs, others stood or paced idly among multi-leveled rows. There was room for pacing, on that side of the half-wall—

room, even, for a coffee machine, to which one staffer or another would gravitate now and then between pacing. On the front side of the half-wall, the audience side, the audience sat on small hard wooden seats, none of which was empty today. The seats were arranged tightly on a flat floor with no room for pacing, barely enough room for standing and sitting. The half-wall divided Room 112 completely between the spacious, polished-leather seating for the committee and staff and aides and, on the other side, the small cramped crowded hot audience. There wasn't any break in the wall, no hinge or gate, no way to cross it short of hopping up over it as if over a sternum-high fence, a physically possible but socially unlikely breach of decorum (it had never once happened that anyone could remember). There were separate doors in the hallway to enter each side of the room, the audience-side doors propped wide open, the Committee-side closed, to be opened for authorized people by the uniformed guard stationed there.

Crawford, in her days as a family-issues activist, had spent a few afternoons in Room 112, over there on the audience-side, waiting her turn to address this or that committee about this or that legislation. At the time, watching the legislators kicked back comfortably in their high-backed leather chairs while she was feeling the elbows of strangers in her sides and their breath on her neck, she'd discerned a crassly arrogant message from the setting: the elected ones, sitting up there like medieval lords in a secure castle, looking down over massed serfs. But now, as she sat back on the Committee side and looked out over the crowded floor beyond the half-wall, she understood the necessity of the arrangement. They had important work to do, these representatives of the people, work that required their full attention, undistracted by crowds and elbows.

Today was the most important work of all, Crawford thought. The impeachment proceedings against Illinois Supreme Court Chief Justice James D. Tipple—proceedings that had begun as a seed of maternal anger in Crawford's own mind—had grown into a towering issue that had spread its branches out over the whole realm of Illinois politics and beyond. Her staff had been tracking the media coverage, putting together daily summaries of it in plastic binders with photocopies of the newspaper stories and transcripts of the television stories, and Crawford, flipping through the binders, was stunned by the sheer breadth of the coverage. Illinois newspapers and television stations were saturated with it, every front page, every newscast, they seemed incapable of talking about anything else, and even national news outside the state was watching the thing.

Someone on Senator Dillard's staff had told one of Crawford's aides that someone in Governor Bell's office had fielded a call from a *New York Times* reporter—Gobble? Kopple?—who wanted to attend the annual media luncheon at the Governor's Mansion so he could gather information for a piece he was doing on the Tipple thing (the Governor's office had agreed to issue the invitation, the aide had heard, after trying to convince the reporter that he might also want to consider doing a piece on Illinois' burgeoning stature as a national tourism destination, a great untold story that was just waiting for the right journalistic touch). The Tipple drama had worked its way into CNN's revolving lineup, the anchor-people reading the same four-sentence summary each time, about the speeding and the fleeing and the official intimidation—“*Do you know who I AM?*”—and each time, behind the anchor's voice, would be the video of the crying little boy being pulled away from his adoptive mother and shut inside the van. Over and over in each cycle, the CNN anchor would explain: “Justice Tipple wrote the court's controversial decision this month removing the Chicago toddler called ‘Baby John’ from the only home he has ever known.”

Crawford mentally paused each time CNN or Fox News or the local news stations or the newspaper stories mentioned Baby John. She paused partly in respect for the trauma she'd witnessed on her television screen that day—oh, that poor boy!—but there was more to the pause. She was considering, each time, the kind of heady constitutional issues that a leader in her position—a Senator!—had to consider. It would be wrong to punish a judge for his rulings; that was a core principle of the separation of powers, she understood that, as any responsible leader would. She had to make sure that's not what she was doing, punishing Tipple for what he'd done to Baby John. Of course, she wasn't. But she knew that, turned just so, in just the right light, it could look that way—could look like she, and the other legislators who had so quickly fallen in behind her call for impeachment, were trumping up a traffic stop in order to get at a man who had immunity for his real crime. It was hogwash, the impeachment charges were legitimate -- “Do you know who I AM?” he'd demanded of the police officer, and if that kind of official arrogance didn't merit impeachment, what the hell did?—but still she worried about how it looked.(((too explanatory, but what follows is good))) She was worried enough that, for a week now, she'd had a forceful, carefully worded response prepared in her mind to answer the question, *Isn't this impeachment thing really about Baby John?* No, it wasn't,

not really, but the reporters could easily make it appear that way if they got the notion in their heads. Crawford was still figuring out these reporters, but it was clear to her that they wouldn't have the kind of power they had if they weren't savvy, dangerously smart people, perhaps the kind of people who spin their smart, savvy webs around you by pretending to be loutish and incompetent (that would explain their clothing, for one thing). Surely that relevant constitutional question would, at some point, occur to these smart, savvy reporters. She was ready for it, but, oddly—perhaps as part of their smart, savvy strategy—no reporter had yet asked it. She kept waiting for it. Each time one of the television or newspaper stories mentioned Baby John in connection with the impeachment proceedings, Crawford knew this could be the moment that some cynical reporter steps back from the thing and takes a long look at its whole meandering shape and says: *Hey, just a minute here . . .*

Crawford was pondering the meandering shape of the issue of Tipple when the actual Tipple stepped into the crowded audience side of the committee room. It took her a moment to realize who he was, a potentially humiliating lapse for a Senator, she thought, but in truth, most people in the room, even the more seasoned legislators around her, had experienced the same momentary lapse. For all the sound and fury swirling around him lately, the short, squat((CHK EARLIER-MAKE HIM SHORT)), unassuming judge was still a largely unfamiliar face to those who didn't sit around watching Supreme Court hearings. The face now was rendered momentarily invisible by the presence of the man walking next to him, his very visible attorney, Thomas R. Jamison. The conversational noise that had been filling the room moments earlier dropped several decibels all at once, as if on cue from some unseen conductor, and all faces turned toward the tall man. The former governor's universally recognized head towered well above the crowd as he waded in, looking like some important governmental statue, which he might as well have been to the assembled audience, many of whom had never before seen him in person. A few of the more seasoned lobbyists and lawmakers had known Jamison pretty well back then, when he was here, and what they saw was an old ally or adversary that they'd not seen in awhile. But most people in the room were seeing something new and startling, verging on surreal, as if a sculpted bust from the coinage in their pockets had come to life and was walking among them. A hundred or more minds at that moment, virtually in concert, pondered the power of notoriety, thinking some variation of: *Hey, look at that! He's a*

*real person!*

The towering ex-governor and the short, squat judge made their way to the long narrow witness table at the front of the room, facing the half-wall and the committee beyond. Jamison paused at the table, laid his briefcase on its polished wood surface, tucked his deep-burgundy tie into to the warm-gray flannel of his suit and smiled and nodded up at the assembled committee members. The committee members nodded back, some of them murmuring *hellos* and *good mornings*, most of them staring openly at the spectacle of this animated governmental statue settling its big form into a chair before them. A few committee members, though, didn't stare, but casually studied some suddenly important papers on their desktops, papers that apparently were too important for them to give their attention to the political legend who was now opening his briefcase at the table.

Claire Ottoman, sitting among the reporters on the right side of the room, noticed the casual non-staring by the few, and she suppressed a smirk. How predictable: There was young Representative Fritch, the hotshot liberal from Chicago's moneyed Gold Coast who was known as much for his model-white smile and cutting-edge fashion sense as his legislative record; young Representative Park, the Wheaton right-winger with the Clark Gable mustache and the Rush Limbaugh sarcasm; young Representative Bradley, the subcommittee chairman and Southern Illinois rabble-rouser who had loudly broken with his fellow Democrats so many times—over guns, over abortion, over gay rights—that Julian Marcus had nicknamed him "Benedict Bradley." These were the ambitious ones, the restless ones, young and cocky and impatient for their own political destinies to begin. These were the ones who'd made it clear with every impassioned floor speech and camera-ready public appearance that they were bigger than this place, they were destined for something great—congressman, governor, beyond. True, their current station was only marginally above that of your average small-town mayor, but they knew in their hearts that that was a temporary situation, an early, quaint chapter in an important future political biography. It was only a matter of time before the tide of history would bend its flow around them. They saw no reason to wait until they were actual statesmen to begin carrying themselves like it. These few, and the few others like them in the Legislature, they could make a sub-committee spat about utility rates sound like a presidential inauguration speech, Claire had often mused to herself. How predictable, that they would make a spectacle out of refusing to make a spectacle out of the arrival of Big Tom

Jamison. They carried their destinies around like billowing flags, these special few, and they weren't about to dip those flags to some has-been Springfield politico who had never been as big as they surely were going to be. Claire supposed it could have been Abe Lincoln himself folding his great frame into that chair at the committee witness table, and the destined ones still would be too busy shuffling the papers on their desks to look impressed.

Claire, unencumbered by political destiny, took her first good look at the former governor, trying to reconcile the man with everything she'd heard and read about the man, and failing. Jamison's tenure in Springfield had ended before Claire's had begun—she'd missed him by a year—but her colleagues on floor two-and-a-half had so meticulously kept his memory alive that she wouldn't have been especially surprised to discover that his butt was hovering magically above the seat of the chair as he sat before the committee. She could tell from her first glance that he did, in fact, have that aura, the one she'd seen radiating off a handful of other important men and one or two women. But she knew the aura was a tricky and fickle thing, created not by so much by what the person said but rather by what was said of the person. Mostly, he looked like a tall ex-politician who knew how to enter a room.

Claire

(INSERT SOMETHING ABOUT HER BEING DISTRACTED ANYWAY,  
BECAUSE OF PENDING DEATH PENALTY THING)

Now, on the other side of the half-wall that divided the room, young Representative Bradley stopped shuffling the papers on his desk, and he looked toward the witness table, and he acknowledged Jamison's presence there, for the first time, with a small nod, then extended the same small nod to the short, gray judge seated next to the tall, gray ex-governor. Jamison smiled warmly and nodded back. Tipple didn't. The judge's eyes were marbles, his mouth frozen into a stoic, carp-like frown. Alice Walden, watching from her seat packed among the other reporters, thought Tipple's face looked more like that of a fish than any human she'd ever seen.

Representative Bradley leaned forward and said into the skinny black microphone on his desk: "Governor Jamison, welcome to this special meeting of the Ad-Hoc Impeachment Subcommittee of the Illinois House Judiciary Committee." His smile was

small and formal, his Downstate-Democrat drawl fully engaged; ``welcome'' came out ``weyl-cum.'' Alice shifted in her chair and looked down at her notebook, feeling her face redden. Of course, to those with an ear for regional drawls, they were as varied as hair color. To Alice's ear, Representative Bradley's languid vowels and lingering syllables bore no more resemblance to her own natural speech patterns than did his jet-black hair resemble her blonde locks, but she knew that most ears in this region weren't so attuned. Up here, a drawl was a drawl, they were all lumped together under the catch-all category of ``downstate.'' It was a broad and subjective category, generally defined from the point of view of Chicago (as everything here seemed to be), and geographically inaccurate to boot. Kankakee and Joliet and Ottawa, all in upper half of the state, qualified as ``downstate,'' as did Rockford, so far north that it was practically within sight of Wisconsin. These Illinoisans, too logistically cloistered to grasp so simple a concept as latitude, couldn't be expected to discern the difference between a Mississippi drawl and one grown in, say, Carbondale, Illinois—though to Alice, the difference was stark. She'd determined from the first that in a universe of drawls which, as a whole, didn't bring to mind intellect and sophistication, the Southern Illinois drawl *especially* didn't. It was a trailer-home dirt-patch of a drawl, full of weeds and rocks, more rural than Southern, with the heavy-bottomed U's of Kentucky dialect, but laced with oddities she'd never heard anywhere else. The first time she'd heard one of the downstaters torture the name of the nation's Capital—*Warshington*—she'd squinted at it and turned it over in her mind and then concluded, for one of the few times in her adult life, that maybe her own drawl wasn't really so bad after all.

Alice continued to cringe inwardly as Representative Bradley continued his seemingly infinite introduction of the hearing. Savoring the packed room and the captive audience and the humming television cameras, he framed the event with roughly the same gravity that Alice imagined Lincoln employing at Gettysburg. Bradley glacially crawled his way, several times, through the lengthy title of the proceedings—*The Ad-Hoc Impeachment Subcommittee of the Illinois House Judiciary Committee*—and ``House'' came out ``Hey-ous'' each time. He noted that Illinois, in the great tradition of the U.S. Constitution, is made up of three distinct branches of government (``guuv-ment''). He pondered the important protection this provided, of governmental checks and balances (``chey-aaks 'n bay-l'nces''). He read the charges against Illinois Supreme Court Chief

Justice James D. Tipple with the somber pace of a town clocktower chiming noon (‘‘drunk dr-aaa-ving, resisting ar-ray-st, off-fay-cial mis-cuun-duuct’’). Alice cleared her throat and looked down again and pretended to write something in her thin white notebook, though in reality she only scribbled mechanically. My, but the gentleman liked to hear himself talk, didn’t he? By the time he finally got around to inviting former Governor Thomas Jamison to make the opening statement for the defense (‘‘de-fay-ence’’), Alice had filled up most of a page with what looked like black, inky smoke.

Alice, and the rest of the room, then watched in silence as Jamison stood from his chair, a process that gave the impression of having several distinct stages to it. People on the audience side of the half-wall were so closely packed in around him that Alice fully expected to see some kind of mishap as he rose. Alice had seen the towering ex-politician several times now in the past few days, in several settings, and still she couldn’t adjust her mind to his height. He looked, still, impossibly tall. She reminded herself that he was a perfectly feasible six-four; that fact had been as well-publicized in the Illinois media this week as the rainy weather forecasts. Six-four, not small by any stretch, but not supernatural. Yet watching him now, standing before the lectern facing the Ad-Hoc Impeachment Subcommittee of the Illinois *Hey-ous* Judiciary Committee, Alice Walden couldn’t shake the sense that she was seeing something surreal. She looked down at her notebook yet again, hiding, and turned to a clean white page and propped her pen tip there and waited for his words without looking at him.

Jamison leaned over the lectern and adjusted the skinny microphone upward with the unhurried competence of one who had done it countless times, and then he looked across the half-wall, at the lawmakers and staffers sitting back in the roomy polished comfort of their officialdom, and he smiled and said: ‘‘Ladies and gentleman of the Committee. Good morning.’’

The Committee responded with a jumbled mass of murmurs: ‘‘Good morning.’’ Jamison paused, as if making sure not to interrupt any stragglers who might yet murmur their *good mornings*. Then he paused a moment longer, letting the expectant silence in the room provide the opening frame for his speech. Garrick Martin, seated in the back of the room, tourists’ elbows encircling him like a cage, recognized the moment, and marveled at the skillful creation of it. He pondered again the largeness—not greatness, necessarily, but largeness—that Big Tom Jamison had brought with him to their corner of the world those

few years ago, and had tucked into his leather briefcase and taken with him when he'd left.

Now Jamison spoke, the unfiltered version of his voice at the lectern looming almost as large as its electronically amplified twin echoing down from the sound system of the room:

“What is *truth*, ladies and gentlemen?”

He let the unanswerable question hang there among the ornate friezes of the ceiling for a moment, before offering another: “Is truth something we can find in a police report? Or in an impeachment resolution?” He paused, and directed a deliberate glance in the direction of Senator Glenda Crawford, seated among the lawmakers, before adding: “Or in a press conference?”

Jamison looked casually back down at the lectern, as several hundred heads turned at once in the direction of his glance, toward the freshman Senator from Aurora, and several hundred minds noted, in concert, that her face was reddening noticeably before their eyes.

Jamison, after another long, unhurried moment: “Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, truth is not something we can find in any of those places. If you want to find *truth*—and, ultimately, that’s what we’re here for—you have to start with facts. And, as John Adams once noted, facts are stubborn things . . .”

Garrick was sitting in rear of the room—away from the other reporters in their multi-colored jackets, behind the staffers and lobbyists in their competent suits and ties, back among the chattering, sharp-elbowed tourists with their multicolored gym shoes and nylon backpacks and little silver cameras and souvenir t-shirts displaying the phony Lincoln quote (“*They’d Have to Shoot Me to Get Me Back to Springfield*”)—because he had overslept and arrived late to the hearing. (((HAVE HIM THINK BACK OVER OLD MRS. JANOVIK CONVERSATION—SOMETHING RELEVANT HERE?))

Jamison: “Yes, facts are stubborn things. The *fact* is, Chief Justice James Tipple was stopped by a police officer on a cold January night, for exceeding the posted speed limit.”

Then: “The *fact* is, more recently, Judge Tipple was forced to issue a ruling in a heartrending legal case before his court—a ruling that was publicly unpopular and

politically unpalatable.”

Then, after steeping the room in another silent moment: “And the *truth*, ladies and gentlemen of the Subcommittee, is that that ruling is the real reason we’re all here today, testing the very boundaries of our system of separated powers of government.”

On the other side of the half-wall, Senator Glenda Crawford stood up suddenly, as if propelled by a spring, her jaw tight, her eyes narrowed. She said, loudly enough to be heard at the back of the room without a microphone: “Mister Chairman, I object to that statement!”

The development so surprised everyone in the room—the committee members, the media, the staffers, the tourists in their t-shirts—that for a long moment, there was no response to it. It was as if time had hiccupped. Even Justice Tipple, sitting at the table facing the half-wall, appeared to have awakened from his carp-faced stoicism.

Senator Crawford, her jaw still clenched, directed her narrowed eyes at Jamison and said: “These proceedings are *not* about Baby John! And I *resent* that allegation!”

Jamison, his eyes theatrically wide with outrage, turned to Representative Bradley and said: “Mister Chairman! This is my opening statement!”

Senator Crawford: “This hearing is about a judge who broke the law—it is *not* about that *horrible* ruling he made!”

Jamison: “Mister Chairman!”

Senator Crawford: “It’s bad enough that little boy was dragged away from his mother, but now to drag him into *this!* . . . ”

Jamison, thunderously: “*Mister Chairman!* What *right* does she have . . . ?”

Bradley, fumbling with the papers on his desk, his loose downstate drawl suddenly tight with tension: “Yes, well, um . . . ”

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\*\*\*WHAT IS ALICE'S EPIPHANY?\*\*\*

*CHAPT 9 (open and close with Weinberg)*

--- *history of Weinberg, setup for fight over gun bill*

--- *Opening of hearings; speech by Jamison, ``what is truth?``; Kemper chides him;*

((Establish Claire has been picked in the lottery to witness I-55 killer's execution))

--- *night: Garrick and Alice tryst in Lincoln's tomb; then Garrick ruins her illusion about Lincoln ((Garrick getting cocky; Alice increasingly insecure about not being taken seriously)))*

--- *House debate on HB47; Flynn in balcony; Weinberg attaches prairie chicken amendment. Flynn fuming.*

((END CHAPT 9))

\* \* \* \*

CHAPT 10 (begin and end with The Inmate)

--- Open on Inmate.

Lunch at governor's mansion; detailed description of it; Reporters see The Inmate, meet Cobble (NYT guy). Have Inmate mention he wants to talk to Garrick. (undertone of racial tension, fear of the black guy)

--- Hearing: Jamison grills officer who pulled Tipple over; embarrasses him on the stand; Kemper chides Jamison; Jamison takes Kemper aside in the hallway and gives her ``shark`` speech

--- Worm, Harvey, Garrick and Cobble end up at a bar (not Norb's), getting drunk in mid-day (break from the hearing), talking about Jamison and Baby John, and peering into Cobble's life at the NYT; he gets into the bet. ((More about Garrick's cockiness; now he's rubbing shoulders w/NYT))

--- remote TV in Blue Room; Cole gets committee member to say CWT, but it wasn't televised.)

--- Hearing later (reporters drunk); Jamison examines computer expert, re. the computer porn charge; establishes it was a case of computer incompetence

--- Jamison runs into Garrick in basement cafeteria (detail about the cafeteria); they talk about Makowski, Kruger, Baby John, and ``the runaway train''; Garrick reluctantly refuses to be eased off the story; a couple asks for Jamison's autograph.

--- Garrick meets The Inmate in a parking garage (lotsa background about noir on this); gets Tipple file in return for promise to write story about housing issue; Inmate looks down on him;

((END CHAPT 10))

\* \* \* \*

#### CHAPT 11 (Start and End with execution)

--- Claire at execution; . . .

--- Flynn comes to pressroom, mad that HB47 has been stuck in House Transportation committee; Julian, Worm and Colleen explain to him how the system works when leadership wants to kill something ((This is a small aside))

--- Hearing; Jamison examines technician who administered blood test, finds Tipple was dry

--- Harvey screams at Jordon on phone about Tipple being dry; then bullshits Morgan

--- Garrick bullshits Helen into getting page one play for the public housing story ((Cocky cocky cocky))

--- Garrick invites Alice out for dinner, finds her working on footage. She's preoccupied with her story, not him. She mentions that it's her last story here; she's gotten a national weather job; he's hurt, she's impervious.

--- Macy calls everyone to the front for Cobble's message, claiming victory in CWT; they look up the story, find it's wrong

--- . . . Claire at execution; more about her memories of Anna, interspersed with death scene.

((END CHAPT 11))

\* \* \* \*

CHAPT 12 (begin and end, something about Flynn)

--- House Transportation committee votes down gun bill; Flynn goes berserk, removed by guards

--- (established Larry increasingly disillusioned with his job; pay cuts?)

--- Blue Room, all the reporters there for briefing; place packed with Chicagoans; Worm talks his colleagues into pulling a shut-out, and they do; Claire saves the day

--- Night, reporters all getting ready to leave pressroom, taking final bets on outcome.

-- Report that night (as Garrick watches on TV) by Alice about Crawford scandal ((she's gone now))

--- Next morning: Tim Flynn arrives, confronts Larry, shoots up the place

((END CHAPT 12))

\* \* \* \*

CHAPT 13(open and close with the white squirrels; maybe, for opening, someone sees Tooth there, doing a story about them—mention them earlier in the story)

--- Hearing; closing argument by Jamison about the nature of truth;

\*\*\*\* THIS IS WHERE WE NEED TO GET AT THE THEME THAT ALL INTERACTION IS POLITICS—BUT ALSO MENTION IT EARLIER \* \* \* \*

Crawford tries to chide him again, but the committee has turned on her

--- In hallway after committee, reporters allow Tipple to walk by without a word; then surround and attack Crawford (based on Alice's story)

--- Pressroom; establish that Larry is leaving to be a flack; going-away party.

--- Garrick is in Blue Room, watching footage of Baby John; Claire comes in; he tells her he's leaving the business; she invites him to dinner

--- Alice is on TV, gets CWT in there, wins bet; Garrick looks at her on the screen, then

leaves (to visit Ms Janovik)

--- End with Garrick by her bedside? Telling her what? (in hospital room, Tooth does ``creamy white thighs'' report about Olney squirrels)(<<or just reference it, how he missed by an hour?))

END WITH:

- 30 -

\*\*\*\*\*

General thoughts:

- the meandering parts work best; the parts that move the story along don't work.
  - need more description
  - sharper characters; quirks
  - go back over garrick's character and sharpen everything about his AMBITION
- (Get rid of the stuff about him losing the lead right after the story broke. The arc of his character is of climbing ambitiously to a high level, then finding dissatisfaction, treachery, and losing it.
- ``Pekin Chinks''

Alice's motive at the end:

*-- not epiphany, but ambition; she bites on the story being pushed by Jamison; her interview w. judge's wife is touching, but she's calculated about that. (OR—some dirt on Crawford)*

*The chance at this story taps into her need to be taken seriously.*

*(should something happen first to tweak that sense?)*

*show (in flashback?) Jamison giving her the tip, after offering it to Garrick? How terrified she is of him—but determined to be taken seriously, so she pursues the tip about Crawford? \*\**

Timeframe:

\*\*\* is on ``the cusp of the millennium \*\*\*\*

-- Garrick having trouble remembering to write 2000 (stead 19--). Mention millennium bug

-- ?? a new character—a reporter for a news website, very new and unfathomable to the reporters; he's a small, shy, reclusive guy whose job no one is sure about (not everyone has home computers). He can come into it when the Judge's website gets mentioned. This should portend how this meek man will eventually inherit the earth (media).

-- weave in pre-9/11 stuff; feeling safe

-- get at dying media of old (use Ron to illustrate this?)

-- call the Baby John story ``baby-gate'' (but should they first consider ``Tipple-gate''?)

--

Flashback to Janovik, conversation about ``you're not safe. No one's safe.'' How he thinks of her as having been around in a dangerous, unsettled time of history, and his own time as settled; she makes it clear that you can't make that judgment in the moment.

(to organize goals in writing, and present to agent)

## OUTLINE/SYNOPSIS

Creamy White Thighs

(Novel; political satire)

*“News was a beast that reporters, politicians and True Believers created together, a thrashing thing that none of them could quite control once it awakened . . . ”*

*Creamy White Thighs* is the story of a routine traffic stop that blooms into an epic political drama. It’s a satiric snapshot of America’s sleepwalking media culture in the first months of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, just before epochal events—the rise of the Internet, the fall of newspapers, the lost innocence of 9-11—changed everything.

Sitting obliviously in the path of those tidal waves is the pressroom on floor two-and-a-half of the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield: Former home to Abraham Lincoln, future launch pad for Barack Obama, currently headquarters for a group of bored, frustrated reporters dwelling in the cellar of their profession, competing against each other by day, drinking together by night, waiting for Something Big to happen.

One of them is Garrick Martin, an astronomer at heart who missed his calling and now is stuck in an earth-bound career as a journalist, wondering if this all there is. He writes for a dying newspaper, is stuck in a sleepy Midwestern state capitol, covering a little-noted governor and an inept Legislature. Thirty-four and single, prematurely gray, Garrick’s only real friend is his elderly landlady, who lost her young brother in the Holocaust and is kind enough to tell Garrick the story every morning, in excruciating detail, over coffee.

The politicians Garrick covers are always forgetting who he is. His editor views him as walking confirmation of the decline of journalism. His fellow state capitol beat reporters—a klatch of poorly dressed under-achievers who spend all their time grinding out the same

meaningless political news stories, while making bets on which of them can slip phrases like “creamy white thighs” into print—see Garrick as being near the bottom of their modest hierarchy.

That changes after Garrick watches in horror as a little boy is forcibly removed from the only home he has ever known, the result of a controversial court order. It’s a sight that, in Garrick’s mind, echoes his landlady’s own nightmarish past, and sends him angrily seeking justice.

He finds it, in a tip from an old friend, about the judge who ordered the boy’s removal. It begins as a small issue—a speeding ticket—but, fueled by political ambition, journalistic ////////////// and a traumatic news clip that ripples across the nation

\*\*\*\*\*

## OUTLINE/SYNOPSIS

12/27/09

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Sitting quietly in the path of those tidal waves is the pressroom on floor two-and-a-half of the Illinois State Capitol in Springfield: former home to Abraham Lincoln, future launch pad for Barack Obama, currently headquarters for a group of bored, frustrated reporters dwelling in the cellar of their profession, competing against each other by day, drinking together by night, waiting for Something Big to happen.

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only real friend is his elderly landlady, who lost her young brother in the Holocaust and is kind enough to tell Garrick the story every morning, in excruciating detail, over metallic coffee.

The politicians Garrick covers are always forgetting who he is. His editor views him as walking confirmation of the decline of journalism. His fellow state capitol beat reporters are a klatch of poorly-dressed under-achievers who spend all their time grinding out the same meaningless political news stories, while making barroom bets on which of them can slip phrases like “creamy white thighs” into print. They see Garrick as being near the bottom of their modest hierarchy.

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He finds it, in a tip from an old friend, about the judge who ordered the boy’s removal. It begins as a small issue – a speeding ticket – but, fueled by political ambition, journalistic // and a traumatic news clip that ripples across the nation, it becomes // the philosophical premise of Garrick’s landlady: that whatever the imperatives of politics and history, “children should be off-limits.”

\*\*\*\*\*

HAD HAD HAD (((pick it up)))

- add in Geek, Obama (Maybe have him just occasionally be giving impassioned speeches about small topics?) and TwinTowers (Larry getting a line on job)
- Sharpen all the writing – W R I T E
- plot out the rest of the story
- get new hardcopy.

\* \* \* \*

3/15/10

**OBAMA**

**(this is unfixed – need to finish it)**

*For the rest of the morning, Garrick played Capitol tour guide for Alice,*

*relishing her eyebrows, her figure, her laugh—it was a strangely boisterous thing for such a wispy woman—and relishing the fact that she didn't yet know that Garrick was the least qualified reporter in the press room to be giving anyone a tour. They began in the Senate, where all had learned the morning before of Senator Stan's death. Life was going on. A tall young black man, thin as rain, was standing at this desk on the Senate floor, giving a monotone(elevated, high-falutin) speech about license-plate fees while his colleagues read their newspapers or whispered to their staff or stared into space. He was Senator Obama, who..... ((something about other black lawmakers distrusting him. `Hollywood' Hendon, etc.))((get smthing from Mendell's book?*

\* \* \* \* \*

*Theme: All human interaction is politics.*

((WEAVE THAT IN EARLIER, THEN HAVE IT IN JAMISON'S SPEECH NEAR THE END)))

-- work in an on-going notion of little politics (as in committee hearings) and big politics (as in the Holocaust)

\*\*\*\*\*

internet geek

\*\*\*\*\*

obama

\*\*\*\*\*

\*\*\*WHAT IS ALICE'S EPIPHANY?\*\*\*

*CHAPT 9 (open and close with Weinberg)*

*--- history of Weinberg, setup for fight over gun bill*

*--- Opening of hearings; speech by Jamison, `what is truth?'; Kemper chides him; ((Establish Claire has been picked in the lottery to witness I-55 killer's execution))*

--- night: Garrick and Alice tryst in Lincoln's tomb; then Garrick ruins her illusion about Lincoln ((Garrick getting cocky; Alice increasingly insecure about not being taken seriously))

--- House debate on HB47; Flynn in balcony; Weinberg attaches prairie chicken amendment. Flynn fuming.  
((END CHAPT 9))

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#### CHAPT 10 (begin and end with The Inmate)

--- Open on Inmate.

Lunch at governor's mansion; detailed description of it; Reporters see The Inmate, meet Cobble (NYT guy). Have Inmate mention he wants to talk to Garrick. (undertone of racial tension, fear of the black guy)

--- Hearing: Jamison grills officer who pulled Tipple over; embarrasses him on the stand; Kemper chides Jamison; Jamison takes Kemper aside in the hallway and gives her ``shark'' speech

--- Worm, Harvey, Garrick and Cobble end up at a bar (not Norb's), getting drunk in mid-day (break from the hearing), talking about Jamison and Baby John, and peering into Cobble's life at the NYT; he gets into the bet. ((More about Garrick's cockiness; now he's rubbing shoulders w/NYT))

--- remote TV in Blue Room; Cole gets committee member to say CWT, but it wasn't televised.)

--- Hearing later (reporters drunk); Jamison examines computer expert, re. the computer porn charge; establishes it was a case of computer incompetence

--- Jamison runs into Garrick in basement cafeteria (detail about the cafeteria); they talk about Makowski, Kruger, Baby John, and ``the runaway train''; Garrick reluctantly refuses to be eased off the story; a couple asks for Jamison's autograph.

--- Garrick meets The Inmate in a parking garage (lotsa background about noir on this); gets Tipple file in return for promise to write story about housing issue; Inmate looks down on him;

((END CHAPT 10))

\* \* \* \*

#### CHAPT 11 (Start and End with execution)

--- Claire at execution; . . .

--- Flynn comes to pressroom, mad that HB47 has been stuck in House Transportation committee; Julian, Worm and Colleen explain to him how the system works when leadership wants to kill something ((This is a small aside))

--- Hearing; Jamison examines technician who administered blood test, finds Tipple was dry

--- Harvey screams at Jordon on phone about Tipple being dry; then bullshits Morgan

--- Garrick bullshits Helen into getting page one play for the public housing story ((Cocky cocky cocky))

--- Garrick invites Alice out for dinner, finds her working on footage. She's preoccupied

with her story, not him. She mentions that it's her last story here; she's gotten a national weather job; he's hurt, she's impervious.

--- Macy calls everyone to the front for Cobble's message, claiming victory in CWT; they look up the story, find it's wrong

--- . . . Claire at execution; more about her memories of Anna, interspersed with death scene.

((END CHAPT 11))

\* \* \* \*

CHAPT 12 (begin and end, something about Flynn)

--- House Transportation committee votes down gun bill; Flynn goes berserk, removed by guards

--- (established Larry increasingly disillusioned with his job; pay cuts?)

--- Blue Room, all the reporters there for briefing; place packed with Chicagoans; Worm talks his colleagues into pulling a shut-out, and they do; Claire saves the day

--- Night, reporters all getting ready to leave pressroom, taking final bets on outcome.

-- Report that night (as Garrick watches on TV) by Alice about Crawford scandal ((she's gone now))

--- Next morning: Tim Flynn arrives, confronts Larry, shoots up the place

((END CHAPT 12))

\* \* \* \*

CHAPT 13(open and close with the white squirrels; maybe, for opening, someone sees Tooth there, doing a story about them – mention them earlier in the story)

--- Hearing; closing argument by Jamison about the nature of truth;

\*\*\*\* THIS IS WHERE WE NEED TO GET AT THE THEME THAT ALL INTERACTION IS POLITICS – BUT ALSO MENTION IT EARLIER \* \* \* \*

Crawford tries to chide him again, but the committee has turned on her

--- In hallway after committee, reporters allow Tipple to walk by without a word; then surround and attack Crawford (based on Alice's story)

--- Pressroom; establish that Larry is leaving to be a flack; going-away party.

--- Garrick is in Blue Room, watching footage of Baby John; Claire comes in; he tells her he's leaving the business; she invites him to dinner

--- Alice is on TV, gets CWT in there, wins bet; Garrick looks at her on the screen, then leaves (to visit Ms Janovik)

--- End with Garrick by her bedside? Telling her what? (in hospital room, Tooth does ``creamy white thighs'' report about Olney squirrels)(<<or just reference it, how he missed by an hour?))

END WITH:

- 30 -

\*\*\*\*\*

General thoughts:

- the meandering parts work best; the parts that move the story along don't work.
  - need more description
  - sharper characters; quirks
  - go back over garrick's character and sharpen everything about his AMBITION
- (Get rid of the stuff about him losing the lead right after the story broke. The arc of his character is of climbing ambitiously to a high level, then finding dissatisfaction, treachery, and losing it.
- ``Pekin Chinks''

Alice's motive at the end:

- *not epiphany, but ambition; she bites on the story being pushed by Jamison; her interview w. judge's wife is touching, but she's calculated about that. (OR – some dirt on Crawford)*
- The chance at this story taps into her need to be taken seriously. (should something happen first to tweak that sense?)*
- show (in flashback?) Jamison giving her the tip, after offering it to Garrick? How terrified she is of him – but determined to be taken seriously, so she pursues the tip about Crawford? \*\**

Timeframe:

- \*\*\* is on ``the cusp of the millennium \*\*\*\*
- Garrick having trouble remembering to write 2000 (stead 19--). Mention millennium bug
- ?? a new character – a reporter for a news website, very new and unfathomable to the reporters; he's a small, shy, reclusive guy whose job no one is sure about (not everyone has home computers). He can come into it when the Judge's website gets mentioned. This should portend how this meek man will eventually inherit the earth (media).
- weave in pre-9/11 stuff; feeling safe
- get at dying media of old (use Ron to illustrate this?)
- call the Baby John story ``baby-gate'' (but should they first consider ``Tipple-gate''?)
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Flashback to Janovik, conversation about ``you're not safe. No one's safe.'' How he thinks of her as having been around in a dangerous, unsettled time of history, and his own time as settled; she makes it clear that you can't make that judgment in the moment.

(to organize goals in writing, and present to agent)

1/30/10

Nerd: Named Jake Nebbish.

When did blogs start? (late 90s)

He was Jake Nebbish, Illinois correspondent for a Florida Internet media firm that was ////////////////