

# The Gorgon's Puzzle

*Why would anyone leave a business card in a public bathroom?*

Kyle found the business card in the men's room of the Road Dawg, a restaurant attached to an old motel on the outskirts of Beloit, Wisconsin, wedged exactly at eye level between the urinal flange and the smooth ecru ceramic tile wall. Intrigued, he plucked it from its place and put it in his wallet, and when he got back to Chicago, knowing my predilection for obscure and outsider art, he passed it onto me. The card was from a shop called McKean's Curios in Coyle City, a town I'd never heard of; on the front was a watercolor painting of a square-faced shot tower, and on the back was a digitally faded photograph of a limestone storefront with a recessed door and art deco windows, a list of merchandise in bold blue Bookman typeface superimposed on it: Antiques, Furniture, Local Art, Curios, Used Books, Vintage Clothing.

McKean's web site was strangely old fashioned, consisting mainly of photos of merchandise with brief captions, and curiously, the site was not set up for online shopping—advertising seemed to be its only purpose. Apparently every shelf in the store was represented—I spent nearly an hour browsing through them without seeing much of interest before I found, below a hideous Midwestern landscape, something quite incredible: a miniature of a small city, rendered with what looked to be, even in the poor resolution of the online photo, amazing detail. Buildings took the shape of tall, slender pyramids, dodecahedrons, tetrahedrons, cylinders, and variegated prisms with slender, delicately arched bridges stretching between the tallest ones. Small trees dotted the broad streets, and in the center was a park with a meadow and, on one side, a tropical greenhouse in the shape of a large onion dome, such as those atop St. Basil's Cathedral. The piece was titled "Future City," and was by an artist named Jacob Giraud. I felt an immediate attachment to it and a strange sensation of heightened awareness, as if the fates had suddenly revealed the intricate weavings of life's tapestry. I don't believe in coincidence; I was certain then that Kyle had found the card and passed it on to me so that I could own "Future City."

Finding information about Jacob Giraud proved to be a challenge; apart from a handful of paintings and sculptures listed in various gallery catalogs there was nothing but one brief biographical sketch posted by a little place in Lincoln, Nebraska. What seemed to be the most important details were these: he was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1942, went to college at NU in Lincoln, then moved to Coyle City after graduation. Apart from a brief stint in New York in the early nineteen-nineties, where he made an early splash in the art world then sank quickly after, he spent his entire adult life in Coyle. He died in 2010.

The next morning, as soon as McKean's opened (according to the hours listed on the card) I phoned and spoke to a man who, despite being named Gene Ayres, claimed to be the shop's owner. He told me that the miniature was on consignment and didn't have a fixed price. I asked him if he might be able to put a hold on the piece until I had a chance to examine it and assured him that the hold would be brief, as I would fly there from Chicago as soon as possible. Without hesitation, he agreed. (This will be important. Perhaps it doesn't excuse my behavior, but...) He wrote down my name and address, recommended a place to stay, and advised me to wear comfortable shoes. I took a short vacation from work, rented a room for a week, and booked a flight to Coyle City for the next day.

### *Locomotion difficulties*

The Coyle City airport was extremely crowded; people filled all of the seats at every gate, packed themselves onto the escalators, and milled around the support pillars and shop entrances emitting a palpable current of impatience and frustration. Upon arrival, I made my way down to the lower level and ground transportation, moving slowly, my pace constantly interrupted by other passengers, few of whom were inclined to make way for anyone else. Outside at the road, more people stood in large clumps around the bus and taxi stands, a few angry shouts sounding out over the noise of the nearby freeway. I tried to check my phone for a bus route into town but had no bars. There was a schedule of routes at the bus stand but no map, a system clearly not designed for visitors, so I went back inside to the information booth. Behind a circular counter dotted with blank computer screens sat a large man with a long beard and shaved head. On the left side of his head just above his ear was a tattoo of a terror bird with an abstracted jungle

background. He was engaged in a static-punctuated conversation via walkie-talkie as I approached, and I waited for what seemed quite a long time for him to notice me. Finally he set down the radio, looked up with arched eyebrows, lips thin, perhaps expecting some complaints. I smiled, and the effect of that expression was minimal. I gave him the address of my rental and asked what bus would get me closest to it.

“That’s a pretty high level of detail you’re looking for there.” He said, not with an unkind tone. “Just an address? No neighborhood, no major thoroughfares, no landmarks? You know every street in your town?”

“Well, I’m from Chicago, so of course not,” I answered.

“Oh, Chicago, well...” He trailed off, giving no clue as to the significance of my hometown.

“I don’t have any reception,” I said, holding up my phone.

“Yeah, that’s a recurring problem around here,” he said. “But you might have done some research before you got on the plane.”

“Sorry about that,” I said, adhering to an authoritative monotone.

He reached under the desk and pulled out a folded-up map on the frontispiece of which was a photo of attractive young people standing in front of the same shot tower pictured on the card from McKean’s. Apparently the tower was some sort of local landmark.

“Here you go,” he said. “When gravity fails, there’s always paper. This’ll show you all the bus routes. Ask the driver if you have any questions.”

I walked outside, found a semi-secluded spot, and unfolded the map. One side showed the streets of the city with the few points of interest it had to offer. The bus routes were listed separately on the opposite side, adjacent to the photo of smiling young people, and after a few minutes of study, I discerned that the Q bus would take me close to the address of my rented room. I re-folded the map and put it in my pocket then shouldered my way through the crowds to a long, narrow concrete field dotted with plexiglass bus shelters. I waited there for an hour or so, and as I did, a crowd formed around me. Most of the people stood quietly, but a few were talking loudly, some laughing, some perhaps arguing, though it was difficult to tell how serious the disagreements were. I felt a little uneasy, I don’t mind admitting. Eventually, the bus came; as we boarded, I gave the driver the address I was trying to get to.

“Hmm...” he said. “How are your shoes?”

“Okay, I guess,” I said.

“Well, I hate to be the one to tell you this, but you’re going to have to do some walking. We’ll take Benmarra Boulevard into town, and I’ll let you off at Campbell Street. What you’ll want to do is take the stairs back up to Benmarra and head south. Eventually, you’ll see a sign that says Gilbert Street, but it’ll be a couple of miles. At Gilbert, take the stairs down, walk south again on Gilbert till you get to a bridge over Gloeckner Creek. Cross that bridge, and you’ll be on Trotman. Not sure where this address is, so you might have to do some hunting. I can’t get you any closer than that, some of the streets in that area are closed for construction, the others have no bus traffic cause they’re in such bad shape.”

I thanked him with as much warmth as I could manage, smiling, nodding, etc. By the time I’d finished talking to him, the bus had filled up with people, standing room only, so I shouldered my bag and grabbed the overhead railing. Slowly, we moved through the airport’s bleak concrete wasteland, over elevated highways and cloverleaves, past cheap hotels and restaurants. After riding a large cloverleaf away from the airport, climbing to a dizzying height, the bus came down to a long, straight six-lane road flanked by squat office buildings, a handful of strip malls, and acres upon acres of parking lots. As at the bus stop, most of the people were quiet, but in the back of the bus, a young man and woman were yelling at each other, and though I couldn’t see them, their physical movements rippled through the crowd as we were shoved forward by their jerking elbows and shoulders; I was nearly knocked off balance more than once. At the first stop, the driver, who somehow knew who was causing the trouble, kicked them both off the bus. The woman had a bloody nose.

Campbell Street was fifty feet below a long overpass—to get to it, the bus took an exit ramp down to a small parking lot bordering a short road with a chain link fence on the far side. The fence was in bad disrepair—the chains were peeling away from the support posts in several places, and parts of it looked as if it had been cut open and pulled apart. I followed the road to an enclosed concrete staircase that ran back up to Benmarra.

On the bus, I hadn’t noticed the rush of traffic, as the burbling crowd, which had made me feel frail and vulnerable, had taken all of my attention. But as I walked south on Benmarra, I could feel the hot airstream trailing the cars, busses, and trucks as they sped by me, loud engines assaulting my ears, exhaust my nose and eyes. After trudging along for nearly forty-five minutes I saw the sign for Gilbert, which was below another long overpass. Climbing down the stairs to

the street below was a relief—the noise subsided, there were trees giving shade from the hot summer sun, and I could hear the creek running along the west side of the road. The street itself was deserted and full of potholes and large patches of grass and ropey, woody weeds growing up through the pavement. Chunks of broken concrete lay in piles along the gutters, and the only car parked there was missing both front tires. The creek was close, and I soon crossed a bridge over it to Trotman. On the map, I located both myself and the house where I'd rented a room. It was two blocks away.

Trotman Street, too, was free of all traffic. The pavement had been stripped, and the gravel surface stretched out to a clump of trees a block and half from where I stood. A couple of bulldozers, a grader, and a roller were parked along the side, but there was no sign of recent activity. The sidewalks were rubbled with broken cement, and grass, dandelions, and other weeds grew up through the cracks and open fractures. Finally, I stood before a faux cape cod with a small front yard and a gravel alley running behind it. A flat-roofed addition ran along the (my) left side towards the alley, looking like a trailer that had been parked next to the house then fused with it out of desperation. A windchime hung just inside the porch, flaccid in the damp and stagnant summer air. I took out my phone to text my host but still had no signal, so I climbed the stairs and rang the doorbell.

*It's not illegal to kill squirrels in your own backyard*

My host, Elisabeth Pillery, was a tall, slender middle-aged woman with a long, narrow, triangular face and dark wavy hair that came down to her shoulders. We shook hands, and she led me around the front of the house to the addition, where a side door provided a private entrance to the room I'd rented. I apologized for being late as the trip from the airport had taken much longer than I had anticipated, but she waved off the apology. In Coyle City, apparently, everyone is expected to be late. In the past, she told me, the neighborhood had been an excellent place for travelers to stay, but as car travel had been made difficult by the condition of the roads, and as there was only one bar and no restaurants within walking distance, vacationers to the neighborhood had become as rare as flowers in Antarctica. Then she invited me to have dinner with her, if I didn't mind eating simply. The room was small but bright and airy with large

windows facing the back yard and alley. It had a bed, an easy chair, and a desk, and a short hallway just outside led to a bathroom that was exclusively for my use. I washed up and lay down on the bed for a short nap.

We ate on the deck at the back of the house. Elisabeth's large yard was a maze of trees, bushes, and squat leafy plants I couldn't identify, laced with inlaid paths of jagged stone. Over a dinner of stuffed shrimp and lentil soup, we had a pleasant conversation of the sort that strangers have, and when dinner was finished and the table cleared, we sat drinking wine and watching squirrels jump from tree to tree. Elisabeth squinted with one eye then turned to me and said, "Do you want to have some fun?" Her facial expression was vaguely flirtatious, but up to that point there had been no hint of any attraction on her part, so I really had no idea what she might mean by the question. I shrugged and said, "What do you have in mind?"

"Wait here," she said, though there was no other place where I would wait.

She entered the house then returned a moment later with a slingshot and a bag of rocks. She motioned me to the deck railing where she stood, still and straight, sitting the slingshot with the grace of an archer. She let a rock fly, and a moment later the squirrel she'd targeted emitted a horrifying, high pitched squeal as it fell from the treebranch on which it had been perched and ran towards the alley. The strike didn't seem to bother the other squirrels, none of which showed any sign of vacating Elisabeth's yard. She drew a bead on another squirrel and let her shot go with similar results. Her actions evoked in me some mixed emotions.

"Isn't there some kind of ordinance against killing animals here?" I asked. I was not trying to be judgmental; I simply didn't want to be an accomplice to a crime on my first night in Coyle City. Elisabeth laughed.

"Nope," she said. "On your property, it's considered pest control. If I nailed one of those fucking things on a neighbor's property, maybe. But in my yard, they are twitchy little trespassers."

She drew on a third squirrel, but it climbed up the tree as she fired, and the rock bounced against the tree trunk a few feet below the animal.

"You want to try?" she asked, holding out the slingshot.

"I..." (in fact struggled to think of the most polite way I could refuse) "would probably just waste your rocks."

“Well, they are rocks,” she said. “You’re from Chicago. Never gone hunting.” It was not a question. She set the slingshot down on the railing, walked over to the side table where her glass stood, drained it and set it down again.

“I’ll open another bottle,” she said.

Once we had glasses again full of wine, she stood by the railing and picked up the sack of rocks. She took one out and handed it to me.

“They’re sandstone,” she said. I put up my hands to convey my complete bafflement over her comment. “Squirrels are tough,” she continued. “You’d have to land a perfect headshot to kill one, even with a lead ball. With a piece of sandstone, it’s barely a tickle.”

I was skeptical, owing mainly to the horrifying shrieks the first two squirrels had let out after being struck, but they both had run away apparently not seriously hurt. In the end, I gave in to her offer. I picked up the slingshot, placed the rock she had handed me in the projectile pocket, and took aim. Elisabeth corrected my posture, straightening my left arm and moving my right arm closer to my body, shifting my shoulder so that I stood sideways instead of facing straight out at the yard. My eye followed my left arm as I surveilled the yard for a target. Soon I saw one clinging to a telephone line that threaded through the trees, and I fired the rock at it. I was hopeless. The rock flew so far to my left that the squirrel didn’t even bother to run.

So we took turns, passing the slingshot back and forth, shooting at squirrels and the odd chipmunk that appeared on the ground between the trees and bushes. Though my skills failed to improve, I did manage a couple of glancing hits, and I must confess I felt a certain thrill when firing a successful strike. Finally, dusk set in, and well into our third bottle of wine, we abandoned the slingshot and sat looking out into the deepening shadows. Under the influence of the wine and the squirrel hunting, which had perhaps delivered to me a premature sense of intimacy, I told Elisabeth that I thought she was lovely. She quickly switched the subject of our conversation to my reasons for being in Coyle City. After we finished the wine, I helped her carry the glasses and empty bottles into the kitchen. On the deck near the stairs to the yard, as I was getting ready to go back to my room, she gave me a hug.

“I had fun tonight,” she said. “It’s been awhile since I’ve had a paying guest, and a really long while since I’ve enjoyed one’s company so much.” Then she kissed me. It was unexpected, brief, but pleasant.

“I’m having breakfast at nine, if you’d like to join me,” she said.

*Electric blue is a fine shade for summer*

In the morning, I got up early and spent some time preparing for my visit to the shop, locating it again on the map and checking the routes to it from Trotman Street. At nine, I went to the deck. Elisabeth was there, sitting and drinking a cup of coffee. She wore khaki shorts and a black halter top, and her finger and toenails were painted electric blue, ten bright points of cerulean light. I tried to remember whether her nails had been painted the night before, but I could not. From a French press on the table next to her, she poured me a cup, and we chatted pleasantly for a few minutes then went into the house to eat. Over a simple breakfast of eggs, toast, and oranges, we offered one another short biographical sketches, neither of which deviated much from what you would expect of white, middle-class people in early twenty-first century America. When we finished eating, Elisabeth collected the coffee pot from the porch, and we went into her living room.

The furnishings were, for the most part unremarkable, though she had more books than the average person would have. However, a painting hung on the wall opposite her sofa was particularly arresting. It depicted a Medusa, standing, in a long shimmering orange dress, one hand on her hip and the other held high above her head. The snakes danced about her face giving a startling illusion of movement. I found myself staring at it; the forms, proportions and colors were so irregular yet so perfectly arranged that the painting had an almost hypnotic effect. Then I realized with a start that the Medusa had my hostess' face.

“It was an indulgence, I admit,” she said. “A local artist was doing these, I think it was a series of some kind.”

The painting was a Giraud. This will be important, but as I was unaware at the time, I will exposit no more upon it.

We sat on the sofa. Elisabeth crossed her legs, smiled broadly, and held up her coffee cup for a toast. Suddenly, seized by an impulse I couldn't control, I knelt in front of her, took her foot gently in my hands and lifted it to my lips. I kissed the top of her right arch, her sole, her ankles, and at last closed my lips around her big electric blue toe. Then I glanced up at her face, and my mood dropped like an egg fallen to the floor. At first I thought she was simply smiling, but then I saw the contemptuous smirk, the cruel, mirthless grin, and I knew she had felt no erotic excitement at my actions but only wanted to humiliate me, make me feel like a child, a child



from the big city who never has hunted and debases himself in front of a woman instead of acting manly. I pictured her with the slingshot and, feeling incredibly stupid, started back and stood up abruptly.

“What’s wrong?” she said.

“I think you FUCKING KNOW!!!” I screamed.

I ran from the house. In my anger, I overturned the coffee table that held the French press, cups, and a decorative vase with fresh-cut chrysanthemums. I am not proud of that, it was an uncivilized thing to do, but I knew at that moment I had to get away immediately, and I did not want her to follow me. Without pausing to collect my map and phone (which I had left in the room), I ran out onto Trotman, crossed the bridge over the creek to Gilbert and ascended the stairs to Benmarra. It was only when I was standing on the overpass watching the cars flying by, that I realized that, without the map or my phone, getting to McKean’s Curios would be considerably difficult. I would have to take a taxi. I trudged north up Benmarra then took the stairs down to Campbell Street where I had exited the bus the day before.

The Q was there idling, empty except for the driver who was looking at her phone and drinking from a steel thermos. The door was open, so I approached and asked her where would be the nearest place to get a taxi.

“You’re asking a bus driver to help you get a cab?” she said.

“Well, I’m going to Division Street, and I don’t have any idea what bus I should take,” I said.

“Actually,” she said, “that’s not too far from here; you’d probably be better off walking, if you can.” She pointed straight out through the front windshield. “That’s Frederick at the edge of the parking lot. Division is three blocks away. Make a right.”

Division Street was straight and mostly flat. The houses on either side were in varying stages of disrepair, and the pavement was broken and choked with weeds, some over three feet tall. There was no one around. But finally, after nearly an hour of walking, I passed into a commercial corridor where a handful of people wandered aimlessly past storefronts that were boarded up and dotted with crude graffiti. Another three blocks down the road open stores outnumbered those that were shuttered, spilling small crowds onto the split concrete. No one was smiling, and beneath the surface, I felt an electric crackle of frustration.

*You can't expect a shop not to sell its merchandise*

The sign over McKean's was small, but even before I noticed it, I recognized the building's façade from the card. I entered. There were only a few other people inside, and I wandered through racks of old dresses, shelves of antique medical equipment, and walls covered with what would generously be termed outsider art looking without success for the Giraud miniature. Finally, after nearly half an hour's worth of failed searching, I went to the back where a young woman sat behind a glass-topped counter on which rested an improbably functional push-button cash register and a plexiglass cube containing the corpse of a piranha. She was nattily dressed in a deep maroon silk blouse with copious ruffles and a black A-line skirt, a sharp contrast to the store's cluttered and dingy shelves and cabinets. I asked her if the owner was there. She turned and in a rough, low timbered voice yelled, "Gene! Someone here for you!" A moment later, a door behind the counter opened, and a short, gray-haired man in faded jeans and a t-shirt with a print of Mode O'Day on the chest came through. He had a round, pleasant face framed in metal-rimmed glasses and a long beard with loose curls. He smiled at me and shook my hand.

"I spoke with you on the phone the day before yesterday," I said. "About a miniature titled 'Future City' by Jacob Giraud."

His eyebrows drew down, his lower lip extended out, and he looked at me as if trying to remember the conversation.

"I'm from Chicago," I said, hoping that detail would stimulate his memory.

He smiled and nodded. "Ah yes, the Giraud. I'm sorry, that's been sold."

"Sold? I talked to you two days ago," I said.

"Well, these things can be unpredictable." His palms went up as if releasing a bird into the air.

"You told me you would hold it until I had a chance to look at it." I was getting angry, and after Elisabeth's treatment of me that morning and the long walk to the neighborhood, I was having trouble controlling myself.

Gene shook his head sadly. He was completely calm. The girl behind the counter sat still and fixed me with a level gaze. "I don't think I would have done that," he said. "And in any case, that's not a very reasonable request, is it?"

"Can you tell me who bought it? I'd like a chance to talk to him." I was talking quite rapidly at that point.

"Is this the first time you've ever bought a work of art?" said Gene.

"No," I said.

"So this can't be the first time someone else has bought something you wanted, right?"

His condescending tone was like an electrode zapping my forehead with little shocks. I stood up to it as long as I could manage, but then I began yelling. I am sure the words I shouted were insulting, but I don't remember exactly what spilled out of my mouth. When I was done, Gene's smile was gone, and the girl was staring at me with an angry expression and gripping the plexiglass encased piranha. The handful of patrons in the store had turned to look at us, and two of them hurried out, ringing the heavy brass bell over the door as they left.

"Look," Gene said quietly, "I'll telephone the person who bought the miniature and ask them for permission to give you their identity. If they agree, I will, if you agree never to come to my shop again." I agreed.

He went through door behind the counter and closed it. The girl still held the piranha block, no doubt fantasizing about using it to cave in my skull, but I didn't mind. I felt myself growing calmer as I waited, and by the time Gene returned, I was fully composed. He had a name, address and email printed neatly on an index card which he slid across the counter in my direction.

"Ursula Skittleskopf," he said.

"Really, Gene?" the girl said, with a skeptical tone.

"It's all right," said Gene.

Then he smiled again, which surprised me. I fantasized about punching the old man in the face, but I merely nodded, pocketed the card, and left.

## *Supply and demand*

Outside the store, the street had grown crowded with restless people chattering, moving defensively, and congealing into tight little groups. The whole area buzzed with malevolent energy, and I found myself stepping from street to sidewalk, sidewalk to street, threading my way through the little crowds until, after a couple of blocks, they thinned out a bit. I took the card out of my pocket and looked at the address—3 Porcellino Court. Hoping to spot a store that might sell maps of the city, I looked down the street, trying to make out the signs above the shops. Then I felt a hand on shoulder, and a moment later, I was simultaneously kicked in the shins and shoved forward so that I fell down onto the pavement. I turned over and saw two young men in t-shirts, baseball caps on backwards, looking down at me.

“Go home, asshole,” one of them said, then they ran towards a nearby intersection.

I stood up. My hands were a little scraped up, and I was a bit shaken, but not seriously hurt. A little coffee shop stood a half block away; I went in, ordered a lemonade, showed the clerk the card, and asked her if she knew where Porcellino Court might be.

“Do you need me to show you how to use Google Maps?” she said.

“I’m from out of town. I left my phone in my room.”

“How’d you get here?”

“I walked.”

She rolled her eyes at me, took out her phone, and after a few seconds of tippity tappety with her thumbs, held it out for me to see. Porcellino Court was a good six miles from the coffee shop.

“Anywhere I around here I can get a cab?” I asked.

“No,” she said and turned away from me.

Among the handful of customers was an older man who made eye contact with me as I scanned the place, then waved his arm in the air to get my attention. He had a long, narrow face with gray hair pulled into a tight braid that fell midway down his back, steel gray eyes, and a magnificent waxed mustache with the ends curled up. I approached the small table where he sat drinking a cappuccino and eating an almond croissant.

“There’s a transport that stops three blocks from here,” he said. “It’s a little expensive, but it’ll take you wherever you want to go.” He pointed out the window towards a cross street. I thanked him, finished my lemonade, and left the coffee shop.

The cross street was in even worse condition than Division, and its sidewalks were suffering a slow collapse towards the ruined pavement. The buildings were spaced farther apart, and between them the lots, some behind chain link fences, were covered spottily by brown grass and a strange thorny scrub. On my right was a one-story brick building with a boarded-up door and glass brick windows, and on my left was a Quonset hut sealed with a rusty padlock. In front of the Quonset hut stood a truck with crawler treads instead of wheels. It had a large cab and an open bed in back with metal benches running along each side. The cab was empty. I looked up and down the street which was also quite empty. As I stood trying to decide what to do next, the man from the coffee shop rounded the corner and walked towards me, smiling and waving as he approached.

“Name’s Keith,” he said, extending his hand. “I can get you there, but it’ll be fifty dollars.”

“Seriously?”

“Got some high maintenance costs for this thing,” he said. “Bus won’t get you there, and cabs only run on the main roads and freeways now.” So, it was profiteering, not kindness, that had motivated him. However, I suppose, if one provides a valuable service, one should be compensated.

“We leave in half an hour,” he said.

“Is there an ATM around here?” I asked.

“There’s one next to the coffee shop.”

Reluctantly, I returned to Division Street. Next to the coffee shop, in a small alcove set back between it and a liquor store was an ATM. I looked around nervously—no one seemed to be paying attention to me, but if I could be knocked down for no reason, I might be given worse for cash. However, I was about to put my travels into the hands of a stranger and probably wouldn’t see a cash machine for awhile, so I took out a couple of hundred dollars, stuffed it quickly into my pocket, and hurried back to Keith’s truck. I climbed up onto the back and sat on the passenger-side bench near the cab. While I waited, seven more people climbed aboard. I didn’t see any of them pay. I was still on edge, but the other people on the truck did not show

any signs of aggressiveness, in fact, they barely seemed to notice me at all, so I settled against the metal backrest and tried to relax.

### *#3 Porcellino Court*

By my estimation, the drive to Porcellino Court took about two hours. We were heading south, but circuitously, through residential neighborhoods with falling down houses and cars on blocks. I didn't see anyone apart from my fellow passengers. The terrain changed slowly from a flat plain to rounded hills, and the further south we went through town, the more the conditions of the streets and houses improved, though even near Porcellino there were blocks of deserted houses and streets choked with dandelions, thistles, and tall grass.

Porcellino Court was a short cul-de-sac with flat ground on the west side and a rounded hill rising up from the street on the east. Houses number one and two were on the west side; on the east was a set of concrete stairs that led to an eight-foot privacy fence with a locked gate over which I could see only the top of a flat-roofed building. As I stood at the gate and considered walking the fence's perimeter, a quadcopter drone flew over me, traced two slow circles, then vanished over the hill. A minute later, the gate opened revealing three people looking at me with openly hostile expressions. The person standing in front was a tall woman with long, wavy red hair and green eyes, in her late forties, perhaps, wearing a tunic like a Circassian soldier's with buttons that didn't match. To her left and just behind her was another woman, younger, with close-cropped dark hair and a pointed chin, dressed more conventionally in a knit shirt and jeans, and to the red-haired woman's right, a tall, muscular man older than the second woman but younger than the first, with black wavy hair to his shoulders, in a t-shirt and cargo shorts.

"This is private property," said the red-haired woman.

"I got your address from Gene Ayres at McKean's Curios," I said. "He thought you might have some information on a diorama by Jacob Giraud that he had in the store until, really, until I think it was yesterday at the latest, though he knew I was interested, I mean, I came all the way from Chicago..."

I was nervous, and I think I probably babbled a bit incoherently trying to explain why I was intruding on their private fucking little compound. I will spare you the details. The upshot

was that the red-haired woman took the card on which Gene had written her address, looked at it for a very long time, then looked me in the eye with a gaze penetrating and opaque at the same time. I felt as if I were a spider, and she were deciding whether to pick me up and toss me outside or squash me with a magazine.

“Follow me,” she finally said as she turned and walked toward the house. The other two waited until we had moved up the sidewalk a bit, then came up close behind me.

I call it a house for lack of a better term. In fact, it looked like a model hotel assembled from mismatched kits. Behind a walk flanked by two rows of blackthorn hedges and a porch with a low roof was a slender, flat-roofed three-story structure, the top of which I had seen from outside the fence. Attached to it on our left was a one-story section that resembled the addition to Elisabeth’s house though it was longer and narrower, and behind that, another slender two-story with a steeply slanted single-slope roof set back a bit from the front of the three-story. The one-story section had a railing running across the roof that did not match the porch railing, and I saw a couple of chairs and the edge of table set up on top of it. Both the two story and three-story parts of the building had bay windows in front and on the side that looked as if they were simply glued onto the walls, decorative flourishes without practical application. The privacy fence enclosed what I assumed was the entire property.

I followed the woman through the front door and through a series of small rooms crowded with old furniture and other bric-a-brac: a piano, a couple of guitars, bookshelves, sculptures, a telescope or two, computers and such things until we passed through a room with three writing desks and a computer stand. There, I was startled to see a painting of the woman I was following rendered as Medusa in a dress and a pose identical to those in Elisabeth’s painting. I stopped walking suddenly and stared at it until the man walking behind me gave me a not so gentle push. We then descended a stairway leading straight down to a long narrow hall with a cement floor and two doors. The red-haired woman opened the first door, and I was led through it to a small room furnished only with a bare wooden armchair that looked to be from a dentist’s waiting room circa 1975. The woman with short dark hair asked for my driver’s license, then I was told to sit and wait.

*A voice in the wall*

After traveling on foot and in the open truck bed through the heat of the day, the room's cool basement air was quite a relief. Yet I was disconcerted by the painting, and as I waited, I tried to divine the possible connections between Elisabeth Pillery and the red-haired woman. Gene Ayres was the obvious link—he had suggested Elisabeth's house for lodging and had given me the Porcellino Court address, but whatever lay behind this connection was unknown to me then. (It still is, and the possibilities have only grown more complex and bewildering.) Then a voice stole into the room, a woman's voice, age (by me at least) undetermined. I looked around for a vent or similar audial entryway but saw nothing. The walls appeared to be sheetrock, perhaps they were that thin.

“So, what do they think YOU did?”

“Nothing, I'm just trying to track down a miniature.”

“A miniature what?”

“Art. It's a long story. What did you mean, what they think I did?”

“Well, they think I'm a spy. They're the ones letting their dog run all over the neighborhood. I only brought it back, then they accused me of trespassing and spying, and they locked me up in this room.”

“Oh, I'm not locked in. I came here voluntarily.”

“Try the door.”

“I...”

She was not wrong.

“Do you know anything about the people who live here?” I asked.

“Nah. They keep to themselves, mostly. I don't know any of their names. Doesn't matter, they're all gonna have DC numbers soon. Anyone know you're here?”

“You're being a little dramatic, aren't you?”

“We'll see.”

As I sat trying to decide whether I should attempt to reassure the woman in the wall or simply extricate myself from the conversation, which had taken a rather dour turn, the door to the room opened, and the red-haired woman walked through it and shut it behind her.

“I am Ursula Skittleskopf, and this is my house,” she said.



“Nice to meet you, I’m—”

“We’ve already done a background check. We know,” said Skittleskopf.

“YOU’RE GONNA EAT MY SHIT, BITCH!!!” said the voice in the wall. Skittleskopf’s face showed no reaction. A moment later I heard footsteps outside the room, then a door slamming, then quiet.

“I don’t have the diorama you’re looking for,” said Skittleskopf, “but a long time ago, Giraud was my lover, and I still command a network of mutual acquaintances throughout Coyle City. If you are willing to demonstrate that you’re a man of integrity and good will, and if you are also willing to provide a little *quid pro quo*, I am sure that I can at least put you in, shall we say, proximity to it.”

“What do I have to do?”

Skittleskopf slapped the palm of her hand against the door once; it opened to the tall, muscular man standing in the hallway. She tocked her head once to the right then exited. I stood and followed her.

### *I endure a test*

We climbed the stairs to the first floor and passed through a couple of rooms into a hallway at the back of which was another stairway. At the top of these stairs was a single door leading into a very strange room. It was completely bare, with hardwood floors, gray walls, and one window to the right as we entered, painted over in black. The ceiling was struck at a forty-five degree angle and ran from the floor to the wall behind us (that which held the room’s only door). On that wall, a mural had been painted that was similar in style and content to the miniature I sought though far from being an exact copy. Giraud’s signature was at the lower right-hand corner of the painting. My heart started beating fast, and I felt a little dizzy. I looked at Skittleskopf with an expectant expression—no explanation came, but at least here was evidence that she had been telling the truth about her and Giraud. I took two deep breaths, closed my eyes tightly, and opened them again. In the mural, Giraud had depicted an aerial view of a future city with buildings in the shape of slender wedges and Platonic solids. The colors were dark as though the scene was nocturnal, and many of the buildings were bare outlines of dark

blues and greens against an only slightly darker background, while here and there highlights followed the shapes of tetrahedrons, dodecahedrons, prisms, and slender bridges, though from a mysteriously indirect source. A green, terraced plateau stood in the center of the town, and in the center of that was a statue—a tiny, painstakingly detailed rendering of a Medusa in a dress that matched the one in both of the paintings I had seen. Again, without an obvious light source, the green plateau glowed more brightly than the surrounding city, and the Medusa figure, small as it was, was rendered with so much more precision and clarity than the surrounding elements that it emanated a compelling yet disturbing sense, one that I cannot fully describe. In fact, its composition diverged so markedly from the rest of the painting that I suspected it had been added later by a different hand.

“It’s important that you do this completely voluntarily,” said Skittleskopf. She held delicately in front of her a round-bottomed flask which I had not seen her pick up anywhere during the walk to the room.

“What exactly?” I said.

“Not knowing is part of the agreement.” She handed me the flask.

At that moment, I seriously considered leaving the house and going back to Chicago. But there would be no more Girauds, and the possibility of possessing one of my own, in the end, was not one I could walk away from. I drained the flask and handed it back to Skittleskopf. At this point, to my utter surprise, she held out her hand and we shook, her grip warm and firm. She turned and left the room. I was certain she had locked the door; I did not even bother to check.

I sat cross-legged on the floor facing the mural. The only light in the room came from a skylight in the slanted roof that was frosted over with an ecru film, and as the light that passed through it was dim and growing dimmer as the late afternoon sun declined, the painting’s details faded into shadow along its edges. I tried to relax and take in the entire set of images before me, and as I did, the shadows along the edge began to deepen, then the whole painting started to ripple as though it were reflected on a pool of water. A moment later, the room pitched under me, and I felt I was falling, but I lay flat on the floor, and the sensation quickly passed. I stood up and approached the mural. As I did, it seemed to enlarge, or perhaps I shrank, and the perspective shifted until I was looking up from the ground at the slender pyramids and dodecahedrons. A broad boulevard opened in front of me onto which I stepped. I looked above me—the sky was black and starless and seemed at once to be both confining and infinite. A faint

light bathed my immediate surroundings, but the buildings in front of me and to my left and right faded into blackness only a few hundred feet from where I stood. I approached the nearest building, a dodecahedron on a prismic pentagonal base. A walkway of tightly placed limestone pentagons led to a broad rectangular shape in the structure's base that I thought might be a door, but there were no latches, handles, or locks visible. As I got near the building, the faces of the dodecahedron seemed to fade from opaque solid to translucent crystalline and perhaps even emitted a very faint green light. I ran my hands over what I assumed was the door, but I could find no way to open it. I approached a second building, a tetrahedron with a triangular 'door,' and could find no entrance there either.

I was frustrated, but at the same time captivated by the beauty and serenity of the place. I followed the boulevard between the fantastical buildings; overhead, slender bridges connected the tall pyramids, while at street level, broad patios, decorated with spiny bushes and made from limestone tiles that reflected the dodecahedrons, tetrahedrons, and pyramids of each building swept in curved lines and spirals from the street to the buildings' sealed entrances. In a few minutes, I reached the center of town, where the terraced, grassy plateau held the Medusa statue. A set of stairs set into the terrace led up to the top—I climbed them and found myself on a broad lawn crossed by four sidewalks, each leading to the statue which stood on a three-foot pedestal, glowing faintly. Her dress was red, the snakes that formed her hair a dark green, and her skin was a sandy light ochrish brown that was almost, but not quite, the color of a lightly tanned white woman's skin. She stood in the same pose as the Medusa in the two paintings I'd seen. Her face was regal, but with a cold and forbidding aspect. It was clear that this statue was the crux of whatever it was Skittleskopf expected from me. As I approached, its head turned toward me. The Gorgon smiled, lowered her arm, and stepped gracefully off of the pedestal. She did not jump or float, she merely stepped down as though the pedestal barely raised her a few inches from the ground. I stopped—she approached me until she was standing only three or four feet away.

“Kneel,” she said. I did so. “Why are you here?”

“Ursula asked me to visit,” I said.

“What do you want from me?” she asked.

“Nothing,” I said. This was a reflexive answer, but as I contemplated it, I knew it was true.

“You may ask three questions,” she said.

“Why haven’t I turned to stone?” I asked. I do not know why this question popped into my head. I knew everything around me was a hallucination, but at the same time felt compelled by an odd dream logic.

“You’re not important,” she said.

“Why can’t I enter any of these buildings?” I asked.

“You’re not allowed,” she said. “These questions aren’t very interesting.”

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“One more,” she said.

I thought for a short while. Though I suspected the Medusa could not know anything I personally didn’t know, I still hoped there might be a way to get some advantage out of our exchange.

“How do I win Ursula over?” I asked.

The Gorgon smiled, and I immediately regretted asking the question.

“Don’t lose your temper,” she said. “Understand what people want. Remember that accidents will hide intents.”

“How?” I asked.

“You’ve had your three, and you didn’t thank me,” she said angrily.

Then the Gorgon’s features began to subtly rearrange themselves, blurring out of focus, pulsing and vibrating as if the parts of her face, her eyes, nose, mouth, brows and cheeks each had independent life. When the features coalesced, I was looking at Elisabeth. She smiled and took a step towards me. I started back and stumbled, then her hands were on my shoulder pushing me down. I fell onto the grass.

“Go home, asshole,” she said. She took another step forward and put her foot over my face. It smelled like summer grass cuttings. She pressed my head down against the ground, mashing my nose, covering my mouth and left eye. With some difficulty, I rolled my head to the side and managed to lick her sole, then her heel was in my mouth, then her toes, then she was gone, and the Medusa statue was back on its pedestal. I closed my eyes. I think I may have fallen asleep for a few minutes. When I opened them again, I was lying on the floor of the bare room looking up at the mural.

*The Gorgon's multiple meanings*

I was feeling groggy, and everything around me, floorplanks, skylight, door, and mural were shooting in and out of focus. I was only vaguely aware of the door opening and two people coming in, lifting me off the floor, and guiding me down the stairs. Then I was sitting, still not completely aware of my surroundings. I'm not sure how long I sat there, but eventually I saw that I was at a table across from Skittleskopf, a cup of black coffee in front of me, the portrait of her as Medusa on the wall over her left shoulder.

"I'd like to ask you some questions about your experiences in the scenarium." She gestured towards the coffee, which I tasted. It was rich with a slight taste of ginger, allspice, and something else I couldn't quite put my finger on. Or my tongue on. "Were you able to go into the fresco?"

"Yes."

"And were you able to frame your mind within it, as if you were its rightful inhabitant?"

"I believe so, yes."

"And did you encounter a living thing, a person, or animal?"

"Sort of."

"What do you mean?"

"A Medusa statue came to life and spoke to me."

"Medusa is an offensive term. We call her the Anguicapillos. What did she say?"

"She said I wasn't important."

"Did you feel threatened at any point during your encounter?"

"No, I felt the Medu— Anguicapillos was rather kind."

"Was there anything sexual in your encounter?"

"Excuse me?"

"Anything sexual. It wouldn't have to be overt, any flirtatious eye contact, subtly licentious compliments, physical contact beyond the most strictly casual?" (Strictly casual?)

"No." This was a bit of a lie. Though there was nothing sexual between me and the Gorgon, when she transformed into Elisabeth and put her foot on my face, I felt an electric vibration through my whole body, virtual though that body may have been, that was many things but was definitely not not not not sexual.

“The Anguicapillos is an important figure for us,” said Skittleskopf. “She is a complicated symbol that gathers many ideas to her soul. Statues and paintings of the Gorgon go back to Neolithic times and represent protection from outside evil and invasion. In Greek mythology, Medusa was one of three Gorgon sisters. She was raped by Poseidon and then blamed for it, cursed for being a victim, as we often are today.”

I nodded gravely. Sipped coffee. Skittleskopf turned and looked at the painting.

“Giraud did this, but the idea was mine. Even before I started this community, the Anguicapillos was a compelling image for me, and not just for me, I might add. When this portrait was done, Giraud was something of a local celebrity here. It became fashionable, at least among the few people in town who cared about art, to have one’s portrait done as an Anguicapillos. He ran them off by rote—same dress, same background, most of them use my body as well. But this one is the original.”

So I had seen three Girauds in one day, though by Skittleskopf’s account, Elisabeth’s Medusa would be a lesser portrait, a derivation, and the presence of such a portrait in both Elisabeth’s house and the room in which I sat at the moment could easily be coincidence. However, if it was not, and Ursula and Elisabeth were connected somehow, Skittleskopf’s speech would serve to assert her authority over Elisabeth and Elisabeth’s subordination to her authority, an assertion which was, I believed, exactly the sort Skittleskopf would make. I wondered if the background check they ran on me included learning from whom I had rented a room, or perhaps they had known even before I arrived. I looked from Skittleskopf to the portrait. As Giraud died in 2010, the painting must have been at the very least about ten years old, but the face in the painting did not look appreciably younger than the living visage across the table from me. I sipped the coffee.

“This is a close community,” she said. “You have earned the privilege of staying with us for a short time, but you haven’t earned our trust. If you still want my help, while you are here, you will do what you’re told and you will ask us for nothing. Do you understand?”

Authority. I nodded. Finished the coffee.

Skittleskopf stood, went to the door, and opened it to the muscleman who stood behind it with his arms crossed. With her in the lead and he behind me, we walked through a jumble of rooms to a what appeared to be the house’s (surprisingly large) main living area. Rising above us was a two-story ceiling with walnut molding and a misty seascape reminiscent of Winslow

Homer painted on it. In one wall below the painting, two bay windows opened to what looked like a small orchard of Chickasaw plum trees and tiny misshapen evergreens. A telescope stood by one of the windows. In the room's center the furniture, two couches, several square easy chairs, three coffee tables, and three ottomans, had been pushed against the walls leaving a broad open space of naked floorboards interrupted by small rugs. A woman with a round face and salt and pepper hair sat in the only chair remaining in the center of the room; her hands were behind her back. Besides this woman, myself, Skittleskopf and Charles Atlas, there were ten other people standing around the room's perimeter, including the woman with short dark hair whom I had first encountered when entering the building. I looked around for some sort of clue as to what might be expected of me, but no one, including Skittleskopf, was paying me any attention at all, so I drifted back towards the edge of the room where an ottoman was piled upside down on top of a coffee table. Skittleskopf walked to the center of the room, stood in front of the woman on the chair, put her left hand on her hip and raised her right hand in the air.

*In condemnation of trespassing: a dialogue*

Ursula Skittleskopf (US): When the first humans emerged from the swamps of Africa, we were not the strongest or swiftest creatures on Earth, but we had two qualities that allowed us to survive in and eventually to master our natural domain: the ability to craft and use tools, and the ability to cooperate. Those who worship at the altar of evolution, for whom the mantra of 'survival of the fittest' is an absolute truth fail to understand this basic idea. We don't believe in survival of the individual, we believe in survival of the group. For millennia, it has not mattered whether an individual is the strongest, smartest, or most crafty, for we all have contributed to collective survival. But in the twenty-first century, this is an outdated idea. The survival of the human race is out of our hands, even if some do not want to admit this. Either we will make the planet uninhabitable and die off as a species, or we won't, but any actions each of us take as individuals or even as groups simply don't matter; the situation is in the hands of politicians and scientists now. Human society has for centuries not worked for the benefit of everyone; that is obvious to anyone who has read even a paragraph of history, and it's doubly obvious to anyone who walks

around our city for five minutes. The only answer is to divest. We are the flowers that thrive in isolation.

ALL: (Except me and the Round-Faced Woman (RFW)): We are the flowers that thrive in isolation.

US: We have no responsibility to a society that shows no responsibility to us. We are responsible only to each other. Of course, anyone who successfully breaks away from our collective society will engender resentment. Society as a whole is needy. Human beings are social creatures, and as such, the collective society reflexively turns against anyone who rejects it. It's not rational. An individual can be rational, but a society is an organism and is ruled by physical and chemical processes that prevent it from ever behaving rationally. Which brings us to the spy. You claim to have come here to return our dog, which begs the question, how did you come by it in the first place?

RFW: Fuck you, you psycho bitch! This is still America, even if our streets are shit. This is kidnapping, you're going to fucking prison unless you fucking let me out of here right now, cunt face!

US: Name calling is not going to accomplish anything. Who sent you here?

RFW: I'm not telling you shit! You are so fucked! Let me go right now, you piece of shit!

US: Is that your final word?

RFW: Fuck you with a razor blade! Fuck you with a giant dildo made of shit!

US: Let me ask you something. Do you live by a creed?

RFW: Are you fucking serious?



US: Why wouldn't I be serious?

RFW: Why should I answer any goddam question you ask me, bitch?

US: It's important to know whether you're looking at the big picture, or simply acting on impulse.

RFW: Clearly the notion of kindness is lost on you.

US: So... Impulse.

(At this point, RFW spat on the floor. Twice. US didn't react.)

US: The problem here is this: even if you don't believe that you have an over-arching philosophy, a creed by which you live, you, in fact, do. But your creed is subconscious, it's the result of impulse and social conditioning. It's based on pleasure seeking and pain avoidance, or perhaps the need to be needed. And if you are acting only on impulse, guided by social conditioning, you will become an agent of destruction for those who do not fit in with that social conditioning. You put everyone who has chosen to live by their own creeds in danger.

RFW: I wish!

US: See? You probably even believe that this is just. So even if your intents are good, the results of your actions are evil.

RFW: I think your goddam creed is that you need a fucking audience! Fuck you! Fuck you! (The RFW repeated those two words many times.)

US: So again, how did you come to be in possession of our dog?

(At this point, the RFW was silent, as were the rest of the people in the room, for an uncomfortably long time, in fact. Then US gestured in the air with her right hand, and the muscleman and two of the other people from the house took the RFW by the shoulders and led her away.)

### *Roof repairs*

We exited the large room. Most of the others vanished into the warrens of the house, and I found myself alone with Skittleskopf and the woman with short dark hair. Skittleskopf instructed me to help this woman fix an observation station located on the roof, so, with her in the lead, we ascended the now familiar stairway to the room Skittleskopf had called the scaenarium. Opposite was a library with shelves of various styles loaded with books in haphazard stacks and rows. In the center was a spiral staircase that led to a room in the top floor of the house. This room was unfurnished but filled with boxes, clothes racks, bicycles, floor lamps, and a few chairs. From there, we climbed a ladder through a trap door to the roof. The observation station was a construction platform built up about ten feet from the roof with a safety railing around it. There was a telescope on the platform and a table with a pair of binoculars. Six bed sheets stitched together with paintings of sunflowers on them surrounded the structure on three sides to camouflage the platform against the neighbors' curiosity. I followed the woman up another ladder to the top of the station.

From the platform, even without the aid of telescope or binoculars, I could see for several miles in all directions but one, where a hill taller than the one upon which the house stood obscured the view. The evening sun slanted warmly over the neighborhood, and a few feathery clouds drifted above us. Down the hill were a smattering of farmhouse style houses, a couple of Victorians, and some sedate ranches with flower gardens and privacy fences in light and dark browns. Two blocks away was a small strip mall with a coffee shop and a karate studio backed by a street of very small houses then a stretch of community gardens. Except for the coffee shop, the strip mall looked deserted, it's parking lot in no better shape than the surrounding streets, but the gardens were brimming with greens and corn. A handful of people were strolling the streets,

and a small clump of mountain bikes was making its way towards the hill where Skittleskopf's house stood.

"Not bad, right?" said the woman with short dark hair. "I'm Carolyn, by the way." She held out her hand, which was clad suddenly in a thick work glove, and we shook.

"How long have you been living here?" I asked.

"Oh, I don't live here," said Carolyn. "I just have friends who do. And I like to help out. I know Ursula can be a little odd, but she's good people, trust me."

"What's going to happen to the woman they think is a spy?" I asked.

"I imagine she'll be discorporated," said Carolyn.

"Discorporated? What does that mean?"

"Put out of the body," said Carolyn matter of factly.

"Does that mean the body of this house, or her own physical body?" I asked.

"These railings need to be braced. Grab that box of bolts and get ready to hand one to me when I need it," Carolyn said. I don't know if she didn't hear me, or if she was ignoring my question.

She knelt down, picked up a metal brace, and began fastening it to the platform support pipe. Whenever she gestured, I handed her a bolt. I doubted my presence was particularly useful.

"Do you think Ursula will help me get the Giraud?" I asked after a few minutes of silent working.

"If she says she'll help, she will," said Carolyn. "We've got a big thing coming up, and, at least according to Ursula, we'll need all the people we can muster."

"What thing?"

"Nobody knows yet. Ursula will tell us when it's time. I think she's waiting for a blackout, and given the state of our grid, it'll probably come soon."

As we were talking, another quadcopter drone approached, drew two wobbly circles above us, then drifted away towards the tall hill. Carolyn, stood, shaded her eyes, and looked at it.

"Does that happen a lot?" I asked.

"More and more lately," she said.

*An overview of my two days as a guest at The Aegis*

I stayed at The Aegis, the slightly grandiose appellation for Skittleskopf's house (or perhaps more appropriately, compound), for two days (not counting the day of my arrival). I slept alone in a narrow, high-ceilinged room with three bunk beds and little space for anything else. Minor maintenance tasks, such as fixing doorknobs, replacing light bulbs, and sweeping the floors were spontaneously assigned to me, and I had little time to myself during the day. The residents of the place were not exactly rude, but they spoke to me only superficially and always briefly. Apart from Carolyn's and Skittleskopf's, I never learned any of their names. During our meals, which were communal, I was completely ignored and sat at a corner of one table looking out the window into the back yard, which was large and home to a vegetable garden and two flower beds. During my first full day, Carolyn was absent, and I worked alone, but the second day she was there, and we again worked together. She was more friendly than the other people in the house, but even she seemed guarded in my presence.

Skittleskopf was The Aegis' undisputed leader, and the people were devoted to her. Though they had called the Medusa their goddess, I never saw anyone engaged in anything resembling a religious ritual.

I did learn that the residents' lack of sociability wasn't confined to my own person, but extended, with the exception of Carolyn, to anyone who did not live there. The labyrinthine layout of its warrens of rooms, the privacy fence, the observation station, all gave The Aegis the air of an improvised fortress. Contributing to that impression were, in addition to the main building, two small houses flanking the vegetable garden, as well as a storage shed resembling a magazine that, according to one resident, had an extensive cellar, though I never actually saw it. Self-sufficiency seemed to be their main aim—they kept chickens and raised a wide variety of vegetables, canned them for winter, sometimes sewed their own garments (hence the mismatched buttons of Skittleskopf's tunic), and only left The Aegis when absolutely necessary. Extremely suspicious of their neighbors, they observed as much as possible through telescopes, binoculars, and cameras their movements around the city, marking them down in elaborate flow charts, maps, tables, and drawings, and each nearby house was categorized by its potential threat level to them. To this point I would append a note: though I never saw the round-faced woman after my first day there, I do believe I detected her depicted in a map and two drawings returning one of

The Aegis' dogs. I must admit, I suspected them of perhaps releasing the dog into the neighborhood to test the reactions of those around them. But I have no evidence of that, it is just a private suspicion.

*A duty for the good of all*

During the morning of my third day at The Aegis, we lost power. A quick reconnaissance from the observation station confirmed that the blackout extended throughout the neighborhood and north into one of the commercial areas of the city. That afternoon, we gathered in the house's large central room and consumed jasmine tea and croissants (made in a fire pit in the back yard) while Skittleskopf addressed all of us in front of an easel on which was pinned a series of poster-size photos, maps, and charts; clearly the endeavor we were about to embark upon was one she had been planning for quite some time. (I will describe the visual materials in the course of setting down her speech and comments from her acolytes.)

"First of all," Skittleskopf began, "I want to apologize for not telling any of you what I have been planning to do. I know it's not in the spirit of The Aegis to keep secrets, but I only ask that you understand, I did have good reasons." A botanical drawing of a plant in india ink and watercolor was the first poster; the plant had drooping, elongated oval leaves and tiny red, black, and yellow flowers.

"This is the teufelbluete, a plant native to southern Bulgaria, eastern Greece, and western Turkey. It is not native to the United States, and if it's planted in this area, it becomes invasive. Our climate here is wetter than the teufelbluete's natural environment, which allows it to grow and spread faster than it would in the dry areas north of the Sea of Marmara."

She lifted the poster and folded it over the back of the easel. Behind it was a photograph of a tabletop. On the table were the following items: a teufelbluete cutting with three leaves and two flowers; a clump of dark brown, dried, rolled leaves that had the appearance of gunpowder tea, a saucepan, a saltshaker, and a cylindrical beaker containing a liquid the color of Canadian whiskey.

"Apart from the plant's invasive nature, it can be used to make a deadly poison. The process is astonishingly simple: you only have to strip the leaves from the plant, dry them, bake

them in an oven, then simmer them in water for four hours. Once that is done, add salt, and you have a poison that tastes like vegetable broth but will paralyze every muscle in the body, including the heart."

The next poster was a photograph of two middle aged people, a man and a woman, smiling. They both had graying black hair; the man had a thick beard and heavy, black-rimmed glasses, and the woman had a long, broad jaw and an aquiline nose.

"These are Basir and Rashida Aydin, children of Turkish immigrants now living here in Coyle City. I found out two months ago that they've imported teufelbluete seeds from their family's hometown and have planted them in their garden. Like a lot of residents of Coyle, they took up gardening to increase their self-sufficiency, and their plot is pretty extensive."

Behind the photo of the Aydins was a poster with a split image. On the left was a photograph of a modest ranch house. A four-foot fence ran from the house to the photograph's edge. On the right was a street map of the Aydin's neighborhood with the location of their house and garden clearly marked.

"Tonight, when it's completely dark, we're going to the Aydin house, and we're going to destroy the teufelbluete plants before they start to spread. I've read quite a bit about the life cycle of this plant. It spreads both through the roots and by airborne seeds. If we don't destroy these plants in the next month, it'll be too late. And blackouts are unpredictable. If we blow it tonight, we may get another chance, or we may not."

I looked around the room. People were nodding in approval. No one objected. Skittleskopf flipped the poster to reveal a map with four different routes marked from The Aegis to the Aydin house.

"Excuse me," I said. "I'm a little confused. Doesn't this little quest run counter to your policy of isolationism? I mean, I thought you didn't feel any responsibility to our, for lack of a better term, greater society."

"Shut the fuck up, flyspeck," said the tall man with muscles. "You're a fucking visitor."

"No, no," said Skittleskopf, "it's a valid point. Normally we wouldn't get involved, but this is a matter of self-preservation. If the teufelbluete starts to spread, it could affect our own gardens. But there's more to it than that. Even if we weren't directly affected, a threat of this scale is one that we can't ignore. Remember the Anguicapillos. She is a protector, and as long as

she is our goddess, we must follow her imperative. Even in our isolation, we have to be a force for good."

The applause took me by surprise. It probably shouldn't have. Skittleskopf approached me as the assembly started to break up.

"This is the labor I needed you for," she said. "Help us, and I'll put you in touch with the Giraud miniature's owner."

I nodded.

I had reservations, no doubt. I would have been an idiot not to have them. But I had already put in a great deal of time, money, and effort, including two days of menial labor at The Aegis and paying for lodging I was not even using, to get as far as I had. I wanted to believe that Skittleskopf's mission was one of public good, but I had no evidence other than that presented by Skittleskopf herself, and without a phone or access to a computer, I had no way to investigate her assertions. And, of course, I also had to entertain the possibility that Skittleskopf had lied outright to me and had no idea who had the diorama. Her connection to it was tenuous at best. But there would be no more Girauds.

*Is this what you meant by a rolling blackout?*

The plan was this: we all would approach the Aydin house from four different routes and meet there at one a.m. Musclemann and five acolytes would nail boards to the front and back doors of the house to prevent Rashida and Basir from interfering with us. Skittleskopf, Carolyn, I, and the other people from The Aegis would then run through the garden with electric tillers, destroy the plants, gather the remains into a pile, and burn them with gasoline. Finally, we would pour salt on the ground and run the tillers through it to embed it into the soil so that nothing would grow there in the future.

At midnight, we mobilized. In the absence of the city's ambient electric glow, the sky was full of stars, a glittering array of useless light. I went with Carolyn and another young man and woman. Carolyn and the young man were pulling a cart made from a large crate and a disassembled bicycle; inside it were the electric tillers, two cans of gasoline, and four ten-pound bags of salt. We made our way slowly, taking a circuitous route that led us first south, then east,

then north, then west, then north again until we arrived at the Aydins' street. The night was so dark that we could see only a couple of feet ahead of us—we had flashlights with thin cloth covering the glasses, but we turned them on only when we needed to read a street sign or check the road for obstacles. We were the first to arrive. The house was as dark as the street. I stood near the fence and looked at the garden—the teufelbluete took up three rows next to some peony bushes, two rows of tomato plants, and two rows of beans. A few minutes after we reached the house, muscleman and two women met us, he carrying a large portfolio style bag with boards, hammers and nails. To avoid attracting attention, we stood a block apart from muscleman's little group and waited for Skittleskopf to arrive.

At first, we only saw their flashlights, then they switched off, and we couldn't see anything until they were standing half a block from us. Skittleskopf and two men were pushing two large cages on wheels.

Muscleman and the two women he had come with went to the front door and started nailing a board across it. As they did, Skittleskopf and the other people from The Aegis tore the balusters from the fence, leaving a large hole opening onto the garden. As Carolyn and I were taking up the tillers, Rashida came running around the house from the back door. She was screaming at us, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. A moment later, she was close enough to us to see how many of us there were. Perhaps she saw the cages, or perhaps the array of instruments at our disposal conveyed to her that we had a serious and inexorable purpose, but in any case, she stopped running and screaming as well, stood still regarding us for a few seconds, then turned and ran across her back yard, through the neighbor's yard and out to the street opposite the one on which we stood. Seized by an impulse I couldn't control, I ran after her, three people from The Aegis close behind me. Only a miracle prevented me from tripping over or crashing into some random obstacle in the darkness of the blackout. I closed in on her quickly—Rashida Aydin was middle-aged and not athletic. I gave her a shove, and she fell sprawling to the sidewalk. Skittleskopf's people were right behind me. They picked her up and dragged her back to the house.

Basir was locked in one cage yelling loudly as Skittleskopf, Carolyn, and the others tilled through the garden, shredding not only the teufelbluete but the peonies and vegetables as well, and even muscleman threatening him and banging on his cage with the hammer wouldn't make him quiet down. I stood on the sidewalk just outside the garden for a few seconds unsure of what



to do. Skittleskopf was trying to direct the activities, but there was some confusion, and as I watched, three of her people poured gasoline on a pile of uprooted, ragged plants and set it on fire. Some gasoline must have spilled, because the fire spread quickly to what was left of the fence, and then to the shirtsleeve of one of Skittleskopf's acolytes who screamed and ran down the street with only the burning sleeve visible as its flames threw faint tracers around it. Then there was the sound of a siren, faint at first but quickly growing louder. Skittleskopf began to yell, and as three of the Aydins' neighbors emerged from one of the houses across the street, her people started pushing the cages away; muscleman led the rest in the opposite direction, and then I ran as well, trying to keep panic from overtaking me, picking a third way I hoped would take me away from all of them, every expectation I'd had for my trip to Coyle City erased. Yet before I made that final break, I saw Ursula Skittleskopf, by the flickering light of the gasoline fire, bend down, pick up a handful of the teufelbluete, and carefully place the plants in a cloth bag she then hid under her tunic.

### *Another offer of help*

When the sirens went silent, I was completely lost. Knowing that a solitary man lingering on the streets during a blackout would look suspicious, I kept moving, wandering through sprawling residential neighborhoods with unkept houses and old, knotty trees. After an hour of walking, I stumbled on a small strip of shops only a couple of blocks long, all one-story buildings with flat roofs and facades from circa 1955. One had a boarded-up window with a hand-written sign glued to it that read "For Lease Call 876-3547." I didn't have a flashlight; I had to stand six inches away from the sign to read it. When I turned back to the street, I saw Carolyn, pulling the homemade cart behind her, walking towards me. The beam from her flashlight smacked me in the face—she had removed the cloth covering.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey. Are you going back to The Aegis?"

"Not tonight. But I can help you get there tomorrow if you want."

"I don't think I want to."

"Right. What about the Giraud?"

"That seems to be a lost cause."

She set the cart down and walked over to the storefront, put her fingers on the plywood, and peered through a gap between the boards.

"I might be able to help you," she said, "if you can help me out with a little delivery."

"What kind of delivery?" I asked.

"We can probably hole up here tonight," she said. She picked up the cart and headed down the street in the direction from which she'd come. I followed. We went to the end of the block, turned the corner, and walked up a narrow alley that ran between the shops and a row of small garages until we were at the back of the boarded-up storefront facing a padlocked, windowless door. From her belt, Carolyn produced a large knife which she used to pry the padlock's plate from the wall. We entered. The room was bare except for several sets of empty shelves and another door that led, we assumed, to the front of the shop. Carolyn dragged the cart in, and we sat on the floor.

"How well do you know Ursula Skittleskopf?" I asked.

"I've known her for a long time, I mean, I knew her before she started to accumulate followers. But we're not that close now. Why?"

"She took some of the teufelbluete plants from the Aydin garden," I said. "She put them in a bag."

Carolyn started laughing.

"Oh my god, none of that is true," she said. "The teufelbluete isn't poisonous, I'm not even sure if that's the right name for it."

"Did Skittleskopf tell you that?"

"Nah, I looked it up. Frankly, I'm not sure what Ursula really believes about it."

"Why did you go along with it? I mean, that was a raid. We raided a house."

"They had a Carnelian X700 generator. And I've got a guy who'll pay big for it."

"A generator? You mean like electric?"

"Yep."

"They took Basir and Rashida away in cages."

Carolyn shrugged. "Tough times."

Certainly, it was quite possible that Skittleskopf genuinely believed the teufelbluete to be poisonous. But if she did not believe that, then she had her own motivations for raiding the

Aydin house, motivations which she had kept secret from the people at The Aegis. If that was the case, I wondered whether my role in the whole affair truly had been a coincidence. After all, Gene Ayres had recommended Elisabeth's rental room and had given me Skittleskopf's address. Had I been a part of some twisted plot from that first phone call, even before I had left Chicago? If so, to what purpose? And what had any of it to do with the Giraud? I began to feel dizzy contemplating the jagged array of unresolved questions. Imagine a chessboard made of sixty-four enclosed rooms, each with eight doors. Each piece, whether rook, knight, bishop, or queen, can see what awaits in the next room only after stepping through one of the doors. That is the situation I imagined myself to be in. Carolyn fell asleep quickly, sitting on the floor leaning against the wall. I did not.

### *On foot among the herrenvolk*

Muted sunlight trickling in through the filmy windows announced the morning. The night had been hot and humid, and I was covered with a salty crust of dried sweat. Carolyn was not in much better condition. We located a bathroom between the back end and storefront, but the water was off, which meant only a quick piss and then greeting the world in our crumpled state.

We walked down the alley and turned onto the street. I couldn't remember what day it was. The area was deserted. An intersection at the end of the strip of shops was flanked by dead stoplights; apparently the electricity was still out. Several times, a quadcopter drone flew over our heads; I am not sure if it was the same one making several passes or different drones on different missions, but one did three circles over us before rising up out of sight. After tracing our way through several residential streets and passing a few blocks of six- and eight-unit apartment buildings, we found ourselves near another small collection of shops with a handful of people scattered about. Carolyn was apparently familiar with this area—she said there was a place we could get coffee, though she didn't say how they would manage to brew it absent power.

About half a block from where we were, the street was blocked off by a string of shopping carts, imbricated and lined up between the storefronts on opposite sides. Beyond the barricade of carts, a small crowd stood in the middle of the street around two young men who

were sitting on the ragged, weedy pavement, their backs to one another. Five bearded men in damp t-shirts, two armed with rifles, stood behind the shopping carts looking towards us. Carolyn set down the generator and told me to stand near it. She approached one of the men, one of the armed men, I might add, the significance in this choice beyond me.

"Coffee shop open?" she asked.

"Not at the moment," the man said.

I didn't hear what Carolyn said to him at this point, but the man put the butt of the rifle on the ground, grabbed the end of the barrel and gestured towards the two young men sitting on the ground. As with Carolyn's question, I didn't catch everything he said, but it was something such as:

"These two guys, they came in, and... instead of sitting down and eating... like civilized people, they just started walking around, looking into windows chewing... carrying... their food, and I mean, no way they're local. I... this coffee shop all the time, and I've never seen... So, we're trying to figure out how to deal with them." He picked up the rifle again.

Carolyn walked back to where I was standing.

"Hey, what's in the crate?" one of the other men yelled, not the one Carolyn had been talking to, but another one, the other one with a rifle. I picked up the cart handles and started backing away. Carolyn turned around. "Books," she called as we were backing away. "Library books. We're headed over to Williams Street to drop them off."

By this time, we were far enough away from the men so that I couldn't quite read their facial expressions, but I am certain I saw one of them squinting at us, probably eyeing the best spot wherein to put a round. At the first intersection, we turned.

"What do you think they're going to do to those two guys?" I said.

"No clue," said Carolyn.

*Seda Security, LLC*

For the rest of the walk, we kept to residential streets and didn't see many people other than a few kids playing frisbee or street hockey. Eventually, near the edge of town, at an intersection with a county highway, we arrived at a small L-shaped building attached to a

Quonset hut. A chain link fence separated its weedy lawn from the sidewalk and surrounding empty lots. Near the building's entrance stood a sign supported by two steel poles reading "Seda Security." The building's lattice and glass brick windows were painted black. The Quonset hut's large overhead door was windowless, but its high, narrow side windows were blackened as well. We went around to the back where the two buildings came together to form a rectangular U, and Carolyn sent a text from her phone. A moment later, one of the smaller steel doors in the Quonset hut opened, and a tall man with black, slightly greying hair and a thick mustache gestured us in.

"Who's this?" he said, looking at me out of the corner of his eye.

"Somebody who needs a favor," said Carolyn.

Just inside the door stood five tables, each with a computer on it, and sitting at each one was a young person watching feeds from cameras or typing into database forms. At the other end of the building, two young women were flying quadcopters near the vents and elongated grids of fluorescent light fixtures that hung just below the high arched ceiling. The peculiar fact that these activities were running on electricity registered on me but slowly. Carolyn and the tall man, whose name I later learned was Jamie, had opened up the crate and were inspecting the Carnelian X700 generator. This went on for several minutes, after which Jamie signaled to one of the people behind a computer.

"All right," he said. "We're putting five grand into your account."

"Mind if I ask you a question?" I said. "Looks like you already have electricity, why do you need the generator?"

"Backup," said Jamie. "People in this town are already on edge, and they depend on our services to make them feel safer. Demand actually goes up during a blackout, and if we can't meet the need, we'll lose business."

"What sort of need is there during a blackout?" I asked.

"People want to feel safe," said Jamie. "We provide background checks, surveillance services, information on city services, police and fire monitoring, we even have a guy in the sanitation department giving us daily updates. People like to know what their neighbors are up to. Plus, a year ago, we had a generator stolen. Never did find out who did it, which was fucking embarrassing as well as being a giant speedbump for the business. That's why we blackened the windows and doors. It's better nobody knows we got power."

Though the Quonset hut's floorplan was completely open, there were areas of general use, such as the drone exercise area and the computer lab. And, at the end opposite the entrance, near a set of aluminum cabinets, was a long table with a Formica top and attached benches. There Carolyn and I sat as Jaime poured a whiskey for each of us. As I was depleted, hot, and tired and hadn't eaten anything that day, I should have refused the drink, but I didn't. Nor did I refuse the next one, and though I know it may seem childish of me to blame the whiskey for what happened, it must, at least, shoulder at least some of the blame. We chatted for a bit, and I talked about my efforts to acquire "Future City." Jamie was not familiar with Giraud, local celebrity though he was. This led to a discussion of the events that brought Carolyn and me together, which raised the subject of the difficulty in moving around Coyle.

"Yeah," said Jamie, "we're going to hell in a suitcase. A lot of people think that the city collapsing is what's making people so paranoid, but it was there before. We were doing great business even ten years ago when our roads were in great shape."

As I sat there, floating in the pleasant calm of my second whiskey, contemplating a third (that I did not get to a third is a small blessing tucked away in the following), I thought suddenly of Elisabeth. Her appearance in my hallucination took on a new and ominous significance.

"So you're saying that anybody out there, no matter who it is, can employ your services as long as they can pay, is that right?" I asked Jamie.

"Absolutely," he said, "we don't discriminate."

"And that includes drone surveillance?" I asked. Perhaps my questions were posed with an urgency that didn't quite jibe with the tone of the previous conversation, for Jamie suddenly sat up, leaned over, and looked directly at me.

"Is there a point to all of this?"

"Well, I'm wondering if maybe you got hired by a woman named Elisabeth Pillery?" I said and shrugged, trying to convey that it meant little to me one way or another.

"Who's she to you?" Jamie said.

"I rented a room from her for my trip to Coyle," I said. "I think she might be having me followed. I keep seeing drones, like the ones your employees are flying right now."

"We're not the only saloon in town," said Jamie. "And besides, I can't tell you that. If two neighbors hire us to spy on each other, we don't tell them. If a mother hires us to spy on her daughter, we don't tell her. Trust is our number one asset."

I must admit what followed this exchange is rather embarrassing. I got angry and did not conduct myself like a civilized person. I started to yell and bang my whiskey glass on the table like a poker player in a cheap western, and I emphatically reminded both Jamie and Carolyn that I had helped bring the generator to Seda Security and had not asked for a cut of the payment but only requested a certain amount of FUCKING INFORMATION and now I was out at the edge of town with SHANKS' FUCKING NAG the only way back and I was no closer to the Giraud. Somehow my glass got broken, and I snatched a keyboard from one of the computer tables and waved it around, not to be threatening, but only for emphasis, and somehow it got broken as well...

So I found myself lying in the weeds outside of Seda Security. I calculated that we were somewhere near the southeast end of town—if I was to head northwest, I would eventually find my way back to Elisabeth's house where I could collect my things and go back to Chicago. Orienting myself by the angle of the sun, I headed west down the street then turned north at the first intersection. I had gone three blocks when I heard Carolyn's voice calling me. I stopped and turned. She caught up to me and held out her phone. On the screen was an address:

46576 Neely Street

Edena

"That's the address for a man named Jules Vaarlock. He has the miniature," she said.

"How do I get there?" I asked.

"Do you have something to write with?" she asked. I shook my head.

"Listen," said Carolyn, "under no circumstances go back to The Aegis or try to get in touch with Ursula. She considers your actions last night a betrayal."

"If that's true, why did she tell you anything about this Jules Vaarlock?" I asked.

"She doesn't know it's for you," said Carolyn. "I told her I haven't seen you since the Aydin house."

She turned and walked back towards Seda Security.

*Another fifty-dollar ride*

Directly north of the Quonset hut and empty lots was a neighborhood of small houses separated by narrow lawns and cut through by a four-lane road. Far in front of me, under a dead stoplight, a jeep crossed the road slowly, but I didn't see any other traffic. As I passed, I watched the house windows, perhaps to catch a glimpse of movement or the outline of a human figure, but only the occasional barking dog gave any sign of habitation. Cars were parked along the crumbling asphalt, but apart from that one jeep, I saw none moving. I wondered whether the people in this neighborhood were going to work—were they going on foot, or was there a secret set of drivable roads?

A mile down the road, the homes were older with broad lawns. On the porches of a few of the houses people were sitting, staring at me as I passed. Though tired, and with a head still abuzz from the whiskey, I walked faster, kept my eyes straight ahead, and listened for the ominous calatripping of steps behind me. None came. But I did hear a different noise—a collection of noises to be more precise—the grinding snap of something large rolling over gravel, the low rumble of a large engine, the hiss and whine of breaks. I turned to see a large truck with an open bed and crawler treads instead of wheels. Half a block away, a small group of people were standing on the sidewalk looking at me, pointing, and making venomous gestures. The door to the cab opened, and Keith stepped out. I must not have looked my best, because he did not extend his hand for a shake but folded his arms over his chest, cocked his head to one side, and looked at me through narrowed eyes.

"Didn't I give you a ride couple of days ago?" he said.

"Four," I said.

"Lost again?"

"I wasn't lost the first time."

"But you are now." Not a question.

"Maybe a little."

"You're a marble in a maze."

I didn't know how to respond to that, so I asked him if he could give me a ride to the address from Carolyn's phone. The price at least had not gone up. In truth, I was so relieved I



would not have to walk the entire distance that I gladly paid the fifty dollars. I climbed onto the truck bed. I was the only passenger.

The four-lane road cut a straight line through the city, then, near the northern end, we turned east and followed another wide street past small houses and four-unit apartment buildings. The terrain grew hilly, and in front of us, spanning two hills, was a highway overpass. I could hear the traffic whirring above us as we crossed under it. Broad exit and entrance ramps extended from the overpass to the street, and beyond them a straight line divided the ruined pavement from the smooth, black asphalt of a newly resurfaced road. Here Keith stopped the truck, exited the cab, and came around to the back.

"This is as far as I go," he said.

"Really? Why?"

"Well, technically, this is Edena, not Coyle City, and I only work in Coyle. But I called you cab—should be here in a few minutes."

He backed the truck onto the exit ramp, turned around, and drove away. I walked to the nearest intersection. A minute later, a cab pulled up. I gave the driver Vaarlock's address, and we rolled away through winding, hilly, suburban streets.

### *An inauspicious arrival*

Vaarlock's house lay on a large lot at the eastern edge of the suburb. The cab let me off at the side of the road. The gravel driveway, almost hidden by a thicket of dogwoods and sumacs, wound in a broad curve down a steep slope to the house, which stood on a small plateau on the hillside. The sun was behind a ridge, and the cicadas were droning loudly from the nearby trees as, unsteadily, I made my way through the bushes and down the driveway's malicious incline; I had not eaten anything that day, and I was feeling weak and heavy from the whiskeys. At the driveway's end stood a two-car garage. A camper trailer made of metal with rounded space-age edges and a domed roof stood between the house and garage, an old pickup parked near it. The front of the house was dominated by a large screened-in porch with a pointed roof and square wooden pillars. I climbed the three stairs and looked through the screen door. Inside the porch was a wooden framed sofa, several rattan chairs, a rug with geometrical patterns on the floor,

and, just under a large picture window, a little statue of a grinning gargoyle with tiny, vestigial wings sticking out of its back. Two terrariums, one with a pair of geckos and one with a dully shining snake rested on a walnut table, and near it was a tall cage containing three green and yellow parakeets. There were no lights on in the house, but the screen door was unlocked, so I stepped through it. The door into the house was about eight feet tall with leaded glass windows set into tiny rectangular frames. I rang the bell; a few moments later a lamp flicked on, shining through a multi-colored glass shade. Then a tall, older man with a pointed beard in a gray Nehru shirt and perfectly pressed black slacks appeared at the threshold. At the same moment, I heard footsteps behind me, and through the screen door came a very thin woman with a bird's nest of frizzy black hair, a hooked nose, a full lower lip but almost no upper lip at all, and large round eyes. She wore a thinly striped cotton summer dress that stretched nearly to the ground. I turned from one to the other, then took a step backwards so that I could address them both. But as I did, I felt a black mist spread from the base of my skull into my eyes. For a moment I was blind and upright; I thought the sensation would pass, but it did not. I collapsed to the floor.

*A guest of very low status*

It was still dark when I woke up, dizzy and disoriented. I was sitting on a cement floor leaning against a bare wall. Through a small hexagonal window above me came a faint yellow light, and by it, directly in front of me, I could see an old car, a Chevy Bel Air. So I was in the garage. After taking a few very deep breaths, I stood, unsteadily at first, and investigated my surroundings. To my right, below the small window, were two overhead doors, both closed. Behind me and to my left, in the wall I had been leaning against, was a narrow side door with a window that matched in size and shape that above the overheads. The Bel Air was the only car in the garage; the second space was empty. Against the wall on the far side of the Chevy was a workbench with three old stools, a steel toolbox, and a pegboard from which hung a handful of the usual tools: hammers, wrenches, screwdrivers, and a hacksaw. I was exhausted, nauseated, and still a little dizzy, and I also had an uncomfortably full bladder. To my relief, (I was not sure what to make of being shuttled into the garage) the side door was unlocked. I exited the garage, went out to the yard, and slowly made my way across the grass and weeds to the edge of the

plateau where I relieved myself. I had no idea what time it was; the house and trailer were both still and dark. Reluctantly, I went back to the garage, climbed into the back seat of the Chevy, and fell asleep.

When I woke up again, sunlight was coming through the two small windows, but the interior of the garage was still only dimly lit. As I climbed out of the car, a knock came at the door. I opened it to the woman from the night before, holding two cups of coffee, one of which she offered to me. She then led me to a patch of grass near her trailer where we both sat.

"What do you want with Vaarlock?" she said abruptly, pushing past pleasantries.

"Am I being screened?" I said. She smiled. "I'm given to understand he recently bought a piece of art that I'm interested in."

"I hope you don't think his condition will make it easier for you to get it off him."

"What condition would that be?" I asked calmly.

She squinted at me, her large, round eyes drawing into rippled slits, and I felt suddenly reduced to a paper cutout. She sipped her coffee.

"You don't know."

"I don't know anything about Mr. Vaarlock."

"And yet here you are."

"I'm not here to take advantage." She nodded. Sipped coffee.

"Jules hasn't left this place in over a year," she said. "He's a complete shut-in. The family hired me to take care of him, cook, do laundry, run errands and the like."

"And you live in the trailer?"

"That's not my choice. I've got a condo in Coyle, but getting back and forth is a pain in the ass, it's easier to just stay here."

"Why aren't you staying in the house?"

She shook her head and rolled her eyes, her thick hair rippling and rustling in the still summer air. "No one's gone into that house since I started working here," she said, "and probably for a very long time before that."

"Any advice?" I asked.

She stood and looked towards the top of the driveway. "Can't help you there," she said and entered the trailer.

*An awkward attempt at intimidation*

I stood and meandered over to the edge of the plateau. A half-hearted cicada drone emitted from the nearby trees, but other than that, the air was very quiet. From the plateau's edge, a steep, rocky dirt path led down to a broad valley with tall grass and few trees. The valley was cut by a wide stream, and, to my left, in the distance, a barbed wire fence wound towards then ran alongside it as far as I could see. Across the valley was a line of hills, the one directly opposite me taller than the one on which Vaarlock's house stood. Through the trees, I could make out a couple of roads and a few telephone lines draped over leaning poles, but there were no other houses. As I stood watching a turkey vulture draw lazy circles high above the hills, I heard a door slam behind me. When I turned around, I saw Vaarlock walking towards me quickly. He wore a short-sleeve shirt with bright stripes of color and dusty blue slacks, and he held something in his hand which, when he raised it and pointed it at me proved to be an antique pepperbox pistol.

"You haven't said a single word to me, and you've already put me to a lot of trouble," he said.

"Does that thing even work?" I asked.

"If I stand close enough." I suspected the old gun was a greater danger to Vaarlock than to me, but I didn't press the point. I held up my hands.

"I got your name and address from a woman named Carolyn Fuller," I said.

"I don't know who that is," said Vaarlock.

"Hmm... she's an associate of Ursula Skittleskopf?" (Yes, this came out, annoyingly, as a question.)

"Her I know, but I don't think much of her."

"I actually don't think much of her either, but she helped me find you."

"What do you want from me?"

"My understanding is that you recently bought a piece of art by Jacob Giraud from Gene Ayres, the owner of McKean's Curios. It's a miniature titled 'Future City.' I'm very interested in buying it from you. I'll give you over and above what you paid for it."

Vaarlock looked genuinely surprised.

"You came all this way for that paltry thing?" he said, lowering at last the pistol.

“It’s not rational, I admit, but there’s something about it that I really find compelling. Since I first saw a photo of it online, it’s almost as if I were meant to have it. If that makes sense. I mean, you’re a collector, right, you must have—”

Vaarlock interrupted me, his tone impatient. “Why not just talk to Gene? Why bring Ursula Skittleskopf into this?”

“Gene told me Skittleskopf had the miniature.”

Vaarlock crooked his elbow and stroked the gun barrels with this left hand.

“Where are you from?” he said.

“Chicago.”

Suddenly he laughed loudly. Not a mocking or derisive laughter, but a laughter of pure delight. When he recovered his composure, he turned and walked quickly towards the porch. At the screen door he looked back at me. “I’m going to need you to stay in the garage,” he said.

### *Keep your distance*

I was unsure of Vaarlock’s exact meaning. Was I to stay in the garage throughout the day, or merely sleep there? In either case, I had nothing to do with myself. After inspecting a little more thoroughly the garage’s interior (I discovered an old wooden downhill racer with no wheels, but nothing else I hadn’t seen that morning), I stretched out in the back seat of the Bel Air again and slept fitfully for a couple of hours. Towards evening, another knock sounded on the door. I climbed out of the car and answered. The woman from the trailer stood at the threshold with a tin plate on which was a chicken leg, some potato salad, and a fork.

“I brought you something to eat,” she said. “You looked pretty shaky this morning. The name’s Cynthia Kohl, by the way.”

I gave her my name as I took the food and sat on the garage floor. She remained standing. In the muted, filmy light of the garage, her eyes looked like gray circles without pupil or iris, other than that, her face wore a kind expression.

“Thanks for the food,” I said. “It’s been a rough couple of days. Is this from your kitchen or Vaarlock’s?”

“It’s from Jules’ refrigerator, but I do most of the cooking for him.”

“Do you like working for him?”

“No. But I need the job.”

She had left the door to the garage open, and through it, I could see the house. Vaarloek was on the porch with a glass in his hand.

“Is he watching us?” I asked. She nodded.

“I don’t want to make things weird for you,” I said, “but do you maybe have an extra bed or a couch I could rent? I slept in the car last night.”

She lowered her lids and shook her head once to the right.

“You should know,” she said. “Jules is a little paranoid, and he definitely doesn’t trust me. I’ve worked for him for more than a year, and I haven’t been inside that house once, and if he thought you and I did more than say hi to each other, he’d have the cops throw you onto the road like a bag of sand. So I guess it’s up to you. You could crash on my couch tonight and be gone in the morning, or you can put up with Jules’ inhospitable impulses and maybe get what you came here for.”

“Got it. I guess the Bel Air’s not so bad after all.”

But the night was long, and I slept quite badly.

### *I pass another test*

Morning. Drifting between sleep and wakefulness, I barely heard the knock on the garage door, but this time, Cynthia entered without waiting for a response. Again with two cups of coffee. She leaned against the garage wall as I stumbled out of the Bel Air, stood, and took a cup from her hand. Trying to look nonchalant, though I had a throbbing headache, I leaned against the car facing her. A faint smile flashed briefly across her face then suddenly curdled beneath a wrinkled nose.

“How long have you been in those clothes?” she asked.

“I guess it’d be six days now,” I said.

“If Jules wants to meet with you, do yourself a favor and stand downwind.”

She exited the garage. Only an overwhelming sense of purpose kept me from feeling completely humiliated. Through the window in the door, I watched her walk back to and enter

the trailer, then I went out to the little patch of grass where we'd had coffee the morning before and sat. Nothing stirred in house or trailer during the half hour or so I spent drinking my coffee. When I was finished, I took my cup back into the garage and put it on the workbench next to the tin plate from the night before. A few flies were buzzing around the remains of the potato salad, but they were not a serious annoyance, so I left them alone. Vaarloek had instructed me to remain in the garage, and I would certainly comply, however, I was determined to reduce my discomfort as much as possible. As the morning sun rose and the garage grew stuffy, I opened both overhead doors as well as the side door that faced the house. There was little breeze, but the extra light provided at least some mental comfort. I waited. I'm not sure how much time passed, but eventually, Vaarloek appeared on the porch carrying a small card table. He came through the screen door and set the table up on the walkway between the house and garage. After looking first towards the trailer, then towards the road, then, finally, straight at me through the side door, he approached the garage. His right hand clutched a pistol, another antique but of more recent vintage than the pepperbox, this one a long-barreled revolver. I am not well versed in antique firearms, but I believe it was a Colt Buntline. I had been sitting in the front seat of the Bel Air with the driver's side door open, looking out. Vaarloek stood just outside the overhead door, the gun not pointed at me, but at his side. He wore a white, collarless linen shirt with a square hem, untucked, and gray slacks with thin green stripes. For a moment, I pondered over the apparent fact that, for a recluse, he took great care with this wardrobe. I stood and faced him.

"I'm gonna show you something," he said abruptly. He turned and walked towards the house again. I followed. When we reached the card table, he turned, gun held casually but generally pointed in my direction. "Wait here," he said.

He walked, not through the porch, but around the side of the house towards the back. A moment later, he returned carrying an object awkwardly, supporting it with the knuckles of his right hand which was still wrapped around the pistol, gripping it tightly with his left.

It was the Giraud. "Future City."

He placed it on top of the card table. I felt light-headed and for a moment thought I might pass out again, but this time the feeling passed. I knelt in front of the table and looked closely at the miniature. Physically present, it was even more compelling—the hard angles of the Platonic solids and prisms, the graceful cylinders, the onion dome of the greenhouse in the park. At the center of that same park rose a structure resembling a water tower with a slender support shaft

and a bulbous ellipsoid at the top. It rose high above the other buildings and gave the entire composition a sense of upward motion. Strangely, I hadn't noticed this feature in the online photograph—perhaps it had been out of frame. The whole diorama rested on a rectangular platform about six inches tall in the side of which were several switches and a socket for an electrical cord. That the buildings in the piece could be lit from the inside was something I hadn't even considered. Reflexively, I lifted my hand towards the tall tower.

“I think you know better than that,” said Vaarlock. I withdrew it immediately.

“I...” No words came to the little man who knelt on the ground in front of the Giraud, sweating in the late morning sun. Vaarlock pointed the pistol skyward.

“I'd like you to go back to the garage now,” he said.

“But...” I managed to stand. Vaarlock was looking me in the eyes, a reptilian, unwavering gaze. He lowered the pistol and was absolutely calm.

*A step forward (or patience rewarded)*

From the Bel Air, I watched Vaarlock lift the Giraud and carry it around to the back of the house then retrieve the card table. For a couple of hours, I didn't see either him or Cynthia. Hunger and lack of sleep must have overtaken me, because, when Vaarlock approached me again, I was half lying across the front seat of the car, driver's side door open, legs sticking out, left leg straight, right bent with foot on the garage floor. He said something, rather loudly, perhaps my name, though I doubt he remembered it at that point. I started and sat up, looking at him blearily. This time, he was unarmed.

“You know,” he said, “you might be more comfortable on the porch.”

“You sure?” I asked.

“No,” he said, “but I doubt you're in any shape to be a real threat.”

“Thank you,” I said. At that point, I was quite sincere.

I followed him up to the house—he'd put a pillow and a rough wool blanket on the porch couch towards which gestured for me to sit. Assuming we would be starting negotiations at this point, I began to ask Vaarlock what had drawn him to the Giraud in the first place, but before I could get three words out, he'd gone back into the house, and I heard the click of the deadbolt



behind him. Suddenly, a droning whine shot through my head. I thought I was suffering some sort of attack, but soon realized the noise came from cicadas in the nearby trees. Relieved, I leaned my head back and tried to nap, but the noise kept me from sleeping. When I opened my eyes, Cynthia was standing in front of me.

“He invite you up here?” she said. I nodded, pursing my lips, frowning a bit, as if to say my being on the porch was nothing out of the ordinary.

“It’s a good sign, right?”

“Don’t take anything he says too personally. He really doesn’t know how to interact with other people.”

“He’s a flower that thrives in isolation.” I’m sure this phrase only popped out of my mouth because I wasn’t thinking straight.

“That’s a strange thing to say.”

“Someone I knew used to say it.”

“Well, good luck with whatever transaction you can manage with him.”

She slipped out through the screen door.

I meandered around the porch—the snakes were impassive, the lizards skittled about first moving quickly then standing still as statues, and the parakeets whistled, chirped, and flapped their wings. I relieved myself again at the edge of the plateau. I walked three times around the garage. I tried unsuccessfully again to nap. I counted floorboards. I designed a stand for the Giraud in my head. The sun was just disappearing behind the hill when Vaarloek at last reappeared. He had a paper plate in his hand—another chicken leg and mound of potato salad. As one might imagine, I ate rather quickly. He then offered me a brandy, which I unwisely accepted.

“Cynthia told you my family hired her, didn’t she?” he said quietly.

“Yes,” I said.

“That’s a lie,” he said.

“What does your family say?”

“I haven’t talked to them in six months. I can’t even say good morning to any of them without their reading something into it. Cynthia is after something, she’s only pretending to help me so she can get close to it. I don’t know if my family is in on it, or if she’s just managed to trick them into thinking she’s looking after me.”

“What does she want?”

“That’s what really gets under my skin. I don’t know. Something in the house, something I’ve collected, probably without understanding its real value. I’ve spent hours making charts of everything I’ve collected over the past two years, but I can’t figure it out.”

“You don’t think it’s the Giraud, do you?”

Vaarlock paused, shook his head, downed his brandy, and poured another. “‘Future City’ is a novelty, not important, ‘s’why at first I didn’t think I could trust you, cause who would care so much about that thing? But you know, when I saw the way you reacted when you saw it, I knew you were being straight with me.”

“But if you’re paying her, couldn’t you just—”

“I’m not paying her. My family says they are, but they haven’t said one thing to me that isn’t a lie in the last five years.”

“This is your house. Couldn’t the police...?”

“She tells them I’m a helpless old man, and they believe her. She tells them stories about me, and they shake their heads sadly and offer to help *her*. Besides, if she is in cahoots with my family, kicking her out would give them just the pretext they need to white-coat me.”

“Was she hired through an agency? Maybe they can find somebody else.”

“She just showed up. She could say anything.”

Vaarlock downed his brandy and went into the house. He left behind the paper plate, plastic fork, two glasses, and the bottle of brandy. I looked out at the trailer. The blinds were drawn. I had a third and fourth brandy. The couch was pretty comfortable, and I slept well for the first time since leaving The Aegis.

### *Fortune’s a right whore*

The sun was piercing the tree cover on the hill opposite the house when the chirping of parakeets woke me up. There was a cup of coffee on the table near the couch, and on the floor, a bucket of water with a washcloth draped over the side and a change of clothes: a pair of drawstring shorts sporting primary polka dots of various sizes, a yellow t-shirt with a screen print of the Hawaiian Islands in silhouette, and a pair of bright orange flip-flops. Behind a short

evergreen near the edge of the plateau I stripped, sponged myself off (the water was surprisingly hot) then put on the shorts and t-shirt. (Yes, I looked ridiculous, but a wash and a change of clothes no matter how unbecoming, was at that point more necessity than luxury.) The lizards and snake were restive, the parakeets a bit noisy as I returned to the porch. For the first time, in daylight, I peered in through the large picture window and saw a living room with modern furniture, hardwood floors decorated here and there with small area rugs bearing Frank Lloyd Wright designs, and a limestone fireplace. I did not see Vaarlock. As I sat again on the couch and began to finish (began to finish?) my coffee, which had an oily flavor that was odd, but not unpleasant, Cynthia emerged from the trailer. She smiled and waved at me then got into the pickup. I watched as it climbed the steep driveway then disappeared behind the sumac and dogwoods onto the road.

“GET OFF MY PORCH, YOU BASTARDING, PIG-FUCKING SON OF A BITCH!!!”

Even before he appeared, Vaarlock’s voice echoed through the house. I stood up quickly, and as the front door swung rather violently open, I saw with some alarm that he now held a Mauser, a pistol of recent enough manufacture that it might actually be effective in ushering me from this mortal coil. I stumbled backward through the screen door, down the porch stairs, and fell on the lawn. Vaarlock stood over me.

“What do you really want? Why are you here?” he shouted.

I lifted my head and shoulders off the ground as far as I could and held up my hands. “I’ve been completely straight with you since I got here,” I said.

“You’re working with Kohl! I saw the two of you last night, scuttling about, whisper talking, those clothes, that’s some kind of code. What does she want? Fucking tell me!”

The gun was dancing in his hand. His face was red. “I think you’ve made a mistake,” I said, the stupidity of those words plain even as I uttered them, but unable to think of anything else to say.

“I’m calling the cops. You can wait for them in the garage.”

So I found myself once again enjoying the style and comfort of the Chevy Bel Air. The overheads and side door were still open when I returned to the garage, but I closed them up to give myself some privacy and at least the illusion of security while I tried to put together an explanation for the police that would keep me out of jail.

*Cynthia Kohl reveals herself*

Two hours later: the police had not arrived, and Cynthia had not yet returned. I wasn't really sure why Vaarlock continued to tolerate my presence—perhaps he was waiting for Cynthia to return so he could confront us together, perhaps he simply wanted her to know that he had discovered our “plot,” perhaps he hoped my presence would provide a pretext for the police to finally remove her from his property. Whatever the reason, it seemed I had a tiny slice of time during which I might persuade Vaarlock that “Future City” was the only thing I wanted from him. Yet in the garage's stuffy, confining interior, I was having trouble developing a coherent strategy. I thought that if I got away from Vaarlock's suspicious eye, I might be able to think more clearly. I stood, went to the side door, and looked through the window at the house. There was no sign of Vaarlock, but I was sure he was watching the garage. Suddenly, I felt dizzy, but I managed to get ahold of the doorframe to steady myself, and in a few moments, my head cleared. I crossed the strip of grass outside Cynthia's trailer, went to the edge of the plateau, and started making my way down the rocky path to the creek in the valley below the house. About halfway down the hill, I fell and rolled to the valley floor. Except for a few scrapes on my left knee, I wasn't injured, but when I got to the creek, I was sweating and breathing hard. After kneeling down and splashing my face with the cold, clear water, I felt better, so I stood and walked slowly along the bank. Dragonflies buzzed around my head and water striders flitted about the water's surface. Here and there, in small, crooked trees, red-winged blackbirds sat. Occasionally they swooped over my head, shrieking loudly. I followed the stream for about half a mile, and though there was no path, the grass was short, and the way was not difficult. Eventually, I came to the barbed wire fence I had seen from the plateau with a NO TRESPASSING sign bolted to one of its support posts. I stood there for some time, looking at the hills on the other side of the valley, trying unsuccessfully to conjure up a plan by which to win Vaarlock's good graces. At last, preparing to resign myself to failure, I turned back towards the house and found myself facing Cynthia. No doubt my walk along the creek easily could have been observed from the plateau—what flummoxed me was that she had approached me in absolute silence.

“What are you doing down here? You're not allowed,” she said, an edge in her voice.

I started to respond, but there was something in her eyes that stopped me from talking. Her hair was writhing, tight curls that that moved against the wind, highlights flashing in the sun; her eyes unblinking stared at me. She stood still, left hand on her hip, right hand raised in the air. A high-pitched whine filled my ears then a heavy stiffness crept over my body, and I was paralyzed. She took three steps toward me, her eyes wide, serpentine locks writhing all around her face, and circled me three times, slowly; she was muttering as she walked, performing some secret ritual. I tried to understand what was happening but the siren whine in my ears stopped me from thinking clearly. Then she stood close behind me, her breath tickling my ear.

“Go home, asshole,” she said. I did not see her walk away.

I stood unmoving, hosting the gnats, flies and mosquitoes that bit me with impunity. I tasted bile at the back of my throat. Sweat poured into my eyes, I could not blink, and soon, all I could see was a watery blur. I tried to focus, tried to understand the circumstances I was in, flashed back to the Gorgon in the mural, every coincidence hides intent, and I realized then that Vaarlock had been wrong—the Giraud *was* what Kohl wanted, and she was trying to prevent me from acquiring it. It was clear to me at that moment that Vaarlock had turned on me because she had led him to believe we were working together. She wanted to leave me isolated, but she had overplayed her hand. In moving against me, she revealed that she was working with Skittleskopf to acquire the Giraud for her, for their, own dark purposes. In the scaenarium I asked why I hadn’t been turned to stone. The Medusa had replied that I wasn’t important. Clearly things had changed. I cast my mind back over the events of the previous week trying to understand how they were connected. (It may seem here that these connections came at once to my mind in a clear and rational way, but, as I stood there for hours unable to move, able only to think, they assembled themselves but slowly, one fragment at a time.) What I sussed through that long afternoon of immobility:

From my very first phone call to Gene Ayres, the wheels were set in motion, strategies set to prevent me from reaching my goal. Elisabeth attempted to seduce me away from it, but could not hide her contempt;

Skittleskopf attempted to distract me, then to wear me down and force me off of my path towards the Giraud—and she would have succeeded if it had not been for Carolyn;

Kohl, the last line of defense, first attempted to turn Vaarlock against me, then turned to overt confrontation.

The one thing I didn't understand was this: why hadn't Ayres simply told me the Giraud was sold? A possible explanation for this was revealed only later—in fact, later events forced me to question all of these assumptions, but at that moment I was working with the knowledge I had at hand. I felt a black rage building inside me—in truth, it was probably to my advantage that I couldn't move, for those long hours by the creek gave me the opportunity to focus my anger and to make a plan. I don't know if I had been drugged again (the oily flavor of the coffee was reminiscent of the hallucinogen I had ingested at The Aegis) or if I had simply fallen victim to the power of suggestion, but I did know Cynthia meant to intimidate me and thus exhort me to leave empty-handed. Her actions, however, only strengthened my resolve.

### *How I acquired the Giraud*

By the time I could move again, the sky was dark, and the moon was disappearing behind the hill on which Vaarlock's house stood. Walking slowly and as quietly as I could, I made my way back to the garage. I took a screwdriver and an awl from the tool rack then, using a hacksaw sawed the handle off of the fork that still lay on the tin dinner plate. Using alternately my foot, then the handle of a hammer, I bent the tines of the fork back at a ninety-degree angle, then I went out to the driveway. The trailer was unlit. I jimmied the door with the screwdriver and crept in. The blinds over one window were open, and the garage's yellow bulb gave just enough light for me to see the furnishings in silhouette. To my right, a curtain separated the bedroom from the rest of the trailer. I could hear Cynthia's shallow breathing which had not changed during my entry. To my left was a kitchen, and beyond that, a built-in couch and two chairs. The keys to the truck were on a counter just to the left of a tiny stove. Luckily for me, Cynthia's phone was lying next to the keys, so I took that, too. I slid the bent tines of the fork into the door latch and closed the door. The fork protruded from door and jamb, the tines forming three little loops; I slid the severed handle into the center loop, sealing the door shut. Putting the truck in neutral and using the slope of the driveway, I backed it up to the trailer and fastened the hitch. There were some wires that would have connected the brake lights to the truck, but they were complicated, so I left them alone—I correctly hoped that if I stuck to county trunks I would escape the notice of anyone who might get in my way. As I went up the driveway, I could hear Kohl banging on the

door, so I accelerated and took the turn onto the road abruptly. I heard a crash that I assumed was Kohl falling to the floor, and after that no further noise. For about four hours, I drove east over two-lane state and county highways, passing through only three small towns and seeing almost no traffic. When I was certain I was far from any town no matter how small, I pulled off the highway and onto a gravel path leading through an open field to a limestone quarry that, judging from the woody, viny growth emerging from the rock faces, had been long abandoned. I parked, unhitched the trailer, and punctured its tires with the awl. No cars passed me during the drive back to Vaarlock's house.

By the clock in Kohl's truck, it was close to 9 a.m. by the time I returned. I parked about a quarter of a mile up the road then walked down the hill to the driveway. The screen door to the porch was locked, so I knocked as loudly as I could, then slapped the door with the palm of my hand making it rattle a bit in the frame. Finally, he emerged. I didn't say anything but gave him a few long moments to notice that the trailer was gone. He looked at me, head tilted to one side, pitched a half-smile, then walked back into the house. A couple of minutes later, he re-emerged with the Giraud and a hard-boiled egg. He did not ask about Cynthia, certainly understanding that the less he knew the better. Using Vaarlock's laptop, I transferred money from my checking account to his. I did not know how much he'd paid for it himself, so I had no idea how thoroughly I was being cheated.

The Giraud miniature was, without a doubt, the most difficult acquisition of my life. One would expect, once I held it in my hands, that I would ask myself if taking possession of it had been worth the effort, but I did not. In fact, at that moment, the trials of the past week seemed completely inconsequential. I did wonder briefly if Kohl would return to Vaarlock's house, but I was certain I would be in Chicago before she could extricate herself from my ambush. The Giraud was mine. Everything else was chimerical.

I packed the miniature carefully in an old cardboard box padded with newspaper and walked up the driveway out to the road and to the truck. At the overpass over Coyle City's border, I stopped momentarily then proceeded slowly over the broken streets until the truck's rear axle broke, at which point I collected the Giraud and continued on foot.

### *The end of the story*

If I had not left my keys and phone at Elisabeth's, I would not have returned. In fact, if my boarding pass were not on the phone, I would have left it in the rented room and considered it a loss worth cutting. (With a call to my landlord, I easily could have replaced the keys.) As it was, though, I needed to retrieve it. I had hoped to use Kohl's phone to guide myself back, but it was password protected, so I smashed it and left the remains scattered about the street near the truck. The details of my long walk are mundane and tedious, so I will leave them out. It is quite enough to relate simply that I resorted to the advice of numerous strangers, who responded with a wide array of rudeness (including insulting comments on the polka-dotted shorts I was wearing), for directions, ate copious tavuk and kofte kebabs at a Mediterranean restaurant, and finally reached the house near nightfall. Wanting to avoid any contact with my hostess, I found a corner bar and had a couple of gin and tonics. Close to midnight, I went to my room.

The door was unlocked, the bed was made, and my meager belongings, including, thankfully, keys and phone, were undisturbed. I stripped quickly and threw away the t-shirt and shorts, though I had to keep the flip-flops (I had left my shoes at Vaarlock's). After a long shower, I laid out clothes for the next morning and packed the rest. My sleep was deep and dreamless.

I had intended to leave quickly and quietly, but when I woke up, the box containing the Giraud was not in the room. Though in a state of consternation, I at least had the presence of mind to pocket my phone, wallet, and keys, before rushing out. Finding no one at the front of the house, I circled to the back yard where Elisabeth stood on the porch in cutoff shorts and a black tank top decorated with a constellation of human skulls. The electric blue nail polish had been cleaned away from her hands, the left of which held her slingshot. On the ground about thirty feet from the porch stood the Giraud. To my horror, I watched as she drew back the sling and let a shot fly, a shot that snapped the delicate water tower in two. A second shot tore through Future City, splintering the small buildings and tearing up the trees. Her ammunition this time was not sandstone, but steel ball bearings. I shouted and ran toward her at which point Elisabeth trained the sling on me, striking my left shoulder and causing me a staggering amount of pain. Another step, another hit, then Elisabeth turned and fired again at the Giraud. Her speed and accuracy



were quite impressive. My next step was towards the half-demolished miniature; her next shot whizzed past by ear but was followed quickly by one that struck my chest.

“Go home, asshole!” she shouted. Another shot, another hit. Two more shots at the Giraud left it beyond all repair. As she turned the slingshot again on me, I ran, the flip-flops hampering my stride considerably, through the yard to the front of the house, across the creek, and up the stairs to Benmarra where I stood with feet rubbed raw, holding less than I came with, waiting for the bus.

On the plane back to Chicago, I contemplated the series of events that had swept me along like a paper boat in a creek. Elisabeth’s actions had confused me and caused me to question the assumptions I had made about her, Skittleskopf, Kohl, and the miniature. Was the destruction of the Giraud the endgame? Did the Gorgon’s followers know I would bring it back to Elisabeth’s house? There were three Gorgons in the Greek myth—certainly Skittleskopf, Kohl, and Elisabeth had been working in concert, but how did they coordinate their efforts? And if the destruction of the Giraud were the ultimate goal, why would Cynthia have tried to stop me from acquiring it? Was her assault on me an elaborate ruse to bestow upon my endeavor a sense of urgency? Yet perhaps the destruction of the Giraud was but a last resort to prevent it from falling into my, or anyone else’s hands. Perhaps they meant to acquire it and wanted to use me to do so to avoid bringing suspicion onto them. Perhaps they did not anticipate the commitment and resolve with which I pursued “Future City.” To this day, I do not fully understand the matrix of schemes in which I found myself embroiled. The actions I took myself I viewed as inconsequential. I was but a pawn in a larger game, and a pawn does not understand the chess match it’s a part of—a pawn is merely an instrument that must keep moving forward until the game ends.