

The Sun from Under Water

by Stephen Stark

For most of the two weeks after she killed Wayne Townsend, Ellen Gregory holed up in Marty, her manager's, pool house, a architectural dreamscape of glass and steel with views of the garden and pool, a full bath for each of its two spacious bedrooms, a fully equipped and stocked high-end kitchen with stone counters and a restaurant grade cooktop, and a fully equipped gym with a studio quality sound and video system.

(It was always nice to see what people could buy with the money they made off you.)

Two burly bodyguards accompanied her everywhere. They wore lightweight, expensive, form-fitting, un-constructed Hollywood suits that showed off their muscles and concealed their armaments. They both had body builders' asses, and she suspected they were wearing thongs, or no underwear at all, because you did not get that kind of gluteal definition in boxers. They drove her to the studio in a black limo and limited their conversation to greetings. Good morning, Miss Gregory. Goodbye, Miss Gregory. They drove her slightly nuts. The time when she had needed them had passed, and yet it was difficult not to want to seal yourself in a hardened cocoon

She swam laps. She ran on the treadmill. She talked on the phone with Patti and Felicity, both of whom were sympathetic, but just didn't get it. She talked to Dave, and he got it. But then he had had his own psycho stalker. She talked to Robin, and he got it. Maybe you had to be out there, in the public eye.

She talked on the phone with Dr. Ling, her therapist (he was a PhD not an MD).

She had several lunches with Marty's wife, a slender, quiet, blond woman who, despite Ellen's long relationship with Marty, she barely

knew. Patti said she was an Ellen stand-in, but that didn't really do her justice.

She ran on the treadmill and watched old movies while she trotted in place, sweating and sweating. She swam more laps.

There was a thing she liked to do in the pool—after running and sweating—and that was to exhale as much air as she could stand, then hold her nose and sink to the bottom and just look up at the surface of the water, the way the sun hit it, the way the liquid moved, and more than once Marty's wife had jumped in, thinking she had drowned or was trying to drown herself.

No.

It wasn't that the thought hadn't crossed her mind. It was an oddity of the human condition, she supposed, that when someone tried to kill you, invaded your home hellbent on stoving in your skull with a baseball bat, and but instead, you killed them—in a spasm of pure in-the-moment adrenaline-fueled animal survival—that the memory of the moment was somehow more real, and more fraught with terror than the moment itself. And that the only immediate antidote to that terror was exactly the antithesis of the whole survival thing.

She could not get out of her head the jaunty look on his ghastly pale face as he handled the baseball bat. Was he going to beat her with it? Oh, Jesus, that had to hurt. (She laughed.) No, seriously, getting beat to death with a baseball bat has got to hurt like a motherfucker.

In the pool, under the surface of the water, was the most peaceful place she could find, and learning to hold your breath for long periods of time was an old singer's trick, a way of building up your breathing. She had learned it a long time ago, back in New York, and it was one of the reasons she could do long, breathless monologues. But so she didn't freak out Marty's wife too much, she modified it and made sure she kept moving all the time she was underwater, even though what she wanted to do was hold completely still.

She slept little, and after sobbing for extended periods of time, sat in the mornings in Marty's garden, sipping coffee and listening to the sprinklers doing their pfffft-chocka-chocka-chocka thing. In the garden, she was the picture of self-contained peaceful Zen perfection.

Workmen were at her house, patching the walls and erasing all traces of Townsend. Her home was not her home, now, she told Dr. Ling, who was the only person who seemed to have any idea of how her soul had been torn from her and crumpled and ground up.

The police were trying (insofar as the police actually tried to do anything) to find out how the slippery Townsend had slipped away from them, where he was staying, where he learned to pick locks. (According to what should read on the Internet, locks just provided the illusion of security. An intermediate barrier. A third grader with a little prepping could pick the toughest lock.) And they and she—and the rest of TV-viewing America, for that matter, were trying to figure out why it was that Townsend had chosen this bizarre way of doing what he did—almost as though he knew she would shoot him. He could have come at any time. He could have come in the middle of the night. It didn't have to be so theatrical.

But Townsend was a short book, no footnotes. No study guide. There were only his letters, which the police had.

She had a dogging, endless feeling of loss, anxiety, a thing close to panic. Dr. Ling said it was a perfectly reasonable grief reaction, a perfectly normal train of thought for a victim to have—how could I have stopped it?—when of course, it was not your doing. It's one of those existential, human dilemmas, he said. The coming to terms with not being able to control what you have no power over.

It all made her want to scream. That something so irrational could just rear its ugly head and take control of your life. No one seemed to get just how violated she felt. No one seemed to get that it could happen to them, some irrational idiotic thing that could suddenly transform and mutilate your narrative.

There were moments when she was fine, just fine, and then there were others when whole blocks of that alternate reality swam up out

of her subconscious and suddenly she was back in her guest bedroom closet, balled up and trying to get her hands around the gun. She could hear him on the stairs, see the baseball bat come through the wall, the explosion of gypsum powder and dust, could see every minute particle of it; she could taste it in her mouth. She could feel the sensation of his hand, pulling her through the broken wall.

(But that wasn't it entirely. For a year or more, she had been having weird, sort of nervous out-of-body experiences. She had been having the sense that her soul had somehow slipped from her body, and the Ellen who was on TV had more of a soul than then the quote unquote real Ellen ever did.)

The weird thing was that her flashback moments were perhaps more real and more horrifying than the original moment had been. Like if you had them on the Avid and could scroll through each in minute detail.

This was not something you could explain, the complete helplessness. It was the kind of thing that made you think about the whole tenuous chain of trust that made up life. Get on an airplane, entrust your life to people whom you've never met. Rent a car from people you've never seen before and will never see again. How utterly dislocating it was that a person would systematically break down that chain just to exploit it.

She thought of all the parties she'd been to, the places where someone could have stabbed her, shot her; she thought of all the places where the hand of fate could have dragged her—and had perhaps dragged her already (with her volition?) into this particular life, pulling her into the life that (now) seemed surely to lead to her death.

To which Dr. Ling said, Of course. Where else does life, stripped of everything else, lead?

It was as if the moon had suddenly decided to crash into the earth—and what could you do about it?

Exactly nothing.

One nameless LA evening, while they were having drinks—Marty, his wife, Ellen—Marty said, Why don't you go to New York for a few days? I have a client who's in LA for a few months and his apartment's available. It's in the eighties, on the Upper West Side. Off Broadway. Pre-war.

Which war?, Ellen said, or choked. She looked at him. She had just taken a sip of her chardonnay when he said it, and she held the glass in front of her mouth, the idea sinking in and leaving her mouth dry and her heart doing some insane Aunt Jemima flip-job.

She had left New York almost the way she had left Iowa—a sudden departure that was never supposed to be permanent, but which had over time become something like that. She saw herself on Broadway, shop windows going past. She saw herself getting on the subway and rattling down to the Village. She saw herself maybe trying to get a little work at one of the clubs she had abandoned for television.

I could talk to a booker—maybe you could do Dave. Talk about the incident.

She shook her head. I don't want to talk about the incident. Jayson had all sorts of shit lined up and I won't do it.

Then just get away.

Are you trying to get rid of me?

Ellen, sweetheart—Marty did a really bad Humphrey Bogart—I'm not trying to get rid of you. I just hate to see you—you know.

I'm sorry, she said. It's just....

I could get you a plane. Private. Just go and chill.

She took the suggestion under consideration and the conversation went onto something else.

When could I go?, she said later.

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The plane out of LAX was a like a limo with wings. Leather interior, a really good wet bar, an unlimited jukebox, movies, surround sound—the only thing it seemed to lack was a sunroof, but that shortcoming was made up by the fact that you could actually stand up and dance, if you wanted.

The plane was some sort of aeronautical timeshare. A young actor called Adrian or Adam Ellen had never heard of—it was his plane. Or his share. He'd had got some early success and had blown through so much money he could have fed a couple of third world nations for a couple of years.

Ellen had never done that—the new Hollywood money thing. Sure, she had spent her share, but she had done without for so long, and had her parents' penny-pinching Midwestern caution so ingrained in her that even buying her house—for which she'd paid cash—seemed like the apex of frivolity. At restaurants, she still felt nervous, after all this, that her credit card was going to be declined.

By the time it landed at LaGuardia—warm, a glorious spring Manhattan day—she was drunk on some really good scotch. How pathetic was it to be drinking alone like this?

It wasn't until she got up to get off the plane that she realized just how profoundly hammered she was. She was giggling, calling the pilot Glen, roaring, Glen. Glen Fiddich or is it Morangie. I'd know ye anywhere, ye auld sod, ye!!, doing Robin Williams doing a Scot.

Glen! Then, Please return your body to the upright position.

How hammered she was was that she almost forgot to wait for her bag. And she knew that this was going to end badly because every time Ellen Gregory had got hammered, it ended badly.

It wasn't that she was a teetotaler. She drank. She enjoyed a glass of wine with dinner, sometimes before. Sometimes a little more. But serious, concentrated amounts of ethanol did not go well with Ellen's tightly controlled personality. Anything stronger than sherry and she behaved like a teenager after her first beer. Her tightly controlled exterior came unbuckled from her brain, and that ever-useful tool, that calculating, scheming, razor sharp, exquisitely well-timed brain became something of a time bomb. But not in the usual comic, I-can't-believe-the-shit-this-chick-is-saying Ellen Gregory sense. But in the way more usual, What-is-wrong-with-that-bitch? sense. The tightly-lidded jar of loneliness she kept locked away in her head got smashed when she got smashed. The kind of stupid,

where-is-my-underwear monkeyshines that landed you on the front page of tabloids—*Ellen Gregory Out of Control!*

The pilot helped her into the terminal, and found the limo driver instantly. He, the limo driver, greeted her warmly—he was a big fan. Ellen was so horny right at that moment—after everything, everything, and then with a nice tumbler or three of scotch in her otherwise empty belly, she might just have jumped the driver had he been even the slightest bit attractive. But he was not, not even in the slightest bit. She waved at the pilot. Bye, Glen. Glued knowing you. She should have jumped him, Glen, the pilot.

For one thing, the limo driver was old—which she pointed out to him with an outstretched finger, Hey, you're old,—and he had a nose that looked like it was made from little bits of partly dried and packed clay, and she started to point that out, too, except somehow the subject got changed and she was nearly knuckle-walking to the limo, following her bag as it swung from the driver's arm.

Driving through Queens and into Manhattan she was glad she was drunk.

Oh, God, she sighed, her breath sucking, as they came over the bridge, and she started to cry, and then they were in mid-town traffic and now she was sobbing as the car bounced through teeming intersections and horns honked and it was all the miracle of time travel—hopping into someone's timeshare jet and zinging across the planet from the palm trees of the coast to the damp deciduous East—and she almost got out except she was completely aware that she could not really walk.

She could see herself 10 years ago standing on some lonely corner, winter, people thronging past her, her dressed in her tutu, a fake rabbit fur jacket that made her look like a psycho hooker, her butt freezing as she handed out fliers, did jokes, Come see me at The X. Guys saying, Want to see my funny bone? And Ellen saying—too many rehearsals on this one—So you're guaranteeing me it'll make me laugh. In advance? And cackling.

So much of life was about loss. So much of hurtling forward in time was what you left behind, without even knowing.

Where was that kid? Who was that kid? How could anyone be so crazy and naïve and young to decide to dress in a black thong tutu with fishnet stockings with garters and shitkicker Timberlands?

The only place she did not feel that sense loss was on the never-ending present moment of the stage, her life's single little sanctuary. It had nothing and everything to do with the audience. It was something about lights. About heat. About that tight little contract between comic and audience—Come listen to me recreate a world that never existed but will always exist. A world that will hurt you with laughter.

The apartment building—the building in which the borrowed or soon-to-be-borrowed apartment was located—was between Broadway and West End, in the low eighties, brass and dark-wood lobby. A doorman with epaulets—brass and blue serge. A gorgeous prewar building that loomed and hunkered.

Hello, Doorman, she almost whooped, as if she knew him.

Hello, Miss Gregory, he said, as if he knew her. I have keys for you.

How did you know my name?

I know you.

No you don't, but you think you do. People always say that but they don't.

No. I saw you on TV.

See, that's a big difference, she said, and wiped some drool from her mouth as she did. Do you mind if I call you Serge?

Yes, Miss Gregory. Er, no, Miss Gregory.

You're not really a doorman, are you? You're really a lobby man. The door thing is just a front. This seemed hysterically funny at the moment and she laughed.

Miss Gregory is tired from her flight.

Yes, Miss Gregory is really tired, profoundly tired. She is so fucking tired. And she's going to go upstairs and find the bar and get way more tired.

Later, she would not remember what transpired in the lobby. The only thing she would remember—and this she would not be certain

of—was a compact man with beautiful eyes and beautiful teeth and a sparkling head shaved completely bald. A smile like 12,000 watts.

It's hard to tell how old he is—30, 40, 50? He simply is. Crossing from the elevator bank through the lobby hush and out the door. Who said 12,000 watts. That smile is at least 50,000. Maybe even a megawatt.

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And then she was alone. The apartment was one of those great pre-war jobs with high ceilings and spacious rooms and a fanfuckingtastic bar. Every kind of liquor you could possibly imagine. Gallons of it. Crystal decanters, glasses. A gorgeous sterling martini kit. The actor-client of Marty's was either the kind of guy who didn't drink and threw lots of parties, or drank and collected various flavors of ethanol with fetishistic fervor.

It was of course not just a bad idea, but a compounded bad idea, but she laid into the bar almost immediately. A pear-flavored eau de vie, which had the most amazing fruity yumminess. The first glass leapt right out of her hand and broke on the granite counter top before it even hit the floor.

The glasses in this place jump, she said to no one. The scent of pears was everywhere. Have to tell the doorman about that.

She struggled to find a broom, talking to herself and giggling. The apartment faced the street and had those great big windows that threw light into the whole room, and you could see the edge of a newer building, and just a little bit of Broadway, looking downtown. The place had clearly been interior-designed, because everything looked like a magazine spread, each room its own little world. The kitchen was a restaurant—but like most New York refrigerators, there was little more than champagne and butter and some odd condiments in the refrigerator. The living room was a cigar bar, with luscious leather couch and arm chairs, and pelts of one-time large, former, late, feline-type creatures. She had no idea if these were real.

She sang to herself: I'm just a girl who can't say no. I'm in a horrible fix. I always say come on, let's go, just when I ought to say nix. I look around and all I see is just a bunch of old dicks.

She giggled, and went back to the bar, and, after breaking another glass found another, and poured some more eau de vie. The pears. In one glass, you could smell bushels of pears. Fucking orchards. She would have to do something about all of that glass.

She found the remote control from the TV and turned it on. Bass fishing.

She sang some more: I feel pretty, oh so pretty, so pretty, witty...

And there she was on the screen. She sank down into one of the cigar chairs with her glass, and watched. It was a rerun from the first season of "Girlfriends," and she watched herself interact with Masters. They were arguing, and he was stroking his waxed chest, beneath his shirt.

It might have been now that all the humor drained out of the day. If there actually had been any. The lark that today had been now seemed deeply pathetic. Canned laughter canned the faux wackiness of the show perfectly.

It was only three years ago that it was shot—she was not yet 30, at the top of her game—and now here she was, crying, suddenly, a world away, with so much else gone.

She sipped the orchard and felt the heat of it burn through her lungs and belly, and wondered if, as the M* * *A* * *S * * *H song went, suicide was painless. She thought of the pistol, the 9, and how much easier it would have been to put the thing to her temple and pull the trigger.

I feel shitty, oh so shitty. I feel shitty and shitty and gray.

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By the time she found the broom, she had forgotten what she was looking for, broken at least two more glasses and the actual bottle of eau de vie. She had also managed to down a glass of scotch, which, once it was done, seemed like another really bad idea. And now there was broken glass, lots of it, a blossom of blood on her finger, which she watched with great fascination as it bloomed.

She thought of the man she had shot with the 9. She thought of how he had looked, the failure of blood. Just holes in his jacket.

The first thing that came to mind was a Johnny Cash song. Which made you want to laugh even while you wanted to sob.

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There was blood and liquor on her shirt, so she took it off and put it on the counter, and then, in her bra and slacks, tried to get all the glass into the trash.

The broom and dustpan were designer reproductions of the old tin and wood and cornstalk originals. The trash bag was a plastic bag from D'Agostino's, filling with little translucent razors, the fragrance of some long ago pear orchard.

When it seemed to be mostly done, she staggered into the hallway, heading for the garbage chute, and there was that Kojak fellow, lighting up the corridor like the explosion of a strobe, himself carrying a bag of garbage.

Oh, hello, he said, as though the world were not fraught with the eroticism of grief.

She tried—valiantly, but, it might be said, vainly—to straighten up, in her state of near alcohol-poisoning, knuckle-walking was really the only thing she was capable of—unless, of course, she wanted the prickly carpet to leap up and attack.

Hello, gorgeous, she said, meaning it to sound equally facetious and horny. It was hard, though, to tell if it sounded either, as the words were slurred. He was kind enough to ignore it.

She held up her bag of garbage briefly, as if to say, Hey, whaddaya know, I'm throwing out garbage, too.

He held up his bag and said, Cheers.

He opened the door, and there was a little room with fluorescent light with a door in the wall. She followed him. Pressed a hand against his back and leaned into the room, but the leaning was more like swinging. She sang: I'm just a girl who can't say no.

He said: Let me help you with that. You're drunk.

Sir, she said, straightening as much as she could and trying to look at him sternly. My good man, she said. I am not drunk.

No?

What I am, sir, is hammered. Hammered like a fucking ten-penny nail.

You're hammered, then.

Indeed. One must..., she started, but then began to feel the building sway. She put her hand to her head. You gotta keep these things straight.

Can I help you?

He was leaning towards her, his eyes wide. He wasn't that much taller than she was, but he was bigger, way more solid than he looked from a distance. There was the tinkling of glass as it fell floor after floor. She swayed with the building right against the man.

Oh, dear, he said.

She had her arms around him now, her face pressed sideways into one carved pectoral muscle like it was her pillow and she'd been sleeping 12 hours.

She could see in rough focus the waist band of his khakis (no belt; no pleats; the fold and bulge of the zipper, and to the left of that, the other not-quite-bulge bulge), and, in the distance, white socks and loafers. Her hand came up without her volition and fluttered a moment, and, as she watched, detached, it fluttered, moth-like, to the flame of his fly.

This was the weird part, or at least the first weird part: There was some business-like, purposeful, and instant flight of his own hands. He now had (this all happened with such instant speed that it left her wondering, What the fuck just happened?) one hand on her head, his hand covering her right ear, his thumb against her temple, his fingers wrapped around her head (he had long fingers) and his fingertips were on the back of her neck; his other hand clamped her shoulder. Suddenly she was standing up straight and feeling way more sober than she had a fraction of a second before; her errant hand was at her side.

You need some sleep, he said. His words were not stern or admonishing. They were neutral: merely the detached field observation of a scientist.

He was still holding her in that peculiar way and she looked at him, his gleaming skull, his flashbulb-bright eyes and smile. This was a moment that seemed to extend, her gazing at him, and she felt some shimmer of recognition. Not recognition in the sense that she knew him, but recognition that—unlike most people she met—he had no motive whatsoever. He was here, this was happening, he was doing what he felt, from his perspective, needed to be done. And this was another weird part, the second weird part. Right at this moment, as he held her, she felt safer than she had felt in a long time. And it wasn't the liquor, either.

Who are you?, she said, the way a child might say the same thing if a genie popped up in her bedroom.

My name is Larry. (It didn't really answer the question, because who he was was a lot more than his name, or so it seemed to some dimly lit part of her mind. But it would have to do.)

She giggled. She couldn't help it. Larry, she said. Larry. What kind of name is Larry?

Diminutive for Lawrence, he said.

Of Arabia?, she said.

Illinois, he said.

This made her laugh. Lawrence of Illinois. Well, hello, Lawrence of Illinois.

And you are?

You don't know?

He raised his eyebrows, widened his gleaming eyes, shook his head. Sorry. Haven't had the pleasure.

The word pleasure did ugly things to her thoughts. He wore a loose, white t-shirt with James Dean style plain front khakis. Beneath the T-shirt, you could see exquisitely cut pectoral muscles. (Did we mention the pecs?) He was not an ostentatious body builder type, with ballooning, hypertrophic muscles. He was fit. His arms were solid.

Ellen, she said. She could see no trace of recognition in his eyes.

It was when he released his right arm from her shoulder and extended his hand to shake, saying, Hello, Ellen, that she realized

that she had come into the hallway wearing only her bra, which was the kind of bra you could pretty much see through. That is, if you were looking. Which he was not. Or not that she could tell.

He smiled when he noticed her noticing. And then he noticed her hand, which had started to bleed again.

You shouldn't play with broken glass, he said, smiling, and took up her hand in his—the other was still on her head and felt wonderfully warm and confident-making there—and flicked away blood and ran his thumb over the wound, evidently to check for the presence of broken glass. Then he pressed down on it.

Let's get you back to your apartment, he said, steering her into the hallway, still holding her head. He did not seem to move so much as flow—his feet moved, yes, his body moved, yes, but the way he moved was completely unified and liquid, cat-like and inevitable.

It's not my apartment, she said.

So you're breaking and entering?

She giggled as she did a sort of wobbly goose step towards the door.

My agent got it for me from one of his other clients.

Your agent, he said. What do you do?

She couldn't decide what to say in response. They were inside the apartment now and he surveyed the place. The television was still on, but muted now.

Nothing, lately, she said at last, suddenly confused and nauseated. I just take up space.

He smiled a completely neutral, gleaming smile. Let's get you bandaged. He left her on one of the chairs, the flat screen TV rehearsing images of soap and food and legal assistance. Without his hand on her head, the feeling of nausea built.

When he returned, he had found a first aid kit, and expertly bandaged her hand. She watched in admiration, hoping she wouldn't vomit on him. She looked up and her image had come back on the TV. For whatever reason, she didn't much want him to see it, but there was no sign of the remote control.

He brought her her blouse. She did not put it on, but pulled herself to her feet and put both of her arms over his shoulders and draped herself against him. God, he felt good. Solid and real and really male. He took her arms in his hands and held them gently, one in each hand, below the elbows.

You're very sweet, he said.

And you're very sexy.

You're wobbling, he said.

I am. Do that thing you did with your hand.

Have you eaten anything recently?

Why?

I believe if I lit a match and had you breathe on it, your breath might catch fire.

It was the longest thing he had yet said to her, and it was humiliating.

No. I didn't, I haven't. Eaten. Lately. When she looked up at him, everything was swimming.

I think I'm going to be sick, she said. Maybe she was crying now. She wasn't sure. And I can't remember where the bathroom is. Yes, she was crying. She was wailing like an eight-year-old.

Larry guided her, but they didn't make it far before she buckled and erupted.

She'd never understood how people could be bulimic. Vomiting was about the worst sensation that she could imagine. A total loss of control. There was puke on her, all over her, but it felt a little better.

He lifted her over the wretched puddle and swooped her into the bathroom, lifted the lid of the toilet, and expertly held her hair for her. He was crouched, one hand in her hair, one on her back.

Outside in the hallway, she had thought that seducing him was a fabulous idea. Now, though, she was scared. Scared of vomiting. Scared of him. It was hard not to be scared of everyone and everything, after Townsend.

Go ahead, he said, and as if on cue, she did.

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When at last she took her elbows off the toilet seat and pulled herself out of her crouch, he was gone. She wondered for a moment if she had just imagined him. She staggered to the sink and ran water from the tap and splashed it on her face, rinsed her mouth. Only after she had dried her face, the water still running, did she look at herself in the mirror. There was always the chasm-like disconnect between the drunk and the drunkenness. The drunk floated along on a feeling of gorgeous and blissful invincibility, oblivious of the appearance of his/her own drunkenness, while the drunkenness itself manifested on the face and bearing of the drunk the ugly visage of a truly ugly and demented evil twin.

There was vomit on her chin, despite the splashing. There was vomit on her bra and on her belly and on her pants. How the fuck did she get vomit in her hair?

Ellen turned off the water and closed her eyes and held the corners of the sink and the world spun. Where did he go? And then she heard the sound of the television in the next room. Her own voice. The cackle of canned laughter.

Oh, God. She had the sensation of standing on top of some precipitously high pile of events, emotional trauma, and it was all now crumbling, and she began to cry again. Even without Townsend, she would likely have hit this personal trough, though it may have been slower in coming. People looked at your 'success' and couldn't figure how being rich and beautiful and famous might make you want to jump off a very high place—if not literally, then at least figuratively. These were the same people who stood in the grocery line (like her mother) and picked up the Us or the People and shook their heads at just how fat your ass had got—and who on earth let you out of the house in that gawdawful bathing suit?

When she opened her eyes, the 12,000-watt man was standing at the doorway. Filling the doorway, and for a moment she looked at him, then at her bandaged hand, and wondered if this was how it was going to end, Psycho-style, in a beautiful black and white New York bathroom.

Feeling any better?, he said. Okay, not exactly a Norman Bates line.

She laughed, but the air moving through her nostrils smelled of bile; tears shook from her cheeks.

You muss thing I'm..., she started, but let it trail off. Her words were still slurred, but not so bad.

We need to get you cleaned up, he said. He said it as though he was a professional at getting people cleaned up.

Thass an unnerstaymen, she said.

Can you stand okay?

He was next to her now, holding her head the way he had before. When he did that, that thing with his hand on her head, it felt like some sort of Vulcan power grip: she almost instantly felt better.

How do you do that?, she said. That head thing?

Ancient Chinese wisdom, he said.

She let go of the counter. As long as you do that, she said, I can stand.

Then the tub. We don't want any injuries.

K, she said.

Why don't you get undressed?, he said, and said it not like a lover but like a doctor. She would remember that. Why don't you get undressed? Let me know if you need help.

It was weird how he could say this, do this, utterly absent any erotic overtones. None.

She unhooked her bra while he kept his hand on her head, then let it drop. She watched him: his eyes were averted. She unbuttoned her pants and pushed them off, panties and everything.

Socks, he said. Then, No, let me help.

There was vomit on her footie socks, and he knelt, one arm around her legs, one butt cheek sort of on his shoulder. He took her right foot and lifted it, peeled off the sock. When that foot was securely on the ground, he lifted the left and did the same thing. You're lucky you didn't cut your foot, he said.

I'm gennally a lucky persimmon, she said.

When she was completely and totally and completely naked, he helped her into the tub. It was an old classic claw foot job with brass fixtures, including a handheld shower attachment that looked kind of like a massive, ancient telephone receiver. The tub was cold. She said so, and shivered. But he had already begun fiddling with the water, and in a moment, he was holding the shower head and rinsing her own retch from her.

She wished she'd shaved.

She watched him in something like awe. He was a bath artist. He painted her with water. He started at her feet, worked his way up her legs, then across her belly and breasts, and up to her shoulders, rinsing, still no apparent erotic reaction from him. He made every contour of her emerge from the tub. For her part, however, she could not remember being more completely aroused. But she was also sort of ashamed for it.

Lift up a little, he said, and as she did, he rinsed the tub beneath her to clean it. When he was satisfied, he motioned that she should sit back down, and plugged the stopper into the tub and turned up the heat.

No one's ever given me a bath before, she said. I mean not since I was a baby, I think.

He just raised his eyebrows a little and maintained his businesslike approach. Do you have shampoo, soap?, he said. There was a cake of soap by the sink, but none around the tub.

In my bag, she said. I don't know where it is.

I'll find it, he said and got up to leave the room.

Hey, she said when he was almost through the door, and he turned. She wanted to see what his reaction would be if he just saw her like that, the water running, her naked body spread out in the tub, knees up, legs open.

He cocked his head as if to say, Yes?

What kind of guy are you?, she said after gazing at him for a few beats.

He shook his head quizzically as though not getting the question. What she wanted to say was, Aren't you turned on in the least?, and say it emphatically. But she couldn't.

When he left the room, she sank down into the water, which had got deep now, the way she liked to do in Marty's pool. She held her breath and held her nose and in the silence of the water she could hear metallic sounds, the sound of the building, the sound of her drunken head, the sound of her heartbeat.

All outside of her own head was a blur, and there was some subconscious notion that she should be exultant that she was merely alive.

When he came back, she only noticed because of the change in the light. Unlike Marty's wife—it was, frankly unconscionable that she did not know Marty's wife's name; refused, actually, to know it—unlike Marty's wife, he did not dive in to save her. When she rose up out of the water and took a gasping breath, he was standing there, beautiful head cocked to one side, slightly, and gazing at her in a way she was not sure that anyone had gazed at her before. He had her makeup/toiletries/etc. bag. The tub was steaming, and she felt completely strange. Completely strange because she was naked and drunk, in a completely unfamiliar apartment, with a beautiful man who seemed not uninterested, but disinterested, detached. Possibly even robotic, although in a very warm and human sort of way. And not only was he disinterested, he was a complete stranger whom she had just met in the hallway, if you could even call it a 'meeting.' She wanted to say something (like, The tub is big enough for two, for example, or, Please fuck me, for another example), but she had no idea at all what she could say. She had embarrassed herself enough in front of this man.

He turned on the shower head again and told her to sit up. She obeyed. He wet her hair, spraying and combing his fingers through it. She closed her eyes as he turned the water off and started to shampoo her. In even the most mad stupid expensive salon, she had never had a shampoo that was this completely perfect—and this had nothing to do with being drunk. It was as though he knew secret

things about her skull, where each of the nerves in her scalp was, and it hit her that maybe he was a hairdresser, that he was gay.

Are you gay?, she said.

No, he said.

A hairdresser?

He laughed.

Celibate?

No.

In a committed and caring relationship?

Not except that with my daughter.

Not...

She giggled when he splashed her in the face with soapy water.

I didn't say....

Don't get ugly.

Now she was baffled.

Did you have some sort of injury? Like that guy in the Hemingway book? Shrapnel in Nam?

If you mean something that would make me impotent, no.

Do you have AIDS or something?

No.

I don't get it.

He was rinsing her hair right now, and her head was hung forward, her hair covering her face, water racing.

Don't get what?

Her eyes were closed and a towel was wrapping her head. She reached up and grabbed it, wiped her eyes. She felt immeasurably better than she had but still pretty woozy. She looked at his eyes and wondered.

Do you, um..., she started, but had to make herself stop.

When he held still, he held still. You could have balanced a plate on his head. Do I what?

She hid her face with her hands. Then peered at him through a crack in her fingers. I am so embarrassed, she said.

You couldn't get any more, um, he said, at last at a loss for words. Any more foolish.

Now she was humiliated again.

Whass tha' s'posed to mean?

Ask me anything.

You don't find me attractive or anything, do you.

I do, he said. I do. But just because I find you physically attractive doesn't mean that I want to have sex with you.

She lay back in the tub. Well, she said, That's different.

This made him smile.

We meet in the hallway, he said. You're so drunk you can barely walk. You're bleeding and you have neglected to put a shirt on. I assist you back to your apartment, and you get sick. You've still probably got a blood alcohol level above the legal limit for decision-making.

Do you always talk like that?

Like what?

I don't know. A cop.

Too much time hanging around them, I guess.

You're a cop?

No. Listen, he said, Your offer is very generous—he smiled—far more generous than any woman should make to a stranger, but it's one I can't accept. And, besides, I have a ten o'clock flight home in the morning.

You can really kill a girl.

I mean no insult.

You're a funny man, Lawrence of Illinois.

You're clearly a very funny lady, Ellen Gregory.

You saw that. The TV?

He nodded.

Not my best work.

She looked down at the soapy water, at her feet and knees and boobs sticking out of it. Okay, she said, But isn't it weird that I feel like a slut because you turned me down but I wouldn't have if you hadn't?

That's because in both cases you're comparing our behavior. But do you really feel like a slut?

Yeah.

Not just a lonely human being?

She studied his face.

Does that mean if I sobered up you'd fuck me?

He laughed and shook his head.

Will you at least stay with me for a while?

#

When she awoke, Ellen Gregory had a singularly fascistic headache, a misery that pounded in her head but wasn't satisfied with just her skull, but insisted on a blitzkrieg towards the absolute abjection of the body, the subjugation of the limbs, too, pounding on its lectern and shouting down that nothing would escape its wrath. And that limb or organ or follicle which attempted to escape would be greeted with the most savage and vicious brutality known to humankind —rape, pillage, burning of the villages and salting of the earth.

It was a fuckmonster of a headache. That was the first thing.

The other thing was she had no idea where she was, or how she had got there. It was almost like waking without a past, except she had enough of a past to notice that the bedroom was gorgeous, though way more masculine than anything she would ever think of doing for herself. And it couldn't be amnesia because at least she knew her name.

She started to sit up, but the dictatorial little fuckmonster garroted her head and gut simultaneously—Submission! Abjection!—and she went down as fast as she had come up. And speaking of coming up, Well, there's always the dry heaves, her interior, stage monologue said.

And then she saw the note. There was a quart bottle of water, and taped to it was a small piece of paper. In tiny, precise male handwriting, it said, Drink plenty of liquids. Start with this. Stay in bed. After you finish this, go into the kitchen.

She did as instructed, trying, as she sipped, then chugged, the water, to remember what had happened last night, and whose mysterious penmanship this was.

She wasn't sure if the water actually made her feel better, but at least it made her need to pee, and she got up, went to the bathroom, then went into the kitchen. There was another note, and another bottle of water, and two tablets of ibuprofen. Take these, the note said, and drink more water. Don't take these unless you've drunk the first bottle of water. Then, new paragraph, Possible liver damage. Eat something if you can. I made blueberry pancakes. Fridge. Maple syrup next to the microwave.

She turned and looked, and there was one of those little jugs of syrup on the counter, gleaming in a spotlight on the granite counter.

Coffee, said the last line of the note, Is ready to go. Bye. L. of I.

L. of I. What was that supposed to mean?

She went to the coffee maker and turned it on, then went to the window and pulled up the blinds. New York. Good lord. Blessed lord. She was in New York. She craned and thought she could see Broadway. Vague glimmers of arriving swam into her head but she had no way of knowing if these were current or ancient memories—the past filling the absence of the present.

Despite the fascist headache, she felt a little flicker of wonder and glee in her soul, and went back into the kitchen and heated the pancakes, doused them in maple syrup, and tucked in. She had nearly finished them by the time she remembered: 10 o'clock. She looked at the clock, but it was already afternoon. She had no idea what 10 o'clock meant, but it seemed important.

She sank back into her chair and looked at the apartment, looked at the baggy pajamas she was wearing, and started to wonder. Just for safety—or something's—sake, she got up and went to the bathroom to see if there was any sign that she'd had sex. There was not, and she went back to her breakfast, her head throbbing, her body entirely unresistant to gravity.

The wondering went on a long time, but nothing came.

She had some vague notion of a man, but he was nothing more than a blur. She had some vague notion of undressing herself at his command, but it made no sense. She thought she should feel some

sense of dread—the whole Wayne Townsend thing, all the ugly experiences with paparazzi, but she didn't.

When she finished the pancakes, she went back to bed. When she woke again, it was dark, the dictator had been vanquished, and she felt better than she could remember feeling for years.

#

Okay, so the coffee in the pot was at least a half day old, one cup will get you through the brewing of a new pot.

The notes were still here, in that fascinatingly precise handwriting. The empty bottle of water in the kitchen. The D'Agostino's bag. The maple syrup. When she called Marty, he laughed into the phone. I heard you got way plastered on the plane.

Where am I?

He laughed again. In New York.

I know that. Whose place is this?

Will Simon's. You've never met him.

Will Simon. Who is he? Where is he?

He's a director. Or a budding director. He had a short film that won a prize at Cannes. He's very good.

But where is he?

Here. LA. He's shooting a music video.

Ellen sat down.

You know you don't handle alcohol well, Ellen darling.

Shut up, Marty.

He laughed again. So, he said, How are you?

Aside from the hangover, which is gone now, thank you, I'm fabulous.

Feel like doing some media?

What are you thinking?

Empty Planet. Rob's people called and they will totally work you in whenever you want. It's your call.

Get me on. I'd love to see Rob. She could have eaten the phone, climbed through the wires and up to the satellites to shake Marty by the lapels. Empty Planet was the best fake news show on cable.

And the interview you did with Entertainment Now is coming out tomorrow, but it's online already, so it'd be good. I'll make some calls. Call you back. I love you.

You, too, she said.

#

Sitting in the green room with a bag of Empty Planet swag, she had no idea what she was going to say. She hated—loathed, despised—doing anything without some kind of rehearsal, some kind of dry run. Yes, she had worked with the writers—they were going to go ironic, play the “Folsom Prison” and she was going to talk about it. But it was going to be funny. It had to be funny. There was no redemption, otherwise.

Still, she had no idea if she might burst into tears at any given moment.

She had no idea if the interview, such as it was, would get serious—which she dreaded—or if Rob was going to be his usual iconoclastic self. She knew she had to turn it around. For all of his professional swagger, Rob Mullins (aka Ruben Leibowitz) was one of her favorite people. One of the sweetest, most sensitive guys she knew in show business. Not to mention smart. She tried to focus on him, predict what he would say. Nothing would come. How did you talk about it, something like shooting a man in your own home, except to be direct about it. He would be direct. Maybe they would play Johnny Cash.

She drank bottled water and waited, her head empty.

#

And then she was behind the curtain, and Rob was saying, Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome my guest tonight, friend of the show, Ellen Gregory!, and she was heading across the stage, tears starting in her eyes like wind-lash, but as soon as they had come they had gone and Rob was shaking her hand and leaning to her, saying into her ear, I am so glad you are okay, and so happy to see you. And then they were sitting and the audience seemed to lean toward them.

Ellen Gregory!

Rob Mullins.

He giggled his famous giggle. She said, There have been so many famous butts in this chair. Wow.

But yours is the best. [Giggle]

Rob, I love the giggle. See, when you interview women—I've noticed this about you—you tend to giggle. Men, you chuckle. It's charming.

[More giggles.] It's so great to see you. You have been through, how do I put this, oh, yeah, hell and back, since you were last on the show. And you KILLED a guy, what is up with that?

There was almost nothing you could not laugh at when Rob framed it. And she laughed.

Yeah. She drew the word out and let the moment hang for a few beats.

I don't really like to think about it that way.

But no, a guy breaks into your house, a guy who has already been stalking you, who kidnapped you, for God's sake.

Let that be a warning to you. She said it first to Rob, then to the audience, pointing her finger, gun-like, and then the camera. I am not a woman to be fucked with.

You're not packing tonight, are you? [Giggles.]

You know I love you, Rob, but this is the kind of thing I just do not talk about. Packing.

Can we be serious for a moment?

I don't know why. [Ellen giggles.] No, really. You have this stalker.

I prefer to think of him as the mother and grandmother of all bad blind dates. I mean, Rob, you really have to learn to chuckle heartily.

Chuckle heartily. I'll take that on. [Turns to stack of papers, pretends to make a note.] Chuckle heartily.

So, tell me about your stalker.

My stalker? That possessive pronoun does things I don't really want the language to do. My. My stalker. Jeez. I prefer to think of him as the mother and grandmother of all bad blind dates.

No, no. Seriously. [Leans in, serious.] You'd been receiving letters from this individual for, like, months, a year. Your people were aware of him, but couldn't do anything.

Nobody could do anything until a crime was committed. So, no.

Does this change your feeling about gun control?

He came after me with a baseball bat. I shot him. If he had any feelings, about gun control or anything else, we didn't get the chance to discuss them.

You know, I'm wetting my pants, but I can hide behind this desk.

Now Ellen laughed.

He wrote you letters. A lot of them.

I'm going to ask you, Rob, do you read your mail?

[Giggles.] I don't know that I can answer that.

Neither do I. Like you, I have highly paid assistants who risk the letter bombs. No. Just kidding. No. I didn't read any of the letters. Any time I get letters that look like they were addressed in crayon by a kindergarten student, I do not read them.

My kids will be so disappointed.

A psychologist who examined them said they were kind of psychotically poetic, but it was like this guy, right, had created a secret society in his head to, like, displace whatever normal feelings he might have had. Like, you know, I'm in the army, it's my job to kill people. So he could turn me into an object. An object about which he had no feelings.

That

