

A
NOVEL

SHADOW MAN

"A more eloquent exploration of memory than any other book I've read, including Julian Barnes' Man Booker Prize-winning *The Sense of an Ending*."

BARBARA DEMICK,
author of *Nothing to Envy*

J E F F R E Y F L E I S H M A N

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v3.1

For my parents

ANNE AND TONY

and the memories they keep alive.

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About the Author

Reading Group Guide

I remember him coming home from shipyards and factories, boots clicking and thumping down the sidewalk, and him whistling and smoking a rolled cigarette, metal flakes in his hair, hands stained and chipped as if he were wandering in from a war. Then into the kitchen for a gulp of beer; if it was summer, he'd step onto the back stoop and stare over rooftops and antennas to the gathering moon. The sky soothed him. Twilight was his time, not that he ever told me to stay away; it's just that sometimes you know when not to crowd a man. I watched him through the screen, setting my breaths to his and staying invisible, like a spy or a saint or a moth in the shadows.

I can't even recall yesterday and here I am tracing the edges of decades ago — I think it's been that long — in a Philly neighborhood of men standing on stoops and drinking Gennep. They were statues, all of them, different shapes and sizes, yes, but statues all the same, with arms raised, cocked arms and tilted-back heads. Sips and slurps played into the night and crumpled cans clattered off the rims of garbage bins as women hurried suppers onto tables and boys like me crossed ourselves, bowed for grace, and counted our sins. What keeps drifting through me, though, like breeze off a sea, is that summer after Mom died, the same year Richard Nixon scowled sweaty and sinister and I started noticing newspaper headlines and halter tops. For some reason girls in halter tops stand out; bare shoulders and tanned backs moving in wondrous rhythms. It was the year my dad told me to call him Kurt.

He was painting navy ships. His days were creosote, endless cans of flat gray (You ever consider, Jim, how many goddamn cans of paint go on an aircraft carrier?), and the salt-egg diesel-in-the-water-tang of the *Delaware* before she slipped her shoals and opened to the Atlantic. He'd get transfixed by oil slicks of purple, gold, and aluminum shimmying past him in the water like abstract paintings, pondering their molecular structures, deciphering maps and designs in the thread-lines of their intricate shapes. He'd come home exhausted. Our house smelled of Bengay and rubbing ointments and was scattered with bandages that seemed like shards and pieces of ghosts. Blackened jeans hung on doorknobs and white T-shirts turned amber with sweat and streaked with gray and muddied red, were draped over the banister as if a man could shed himself, peeling to nakedness and standing in the shower with steam seeping through the second floor like fog.

That was Kurt five days a week, sometimes six if the foreman offered overtime, but never on Sunday. Kurt had a passion most guys who painted ships didn't: tennis. He loved it especially the few times he played on grass, the skitter and slide of the ball, its unpredictability. Growing up, he didn't like football or baseball, so he'd head to the tennis court with its drooped net that looked like laundry shot up by a machine gun. He learned the game from an old guy who wore overalls and walked his dog around the playground. This old guy reveled in the game's mathematical complexities. He passed his tricks on to Kurt — the topspin, the slice backhand, the toss on the serve, the way to sneak in for a volley. "Creep like an aberration," the old guy would say, rasping and huffing when he spoke.

Every US Open, he'd drive Kurt to Jake's Tavern and they'd sit studying the players like they were two rich guys at Flushing Meadows, the old guy breaking peanuts and drinkin

beer, Kurt sipping soda till he nearly exploded, the dog lying on the cool floor. The old guy's favorite saying was: "Hit the ball on the rise, that's where the magic lies." One day, the old guy didn't show up, and then didn't show up the next, either. Kurt had heard something happened to him, but it was vague, whispered. Kurt didn't want to know, really, so he let it go, gratified to have the can of balls and the racquet and a book of diagrams the old guy had left him. But he'd tell me later that he wondered about that old guy; said you can't forget a man who gives you something that's deep inside yourself to begin with. You're bound to find it probably through the ages.

On Sundays, Kurt would lose his workingman self. He'd get up early and go to his special drawer, the one holding his white tennis shorts, white shirt, and white wool socks. They were the only clothes he ever ironed and he'd get mad as hell if I so much as peeked in the drawer. He'd dress, tiptoe past my room, and head out the door on pale legs, walking up the burned-brick street, past the flats of his working buddies who teased him about being uppity, joking with him about wanting a "spot of tea," then he'd jump on the El and cross out of the city to neighborhoods with lawn sprinklers and tennis courts with no cracks. I went with him a few times. He was compact and graceful, flowing across the court like rain squiggling down a window. He was quick, too, hitting lines and angles, holding his power until needed. His serve curved and kicked in hard, and his backhand was a one-handed swoop of symmetric perfection. He cursed under his breath when he missed a shot; an unforced error was a dreaded thing. Those rich guys from the suburbs didn't know what this scarred, rough paint of ships might do. But those times on the court were the only times I saw Kurt not as a father but as a man, a man who was part of me, yes, but one who had another dimension. I never asked him about it, but as I got older I understood there are parts that don't surrender to what the rest of you becomes. It is my experience that men have more of these parts than women, and that's what breaks them in the end, although I may be wrong. I have not studied it thoroughly.

The summer I called my dad Kurt was also known to Kurt and me as the summer of Vera. She burst into our neighborhood diner on a Friday night, one of those people you hear coming before you see them, not like the cowboys in the movies who ride in from way off the distance without making a sound. Vera jangled. She plucked a menu from the slot next to the silver cash register and pulled it to her eyes and ran her fingers across each line as if she were reading Dostoevsky or a lawn mower manual, something you had to pay real close attention to. Everyone looked up quick, got a glance, and then stared down at the Formica tops, counting those little gold flecks, hoping, praying this woman would pass them the way a storm skims in real close and then mysteriously whirls away. She spotted Kurt and me sitting by the window, minding our own business, trying to scrunch small, but you can't get too small in a window seat, especially at night when the lights outside put you on a kind of stage. She headed right for us. Kurt said under his breath: "Shit."

"You boys look lonely."

"No, we're pretty good," Kurt said.

"Well, you look lonely to me. What are your names? Mine's Vera, and I'm tired of driving. Exasperated, you might say. I saw this ragged-lit place from the road. You know Edward Hopper? This diner could have slipped off one of his canvases." She held up a spoon, polished it with a napkin. "I need some tea. Tea with lemon. I prefer it that way, although I know the

Brits drink it with milk, but I never did trust the Brits, not since my first boyfriend, he was Brit, ran off with a good friend, at the time it seemed she was, anyway. Scooch over and let me in.”

Vera slid next to Kurt and kept chattering. Chatterers drove him insane, the same way unforced errors did. I was still trying to figure out Edward Hopper.

Vera’s face was fury and delight. Soft yet angular, it was hardened by eyeliner and lipstick, a face you could kiss and fight with in a single moment. I decided she was pretty, especially in profile. Her voice, despite its chattiness, was husky, bruised almost, a late-night-movie voice kind of like Lizabeth Scott’s, this old Hollywood actress with a slight lisp Kurt was in love with. Every Sunday when the *Inquirer* hit the doorstep, he’d grab the *TV Guide* and go through each day of the week hoping for a Lizabeth Scott movie. If he found one, a little howl would echo through the house and he’d circle the time and channel, and if it wasn’t too late, maybe a little past midnight, he’d haul me to the TV to watch it with him. I was more into Wonder Woman, but there was something alluring about Lizabeth Scott, luminous in black and white, like she was part of an ancient story that would keep playing even after the TV went off and the glow on the screen shrank to the size of a dime before going dark.

Vera kept talking and Kurt kept sliding in the booth and Vera kept sliding after him, until Kurt was pretty much pressed against the window. “I’m glad I met you two fine gentlemen,” said Vera. “You live around here?”

“Up the street a ways. Not close, in fact it’s kinda far, now that I think about it. It’s pretty far, huh, Jim?”

“A good ways away.”

“Well, Kurt, here’s the deal. I need a place to stay. I’m in a little trouble.”

“What kind?”

“The kind a woman gets into and can’t easily get out of.”

“That could be a lot of things.”

“A man.”

“What kind of man?”

“The worst damn kind.”

“I don’t know, Vera. Me and the boy stay to ourselves.”

We were definitely in a Lizabeth Scott moment. Kurt knew it, too. It came over his face the way a mathematical equation suddenly makes sense to you. But Kurt was holding back, and Vera kept pressing. She ordered more tea and played with lemon slices like they were tiny suns setting in Kurt’s periphery. Kurt kept his eyes straight ahead, sometimes looking at me to help him out, and I kept trying to think of something, but deep down I didn’t mind if Vera came home with us. It had been a lonely house.

“This man,” said Kurt, “is he big?”

“Not especially. But he’s meaner than hell. He once shot two guys in the same day.”

Kurt moved in his seat.

“Man, Kurt, you’re easy. I’m teasing you. The guy’s not big, but he’s evil, sinister. Like a phantom.”

It was hard to know if she was telling the truth.

“I don’t want to know about it,” Kurt said.

“Best not to.”

Vera reached over and brushed the hair off my forehead with her fingers. It felt strange and nice, and she told me that I looked a little like Kurt, only handsomer, which made me smile, and I could see Kurt wanted to smile, too, but he stayed quiet by the window thinking. Vera hummed “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” by the Rolling Stones and asked me if I wanted to dance, but I said no. I had never seen anyone dance in the diner, except when Billy Doyle played “Fly Me to the Moon” on the jukebox and danced with a bottle of Thunderbird and an imaginary girlfriend after he pitched a no-hitter in church-league softball. Vera hummed another tune and reached for Kurt’s hand; no woman had touched that hand since Mom died.

“I need help,” she said.

Kurt told me to go pay the check. I watched from the cash register as he leaned in and talked to Vera as if he were bargaining over the price of a stolen watch. I didn’t know what he would do, but by the time I got back with the change, Kurt was standing by the booth, and in the next instant we were strolling out the door with Vera between us. She laced her arms into Kurt’s and mine and said an adventure was beginning. It seemed surreal to be walking through our neighborhood with this new person leaning warm against me. Surreal being a word I’d discovered along with luminous a few days earlier on my daily scan of the dictionary in which I had promised Mom to learn every English word before I died. I told that to Vera and she kept repeating “surreal,” saying she liked the way it curled in her mouth and melted away.

We got to the house and opened the door and, suddenly, I felt Mom’s presence. She was cool on my shoulder, the way nighttime air whistles through a window crack. She died the winter before the summer Dad said I could call him Kurt. She was making a cake and had run out of brown sugar so she hurried out of the house and down the street to Merle’s Market, and when she was coming back, a Fleetwood skidded on ice, jumped onto the sidewalk, and killed her. A Fleetwood in our neighborhood meant a bookie or a mob-connected guy was tracking debt in the numbers racket. We never found out. No one saw the license plate, and the car sped away in a black flash through the snow. Mom had left the oven on preheat, flour on the table, and two egg yolks in a Pyrex mixing bowl. That scene was as precise as a still life, more vivid than her funeral mass or the way the sleet blew sideways when men my dad worked with burned the frost off the dirt and lowered Mom into the earth. I missed her; her linen dresses and her scent — Chanel and Clabber Girl Baking Soda — and her slacks and hair shirts and her hair pulled back and bouncing. She would slide behind me, wrap me in her arms, and whisper in my ear, and sometimes she’d make me cut vegetables for dinner, laughing as onions made us both cry and joking until Dad (Kurt) got home and pulled out a beer, washed his face in the sink, and turned and hugged her, her back bending on his broad forearms, telling him to get cleaned up better than that if he wanted to get kissed back, which he always did, but not before he stepped out on the stoop and breathed in the ending of the day. That’s the pretty version and the one I’m sticking with, but to be honest, the real version was not that far off. We were happy.

Vera wasn’t the kind of woman to be shy about taking another woman’s space. She stepped across the threshold and told Kurt to put water on for tea and then she went upstairs and took a bath. She came down an hour later in one of Kurt’s T-shirts and a pair of cutoffs and

sat at the kitchen table as if she'd been living in that house since it was built. Kurt seemed mystified, too, and we looked at each other as if to say, *Who's going to tell her the rules?* but neither of us said a thing until Vera poked into the refrigerator and sighed. "Kurt, where are the lemons?"

We never had lemons in the house, but Kurt said, "Hmmm. We must be out." Without another word, Vera grabbed her bulky macramé, fringe-swinging purse and disappeared out the door. Kurt looked at me and said: "I don't know if I like her or not, but she is direct." Unabashed, I thought, and went to the dictionary.

Vera came back with lemons, oranges, and grapefruits and squeezed them all into a pitcher and shoved it in the freezer and started talking about Cairo and the pyramids and the Nile and about these guys called muezzins who sing prayers from minarets shaped like flutes and how on a feast called Eid they slaughter sheep across the city, blood flowing in the streets and alleys and everyone giving thanks to Allah and feeding the poor.

"How do you know all this?" said Kurt.

"I was there, honey."

"In Cairo?"

"All across the Delta."

I thought Kurt was going to say Mississippi, but he thought better of it. Vera and her friends had hiked across North Africa years ago, starting in Cairo then to Alexandria and then into Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco. She spoke of Bedouins and fires in the desert and storms that blew through the sand. She kept talking as if the whole trip were playing out in front of her, every detail an ornate creation, much better and more alive than the slide shows we had at school and those *National Geographic* pictures that were beautiful but seemed too pretty to be real. Vera's stories were ragged and exotic and full of things like horses galloping along beaches or the sounds of hammered copper, and big bazaars, and a souk in Marrakesh where a man with skin the color of eggplant and eyes like blue ice reached his hand into a sack of saffron and held it up like gold. Marrakesh, what a word. Three syllables of music: Mar-ra-kesh. I think I heard it once in a Lizabeth Scott movie, or maybe it was a film with Humphrey Bogart, whom Kurt wasn't crazy about, but I found him believable in most roles: Marrakesh. Tripoli. Carthage. Vera was lucky, and I felt lucky, too, just listening. I looked over at Kurt, and he was following Vera's stories. She was chattering, yes, but Kurt was enthralled and every now and then he looked for a spot to interject something. He'd fill with air, but then he'd hold it as if wondering how a guy who paints ships in Philly can spin off something as remarkable as Marrakesh. But finally, after Vera had trekked us across the Maghreb — I had to look that one up — Kurt couldn't hold it in any longer.

"I play tennis on grass," he said.

A pause. A too-long pause.

Vera laughed and reached out for Kurt's hand. He pulled it back, not fast or startling but in a way a plate is cleared from a table. Vera laughed again, but she clipped it. Kurt smiled one of his famous half smiles that kept you guessing, and I think Vera caught this, too. The conversation changed to things more American, closer to home and graspable (a word that looks funny but does exist), but I thought Vera had a lot more desert stories in her and hoped to hear them all.

The light was warm over the kitchen table. A sixty-watt yellow glow that obscured the

exactness of things not directly in the light; they lingered in the shadowy edges the way actors stand in the wings before a cue leads them into the floodlights. I could hear rain falling in the alleys. It rattled over our stoop and set the neighborhood dogs running. They barked close and then distant and then I heard children sloshing near the manhole covers that bubble up when it storms. Lightning flashed, but there wasn't much thunder and soon the storm passed, leaving soaked kids and a coolness behind. I left Kurt and Vera in the kitchen and walked down the alley to St. Jude's. The streets were slick and pure, black mirrors reflecting the gray ghosts of clouds racing overhead in the wind and, every now and then, a break in the clouds and a glimmer of moon. The rain had cleaned the dust from the church's stained glass windows; I studied the deep, rich colors of the saints, the artistry of their beards and hands and their eyes, the way they followed you, watching you from up there, frozen, but at night, after a rain, they seemed alive. I walked to the front of the church; water poured from the drain spouts and made mud beneath the holly bushes. The stairs were slippery, the railings rusty.

Father Heaney's head was bowed in the rectory window. He was likely reading one of his mystery novels. He once told Kurt they cleared his head after tending the sick and hearing confessions littered with "misdemeanors and a few felonies from the unexpected." Russel-haired with a pink Irish face, Fr. Heaney had given me my first communion years earlier. There is a lot to think about in that second when Jesus hovers before you, crisp and hard and then softening on your tongue and melting into you and becoming part of you in a slow dissolve as you cross yourself and walk back to your pew, tasting cardboard and grain, but knowing it's Jesus who rose from the dead to save your soul. I like that moment of believing. Fr. Heaney told Kurt — he was always pulling Kurt aside after Saturday-evening mass — that the act of communion was "transcendence of the spirit." Transcendence was one of my first dictionary words. Transcendence will lead you through the dictionary, which is really a book of clues, to spirit, revelation, and redemption. The only problem with communion was that you had to go to confession first, whisper your sins through a web of cheesecloth to the silhouette of Fr. Heaney, who knew who you were no matter how hard you tried to disguise your voice. Once I tried a Peter Lorre imitation and Fr. Heaney laughed and said: "Jim, just give it to me straight." I didn't tell him all my sins. Some of them belonged to me and not to God.

I was going to knock, but I left Fr. Heaney alone with his mystery novel. The city was quiet, its great energy washed and calmed by the rain. Dogs were rooting in the garbage of a blown-over trash can, and I walked home and stepped up the stoop and into the kitchen. Kurt and Vera were drinking vodka and lemonade, sitting across from each other like two poker players; Kurt cagey and Vera garrulous, making you wonder if she had a full house or a handful of nothing. They weren't drunk but they were happy.

"When you hit a backhand, Vera, your body flows in one long twist. People think a forehand is easier to hit than a backhand, but I disagree. A backhand is more natural, and much prettier when hit correctly. It's like opening up your wings to fly."

Forty-six words. Kurt had spoken forty-six words. A paragraph. Without stopping. It might have been a record.

"Teach me to hit a backhand, Kurt."

"One day, maybe."

“Now.”

“It’s dark and there’s no court.”

“In the alley.”

Tennis was sacred to Kurt, and Vera was asking him to hit in the alley, which I suspected may have been sacrilege. Kurt sat for a minute. He sipped his lemonade and vodka. He got up and left the room, and I figured this was the end of Vera. But Kurt returned with a tennis racquet (not his best one) and two cans of balls (old). He walked into the alley.

“Jim, get down there. Vera, come here.”

He gave her the racquet. She slipped between his arms. Kurt bent her body and taught her the flow of the backhand. Vera hit wet balls down the alley. I chased them and threw them back. She was laughing and Kurt was telling her to concentrate and to pretend she was lifting into flight. One time she did and the ball zipped down the alley with topspin, water streaming off it like a shooting star in a telescope. I ran after it into the dark, my breath and heart beating harder, my sneakers soaked, a smile breaking across my face. The whole neighborhood was sleeping except the three of us and when I turned with the soggy ball in my hand, Kurt and Vera shimmered like cutouts in the night. As I walked closer, I heard their voices and for a moment pretended that Mom was home and nothing had changed. Another rainstorm rolled in and Vera and I went running for the house while Kurt jumped on the stoop and back off again, juggling two balls in puddles beneath the sputtering streetlight like some crazy kid or a guy with a night pass to the carnival.

There's light through the window shade. It's morning, or perhaps some luminary trick. I'm lying on my back like a corpse, waiting for what, I don't know. I think something's supposed to happen. It seems to me there should be sounds by now, some shape moving toward me. I try to remember my name. I can't, but I know I am somebody; I can count my fingers. How every day like this? I don't know. I know Kurt and Vera by heart. They live inside of me, and I know that they were real. I can still hear them. The shade is bright with light and someone, a woman in white, is saying, "Good morning, James." I must be James because she's pulling down my sheet and propping me up on a pillow. She hands me a glass of water. It seems like this scene has happened a million times, but I can't recall what happens next. The woman in white opens a drawer and rattles things; she combs my hair and holds a mirror up. An older man looks back. Not old, entirely. Maybe fifty or fifty-two. Lines fan out from the eyes, but the face is sharp, perhaps a bit slack under the chin. The hair is gray and black, the color of the sweater Kurt used to wear, but Kurt's is not the face I'm looking at, although there is a resemblance. The man in the mirror, not a bad-looking guy really, seems lost, as if he's trying to remember where he put the car keys, or how he ended up at the bank when he was aiming for the grocery store. I look at the woman in white. Then to the mirror. "That's you, James. Hurry up, we've got to get you ready. Eva is coming today." I can't recall who Eva might be, maybe another woman in white. Flowers sit in a vase on a table near the bed, and there's a little desk in the corner under the window. The desk is covered in papers and books. "Are you going to write today, James?" I don't know. Is that what I do? The woman in white pours me juice and hands me a pill. I seem to know what to do, so this must have happened a million times, although if it did, the woman in white should know I prefer grapefruit juice to orange juice. Prefer comes from preferential. The woman in white pulls up the shade, and for a moment she disappears in the light that rushes into the room. "A new day, James." I guess it is.

"Where am I?"

"You're where you've been for the last two years. St. Jude's home."

"Is this heaven?"

The woman in white laughs as if I've made a joke, but I feel completely serious.

"No, James, this is earth."

"What city?"

"Philadelphia."

"Philadelphia."

"You were born here, not far from where you're sitting right now, if you look out the window across the rooftops and the steeples. There's not as many steeples as there used to be, with churches moving out to the suburbs and leaving us in a city without God."

"God is a concept by which we measure our pain. John Lennon said that."

"Well, I don't know about John Lennon, but seems like a little of that memory of yours is kicking in. Might be one of the good days."

"John Lennon was a Beatle. The best one in my opinion, although Paul had a gift for

melody. The others I can't remember. Who's Eva?"

"You know who Eva is, James. Think."

The woman in white lays out my clothes on the bed as if I'm a child. Khakis, a blue button-down shirt, gray socks, a brown braided belt. She says I need a shave and leads me to the bathroom and sets me in front of the big mirror over the sink. She runs the water, hands me a razor and a can of shaving cream. She leans against the wall and watches. I have two thoughts: Why am I here? And if I know what to do with a razor and shaving cream, why can't I remember this lady Eva who is coming to visit me? The razor scrapes. It's a sound I know well, a soft sound, like sand on waxed paper. Every shave peels away a mask and brings a new man. I seem to know this analogy; maybe it's from Kurt, maybe from those times when I was a boy standing in the bathroom watching him the way this woman in white is watching me. It's a nice thought, to be new. I finish shaving and am pointed toward the shower. The woman in white steps outside the door, but leaves it open a crack. The water runs hard and warm; it feels good, washing away the clenched feeling the face has after a shave. I dry and put on my clothes. The bed is made and I sit on it. I smell of powder and deodorant. The vase on the table holds flowers; they look fresh.

A man, a doctor, slips into the room and asks me questions and writes things on a clipboard. He says I have a far-back but not close memory; my childhood vivid, my adulthood dormant, colorless. What I see, witness, experience one day disappears the next like that shiny plastic paper I wrote on as a kid; when you lifted the paper off the inky board whatever you had drawn was gone so you could begin anew. There are, apparently, endless analogies for what's happening to my shriveling mind. A small part of my brain resembles a glacier with deep recesses sunlight cannot penetrate. He says it's like when ice climbers descend into a fissure and the light dims as they dangle on ropes in the darkness. The doctor says there will be fewer fissures of light, and eventually all will be black, except for an occasional flash of unexplained lightning that may revive a memory for a few seconds or maybe an hour, but it doesn't matter because it won't last and the memory won't be remembered anyway. Confetti in the wind; a shattered mosaic; these are other examples he uses. He brims with metaphor. The doctor is heavysset with a broad face and curly brown hair that glows in the window light. He speaks quietly but in a determined, uninterrupted flow like a book on tape, or a man telling you interesting facts between train stops. He is intrigued by me or, more precisely, my case; I am younger than the ashen-faced droolers lingering in the hallways of piss and peppermint and that antiseptic scent that makes the floors sticky. That's what excites him, my youth. I am, he says, very young "for such depletion." Usually, a mirror in my state is seventy or seventy-five years old, but I have somehow "depleted" earlier and this concerns the doctor, who says it's happening more and more as baby boomers age; the whole generation dangling in the dark. He says he suspects "environmental causes mixed with the stresses of modern life that somehow, in its technology, has done something to the mind." He speaks of synapses, brain circuitry, and promising drugs that have done wonders with rats. I have a headache. I want to ask him a question but I don't. I just sit in my powder smell, staring at the flowers until he leaves. What is there to say about lost ice climbers?

"Do you want one of your books on photography, James? You like those."

Does the woman in white ever go home, I wonder.

I shake my head and she leaves the room. I go to the table. It's messy with *Philadelphia*

Inquirers, books (Emerson, Updike, Edward Weston), pens (Uni-balls), and notebooks scrawled with pictures, words, and stray, strange symbols. On one page "James" is written one thousand times in minuscule letters as if with a rat's paw. On other pages paragraphs seem to lift out of nowhere as if they arrived uninvited, without context. One notebook is full of stories copied exactly from the *Inquirer*, except for the bylines, which all read "James." I am James. I write the name James; the penmanship is the same. These are my notebooks. There's a box on the table. I open it. There's a stack of newspaper clippings inside, most from the *Los Angeles Times*. I pull the top one out. It's dated September 12, 2001. The headline reads TERRORISTS ATTACK NEW YORK, PENTAGON. Fireballs and huge blossoms of smoke roll out of two buildings that look like silver pillars in a war without soldiers. Under the picture there's a story written by James Ryan. There's that name James again. I pull other clippings from the box. They are all written by James Ryan; some go back twenty years. I am James Ryan. I write for newspapers. Do I still? If this is me I've been to Prague and Budapest, Baghdad and Tehran, and many other places I don't remember. But these are documents and datelines; they don't lie, don't appear mysteriously out of folders; no, they are real. There are pictures with the stories. One is of a crowd in the snow, stony faces peeking through a gray dust dotted with ripped umbrellas, raised gloved fists, and a husky man with a full mustache and a bullhorn suspended above the crowd, transfixed in twilight, his eyes like dark fire. The caption identifies the man as Lech Walesa. I know that name, but I don't; who is that name? I stare at the face, run my fingers over it, but he is meaningless to me, a stranger.

Another picture shows bearded men in the desert, bandoliers crisscrossing their chests, their faces hard and thin, their white teeth flashing, all of them standing in the back of a pockmarked pickup truck. They seem a ragged army of bank robbers or castaway nomads in the desert. The caption says they are mujahideen fighting American forces in a place called Anbar. I study their faces, too. But nothing comes. How can it not come? My name is there in ink. James Ryan. James Ryan was in Anbar with wild, bearded men. How does one forget that?

My head hurts. I close the box. I pick up another notebook. Pages and pages filled with spirals drawn in red, black, and blue ink; they look like twisters and tornadoes, storm clouds whirling across paper. Another notebook is full of noses. Drawings and drawings of noses, faces, slim, long, bulbous, pert noses. They remind me of when I was a boy with Kurt and we went to a Halloween store to try on masks and I picked out a big waxy nose attached to black glasses and bushy eyebrows. Kurt said I looked like Jerry Lewis in *The Nutty Professor*. Why can I remember Jerry Lewis and not Budapest?

I pick up the Emerson book and sit on my bed. I don't read it. I hold its worn hard cover and let the sunlight warm me. I see steeples out the window, crosses pricking the sky, sneakers draped over phone lines. It seems familiar to me, as if out there on those streets part of me wanders. I step closer to the window. I am suspended over the city. I see a bridge, a twist of river, row houses, pigeons, laundry on rooftops, a silver train silent in the distance racing beyond the car traffic and out of sight, so sleek and beautiful. There's a park to the left. The leaves are yellow, plum, and brown. It must be the last days of autumn; I imagine I can hear the fallen leaves scratching the street, spinning in crinkly coils in the alleys. I try to go back to that last image, but it's gone; my thoughts are ether, burning one brilliant moment and then vanishing. Perhaps they return, but how can I know.

I hear shoes squeaking. I turn from the window and see a woman in white. She smiles and steps into the room. There is someone behind her. The woman in white smiles, turns, and leaves the room. The lady standing near the window with me has dark hair, black, I think, but I can't say for sure — sunlight plays tricks with color. Her face is sharp and pale, not sickly pale, but radiant, as if lit from inside. Her eyes are aluminum blue; her lipstick is red, but a quiet red; her hands are the long hands of a magician, or maybe a seamstress or sculptor. She reaches into her purse and pulls out a paper scribbled with ink. She unfolds it; it makes no sound. She looks at me, then at the paper. She reads:

The world is changing around us. The tanks, the placards, the snow and winter's bite, a revolution moving like a ripple through water. I love you. I love this hotel. Outside, the streets are finally quiet. It is nearly dawn. The last protestor is clopping home. You sleep in your clothes; I carve you from the darkness. I write another story. Can you hear the keystrokes? Dawn is an hour or two away, and soon we'll be off again into history ...

She folds the paper and slides it back into her purse. She puts her hands on my face, her thumbs skimming gently beneath my eyes. Her perfume I do not know. She looks hard into my eyes, studies them, as if something is written on them, a language or thoughts to decipher. Her hands slide from my face, brush my shoulders, and withdraw. I look at her, maybe the way a man looks at a map from another country. She sighs.

“You don't remember that, do you? You wrote those words in 1989. In Prague, after Havels led them through the streets. James, you must remember. They are your words, in your hand, to me. I was the one sleeping in my clothes in the night. Don't you remember how we laughed about working so hard that we slept in our clothes and woke up wrinkled.”

She steps closer and whispers into my ear.

“Sometimes we slept without our clothes. You must remember, James, the snow falling outside. Who am I, James?”

I want to know who she is, but I do not.

“I am Eva. The girl you met when the world changed.”

I am the woman in white.

He doesn't know my name; doesn't remember my face. Every day he asks: "Are you the woman in white from yesterday? I think there was one yesterday." I listen to Eva tell him those stories; what a time it must have been, on the brink of so much. How can he not know this? He is young and handsome, the way men get when they start to gray, an angular classicism. His mind shouldn't be so decrepit. These other drones in here, okay, they've slipped away. I see them, blank and ghost-eyed, fortunate their bodies move to permutations other than thought. Or is it? I don't know. But he is younger and should not be so lost.

He tells me every day about Kurt and Vera. They're the only alive things in that brain of his. I listen and imagine as he repeats their story under his breath. I am good at that. As a child I played make-believe, running through hidden passageways and lurking beneath windows, spying on neighbors with pocket cameras and decoder rings. Life is best understood in whispers, not in laughter and loud voices; we carry with us the secret things that quietly wear us away. I watched birds, too. My binoculars scanned the skies over fields of wildflowers and thistle. Dusk was the best time to see them, flying against the invading darkness; swift birds with tiny hearts and wings of purple, yellow, and black, and higher hawks circling on wind currents like kings and queens in a storybook. I collected fallen feathers and taped them to my closet door, which over the years grew into a plume as lush as a Cherokee headdress. Birds were magic to me. They could go anywhere. I was a gangly girl with untamed knees and elbows peeking from my communion dress, lost in the silk and taffeta of my prom gown. I evened out eventually and, although I am not a beauty, men have suggested I possess a bookish sexiness. I can never tell if that is a promise or a lie. There is so little space between the two, and as any woman knows men are capable of the sweetest phrases between happy hour and last call. I suppose it means I am thin and wear glasses and tied-back hair but have good breasts and clear skin. Even in adolescence, when other girls cotton-balled themselves with astringents and emollients, my skin was as bright as an empty page. James doesn't mention such things. He offers no compliments, tells no half-truths; he looks at me the way a stranger does in a grocery store, a flicker of recognition that vanishes as the cart passes. I hope for more. The doctors, the administration, no one knows the secret bond I have to James. The way I appeared — an applicant with strong recommendations seeking work at an institution with high turnover — is a matter of perseverance with which I have been blessed. A natural talent, I suppose, in the way a handyman is gifted to fix broken blenders and sewing machines. We each have our proclivities, those things big and small that make us unique and enviable in the eyes of others. I suspect I am not much envied, although I do have, despite my previously mentioned active imagination, a reputation for pragmatism, but that may be the twin of perseverance. I prefer to think of myself as a quiet multitude of unappreciated qualities.

If that sounds bitter, I am not. I am a woman searching amid hallways, carrying syringes and paper cups of pills. I like the weight of the stethoscope around my neck, and sometimes I listen to my heart, marveling at the mystery of its energy and wondering how and when

will stop. Tick-tock. I don't linger on such thoughts. I have a mission. I carry James's chart. It is battered and heavy, and although I write neatly in it, meticulous in my numbers and abbreviations, it is filled with pages of what we nurses call "doctor-scratch." I cannot read it all but I know what it says about advancing Alzheimer's, the shutdown of the light field across the medial temporal lobes (MTL), where the larva-shaped hippocampus loses its grasp of memory, perhaps caused long ago by trauma or maybe a disfigured gene or other predisposition that lurked in the tissue since birth only to one day bloom with mischievous intent. There are so many ways for a mind to tumble and lose itself in worlds far from us. The body on those Discovery Channel documentaries is glorious, intricate, and strong, a wonder of God conspiring with nature, but really we are as fragile as rice paper, ruined over time by imperceptible rips and tears.

I search for clues on a color-coded poster of the brain in profile I kept from nursing school. It strikes me that the most ingenious thing about us humans — not counting the soul — looks like a boxing glove. Atop which, to borrow a metaphor from James's curly haired doctor, the cerebral cortex hovers like a trapped cloud. Where are the answers? I study the science and anatomy of James, his blood pressure, reflexes, temperature, the dose of his cholinesterase inhibitors, but I don't know him, not even on my late shift, when all the doctors are home and I hold his CAT scans to the light and he floats before me, fleshless, a silver-graying apparition, yielding little. His hip bones resemble folded wings, his forearms flutes, his legs strange spindly reeds. He has five fillings, a broken rib that must have been untended when he was a boy, healing poorly, leaving the thread of disjointed marrow. This is what the pictures of science and technology bare. This is what I see. It is not enough. I need him to come back.

The marshlands south of Philly stretch to Wilmington and to beaches beyond; they glisten brown and green in the wind and make you think of another time. We skated by them in Kurt's Impala, the windows down, our hair flying and me wedged between Vera and Kurt on the front seat. The radio played so loud that it was a cacophony (I had my dictionary on the trip) of static and breeze, although every now and then a recognizable tune burst through like the guitar lick in "Signs" by the Five Man Electrical Band or the chords of the great waltz opening of Black Sabbath's "Iron Man."

We came around a bend and drove over a small bridge, the Impala bouncing along as if racing across a surface made of stretched rubber bands. I thought I heard "Tiny Dancer," and when I looked over I swore Vera was mouthing the words, but I couldn't be sure because her hair was a black sea tossing around her. Kurt stopped for coffee at a shack with a sandy parking lot. Vera got out and pointed her face toward the sun, leaning on the car and asking Kurt to buy her lemons. Kurt walked through a screen door and flies scattered and I saw an old black man with a tilted hat peek up from behind the counter as if he had been awakened. He smiled the colors of stained ivory and broken gold.

"I love a car trip, don't you, Jim?"

"Sometimes they get too long."

"Can you read a map?"

"Not too well."

"Unfolding them is like opening a mystery. New worlds stretching before you in circuitous lines. There's a word for you, Jim. Circuitous. You can run your fingers along roads and mountains and coasts. I wish I'd have lived centuries ago. I would have been an explorer. But you know something? I'm tired after a car trip. I think that's funny, don't you? You're just sitting for hours, listening to music and wind, but it takes it out of you, you know? Maybe it's the sun, and the distance, and your body having to re-gather in a new place."

I looked out the window to Vera. She had on shorts and a white halter top with a collar and black buttons on the front. She pulled back her hair and tied it with ribbon. I still couldn't tell how old she was. She was hard to read that way; she could be young, like the night a week or so ago when she was hitting tennis balls in the alley, or she could be older like now with the sun and no shadows on her face. I heard the flat rubber sounds of cars passing in the distance and the bark of a boat horn coming from the ocean beyond the marshes. Kurt came out and handed me a Sprite and gave Vera a knife and a bag of lemons. Kurt sat on the hood, sipping his coffee, and Vera cut lemons, squeezing the juice in her mouth and not even wincing like most people do.

"Juiciest lemon I ever had was in Sorrento."

Kurt and I looked at each other.

"That's in Italy, boys, below Naples. The cliffs are high and the lemons are big as grapefruit. You could fill a whole glass with one lemon. I swam in the blue sea and dreamed of sirens tempting sailors. Imagine voices so pretty that they lead you to ruin. Haunting. There's another word for you, Jim. Haunting. A voice out there in the mist, calling."

Kurt and I had seen *Jason and the Argonauts* on TV, but neither of us said anything and Vera went on slicing and squeezing lemons, the juice dripping down her forearms and elbows and into the sand. She could do that. Begin a story, frame it out pretty so as to invite you in, and then let it trail off the way a breeze lifts out of nowhere and vanishes.

Kurt tossed his coffee cup and we were off again. Marvin Gaye was on the radio, but we lost him when Kurt accelerated and the car filled with crackle and wind and Vera's flying hair. The road beyond the windshield was wide and not too curvy. Kurt was sweating and daydreaming, his hand loose on the wheel. What was going on? It wasn't like Kurt to take vacation so suddenly. He hadn't been off work since Mom died, but the summer days and Vera enticed him. We still didn't know her real story, or at least I didn't. Kurt may have because he and Vera had been staying up long nights talking. They weren't sleeping together. When I'd come down in the mornings, Kurt was back-flat on the floor and Vera was curled on the couch. They'd ease into the day like two cats; Kurt making coffee and pouring juice; Vera snatching the *Inky* from the porch, thumbing through pages and glancing at ads and pictures with the occasional, "Hey, Kurt look at this." Her clothes tangled with his, hanging off the banister and on the towel racks in the bathroom scented with her balms of lilac and musk. She'd sit on the back stoop and murmur Buddhist chants and sometimes it seemed she went into a trance. Neighbors peeked from behind window shades and Kurt told the Kowalskys and the McMurphys that Vera was a "distant relative who had spent her life in exotic places." Vera played along, calling Kurt "Cuz" and inventing family histories.

She'd come into my room and lie beside me while I studied the dictionary, asking me to read her the second and third meanings of words. I'd read slow and I could feel my voice calm her or maybe it was the glow of the lamp and the sounds of distant cars in the alley. She'd close her eyes and tell me that words were masks and disguises. "Did you know, Jim, that God has ninety-nine names in Arabic? The Avenger. The Truth. The Shaper of Beauty. They're written in holy books and on fortress walls deep in the desert. Go see these places one day, Jim. Promise me you'll go and trace God's name on a desert wall." A few times a night, while Kurt was sleeping, I'd sneak and sit on the stairs and see Vera in her underpants and T-shirt kneeling beside the radiator, twirling her hair and staring at the front door as if waiting for someone to turn the knob. Once, I thought I heard her crying and talking to herself in the basement, and when she came up, wiping a startled look off her face, she told me she had been singing a rhyme from childhood and was sad that childhood would never come again. She put a picture of a yogi, a guy with a long beard who looked like he had his diapers on and hadn't eaten in a while, on the coffee table. She bought beads and hung them between the kitchen and the dining room and then tried to teach Kurt to meditate by closing his eyes and sitting pretzel-legged, but Kurt cracked up and shook his head when she lit incense around him.

"Vera, this isn't me."

"You need to get in touch with your inner self."

"My inner self is doing just fine without me going to look for it."

Sprawling as she was in moods and scented possessions, though, Vera could not make the house her own, not even by carving her initials above the stove near the crucifix. Mom's spirit was there, not ready to give its blessing for Kurt to start a new life. That was fair. No one wants to be forgotten, especially in a house that held your pots and recipes and two

boxes of stuff Kurt and I taped and wrote on with Magic Marker and slid into the attic next to the Christmas ornaments and a bicycle that had been there since before we moved in. It's hard to choose what you want to save of a person; it makes you wonder if you really knew them at all. Every scrap, shred, picture, scribbled note, favorite sweater is sacred.

Vera slipped in amid these things when we weren't looking. She brought stories that made the world bigger and more interesting. Our row house didn't have enough rooms to hold Vera's tales and Mom's memory, so Kurt, finding a streak of spontaneity I had only seen on the tennis court, stepped into my room just before dawn and announced: "Jim, we're hitting the road. Get dressed." He loaded us into the Impala when the streets were dewy and cool and paperboys strained against their canvas sacks of headlines, while milkmen delivered bottles from Kensington to Fish Town to Rittenhouse Square. Paperboys and milkmen didn't need maps. They knew the alleys, back alleys, crevices, the fires in the drums near the trestles, the shantytowns on the riverbank and the iron and cement underbelly that kept the city from sinking. A lot of paperboys I knew were also altar boys; milkmen were pretty much just milkmen, except for Eddie Blankenridge who strangled widows in their bathrobes before the police arrested him climbing out of a window.

I had packed shorts, T-shirts, one pair of jeans, my dictionary, and the Beatles' *White Album*. You never know when you might come across a stereo. The *White Album* was my favorite, a jumble of moods and images. That's what I liked most about the Beatles; they were magpies (one of my favorite words, looked up after I heard it in a poem) gathering a little of this and a little of that and turning them into "Rocky Raccoon," "Cry Baby Cry," and "Savory Truffle." Vera liked the Beatles, too, but was more partial to the Rolling Stones and Tim Buckley. Kurt liked some guy named Walter Jackson, who had a deep, welling voice with no cracks, like a perfect sphere. That's all we had to listen to in the Impala — the radio and one Walter Jackson eight-track that kept sticking on song three until Kurt whacked it and it warbled back to the baritone of a man broken by the cruelty of love.

"Kurt, you have to buy more music."

"I could listen to Walter Jackson every hour of every day."

"I don't know if Jim and I can."

Kurt hit the gas and the car gripped the road, speeding south along the Delaware coast. Vera tried to light a cigarette but matches died against the wind. She cupped her hands and dipped her head below the glove box, and finally asked Kurt to slow down, which made Walter Jackson louder, like God coming through a silver speaker. Vera took a drag and Kurt was off again, Vera's ember burning orange and fast. I kept looking over at her. Who was this woman? She said in the diner that night we met her that she was hiding from a man, and then with her stories of Cairo and Marrakesh I thought of her as a spy or a damsel of intrigue, an updated Elizabeth Scott with purple-tinted sunglasses and fingernails dotted with stars. Kurt wasn't telling me all he knew, and he seemed a different person, too, a man with more sides than I had once known. If I held him to the light I'd see all kinds of angles and colors. He started wearing sandals and skipped his normal haircut day at Johnny's; he didn't even shave every day, and on the days he didn't he looked like, but not exactly like, an apostle.

We crossed out of Delaware to Maryland and into eastern Virginia and the scents of bay crabs and marshes and smoked ham; signs for fireworks and summer squash. Moss hung in streaks and tresses, and the air was heavy. Dragonflies at the road's edge hovered over Queen

Anne's lace and black-eyed Susies and buzzed away, slowly, as if flying through a sky of invisible honey. The earth was wild here, shaggy and vine-filled, devouring almost, yet serene, and the air clung to you like scrimms of wet breath blowing across your shoulders and neck. Steeples slumped like tilted hats on wooden churches and rusted corrugated sheds covered in strangling vines, sheltered lawn mowers and half-put-together motorcycles. Two men were gliding scythes through weeds and I swore I could hear their blades, the faintest rust and a whoosh of air, as if you ran your fingers through a cave of spider webs. They kept slicing like they were slow-dancing with crescents in the cool cut grass of a shade tree, the perimeter widening into the sun, but in no particular hurry. I could smell the grass. As we came around a bend, a black boy riding the whitest horse I had ever seen galloped through the thin pines, kicking up sand and needles and disappearing over a small bridge into the thicker woods. The boy had no saddle and he gripped the mane, flying almost, it seemed to me, his weight insubstantial and no burden on the muscle and bone moving beneath him. Vera spotted the boy. She turned her head as the car passed, watching the white horse shift from sunlight and shadow as it sprinted deeper into the woods toward another break of field and maybe she was thinking of the Maghreb or some other distant place.

"I need to play tennis," Kurt announced.

He pulled the Impala over at a brick school off Route 13. There were two courts of cracked asphalt and ripped nets. Kurt looked at them and wondered if we should just move on, but he opened the trunk, pulled off his jeans, put on his tennis shorts, grabbed his Slazenger racquet and two cans of tennis balls. Vera put sun lotion on her face and lounged on the hood. Kurt started serving to an empty court and as he got to the fifth ball — before I could join him — a guy with spider crab legs and falling-down tube socks walked to the baseline with a racquet. He had an Afro and wore a tank top and sneakers ripped near the toes.

"You wanna hit?" he said in a drawl that seemed to mimic the way he sauntered along the fence.

"Why not?"

Kurt looked at me and winked. He started off easy, loping the ball deep toward the guy, settling into a rhythm. The guy struggled at first, misjudging balls, reacting too late, swinging wildly. But after a few minutes he settled and tugged his body tight, finding an economy of motion. Every move was a burst of concise energy, nothing wasted; it flowed through the shoulder to the elbow down the forearm through the wrist — a motion of flipping pancake only faster, tighter — to the sweet spot in the racquet, where the ball struck a clear chord like a bass tuned to perfection or the voice of Walter Jackson. The guy was moving Kurt, pulling him with angles and variations of spin and speed, and Kurt was mixing it up with drop shots, slices, and down-the-line backhands, trying to crack the guy, but the guy was like a fish, darting when necessary and then rippling soft in a current. He was pretty to watch. Beads of sweat spattered around him on the baseline and evaporated in the sun. Kurt kept trying to find the guy's weak spot, but on some days, with some guys, there is no weak spot and Kurt lost two close sets. Kurt shook the guy's hand at the net and the two walked off the court; Kurt not minding, not too much anyway, being beat by a better player, a raggedly dressed guy out of the piney woods, and then saying how tennis was good that way, bringing strangers together, forcing them to share intimacies, showing themselves and their character on the shots they chose.

Vera was sitting on the hood of the car, crying. She told Kurt and the guy that she loved watching the struggle between them; she said there was beauty in it and she slid off the hood and hugged Kurt and the guy and told them that out there on that old court with nobody around and the wind blowing hot through the trees two men came together and made magic. She said imagine how often that happens every day around the world, and nobody knows about it. Little scenes of magic played out in hidden places, witnessed only by a few and tucked into the deep, deep memory of the world. She wiped her eyes and started laughing embarrassed I guess, but I knew what she meant. Vera had a way of saying something you felt yourself. The guy stood talking for a while. He lived a mile to the east on tobacco land that had been sold off long ago and now grew cauliflower, which he and his family planted and harvested, except in the off-season and through the winter when they swept blood from the floor of the chicken factory, which, the guy said, gave off a scent that seemed to live in his nose hours after he went home and washed up.

“That smell is who we all are,” said the guy. “My preacher, he works there, too, says it’s the raw element of this world, connecting us all, animal and man alike, until God takes our souls.”

“How long has your family been here?” said Vera.

“Since the ships came from Africa.”

“You ever been?”

“To Africa? No. I ain’t even been, I’ll bet, more’n fifty miles from where I’m standing right now. Got no need. The world comes to us here, like you people. Taking Route 13 to that bay bridge tunnel yonder. All I ever need to see of the world I can see through the windshields of passing cars.”

“You play a lot of tennis?” said Kurt.

“See that school wall? I hit against it two hours a day. That wall is tougher than any man who ever played. The ball just keeps coming back, coming back. There’s no time to think.”

“Instinctive,” said Kurt.

“If that’s what you want to call it.”

Kurt pulled a roll of grip tape from his bag and handed it to the guy. The guy thanked him and said good-bye; he walked past the edge of the court and toward the pines, his racket spinning in his hand like a propeller.

“You believe in God, Jim?”

“I do.”

“Kurt?”

“Mostly.”

Vera sat back on the hood of the Impala and we were quiet. Kurt wiped sweat from his face. Tranquility is how my dictionary described it. Then the cicadas started a boisterous music in the trees, and that riled other noises, dragonflies dancing and bobbing over the car. Vera’s rattling map, Kurt packing his tennis gear and sitting in the front seat, clicking the ignition, the eight-track squeaking to life and Walter Jackson rolling in like a storm from a great distance. We were off again, bound farther south toward the marshes that fringed the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel, the tang of egg, wet, and reed filling the air, salty on our tongues and slipping into our lungs. Egrets and smaller white and gray birds took flight

around us, keeping pace with the Impala and then peeling off in silent arcs while above the windshield and over the water gulls glided on the crosswinds, their wings outstretched and still.

“Vera?”

“Yes, Jim.”

“What’s your story?”

Kurt’s hands tightened on the wheel and the Impala slid into the tunnel darkness, millions of gallons of water above us, heaving down in a long curve, like a bow with the string pulled and above that, out of sight, the sky and the birds.

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