



Jamaica

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THE DAYSHIFT GUYS were occupying their usual lunchtime table in the Repo Depot cafeteria, and Stankowitz, a Roman Catholic with five children and an ulcer, was delivering his usual high-decibel opinions, flecks of white bread and salami speckling his goatee. “How could you possibly know whether it’s better to have kids or not unless you’ve actually had one?” he asked, thrusting a hairy-knuckled finger at Wrigley, who stood solidly in the anti-kid camp.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Wrigley said. “Why can’t you look at it logically, like in terms of economics. Everybody knows what a money-suck kids are.”

“Nah,” Stankowitz said, dismissing Wrigley as he would a biting fly. “You can’t look at it that way. It’s like this: there’s an emptiness before kids come along. You don’t know it’s there, but it is, then the kids fill it up. It’s impossible to explain to someone like you, so I won’t even bother.” The two would go on bickering like this throughout lunch but would end up repossessing a Ninja ZX-14 together afterward and hoist a beer after work.

Jason, for his part, kept quiet. At one point having children had seemed the honorable, inexorable path, but now he was suffering some serious misgivings. With the extra shifts he was pulling, not to mention the money issue Wrigley brought up, he just didn’t see how it was feasible. Only by being childless, for instance, could he afford his townhome. It was a nice townhouse, like the brick-faced row house the Huxtables on TV lived in, only plunked down in a sodded-over Iowa cornfield with a freshly blacktopped bike path viewable from the upper-story windows and glimpses of deer and wild turkeys foraging nearby in

the mornings. Highly pastoral. He cringed at the thought of poor Stankowitz in his cramped, un-updated ranch house in the middle of the city, one missed mortgage payment away from the ghetto—mold in the unfinished basement, mice nibbling away at the wiring—bombarded the moment he stepped through the door with demands for icy pops and trips to McDonald's, help with spelling lists and long division.



Today's had been a killer shift: two snowmobiles, a classic Camaro, a bass boat, then Jason and Monson had repo'd an RV from a dentist's house. The dentist had dogs, and even though the rottweilers had been noted in the prelim report, the repo had still been an adventure, to say the least. There'd been pepper spray and a speed-dialed call to animal control and ultimately a couple of stitches for Monson at the walk-in clinic. The very thought of it caused Jason to sink deeper into his paid-for sofa and turn on his paid-for TV.

Sadly he found, flipping through, far fewer channels than the last time he'd checked. "Miranda?" he called out. Jason found her on the balcony, feeding flanks of meat to the grill. As he slid open the door and stepped out he was engulfed by a feverish, nearly asphyxiating humidity. The air over the grill shimmered. All along the complex, AC units made chuffing, irritable sounds. Down at street level some city workers in orange T-shirts, struggling with a culvert or sewage project, had been waylaid by the heat and were splayed now along the curb like victims of a roadside bombing. "There's something wrong with the TV," he said.

"What's it doing?" Miranda asked as she painted the meat with what looked like an orangey unguent.

"It's not what it's doing, it's what it's not doing." Across the street, beyond the road crew's excavations, stretched a fine expanse of unoccupied space sprinkled to an Edenic green by the just-built megachurch to which it belonged. The roof of the church angled skyward like a launch pad for some surface-to-air missile.

"What is it not doing?"

"Only the local channels come in."

"I was going to talk to you about that," said Miranda, squeezing past on her way back inside.

Jason turned and trailed behind.

"I cancelled the cable." She was in the kitchen now, pulling some potato salad from the fridge, prying open the lid, wedging in a spoon.

"Why would you do that?" Jason said.

"It's the downturn. Or recession. Whatever they're calling it. Our jobs aren't safe. We've got to scale back."

"My job's fine." Just that week, in fact, it had been announced on the company's intranet page that for the third quarter in a row Repo Depot had generated revenues that exceeded pretty much everyone's expectations.

"That's what everyone says, but who knows?"

"So you're cancelling the cable but we're having steak for dinner?"

"They're the last ones from the freezer, the ones your mom gave us. The steaks she bought from the guy in the truck. *Those* steaks. Starting tomorrow, it's hot dogs and macaroni."



"They let Suzie and Ryan go," Miranda said. She and Jason were lying in bed. She had folded her book on her abdomen, the sign that an outside thought had struck. Miranda was a reader, mainly of materials salvaged from rummage sales: biographies of British monarchs; true tales of Bigfoot and the Bermuda Triangle and Area 51; cookbooks; books of limericks; ski magazines (she didn't ski); and, lately, baby magazines, which Jason found distressing. Miranda had decreed the bedroom a TV free zone—also distressing for Jason, a non-reader. Mainly as they lay in bed for the hour or so before sleep he worked Sudoku puzzles or listened to his iPod, though this, he felt, was frowned upon. Sometimes he just stared at the ceiling.

"Who's Suzie?" he asked.

"The girl with the nose ring."

"Can you narrow it down?"

"The one who brought pot to our Super Bowl party."

"Oh." Jason studied the bands of dust that clung to the edges of the overhead fan blades like ornamental tulle. "And Ryan?"

"He brought the meatballs."

"Those were good, especially after the pot."

"Our office is starting to have these big empty spaces. Everyone avoids them like Indian burial grounds or something. It's so quiet. Everybody's trying to

look busy but there's nothing to do." Miranda was a mortgage broker in an atmosphere of frozen credit markets where no new mortgages were being brokered. By virtue of her relative seniority she had managed to hang on thus far, but any day she expected the dreaded summons from HR. She inched nearer to Jason, sliding a leg over his. Hers was warm, newly-shaven. "Why don't you turn out the light?"

Something jangled in him, a chord struck, the familiar low frequencies moving through his body. They fooled around a little.

"You know," Miranda said, "it wouldn't be the end of the world if I lost my job." It was amazing how quickly she'd dispensed with her clothes.

"You'd find a new one," Jason murmured.

"I could be a stay-at-home mom."

"You need kids for that."

"I know."

"I'm not sure this is a good time to start talking kids," Jason said. "What with the economy and all."

"Why? You said your job is fine. You've been working all those extra hours."

"Yeah, I mean it seems fine, but what about when things pick up and people start paying their bills again?" He suspected there'd always be deadbeats biting off oversized hunks and banks only too happy to abet them, but that was neither here nor there. "I just think it's something we need to give some more thought to, that's all."



Everything had been ordained: ten revivifying, revitalizing days in the Caribbean. Jason and Miranda had requested the leave, booked the Jamaican resort, reserved the airline tickets, planned and re-planned the itinerary down to the make and model of wine they would order on their first night away. Miranda bought a bikini online and subscribed to a swimsuit-ready-in-six-weeks workout regimen, along with a series of tanning sessions. Once a week they attended their scuba certification course at the local high school pool. For Jason it became something of a sickness, the scuba diving and the thinking about scuba.

Chlorinated to nearly corrosive levels in that windowless hothouse of kickboards and swim fins, it was the same pool where years ago they passed innumerable hours of PE classes in unflattering school-issued suits. Jason felt

comforted by the place. He liked swim days back in school, being in the pool and playing water basketball and dunking classmates and cannonballing into unsuspecting crowds. He particularly enjoyed watching the girls emerge from their locker room, synchronous and duck-like, how they surfaced from their dives, pulling the hair from their faces, eyes bright, suits slick, legs pale and amorphous under the surface of the water.

Miranda had been one of those who hated gym class, who kept a special heaping of contempt in reserve for swim days and who angled fiercely for doctor's notes regarding recurring ear infections or her period, notes both genuine and forged that might keep her sitting dry and distracted on the sidelines.

Jason was lulled by the scuba diving, the downward slide to the floor of the pool, the measuring of breaths. His daily stresses—the sounds of so many invectives hurled his way, the men who had to be restrained or threatened with violence as their expensive toys were taken from them—dissipated, floating harmlessly to the surface, and he closed his eyes, picturing Jamaica. A blinding white beach, attendants delivering rum drinks in fishbowl-sized glasses, rolling green hills in the background. No sounds but his regulator and, distantly, steel drums. Maybe there was something embryonic about these interludes in the matronly belly of the pool, something Freudian, though the point was not to overthink such things.

There were seven of them in the class, two other couples (both boring) and a middle-aged giantess named Edwina who loomed over everyone, moist-eyed, full of off-color jokes and snide comments that Jason found endearing. In the water Edwina's awkwardness melted away and she became a silent, elegant version of herself, a penguin scampering comically along until it slides from the ice shelf into the sea.

Miranda had been having trouble since the start of the course. Maybe memories of gym classes from years past had calcified into some psychic Bermuda Triangle that messed with her inner compass. She would never be able to succeed in this landscape. At first Jason had been understanding but eventually he'd grown embarrassed and, like the others in the class, irritated. They had only the one teacher, Suzanne, and when she was forced to lead Miranda again through the basics—checking her equipment, clearing her mask and demand valve—everyone suffered.

Edwina, goofing while they waited this morning, found a way to send bubbles shooting up behind her. "Oh," she said, mock-surprised, "I guess I better steer

clear of those breakfast burritos.” Jason laughed, and the others—Miranda included—shot them sour looks. Still, Jason was grateful to Edwina for deflecting attention from Miranda’s deficiencies. It seemed the humane thing to do, the way parents will distract a child to keep him from pointing out a stranger’s deformity.

They practiced diving for weighted rings, then class was over and Jason was back in the car with Miranda, their hair still wet from the shower, skin smelling faintly of chlorine. The weekend stretched terrifyingly before them. The laundry was done, the dishes dried, the yardwork performed by an El Salvadoran hired by the association. It was too hot for a bike ride, too risky to rely on network TV. Miranda would want to go garage sailing from one junk-strewn yard to the next, a bird bringing back odds and ends to line the nest.



It was a plain piece of blue-lined notebook paper with a single phone number written on it, but as Jason fingered the note in his pocket he felt his mouth go dry and his heart announce itself in his chest. He’d been carrying around the scrap of paper for weeks now but had only recently summoned the courage to use it. He bypassed the cafeteria, the other employees eating lunch, following instead the path of the brook to the far edge of the Repo Depot campus. A wrought iron bench overlooked the sluggish beginnings of the water source, and beyond that some razor-wired chain link divided Repo Depot from the wider world. Here Jason found himself sufficiently secluded. He took out his cell phone, dialed the number on the slip, waited. He had just a few questions and didn’t feel he was committing himself to much. A trio of tones startled him, then a somnolent female came on the line to inform him he no longer had service. He hung up and tried the number again, with the same result. No service. The message ran its course, then the woman switched to Spanish. *No servicio.*



Jason knew, making the morning commute, that things might go badly. Already a haze hung over the softball fields to the south and the gravel pit and grassy airstrip to the north. In the boggy regions along the river you could practically see the mosquitoes aligned, low silvery arcs of them hovering over the water. Hot weather made people irritable, especially when they happened

onto repo guys sliding a stinger under their vehicles, especially on the eve of Independence Day. Technically the cars and trucks were the bank's, but training had taught the repo guys not to argue semantics with mohawked ex-linebackers sporting razor wire bicep tattoos. Verify the VINs, pick the locks, get the vehicles hooked up, do whatever it takes, but without any idle chitchat.

As Jason entered the building he nodded at a couple of new hires who'd previously done some strong-arming in Iraq for a private firm before being disinvited from the country. They were still sporting cammies and boots as though lounging in the green zone instead of the lower level snack alcove. Repo work wasn't about muscle, it was about stealth, wiles, quick wits. Jason was average-sized, with minimal self-defense or martial arts training, yet his recovery ratios were good and his incident reports were few. It bothered him that management was hiring more and more of these goons who were bound to fly off the handle and do something stupid. The whole point was to avoid confrontation. Once there was a breach of the peace, you couldn't legally snag the vehicle anyway. Jason checked the assignment board in his boss's office and saw he was paired up with Stankowitz. Speaking of flying off the handle.

He found Stank at one of the computer kiosks the repo guys shared, doing some two-fingered pecking on his keyboard. "You ready to head out? I got our first assignment," Jason said, holding up the day's itinerary.

"Give me a minute," Stankowitz said, cro magnon brow furrowed, "I've got to finish this."

Jason went out and sat leaning against the side of the building in a spot where a sycamore lent some shade. He tried his cell phone again to no avail, so he went back inside and happened to catch Wrigley coming out of HR.

"Wrigley," he said, "can I borrow your cell phone?"

"Sure," Wrigley said, tossing him the phone, "but don't mess with my settings. And don't look at my call history."

"I won't."

"Or my address book."

"Fine," Jason said, retreating. He reminded himself that he was merely calling for a consultation, to talk things over. It committed him to nothing.

Afterward Jason returned the phone to Wrigley, then he set out with Stankowitz to do some good works on behalf of the Repo Depot company. Unfortunately he was right in his predictions about the day. Right away Stankowitz

got into it with a guy whose Harley they were circling. Sure, the guy had been drinking, he had some illegal fireworks in his possession, he had called Jason and Stankowitz a couple of cum-guzzling butt-humpers and had aimed a few bottle rockets at them as they loaded up the bike, yet Jason had considered the situation practically resolved—the guy was staying primarily in his rusty swing-set- and dandelion-littered yard—when Stankowitz walked up and leveled him. One punch. It shot forward from Stankowitz like something spring-loaded, knocking the guy flat. This was expressly forbidden by Repo Depot policy, as it would undoubtedly end up in the courts, and it pissed Jason off personally because he'd get subpoenaed and would be forced to admit that apart from some verbal harassment, nothing atypical to the job, Stankowitz had been unprovoked.

“What were you thinking?” Jason asked on the way back to the Depot.

“I wasn't, really,” Stankowitz said, shrugging. “I just lost it when he called us a couple of homos. Even if I were a homo, which I think you know I'm not, considering the fact I've got five kids, but even if I was I would take serious offense at the nature of his comments. I mean, those were majorly derogatory. And I don't need to take that from some dirtbag, not just on a work level but on a fundamental human level. That guy was trying to fuck with my sense of self-worth, and I will not have it fucked with.”

Jason had meant to deliver a bitter little bromide on professionalism, but Stankowitz's response had been surprising—stirring, even—so Jason merely turned up the ZZ Top and they drove on in silence.



This year they were skipping Jason's mother-in-law's annual Fourth of July picnic: no charred burgers, no drunken croquet contests, no sparklers or beestings or Jell-O salad. Miranda had charitably agreed to a matinee instead. “My cell phone's not working,” Jason mentioned as they sat in the darkened theater, waiting for the previews to start.

“I was meaning to talk to you about that,” Miranda said. She had painted her nails the magenta of a bullfighter's capote. “I sort of cancelled the service.”

“You're kidding. First the cable and now this?”

“I'm sorry, I'm just really worried about getting laid off.”

“Why can't we talk these things over? What if someone had been trying to get ahold of me?” Jason tried keeping his voice low while simultaneously exuding

waves of psychic irritation, though he wasn't quite sure how to do this. It was a trick he was developing for work.

"Like who? You don't even use your phone. What are you getting so uptight about?"

"You're cancelling everything! I'm surprised you even agreed to this movie. Stop obsessing over your job."

"It's not just my job," Miranda said, "it's yours too. Have you ever considered how dangerous your work is? And when we have kids we're going to have to make sacrifices, so we may as well start getting used to it."

"Did you cancel your cell phone? Because I thought I saw you use it on the way here."

They stared at the screen, on which still images were flashing—movie trivia, ads for Coke and, alas, a cell phone provider. Jason and Miranda sat very still, unspeaking, as though their argument had moved out of sight, burning now in the walls and rafters. "I use my phone more than you do," Miranda finally said.

"But it's my phone."

"Fine," Miranda said, turning toward him, "if you're not willing to make sacrifices then start up your service again. Do whatever you want."

Jason opened his mouth to respond, but at that moment the speakers erupted with sound, the first of the previews, and he was released from the obligation of a reply.



Then again, maybe Miranda was onto something. At her company, that second full week of July, the board elected to freeze merit increases, increase health insurance co-pays, decrease the corporate 401(k) match, cancel company outings and the annual Christmas party, place a moratorium on employee holiday gifts, pawn the corporate jet and fleet cars, let go the fleet services personnel and pilots, lay off the fitness instructors, terminate the contract labor, reduce the hours of the wellness center, dispense with freshly-laundered towels in the locker rooms, surrender the company box seats at the minor league ballpark, and increase entree prices in the cafeteria.

At the Repo Depot, one of the new guys had been knifed over a Mazda RX8 by a financial planner who was supposed to be at work but had just been let go by her firm. Jason was reluctant to tell Miranda, as he knew it would lead

to heightened fears, which in turn would lead to more dinners of hot dogs and mac & cheese and further cost-cutting measures.



Their usual lunchtime table was emptier, quieter now that Stankowitz was on admin leave. Jason had given a description to Legal of the events as he witnessed them and had received a gag order in return. That didn't keep the other repo guys from grilling him about it.

"So Stankowitz just hauled off and hit the guy for no reason?" Wrigley asked. "You'd think he'd know after all this time to just stay in the truck."

Jason shrugged.

"I heard the dude insulted his mother," said Monson. "That really gets him fired up."

"It's sad," Wrigley said. "What's he going to do when he gets shitcanned? His wife's a stay-at-home mom and one of their kids is retarded or something and needs special care."

"All I can say is I think we're going to start seeing more of this kind of thing. Stankowitz was a hothead, so it was bound to happen, but these new guys they're hiring, these military types—they're trained to be aggressive, to use force at the slightest provocation. I didn't think that was the kind of image our company was trying to promote," Jason said. He began sifting through his lunch as though it were crash site wreckage, with the same gut feeling of alarm and despair. Carrot sticks, yogurt, pudding, sandwich, everything apportioned into little baggies or cups. Miranda had begun packing a lunch for him to save cash, and already he was bored to tears by the monotony of it. "You guys ever have any doubts about what we're doing here?" he asked.

"We're having lunch," said Monson.

"No, I mean like the value of our jobs."

"Sure, everybody thinks about stuff like that," Wrigley said. "You figure out you're not going to be an astronaut or ballplayer or whatever, then your dreams die a little. But we're doing okay. We're providing a service. No point getting philosophical about it."

"A service? But who's benefiting?" Jason asked.

"As long as we get paid, everything's on the up-and-up, and the company seems to be doing okay, what's it matter?" Monson said. "I don't know if you've

looked around lately, but times are tough. My brother-in-law got laid off by Pioneer, and now he can't even get on part-time at K-Mart."

"Maybe I'll move to the Florida Keys and take up scuba diving."

Monson snorted. "How long have you been diving?"

Jason shrugged. "A month."

"A month?" Wrigley said. "Are you even certified?"

"I was joking," Jason said, opening a new Ziplock and rummaging among the desiccated grapes.

"You'd get bored anyway," Monson said. "You'd get tired of spending all your time in the water. You'd have to be an instructor, or one of those guys the police call in to look for drowning victims. Like anyone would want to do that."

"Being an instructor would be all right," Jason said.

"Babysitting sunburned tourists all day?" Wrigley said. "No thanks."

"Maybe I could be an underwater photographer," Jason argued.

"You need artistic talent for that," Monson said.

"So what's your dream job then?" Jason asked.

"You're looking at it," said Monson, spreading his arms wide.

"Come on. A repo man? Seriously?"

"My dad always told me the honorable thing in life was to hold a job and provide for your family, simple as that."

"But don't you feel like we're kind of taking from the little guy and giving back to the big guy? It's like we're Robin Hood, only the opposite of Robin Hood, Bizarro Robin Hood. We're bank henchmen." Jason pondered for a moment. "I'm having ethical qualms."

"Ethics is a class you take in college," Wrigley said, "and since Monson and me didn't go to college, we don't worry too much about it."



Jason had done plenty of time in waiting rooms and exam rooms, an occupational hazard, but had never before been in a doctor's honest-to-god office, the place that contained the framed diplomas and filing cabinets and sturdy desk, the industrial-strength telephone with its various red and green blinking nodules. The art on the walls appeared uninspired, hotel-like, making the doctor seem fraudulent, an imposter. His forehead was in ascension, his hair in retreat. He had on a pair of glasses with flimsy, nearly transparent frames, a blue

Oxford shirt, jeans, and tennis shoes—no lab coat, no stethoscope. The doctor's mustache slid up and down his face as he spoke. Jason personally distrusted mustaches. All the big dictators wore mustaches.

"This is a low-risk operation?" Jason said.

"Extremely low-risk. Routine. I've got two scheduled this afternoon, actually, outpatient procedures. Easier than having a tooth pulled."

"Except when people get their teeth pulled they can still have kids," Jason pointed out.

"Generally speaking, yes," said the doctor. The phone, with its pulsating lights, began to trouble Jason—maybe people calling regarding botched surgeries, ignored by the doctor as he set about lining up more patients, a slipshod assembly line of misplaced snips and knots. "Listen," the physician continued, "this is a big decision, so I want you to be sure about it. It's nothing to rush into. But if worse came to worst, we could always reverse it, like untying a shoelace."

"But it won't come untied on its own?"

"Generally speaking, no."

The doctor kept speaking generally when Jason wanted specifics. Up on a high, dusty shelf was a photo of the man posing with his glimmering progeny. The decision of whether or not to have kids had probably never even occurred to him. Undoubtedly he had a nanny and whatever resources he needed at his disposal and was making a hell of a lot more per vasectomy than the hundred bucks Jason earned per repo job.



This was one of those summer evenings before all the little deaths occurred when it was possible to forget that winter existed, that it would ever return. Jason and Miranda were sitting out on the balcony, feet up on the railing. People milled down below with dogs and babies, on errands they'd invented for themselves. Miranda was reading something about Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation while Jason inched his way through an icy beer.

He found that if he looked sidelong at Miranda, quick glances, she appeared a decade younger, the way she looked when they first met. Cut-offs and a bikini top. An ankle bracelet. Cleavage in abundant evidence, blazing forth. Her skin was a freckly bronzed color, her hair lightened by the sun to a honeyed brown.

Beads of sweat aligned themselves along the creases of her midriff. "I can't wait for our trip," Jason said.

"Mmm," said Miranda.

Men were staking a tent on the side lawn of the megachurch. It was a massive structure, a mega-tent, for Bible school or a modern-day revival or a pig roast, and the workers seemed baffled by the multitude of canvas. "Aren't you getting excited?" Jason asked.

Miranda closed her book and rose. Her legs looked good, though Jason thought he could make out the beginnings of a spider vein high up on the back of her thigh. He tipped his can, letting the liquid fill his mouth. The cold beer grated on a rear molar that had been giving him grief. Jason followed his wife inside, a finger thrust into his mouth, exploring the tender area. He found her on the living room couch, draped in a formless sweatshirt. "I don't think I'm going to class on Saturday," she said.

"You have to," Jason said, "you're my dive buddy."

"Edwina can be your dive buddy."

"But you have to attend every class to get your C-card."

"Look, Jason, I'm not really cut out for diving."

"What are we going to do when we get to Jamaica?" Their trip was less than six months away, and sometimes the thought of it was what kept Jason going. He knew the dangers in that. At a certain point everything became anticlimactic. There were bound to be flight delays, soggy meals and sullen service in airport eateries, sweaty baggage-bedecked rushes through the concourse, but for now, for Jason, the trip retained about it a gilded aura, like one of those Virgin Mary paintings by Fra Angelico.

"Honey, I want to talk this over rationally," Miranda said.

"That sounds ominous."

"I was going over the costs of the trip, all that money we're paying for airfare, hotel, meals, scuba diving..."

"You're not diving."

"No, but you are. Or were planning to, anyway. And when you add everything up, it's a fortune. Just think how far that money would go toward other stuff."

"What other stuff?"

“Life insurance, a will, a lock box at the bank.” She began counting things off on her fingers. “A shredder. Identity theft is a real problem right now. And what about diapers, formula, baby clothes? Those things are going to cost a fortune.”

“Nothing’s been decided about that,” Jason muttered.

“Yeah, well, I’ve decided we can’t afford the trip right now.”

“What?” Anger swarmed in Jason, jangling his muscles, clouding his vision. “Stop fucking cancelling everything,” he said.

“It’s time to grow up here, Jason. As bad as things are, people losing their jobs, their houses, we can’t be goofing around, going on vacations. It’s not even ethical.”

Ethics. Apparently Miranda had gone to college too. The funny thing was that Jason hadn’t taken ethics in college. He’d taken volleyball and Eighteenth Century Religions. “One trip in ten years. One trip. Singular.” Jason’s impulse was to storm out of the townhouse, to slam the door and flee as he’d seen done in the movies, but there wasn’t anyplace worth storming to, and besides, he refused to be forced from his own house—not to mention that when he returned Miranda would be entrenched, making it that much harder to re-establish position. So Jason fell back to the computer room, waiting until Miranda was asleep before climbing in next to her, careful not to let even a solitary toenail brush her skin.



“Where’s Wrigley?” Jason asked, sitting down to his sack lunch in the cafeteria. He was still seething about the vetoed trip and needed someone with whom to commiserate, but Monson wasn’t really an option.

“You’re kidding,” Monson said. “You haven’t heard?”

“Heard what?”

“Wrigley quit. The thing with Stankowitz, then the new guy getting stabbed, it spooked him.”

“What’s he going to do?”

“He’s heading back to school.”

“What’s he studying?”

“Arc welding?” Monson seemed unsure. “Can you study that in college?”
“It might be more like a trade school.”

“A trade school, that’s right.”

Stankowitz’s assault and the knifing of the rookie, those hadn’t spooked Jason, who’d seen them as eventualities. It was this new development with Wrigley that truly caught him off guard. He considered Wrigley a good friend—they had played video games at his apartment and had watched a few Pay-Per-View wrestling matches together—but Wrigley had mentioned nothing about a career change, even after Jason had expressed some doubts of his own about their profession. Then again, Jason figured everyone was entitled to a secret or two. After all, he hadn’t been exactly forthcoming about his urologist appointment—he hadn’t even told Miranda about it yet. Though he’d never taken ethics in college, Jason was pretty sure that was a no-no.



Jason did not particularly enjoy driving to scuba class by himself. Things felt altered, upended. This final class was to be held at the reservoir, out in nature—no comforting crystalline pool, no Miranda nearby, and no Wrigley or Stankowitz at work come Monday, just a new crop of repo guys that made Jason feel like a relic. There were some boats on the water already this morning, sailboats and runabouts pulling skiers. The other two couples in the class were changing into their wetsuits on the little strip of trucked-in sand that passed for a beach.

Edwina arrived. “Where’s your wife?” she asked as they changed.

Jason felt the others watching. “She has the flu,” he said. His classmates were relieved; he was sure he could read it on their faces.

Only Edwina seemed sympathetic. “That’s too bad,” she said. “I bet she’ll be able to make this up later though.”

Jason nodded. With Miranda absent, he was paired with Edwina, and they helped each other with their cylinders, their BCs, their fins. Aside from the divers, the beach was empty, the sand still cool from the previous night. Jason pulled his mask over his eyes and the sunlight became less vivid, the boats seeming farther away, buzzing flecks.

The divers walked into the water. All around were the plain mud walls of the reservoir, scooped to a mild concavity by last spring’s floods. Above the flood line the foliage was tangled and vibrantly green. With each step, the divers moved slightly deeper into the man-made basin—sixty feet at its maximum depth,

yet to Jason it gave the illusion of being fathomless. In the distance he saw the dam, the riprap of faded stones, cars drifting across, then he was submerged.

The water was clearer than he had imagined, the other divers more distinct. The class convened there for some brush-ups, some preliminary drills, then they were led a little farther toward the reservoir's center. Beneath them the lake bed turned splotchy with pebbles and soil but also some mossy kind of vegetation, tufted and thatched. Their breathing bubbles rose and vanished. Little fish began to appear, unafraid of the divers, nearly curious about them. Jason kept looking into the distance. The scene around him was clear, though a bottle-green sort of clarity that at its outer edges contained darkness. The darkness was what compelled Jason, as though he were being yanked along by it, a leashed animal. He wanted to climb inside it. There'd been a fair amount of discussion during their classes about discipline and not freaking out. Jason felt that he was calm, that his thoughts were orderly, yet he couldn't focus on his instructor's signals. They seemed like some kind of bird-language, insufficient, at odds with this place.

And then he was swimming away. There was no other way to put it; he had simply turned and begun to swim toward the center of the lake, wild fluttering downward strokes. The light from the surface dimmed and there was that alluring darkness ahead, always ahead. Jason wanted only to know what it felt like, that aloneness, if only for a few moments. Something gripped his ankle, and that's when he began to panic, to thrash violently, but it would not relent, some terrible creature, some fishing implement, his own undone mind clamping down. Then he turned and saw it was Edwina. She had outswum him and caught him and was holding on. Jason shook his head, again kicking his legs. Behind her, some yards away, were the other divers looking toward him. Edwina held on as though it were her mission in life, her face closed-off and clenched with the effort. Why had she come to retrieve him? Why, when it was so clearly his own choosing, why couldn't she just let him go?