

ROM COM

June 2010

He was due at one. At a quarter before he called from the lobby and got Ann Seldom's voicemail again so, assuming she was still busy with the preparations, he decided to go on up. The thirtieth floor was sunny and beautiful—a floor of honey-wet wood ran all the way to the windows and a postcard view of the city—white towers, lawns, the river and a vast featureless blue sky. The reception desk was a yellow marble island and on a table to one side was a vase of empire roses, heavy heads hanging down.

'I'm a little early,' he explained handing over the letter about the interview.

Carmen, the receptionist, dialled and turned away talking discreetly into the flesh-coloured bud on her cheek, looking back at him once or twice and nodding.

She led him through a glass door into the back office. So much for beauty. This was an office like any other: cubicles, coke cans, photocopiers and little glass-walled offices for the managers.

Carmen opened a door to a meeting room. 'Wait in here if you like...they shouldn't be long.'

The view was to the south, to the river and the freeway and because it was a Friday and early afternoon, traffic was already building up. From this height it all looked like a scale model of a freeway with miniature cars and trucks and taxis and over there on the off-ramp was an accident: a car had hit one of the barriers, skidded and was now bent around a pole. There was a flame and a curl of cottony smoke. Traffic was already backed up. Some cars were trying to ease past in the far lane but most had stopped. Further back others were slowing and would soon stop. Someone was running towards the burning car.

The ethics of his situation niggled. He wasn't looking for a change; he was happy where he was, he liked teaching and the college. That aside, why not a phone interview or even video? But they had insisted on face-to-face. So they paid his airfare and his hotel and had even given him a meal allowance. The least he could do is listen to what they had to say, right? There was no obligation: he'd been clear about that all along (although he had bought a new tie for the interview, a green one). And since the plane home wasn't until Sunday he could visit his mother in The Village tomorrow. They didn't like it when you called it a home: 'It upsets our residents, we prefer *dynamic retirement setting*.' He would

take her out. To a movie, maybe something historical with Cate Blanchett or maybe Jennifer Anniston's latest.

It was a meeting room: there were chairs around a long table and a row of spares against the wall. A kitchenette to one side and a whiteboard with a sprawl of calculations and arrows. The wall onto the corridor was translucent and he could see the outlines of the office workers as they passed.

It was ten past so he opened the door and looked about. Most of the workstations were empty. He would wait another few minutes.

Out on the freeway the car was still alight but the wind had shifted and smoke obscured his view. Down here on the on-ramp, it must be two kilometres to the accident, an ambulance, its little lights flashing was making its way, riding up onto the median strip and then over onto the breakdown lane which was already jammed.

He picked up the phone and pressed zero on the keypad: nothing. He tried again this time pressing nine: 'Yes Mr Anders,' said Carmen.

'Chairman's office,' he said.

'Connecting you.'

'This is Ann Seldom in the Chairman's office. I can't take your call right now...'

He put the phone down.

Now he was thirsty, so he started going through the kitchenette looking for a glass. The fridge was loaded with beer and in the

cupboards were biscuits and pretzels but no glasses, no cups, no vessels at all. So he cupped his hands and drank directly from the tap. His nice new tie fell into the sink and was soaked.

Then the phone rang.

He picked it up.

'Accounting?'

'I'm sorry,' he replied.

'Who is this?'

'I'm just...waiting.'

'Well put me back to switch.'

'I don't—'

'It's the red button. Press the red one.'

'There's no red,' he said. 'Can't you redial?'

'You people,' the caller said. 'First you send me this shit in the mail and now you don't know anything. Listen. You can all go take a flying fuck because this is the last. And if you see him, you can tell that turd Fowler that Toby Weinstein says he can fuck himself too. I'm not paying another cent. Nada. You got that?'

'Mmm.'

'Fuckers.' And then he was gone.

Drinking had been a mistake: now he had to piss and he hated unfamiliar toilets, he just clamped up.

‘Excuse me,’ he said to a woman at the end desk who was tucking into a container of dark meat with chopsticks. ‘Where are the...?’

She tilted her head, a bead of brown sauce escaping onto her chin.

‘The toilets,’ he whispered. ‘Where are the toilets?’

She pointed with one of her sticks and smiled releasing some more sauce and showing the gristle in her teeth.

It wasn’t going well. He stood at the urinal waiting, reading the laminated sign that had been taped at eye-level explaining how the biologically active cube in the bowl had made flushing with perfectly good drinking water obsolete. Next to this there was a small cartoon of a desert—a mesa and a cactus. *Make the Desert Bloom* it said. He thought about deserts, desiccation and parchedness.

‘Bullshit,’ said the man at the next urinal. ‘It’s just some petroleum by-product dyed and perfumed in some Bangkok factory and shipped back to us. Just hides the pong.’

‘Haven’t seen you about,’ the man said as he zipped his fly. ‘Dave Fowler.’ He stuck out his hand. ‘Call me Chook.’

‘I’m here for...I’m waiting.’

Fowler's hand was still out. 'Don't leave me hanging pal.' Anders shook it quickly.

Fowler raised an eyebrow. 'Problems with the old plumbing eh? You want to get that looked at. You know prostate effects nearly thirty percent of men in your bracket but if you get it early—'

'—it's not...I'm just tense. The interview.'

'Chairman running it is he?' Fowler asked over the noise of the hand-dryer. 'Friday afternoons you can tell the Chairman anything. He'll have had three or four bottles at lunch with his dingo mates and a belt of something back at the office. By four he'll be flat out on the chesterfield in his office. Company policy: save bad news for Friday afternoon; by Monday everything's forgotten.'

'Don't worry pal. He won't even remember your name.' The door swooshed and he was gone.

'Toby Weinstein rang,' he said. 'Said you were a turd.'

—

'It *is* Anders. I knew it,' she said.

She had come up to him in the street, put a hand on his shoulder and kissed him on the cheek, kissed him for just a fraction longer than you would if you were hello-ing just anyone. He breathed in jasmine and musk and cigarettes and onions.

She stood back and looked at him, shook her head in amazement.

'Look at you. How long has it been?'

He shrugged smiling, trying to place her.

She handed him a business card. 'That's right, I'm Elizabeth Ferris now. Teddy wanted me to take his name. Insisted. So I said yes. What the hell eh? You do all sorts of fucked up things when you're in love.'

'But you know all about that don't you?' she said. Her wide red mouth was just slightly apart, sharp little teeth peeking through. High school? College? He went back through the list while he told the story of the airfare, the hotel and the missed interview.

She patted his arm. 'They'd probably already filled the job.'

'They could have called,' he protested. 'It's a waste.'

'They'll just write it off,' she said. 'Anyway, the important thing is you're here and you get to see your mum. How is she?'

He tried to abbreviate the story but somehow it became longer and longer: here was the funny-sad line about the dynamic retirement community, the hospital episodes and the specialists, geriatricians and social workers who were part of his mother's support team although you could never get them on the phone when you needed. While he talked he watched her listening to him, her expression fixed. He saw the way she held herself, getting through the time, getting through the story being told.

'...so I thought if she's up to it, a movie. Has that one with Sandra Bullock opened here?'

He knew he should ask about her family but what if there was some issue, something that he really should have remembered? So, instead he went on and on about Sandra Bullock. He couldn't stop himself. 'It was after the FBI ones where she was a dancer in Las Vegas and in this one she's head of some company and has to marry her assistant. He, of course, has no idea what's going on and that's where the comedy...'

She looked at her watch. 'Shit,' she said. 'Look come to dinner tonight. Teddy will want to meet you.' She wrote an address on the back of her business card and pressed a key into his hand. 'You two, you're so alike, it's amazing.'

'And if we're not there dead on eight,' she said as she turned to go, 'just go on in. Have a drink. Have a swim. Did you bring your swimmers? No? Well who cares?'

And then she was gone.

It was twenty past when he arrived. The house was dark but the garden was lit, ancient casuarinas and peppermint gums above the sprinklers hissing on the grass.

He opened the door. The only light was from the floodlights in the pool. A swimmer stroked through the water, tumbling at each end in a neat wash of ankles and legs, a smooth wave rising ahead of her.

He watched for a time and then turned a light on in the kitchen. After a few more laps, the swimmer stopped and climbed from water. She

was young, maybe fifteen, a towel around her waist dripping onto the tiles. An angry red scar the shape of an open hand ran from her cheek down her neck and onto her shoulder.

She towelled her hair as she walked past him. 'Anders right? She rang and said that I was to entertain you until they get here.'

'I'm May,' she said. And then she smiled: 'Oh goody. You brought wine.' She took the bottle from him and pulled glasses from a shelf.

'Aren't you a little young?' he said.

She was struggling with the screw top. 'We always have wine. Mum says it's European,' she said handing the bottle back to him.

He followed her into the house. She stopped in front of a mirror. 'Not quite a six-pack but better than that cow Fiona's. What do you think?'

He looked at her pale stomach and the lip and curl of her navel.

'She's such a slut,' May explained. 'Always flashing her midriff at the boys. Wants to work in a gym when she leaves school, wants to have her own cardio class. She's been working on a mix tape. What a dope.'

'And you?'

'Well, Daddy says it's engineering or geology like him, so that's out. Definitely. *She* doesn't care. Says do anything or do nothing, whatever as long as I'm happy. If she really wanted me to be happy she wouldn't treat me like this would she? Anyway, I haven't decided.' She took the glass from him. 'I'm just a kid. I'm waaay too young.'

They sat on the sofa watching the ripples of the pool reflected on the ceiling.

'You're here under false pretences,' May said.

'I knew your mother in...school,' he started.

'She only does it to hurt him,' she continued. 'Let me tell you how it will go: *if* they make it home tonight she'll sit right up close to you, laugh too loud at your jokes and she'll rub your knee, all the time looking at *him*, making him jealous and as the night goes on she'll drink more, get louder, get you to dance.'

'Your mum and I,' he said. 'We met on the street this afternoon, just ran into each other. I had this interview and they didn't show. So there I was at a loose end and out of the blue—'

'Didn't you say?'

'In the end, there was no-one.' He explained about the airfare and the meal allowance.

'What a waste,' May said.

She sat up. 'Know what I'm going to do Anders? When I'm old enough I'm going to Switzerland and I'm going to buy that cosmetic surgery. I'll put up with the skin grafts, even live in a bubble if I have to.'

'Does it...?' he asked.

‘It was just another car accident. Nothing special except for the fire and the ten-year old in the back who got petrol on her while they were trying to undo the seat belt. They put a blanket over her to quench the flames.’

‘I dream about it. I can hear my hair crackling and there’s bees on my face and I can smell that sour old blanket, like putting my face onto a wet sheep.’

‘Bah-ah-ah,’ she laughed and he smiled gently. ‘Your turn Anders. You’re pretty ancient you must be full of regrets?’

Content in the warm evening he couldn’t think of anything. But then he told her about his mother: the palsy in her hands, the restlessness in her after the stroke wiped away her speech, her balled fist as she struck at her now-useless arm. Trying to hold the pen up to the little personal whiteboard they’d given her — she couldn’t even write her name. The day she slapped him when he told her they had to sell her home — they’d both cried.

‘I’ll take her to the cinema tomorrow,’ he said.

‘How about a vampire movie?’

As he was leaving May kissed him on the cheek. She put her small, cool hand on his face and kissed him. Kissed him for just a moment longer than you would if you were farewelling just anyone.

In the cinema the next day he held his mother's hand like a fallen leaf and thought about May and her theory of movies.

'The clothing changes,' she'd said. 'And the lighting and the time of day but the movies are all about beauty talking to itself. It's only us who know that someone, say Ryan Gosling, is beautiful. He doesn't know it does he? I mean he's inside, looking out. He can't see what we see. Even in a mirror or with everyone telling him how great he is, he can't *know*, not really. It's only us who see him and make him perfect in our eyes.'
