

“The way to look at it is, that was somebody else, some eighteen-year-old kid with the same name. It wasn’t you.” His brother, Dennis, sat at the foot of the bed, watching him in the mirror.

“Who was it, then?” Gordon Loomis squinted through the blur of sweat. The jug-eared face was the same, bland, the deep chin cleft its only discernible feature. He dragged his starched sleeve across his forehead. He still wasn’t used to the heat of a proper room. The closeness of his brother’s voice seemed the only air to breathe.

“You know what I mean!” Dennis said. “And besides, people forget. I mean, twenty-five years! That’s like what? A lifetime ago when you think of it. Nobody’s the same person they were then, just like you’re not.”

“But I am. I’m still the same,” Gordon said. His thick fingers struggled with the tiny collar button. Three hundred and fifty pounds, six and a half feet tall. Just as big then—“Loomer,” because he took up so much space. Because of the way he leaned so close to hear. Because he never knew quite what to do with himself or where he belonged.

“No, you’re not! For one thing, you used to be a complete slob, and now look.” Dennis laughed, pointing at Gordon’s hairbrush, the comb placed in the exact center row of bristles. “What do you call this? Obsessive-compulsive? Anal retentive?” He meant the rows of coins stacked heads up, the sleek black flashlight, and still in its box the blue tie Dennis had bought for him to wear today. Gordon had laid it all out last night. Some things he could control. Most he could not, like this job interview.

He took deep breaths to block out the nasally thrum of Dennis’s voice. “I don’t get it. Lisa and I had you all set up in Mom and Dad’s room. So why’d you go and move your stuff in here? It’s the smallest room in the house.”

“It’s my bedroom,” Gordon grunted, chin raised and straining, the button almost fastened.

“Was your bedroom. Was—twenty-five years ago. But life moves on, Gordon! Right? It does, doesn’t it?” His brother’s pained smile rose like a welt on his lean, boyish face.

Gordon knew better than to answer. His younger brother was as thin-skinned and mercurial as he was generous. It couldn’t have been easy all these years with his greatest desire, Gordon’s freedom, so fraught with expectations of disaster. In the week that Gordon had been home, Dennis had criticized his every decision. His brother’s confidence in him was strongest with visitors’ Plexiglas between them.

“It’s so damn dark back here.” Dennis looked out the window into the leaf-tented patch of shade, the old tree’s crown grown bigger than the yard. Now Gordon would hear how he should have gone to California: he’d have a fresh start there, complete anonymity.

“Damn!” he muttered, and Dennis started toward him just as the button went through.

“You're so nervous!” Dennis handed him the tie. “It’s just an interview. What’s there to be nervous about?”

Gordon turned his damp collar over the tie. The interview was too soon. He wasn’t ready. Freedom was like this new suit Dennis had bought for him. It might look a perfect fit, but it felt as if it belonged to someone else. Gordon tried to knot the tie, then yanked it apart. “I never could do this!” He threw it down on the bureau.

“C’mon, big guy,” Dennis coaxed, slipping it back around Gordon’s neck. “Hey! After all you’ve been through, this’ll be a piece of cake! You’ll do fine!”

Gordon glared until Dennis stepped away. His hands trembled as he fastened the tie himself.

“Knot’s too big,” Dennis said, shaking his head.

Gordon pulled tighter, his face a mask again, eyes half-lidded to this speck in the mirror, not a man, but a point in time, that was all. No more than a moment. A moment. And then it would pass without pain, without anger or loss.

“Now what’d you do? You got the wrong end too long.” Dennis chuckled. “Here, let me.”

He reached out.

Gordon stiffened. “There.” He stuffed the longer narrow end into his shirtfront. “You can’t even see it.”

“No!” Dennis howled with dismayed laughter.

“That’s the way I always did it,” he said.

“Sure, when you were a kid. C’mere!” Dennis was undoing the tie. “We don’t have much time left.”

Gordon recoiled from the sour intimacy of his brother’s breath. According to the corrections manual, each inmate had his own space, a circumference of twenty-four inviolable inches.

“That guy I told you about, Kinnon, my patient?” Dennis murmured with the last loop. “I called last night to double-check, and he said it was all set. He said he’d already laid the ground work. He’d already explained things.”

“What things?”

“Things. You know what I mean, the details.”

The knot dug into his gullet. Details. The scrapings of flesh—his—gleaned from under her fingernails. The cuts on his enormous arms measured, photographed: the quantifiable proof of

her grasping, desperate struggle against the pillow. Details, twenty-five years deep, most like flotsam released in pieces, surfacing through dreams, or snatches from a song, certain smells: the damp sweetness of shampooed hair, or even abrupt silence into which would rise her muffled pleas, soft moans, the last earthly sounds of Janine Walters and male fetus. Kevin.

“He said he explained it all, you know, how young you were and everything,” Dennis said as they got into the car.

Everything. Gordon stared out the window. As if it were one of those crazy things kids do? A prank? Just break into a house and kill a sleeping woman. His eyes closed. “I hope you never forget! I hope every day of your miserable life is a living hell!” her raw-eyed mother screamed with the verdict. She had wanted him dead.

“So now you just have to show them what a normal, regular guy you really are.” Dennis grinned. “Plus, you’ve got all these letters.” The folder between them was thick with testaments to his good behavior and trustworthiness from chaplains, wardens, guards.

“The best one though’s from Delores.”

“What do you mean, from Delores?”

“Her letter. I told you I was going to ask her.”

“No, you didn’t!”

“Well, I thought I did. I meant to. I must’ve forgot, that’s all. No big deal.” Dennis backed into the street, then had to wait while a chunky young woman in a skimpy sundress carried an infant while maneuvering a sagging stroller across the street. Roped onto the stroller was a television set.

“And where the hell do you think she got that?” Dennis sighed and shook his head. “Don’t forget: Keep everything locked. Mrs. Jukas said you even leave a window open and they’re in like rats.”

“You shouldn’t have done that. I can’t believe you asked Delores without asking me first.”

“What? What’re you talking about? It’s just Delores! What’s the big deal?” Dennis said.

The minute the woman passed, he hit the gas and raced up the street.

“I don’t want her to write a letter.” He gripped the door handle. The contents of his stomach rose and fell with the blur of signs, sunstruck glass, cars passing, the honk of a horn. On the way home from Fortley, Dennis had to stop on the highway three times while Gordon dry-heaved alongside the car.

“What’re you talking about?” Dennis shouted. “She already did! She wrote it! All it says is how she’s known you all your life, and what a decent person you are. You know, things like that.”

“No! Take it out!”

“But it’s just a letter. She wanted to!” Dennis kept looking over, stunned. “It’s not like I put pressure on her or anything. You know how she feels about you.”

“No. I don’t want it in there.” Gordon reached for the file, but Dennis clamped his hand over it.

“Will you tell me why the hell not?”

“Because.” He felt breathless, as if he were running up a steep hill. “Because she shouldn’t have to have her name mixed up in this.” Because he didn’t want to owe her any more than he already did for all her letters and visits through the years. He had nothing to give. He had to be careful, careful of everything. More so now than ever before.

“Have her name mixed up in what? What do you mean? She’s your friend, that’s all.”

Gordon groped for the handle to roll down the window, then remembered. It was a button now.

“Can you slow down a little?”

“You want to be late?”

“My stomach, it feels funny.”

“You’re nervous, that’s all.”

“No, it’s riding. The car, I’m still not used to it. It makes me feel sick.” Eyes closed, he turned his face to the open window.

“Jesus Christ,” Dennis muttered, slowing down. He said no more until they pulled into the Corcopax parking lot. “Oh, and one more thing. The only opening right now’s in Human Resources.”

“Human Resources? I thought you said laminating. They’re not going to hire me for a job like that. Why didn’t you tell me? I don’t want to do this.”

“Look, Gordon, let’s get something straight here. I’m doing the best I can. I’ve got one hell of a busy life. I’ve got my practice, my family. I’ve got a million things I could be doing, but right now this is the most important thing. This! Being here! Helping my brother get off to a good start, that’s all!”

“I’m sorry.” He hung his head.

“You want me to butt out, you just say the word.”

“No.”

“Because I got so much shit going on right now, I can’t begin to tell you,” Dennis said with a disgusted sigh.

“I know. I’m sorry. I’m just nervous, that’s all. It’s just a lot all at once. I mean . . .” No company was going to hire him to work with people. Unable to say it, to give up even that much of himself, he rubbed his face with both hands. All he wanted was to be left alone. In Fortley he’d at least had that.

“Aw, c’mon, Gordo! You’re going to do fine!” Dennis assured him as he got out of the car. He handed him the file. “I probably shouldn’t get your hopes up, but I think this is a done deal. At least that’s the way Kinnon made it sound.” He waved, watching a moment, then pulled up alongside as Gordon trudged toward the gleaming glass-and-granite building. “Jesus! You’ve got to look more confident than that! C’mon, Gordo! Head up! Shoulders back! Go get ’em!”

In the lobby, Gordon slipped Delores’s letter from the file into his pocket. All along the way, in the elevator to the third floor, then down the long bright corridor to the personnel office, he could feel people staring at him. Conscious of the sticky-sounding tread with every footstep, he walked quickly, met no one’s gaze. He shouldn’t have let himself be pushed into this. He wasn’t ready. He woke up every morning disoriented to be home in his own room, as frightened as he was grateful to be free. He should have had Dennis come with him. Not into the interview, of course. Just to be close by. But, no. He couldn’t always be a burden. As it was, Dennis had canceled three patients to bring him here. So far, every decision had been made for him: his new clothes, the house fixed up and ready, cupboards filled, even orange Popsicles in the freezer because Lisa, Dennis’s wife, remembered his saying once how much he missed them. Personnel. His hand closed over the knob.

“Right in there.” The receptionist’s eyes swept over him. She pointed to the open door.

“They’re waiting,” she said as he hesitated, caught between flight and paralysis. Her chair squeaked as she turned. Not every day she got to see a murderer.

“Mr. Loomis.” A delicate woman in a hot-pink suit rose from her desk. After a lifetime of gray, colors came as a shock. As did beauty. Softness. His face reddened with the limp graze of her slender palm. He lowered his eyes to keep from staring at her face.

She said her name. Jamison. Then something about Brown. Who was Brown? He tried to follow her rushed explanation, then saw the bullnecked man in the corner. Mr. Brown would be just sitting in on the interview, a kind of monitoring process, that was all. She seemed extremely anxious that he understand this.

Gordon nodded. “I see. Yes, of course.” He wondered how old she was. Or how young. He had no idea, no frame of reference for women. He tried to smile at Mr. Brown, whose emotionless stare never wavered.

“Let's see now.” She opened a green folder, ran a glittering pink fingernail down the top sheet. “Your GED. A BS in business administration from Sussex State College.” She glanced up. “Did you actually attend the classes?”

“Some.”

“What did they do, bring you? I mean, you couldn't just leave the . . . the place, right?”

“The ones I went to, they had them right there. In the beginning. Those were the first classes. The first year. The courses, I mean. The ones everyone takes. Introductory, that is.” His tongue swelled in his dry mouth. He kept swallowing. “Well, not everyone takes them. I mean, for the, you know, the ones that are . . .” He rolled his hand to churn up the phrase from the perfectly still, dead air. “Taking the courses.”

She nodded, took up her pen.

He was making this easy for her. “Not just potentially dangerous, but inarticulate,” she was probably writing.

“The rest were by mail.”

“You’ve had some counseling experience, Mr. Loomis?”

“Counseling experience,” he repeated to calm himself. His breathing was the only sound in the room.

“Did you work with any of the other . . .” She paused. “Men who were there with you?”

“No, ma’am. They had professionals for that kind of thing.”

“What about peer-group activity? They must have had that kind of interaction. Most places . . . facilities like that do.”

“They did. But I didn’t. I didn’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“Because.” He squirmed, wringing his hands. Because he hated talking about himself: the misery of it, the emptiness, the dead echo behind every word like footsteps through an endless tunnel. “Mostly I just kept a pretty low profile.”

“For twenty-five years?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“But what did you do? I mean, how’d you keep busy? You must’ve done some kind of work.” She closed the folder.

“Yes. Of course.” He’d worked everywhere, in the library, laundry, kitchen, dining room, infirmary. But mostly in the sign shop. “I was a good worker. I always worked really hard. I like working. I always did.”

“Hmm.” She looked at her watch. “Well! I guess that about covers it. Unless there’s something you’d like to add.”

“Just these, I guess.” He handed her the file. “They’re letters. They’re all from people I know. Well, people who know me. And who think I’m a good . . . worker.” He’d almost said “person.”

She thanked him, put the file into hers. “So what we’ll do is go over everything and if something comes up, some position that’s compatible with your particular experience, Mr. Loomis, then we’ll certainly be in touch,” she recited with a dismissive smile as she and Mr. Brown got up. Gordon rose in a panic. He couldn’t very well go back to the car after such a short interview. The new suit. Dennis’s canceled patients. “Excuse me! Could I just tell you about the sign shop?”

“The sign shop?” She glanced at Mr. Brown.

The prison shop made street signs for cities and towns all over the state. He had been in charge of the enameling process, getting the heat to the right temperature, then baking the signs. Well, in a manner of speaking, baking them, he added in a thin voice. “I did it for almost ten years.”

“Really? Well, that’s a long time.” She was at the door again. “Well, in any event, Mr. Loomis, thank you. Thank you for coming.”

“But I don’t even want Human Resources!” he blurted before she could leave. “I’m much better with my hands. I mean, I’m quite conversant with the . . . the thing you make, the flashlight.” He had taken it apart and then assembled it countless times last night. “In fact, I . . . I . . .” Breathless, he couldn’t think. “I mean, actually making the flashlight, that’s what I’d rather do. But of course I’ll do a good job wherever I am. I just need a start. Someone to take a chance on me.” He felt sick, weak for sounding so frantic. She stepped back, as if from cornered vermin. “I’m sorry!” he said quickly. “I’m nervous. I shouldn’t be here. I’m not ready.”

“You can always come back another time, Mr. Loomis.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’ll hire me though, does it?” he asked quietly.

“I didn’t say that!” Another step back.

“No, I know! What I meant was, it’s my brother. He thinks this is all set, so if I say you said I could come back, then that’s what he’ll ask me. The same thing. But if I tell him, ‘No, they don’t want me’—that, he’ll understand.”

“It's not like this is anything personal, Loomis.” And in Brown's growl Gordon felt the steel cold at his face, the warning in the guards' hard eyes.

“No,” Miss Jamison added. “It's just a matter of no positions being available right now.”

“Of course. Yes. I understand,” Gordon said. He stepped into the hallway, then turned suddenly and stuck out his hand. She cringed, gasping. They regarded each other with mutual horror. “I was just going to say thank you. I forgot to say that.” He felt like the same sideshow freak he'd been at the trial—the last time he'd had to convince someone he was a normal human being.

All the way back, Dennis tried to contain his anger. He reminded himself of what Lisa kept saying: that Gordon shouldn't be rushed; he would have to be coaxed from his numbness, eased into everyday life. But she hadn't known Gordon as a kid. He'd always been like this: thickly, maddeningly stubborn, to the point of oafishness, always being picked on, never fighting back or protesting, never telling anyone or even taking a different route to school to avoid their taunts, instead just plodding along as if it weren't really happening, as if he didn't care. But from the next room his younger brother would hear him cry out in the middle of the night, “Don't! Please don't! Please don't do that!” Don't just stand there with your head down, their mother had told them both. Act like a loser and that's how you'll be treated. Look people right in the eye and tell them exactly who you are! Who's that, Ma? Dennis would ask, not just to get her going, which it always did, but because it had really meant something. “The last name might be Loomis, but remember, up here you're Teresa Pratt's kid. And up here's what counts,” she'd say, tapping her temple.

Of the two brothers, Gordon was most like his father, a shy, dull man, a cement worker for years until he injured his back pouring a foundation. When his father went on disability, Teresa's uncle, Jimmy Pratt, a records clerk at City Hall, spoke to his buddy the mayor. One phone call, and the next day perky Teresa was a secretary at the high school. She couldn't type, so they put her in charge of the copy machine, on which she printed out exams and study guides, reading them for typos and learning as much as she could about everything, preparing for the day opportunity knocked on her door.

Education, she preached constantly—it was the surest road to success. But if their mother's determination had fueled one son, it had had little effect on Gordon, who was just as awkward around people as their father. Dennis still remembered the time his mother was too sick to attend his basketball banquet. Without her effervescent shield, his father and brother never once left their seats at the farthest table in the corner for fear someone might speak to them.

Dennis clicked on the door locks as he came off the highway. The minute he turned onto Nash Street, bleakness took hold, the gray net slipping over his eyes every time he came back. The neighborhood had never been much, but now it was a slum. Broken windows. Graffiti, the swaybacked, sinuous lettering, words that made no sense, it was everywhere. Here, the word *cargo* sprayed on the front door of the Langs' big old Victorian on the corner. Once the nicest house in the neighborhood, it had been chopped up into tiny apartments. Ten mailboxes flanked the door, their ragged strips of masking tape bearing the latest tenants' names. The house across from the Langs' had stood empty for years before it caught fire last winter. A homeless



man had kept himself and his dog warm by burning papers and wood scraps in a bathtub. Plywood covered the windows, and with the slightest wind the blue tarpaulin on the roof puffed up and down over charred rafters. A man wearing a glittering gold necklace stood on the corner, lighting a cigarette for a skinny girl with pale, frizzy hair.

“Nice,” Dennis said, watching. She was no more than thirteen or fourteen.

“Wait!” Gordon called, and Dennis hit the brake.

The man’s hand slid to his pocket. He stared as the silver BMW slowed. ““Go ahead, try it,” Dennis muttered, staring back.

“What’d that sign say?” Gordon was trying to see out the rear window.

“What sign?”

“Back there. In the market.”

“But you’ve got tons of food. For at least two weeks, anyway, Lisa said.” He backed up, stopping in front of the Nash Street Market. Crooked, curling signs in the dingy windows advertised the week’s specials. A square of red-lettered cardboard taped to the front door said help wanted.

“Okay,” Gordon said, turning back.

“No,” Dennis groaned. “Don’t even think of it. You don’t want to do that. C’mon, Gordon. I mean, for chrissakes, it was just one interview. So maybe they did have security sitting in. I mean, what do they know about you? What does she know? You could be some screwball, some raving maniac, some kind of—”

“Killer.” Gordon unknotted his tie.

“But she doesn’t know what happened. The details. So naturally she’s a little tense. But what’re you going to do? You’re never going to go on another interview? Instead, you’re going to go what? Take up where you left off twenty-five years ago? Be a stock boy at the Nash Street again? What’re you gonna do, wrap chickens? Juggle melons? Stack fucking tampon boxes?” he shouted, already knowing by the set of his brother’s thick jaw that that was exactly what he wanted. Safety. A corner, a hole, some dark, out-of-the-way place to curl up in for the next twenty-five years. “Like Dad!” he exploded, then caught himself. “You know what I mean,” he said more softly, then jabbed his brother’s arm as they neared the little white house, their childhood home. Dennis’s chest felt tight. Coming back here was a mistake, but Gordon had insisted. It was all he had, he said, the one thing he’d looked forward to all these years.

“C’mon, Gordon, just give it a chance, will you? I know people. Lisa’s dad—I got all these contacts. I’m not going to let you down. You know I’m not!” He turned too fast into the narrow driveway, annoyed yet again with the hard bounce over the concrete berm, their father’s barrier

against rainwater surging in from the street, even though the driveway was pitched higher than the road: his life's energy squandered on petty projects, meaningless chores like his beloved rosebushes overrun now with weedy vines.

"I know," Gordon said before he got out.

A curtain moved in the window of the house next door. Gordon looked away quickly, but Dennis waved. "Always on duty, the old bitch," he said through a smile as Mrs. Jukas peered from the side of the curtain the way she used to when they were kids.

"She must be lonely without Mr. Jukas. He was a nice man," Gordon said.

"Yeah, nice man, always bird-dogging Mom." He didn't tell his brother, but after their mother died Mrs. Jukas had cornered him at the funeral home to say she hoped he wouldn't be selling the house to Puerto Ricans now the way everyone else had done. It wasn't his to sell, he'd said, enjoying the sour pucker of her mouth. His parents had left it to his brother.

Even freshly painted with new blinds and curtains, the wallpaper borders, and Lisa's delicate stenciling in the kitchen, it still looked the same. Tired, cramped, the kind of place you'd live in only because you had to. When Gordon had seen it last week, he had been amazed by the changes, the furniture, the big television on its laminate wooden stand, the cordless phone. Even the metal storm door, he had said, entering the kitchen, overwhelmed to think they'd bought all this for him to live here. Dennis had to explain that things seemed new only because he had never seen them before. Most of it had been bought by their parents after he went away. Went away, the euphemism, their code for imprisonment, for the wrenching turn their lives had taken. Gordon had gone away, taking along laughter and whatever good times there had been. Now they were gone and he was back.

Gordon's big feet thudded up the stairs. He can't wait to get out of the suit and tie. What was that all about? Dennis wondered. Just a favor he had to do for me? Go through the motions, never being honest so people won't get mad at him? So they can't get too close? Dennis called up to remind him that Lisa was expecting him for dinner Friday night.

"She wants to know if you're bringing Delores," he added.

"It'll be just me."

"But you said you were going to ask her!" When Dennis had run into Delores the other day, he'd mentioned dinner, foolishly saying that Gordon would call her.

"I know, but I didn't."

"So call her now. She's dying to see you. She told me."

Looking down from the top step, Gordon shook his head. "I don't want to."

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel like it.”

“Jesus, she’s your friend! I mean, she’s been writing and going up there for how many years now?” Not much to look at, maybe, but she was exactly what his brother needed right now, a good woman and a good job. Gordon's impassive stare was maddening.

Goddamn sphinx, he should consider himself lucky Delores even cares. Lucky she’s so desperate. “You gotta call her, Gordon. It’s the least you can do.”

“What time should I come?”

“Anytime.” Dennis grinned with the rare concession. “We’ll probably eat at six-thirty or seven, but you know Lisa, the earlier the better!”

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