

Ablutions

Patrick deWitt

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*For my father, Gary deWitt
the last of the old, bold pilots*

One

Discuss the regulars. They sit in a line like ugly, huddled birds, eyes wet with alcohol. They whisper into their cups and seem to be gloating about something—you will never know what. Some have jobs, children, spouses, cars, and mortgages, while others live with their parents or in transient motels and are on government assistance, a curious balance of classes particular to the parts of Hollywood devoid of klieg lights and make-believe. There are sometimes limousines at the curb out front; other nights feature police cars and ambulances and vicious street scenarios. The bar interior resembles a sunken luxury liner of the early 1900s, mahogany and brass, black-burgundy leather coated in dust and ash. It is impossible to know how many times the ownership has changed hands.

The regulars are warm with one another but generally come and go alone and as far as you can tell have never been to one another's homes. This makes you lonely and the hearts of the world seem cold and stingy and you are reminded of the saying, every man for himself, which as a child made you want to lie down and "be killed."

You do not take much stock in the North American definition of the word but you suppose these people are alcoholics. They like you, or anyway are used to you, and they reach out to touch you when you pass as though you are a good-luck gambling charm. You once found this repulsive and would circle the bar with your back hugging the wall rather than move through the network of fleshy red hands, but you have reconciled yourself to the attention and it has become familiar, even enjoyable for you. It now feels more like a commendation than an intrusion, recognition of your difficult job, and you nod and smile as the hands grab you around the waist, rubbing and slapping your back and belly.

From your post at the side bar entrance you watch them watch themselves in the mirror behind the bar. Preening, pecking, satisfied by their reflections—what do they see in their murky silhouettes? You wonder keenly about their lives prior to their residence here. Strange as it seems, they must have been regulars at some other Hollywood bar, but had moved on or been asked to move on, and they sought out a new retreat, settling down with the first free beer or kind word, some bartender's impotent joke mutilated beyond recognition in its endless retelling. And the regulars turned to tell the joke once more.

You wonder also about their present lives but to make inquiries is purposeless—the regulars are all sensational liars. But you want to know what it is about their existence that fuels the need to inhabit not just the same building every night but the same barstool, upon which they sip the same drink. And if a bartender forgets a regular's usual, the regular is cut down and his eyes swell with a lost suffering. Why? It bothers you to know that the truth will never reveal itself spontaneously and you keep on your toes for clues.

When you first come to work at the bar you drink Claymore, the least expensive or what is called the well scotch. This was your brand when you were out in the world and you are happy to finally find a never-ending, complimentary supply. You have been at the bar for two years, drinking Claymore in great quantity, sometimes straight, oftentimes with ginger ale or cola, before the manager, Simon, asks why you don't drink the quality liquors. "There aren't many upsides to the life, but I drink the best booze," he says. And so each night you sample a different scotch or whiskey. There are more than forty-five different types of scotch and whiskey and you are very tired at the end of your quest but you find at long last the quality liquor Simon spoke of. As someone who spends a good deal of time surrounded by alcohol, people often ask what you drink, and now you do not shrug or cough but look up and say directly, "I drink John Jameson finest Irish whiskey."

You fall in love with Jameson Irish whiskey. Previously when you held a bottle of alcohol in your hands you felt a comfort in knowing that its contents would simultaneously deaden and heighten your limited view of the world but you did not care for the actual bottle, as you do now with Jameson, you did not trace your hands over the raised lettering and study the exquisite script. One night you are alone in the back bar doing just this—the bottle is in your hands and you are mooning over the curlicues at the base of the label—and the name John Jameson brings into your head the child's tune "John Jacob Jingleheimer Schmidt." You are humming this to yourself when Simon, the man responsible for your discovery of Jameson whiskey, enters the bar singing aloud *this very same song*. He waves to you and walks past, into the front bar, and you are staring in disbelief because there is no explaining so obscure a coincidence and you feel you have been visited by the strongest of omens. Good or bad, you do not know. There is nothing to do but wait and see.

Now a group of drunks up front have picked up the song and are singing in the single voice of a runaway giant.

Discuss the ghost woman that hovers beside the tequila bottles. Like all murdered ghosts she is in need of impossible assistance. There is a mirror running the length of the bar and as you set up for business you see or believe you see furtive movements of light just over your shoulder and in the reflection of your eyeglasses. This happens hundreds of times, so you come to take it for granted when, one night, alone in the bar, the ghost stops you in your tracks with a cold weight-force centered at your shoulder. You feel as though all the air has been pulled from your lungs and mouth and you cannot breathe in or out and you push forward again and this time do not feel the

terrible force but the tequila bottles rattle as you move past. You cannot leave the bar unattended and no one will arrive to assist you for over an hour and what you really need is a nice big drink of Jameson but you cannot bring yourself to walk past the tequilas to the whiskey assortment. If you ever hear the rattling again, you say to yourself, you will drop your head on the metal sink edge and knock yourself out, and you see in your mind the image of your unconscious body sprawled on the rubber mats behind the bar. The ghost is fully formed and hanging over as if to injure you but your lights are out and nobody's home and so the ghost, dissolving, returns wanly to the tequila.

You have bad teeth and your breath is poor. Your tips consequently are also poor and there is clotted blood in your mouth and you lose tooth pieces on soft foods like mashed potatoes and rice. You are talking to the bar owner's wife when an entire molar comes dislodged and lies heavily on your tongue. You hope to keep the tooth a secret but you are speaking strangely and her head is cocked in wonder. You have begun to sweat and blush and you pray that she does not ask what the problem is but she is opening her mouth and this is just what she does. You swallow the molar and hold out your palms to show that you are not hiding anything. You are an honest man with a clean, hopeful heart.

Discuss the new doorman, Antony, who at the end of his third night on the job accidentally cuts a man's thumb off. Antony is a talented mixed martial artist known for first-round knockouts and an apparent inability to feel pain. He is bitter that he has to pick up bar shifts to survive and he wonders if his management team is skimming more than what is customary. You find him intriguing and are impressed with his prejudice when he tells you he listens exclusively to West Coast hip-hop. Anything written or produced outside of California is of no interest to him; there are no exceptions to this rule. Antony takes a shine to you because you are so skinny and white. He is Puerto Rican and wonders at your drunken life. He asks if you eat only one Cheeto per day and you tell him that sometimes if you are famished you will eat two. You tell him you are available as a sparring partner on Tuesdays and Sundays.

The lights are up and Antony is shouting for everyone to leave the bar. He is learning that people want more than anything not to leave and will have many excuses at the ready, but now their excuses are running thin and his mood is ugly. He has kicked everyone out and moves to close the heavy steel door when Simon calls out his name and he turns. He speaks with Simon while trying to close the door but it is jammed and he slams the door three times with all his weight and finally the latch catches and he walks away but hears a wailing outside and returns to look out the peephole and there is the man with the missing thumb spinning around and bleeding

and Antony is stepping on something, later he says he thought it was an old cigar. The thumb is cleaned and wrapped in ice and given to a friend of the man who lost it and they rush off to the hospital together, and you tease Antony, calling him a terrific racist intent on de-fingering innocent white men. His eyes rise level to yours and you see that he is heartbroken by what he has done. "I know how important a man's hands are," he says. His shoulders are trembling and the bar workers say nothing. It is at this moment that you fall platonically in love with Antony.

When you sleep, your dreams are those of a dullard: You polish ashtrays, stock the ice bins, reach for a bottle and find it there or not there, and exchange names and pleasantries with familiar-looking customers. These scenarios run in a spinning wheel and are identical in texture to your drunken memories. As a result you have only a dim idea what is fact and what is fiction and are constantly referencing past conversations with people you have never spoken with or else ignoring those you had for fear you had not. And so the general public is of split minds about you: Some say you are stupid, and some say you are rude.

Discuss the ingesting of pills in the storage room at seven o'clock and waiting on a barstool for the high to hit. There is a faint chalk line of daylight at the base of the front door and two customers are looking over at you. Their drinks are empty and they want to call out but you make them uncomfortable. Why, they are wondering, is that man smiling? The bar is silent and the pills congregate in your fingertips like lazy students in an empty hall.

Discuss the effects of the full moon on the weekend crowds and the dread you experience when you see the full moon wedged in the corner of the sky. Discuss the short muscleman who is stripped to the waist and eager to fight. He hits a larger man over the head with a bottle and is apprehended by a doorman. The muscleman makes a show of taking his time to leave and so when he reaches the exit there are many angry people waiting for him on the sidewalk. You move to the door to watch because the world is full of short musclemen wanting to fight and you hope to see one hurt or killed.

The muscleman stands behind two doormen and spouts profane threats to the people on the sidewalk; the man with the head wound stands at the front of the pack, proud of his bloody face. His injury has awakened a subtle greatness in him and he licks at the blood and his eyes are wild and wonderful and it is just as he says: He is going to murder the muscleman. The doormen are in no danger but do not like

protecting a villain and finally they give up the muscleman to be slaughtered when he will not keep his mouth closed. He is backed against the building and to the last is confident he will emerge victorious and he asks the crowd of twenty who will be first and there comes an answer in the form of a tremendous fist in his face. The fist belongs to the man with the head wound, who is delighted with the punch, as well he should be—it is as in a heroic dream. The muscleman drops like a stone and the crowd swarms over him in search of available openings.

Discuss Curtis, a disconsolate black man and regular with a law enforcement fetish. He wears a bulky leather motorcycle-cop jacket and mirrored cop sunglasses and a heavy leather gun holster without a gun in it. He has another holster on his belt for his Zippo lighter; he knows many tricks involving the lighter and offers people cigarettes so that he might showcase them, though Curtis himself does not smoke. He suffers from the skin condition vitiligo and both his hands from the knuckles to the fingertips are patchy with raw, pink flesh. He plays the Rolling Stones' "Memory Hotel" over and over on the jukebox, a song you once liked but which he has poisoned for you. He sings along, eager to show that he knows every word, and his tongue falls from his mouth like a tentacle, his gums like dirty purple curtains. His hair is short, with a part shaved into the side of his head; he has a silver-dollar-sized bald spot to which he applies an egg-smelling cream, the scent of which oftentimes alerts you to his presence. His head bobs deeply as he drinks and his neck stretches long like caramel taffy on a pull.

He has many annoying habits, not the least of which is mimicking your brand of drink. When you made the final switch to Jameson, for instance, Curtis followed suit. When your liver began to ache and you took to mixing ginger ale into your whiskey and chasing this with cranberry juice, Curtis did as well. This could be the sincerest form of flattery but most likely it is his plan to instill in your subconscious the repellent notion that you and he are kindred spirits. Also this practice of copycatting makes it easy for him to shout out that you should make it two when he sees you moving toward the bottles to fix yourself something. After the drink slips down his throat he bombards you with praise and brays at any little joke you make, though it cannot be said that he is looking for friendship, only free whiskey. You supply him with this because he has been drinking on the house for years and the alternative would be to sit him down and essentially break up with him, and because the whiskey after all is not yours, and it is easier to give it away than to have so intimate a conversation with someone you spend every night trying your best to avoid even glancing at.

Curtis was not always like this. When he first came around he was a model customer. He tipped well and bought rounds and picked up tabs that were not his and at the end of each night he would help clean the bar or stock beer and was bashful and sweet if you should thank him. He never got overly drunk, he never leered at women,

he rarely spoke and then never about himself, and he never once wore his mirrored sunglasses indoors. Everyone liked him, you included, and you showered him with warmth and gratitude, and eventually with alcohol.

He had at first refused any complimentary drinks, feigning shock, as though the idea was the farthest thing from his mind. Then he allowed it infrequently, and only when it was demanded of him, and his tips would reflect his appreciation of the gesture. Slowly, though, he accepted the drinks more and more and in time, six months perhaps, it was understood that Curtis was one of those who drank on the house. Once this was established, once he was inextricably enmeshed in the fiber of the bar, once he became a *regular*, then he began to change, or as you believe, to reveal his true self, the man he had been all along: He took an interest in women and became one of those who approached and bothered them; he drank to the point of drunkenness and spoke of his life, or rather, lied about his life, and the lies were feeble articles, too sad even to handle and dismantle; he ceased helping with the after-hours chores but stayed on all the same, making asides and offering peppy talks where none were needed; and finally his tips trickled away, from tens to fives to ones to change to nothing at all, and this was the worst aspect of the new Curtis because he hoped to replace the divot in the tip jar with his oppressive, counterfeit friendship. Now he stares long and hard until you cannot help but return his gaze, and he motions you over as if you were close companions with great things to share. He imparts an obvious falsehood about an imaginary girlfriend before squeezing your shoulder and asking if you have had a drink lately, and if you tell him you have not he says, let's the both of us have one together. If you say that you have he tells you to slow it down until he catches up and he asks with reptilian humility for a double shot of whiskey and a beer, anything cold, anything besides Budweiser, or Pabst, or Tecate, and he names off all the beers besides Guinness, the most expensive beer, which is what he wanted all along.

It has been so long since Curtis was the model customer that most do not remember the phase at all, or else they say that he tipped and was helpful on only one rare day. Those who do remember assume Curtis has fallen on hard times and take pity on him, but you know he has a job in a Kinko's copy shop because you have driven by and seen him at work. He could still tip but chooses not to, and you believe he has studied each bar employee and decided that there is not one in the bunch who cares enough about his or her job to put a stop to his endless tab, and in this he is correct. You sometimes see this knowledge glowing in his eyes, and see how badly he wants to share it with someone, anyone, but he doesn't dare for fear this will affect his tenuous standing, and each time he receives a drink he is greatly relieved and he laughs aloud and thinks to himself, How much longer will these people let me drink for free?

One night he is drunk and whispering into the ear of an unaccompanied woman. You cannot tell what he is saying and you do not want to know but the woman is offended and you see her jerk back and douse him with her drink and she calls Curtis a loser and his ridiculous, agonized expression somehow crystallizes the word's definition and you are traumatized to finally understand its true meaning—that is, someone who has lost, and who is losing, and who will continue to lose for the rest of

his life until he is dead and in the ground. She leaves the bar and Curtis retires to the bathroom to dry his face and holsters. He returns as though nothing has happened, and before he can begin telepathically attacking you, you head for the bottle of Jameson and pour out two large shots. Curtis wants to drink to friendship but you opt for health, and he shrugs and pours the whiskey down his throat and you see his tonsils glistening as he tips back the glass to drain it.

By last call his face is on the bar and his bald spot is slick and beaming under the lights and you feel a warmth toward him because there is something childlike about his head and skull, something innocent and fine, and you worry for the skull, propped and dozing, and you think to wrap it in cotton and set it in a cupboard for safekeeping, but when he raises his red eyes to meet yours, whatever tenderness you had for him trickles away and is gone. Now you hate him and you tell him he has to go home and he turns to the glowing green EXIT sign that hangs above the door. Following its instruction he moves out and into the night, staggering as he goes. "See you tomorrow," he calls back, and you set your teeth to grinding. The sinks are full with cold brown water and your arm is like a hook as you dump in all the dirty glasses and you hear the muted sound of glass breaking underwater and want to plunge your palms in and shred them through but you only empty the sinks and watch the mound of glass shards shining under the lurid red light of the bar.

You like to think that if you were ever attacked by a shark you would afterward swim in the ocean without the slightest fear because statistically it would be impossible to be attacked again. This is your feeling on the subject of the ghost: Your quota of naked terror is now full and you will not be bothered anymore. You no longer see her in the mirrors or hear the rattling of bottles and you tell yourself that the weight-force on your shoulder was only fantasy, another of your bar dreams. And yet you still think of her, and from time to time engage her or the idea of her in conversation, asking questions like, "How do you think tonight will go for me?" and "What do the bosses say about me when I'm not around?" as well as "Are you cold?" and "Do you carry the woes of the world on your very shoulders?" and also, once, "Do you see how differently the young women dress today?" A voice resides in your head to answer these and other questions. It is a wise and sexless voice and you cultivate its sound and are happy to have created so fine a being, but the voice sometimes frightens you, as it seems to know things you do not. For instance, you are often poked and stabbed with broken glasses and bottles and your hands are marked with many small cuts. You invent a game where you run your hands under hot water and with eyes closed attempt to pinpoint and count them, but the pain makes the wounds blur into one another and when you open your eyes to check you have always missed a cut or two or added a cut or two, and you laugh at the silly diversion.

One night, after hours, you are alone and running your hands under the hot water when the voice asks if you aren't through with your ablutions yet. You do not know the

word but write it down to look it up the next day. You learn its definition on page 3 of *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "The washing of one's body or part of it (as in a religious rite)." You are certain you have never heard this word before as you were raised without any religion and have never set foot inside any church or temple, and you return the dictionary to the shelf and vow never to play this game of counting your wounds again.

You drive home drunk at the end of each night but the police have never stopped you because your car, a 1971 Ford LTD, is magical. It is a twenty-minute drive through empty streets and highways from the bar to your home and by rights you should have been arrested a hundred times over, but the car's powers are such that even when police drive behind you they are rendered blind and deaf to your weaving and your squealing tires. You sometimes do not remember driving home at all and later find dents and scratches in the front and back fenders, but each morning you awake in your bed and not in a jail cell and you wonder if the car became magical only after you owned it or if it rolled off the assembly line this way.

You believe the Ford's magic is ever growing like money in the bank, like a slow-blossoming flower, but you have had the car since you were sixteen years old and so despite its powers you do not want to drive it or look upon its decrepit exterior anymore and you retire it to the carport where it becomes host to an unfriendly stray tomcat and a variety of spiders whose many webs embroider the interior like a lace doily. You place a newspaper ad in hopes of selling the car but no one will purchase a vehicle in such a state: The convertible top is permanently down, the plates are out of state, the steering wheel has a quarter turn of slack, the doors do not open, the right rear wheel wobbles, the seats are shredded, the radio turns on and off at will, and the gas pedal sticks when you drop it to the floor. You tell potential buyers about the car's crafty, police-eluding talents, but they only point to the rust and the broken taillights and walk away thinking of their wasted time. Eventually you give up on the idea of selling the car and begin taking your wife's Toyota to work.

The Toyota is not magical and it seems that each time you drink and drive there is a policeman lurking in the rear-view mirror. Whenever this happens you decide that if you are pulled over you will tell the policeman directly that you are drunk and ask to be jailed at once, but the red and blue lights somehow never come on and the police car rushes past you toward some fatal danger or another. Your hands tremble and you turn down a side street to park and you think of the repercussions of a DUI and swear never to drink and drive again and all the next day you feel righteous and masterful but that night you misplace your purpose and drink and drive again. It makes you sad that you can't keep a promise to yourself but you are of two minds on the matter. The minds are cleanly separated and functioning independently of each other. They are content with this arrangement and have no plans to alter it.

Your luck is buckling. Someone gives you a handful of pills that you eat along with your nightly whiskey and as the narcotics take effect a love grows in your heart and you wonder if this isn't how saints feel. But you are drinking more and more and the feeling is hidden in ugly clouds and by night's end you are unable to speak and you walk to the gas station to purchase aspirin. You are slurring your words and the Arab man behind the bulletproof glass does not like you. Now he is standing over you and shaking you awake: You have fallen asleep in the gas station bathroom, though you do not know why you entered or how long you have been there. You return to your car and find a note on the windshield: "Where did you go?" The note is not signed and the love in your heart is gone. It feels as if it was never there at all.

You are driving. A car is approaching in your lane and it seems you will collide with it. Both cars' brakes lock up but there is a slight accident. You pull over and a man jumps from the other car looking to attack you physically. It was not he in the wrong lane but you and his front fender is dented and he is furious. He is all muscle and it appears you will be beaten for your careless driving. Your blood is a dead weight in your veins and you are very confused by what has happened and the man asks if you are drunk and you say that you never drink, not even wine on Sundays, as you are devoutly religious and believe that alcohol is the handiwork of the devil himself. You manage to say this without a stutter and the man stands back to look at you. His anger is diffused by your proclamation and now he is searching high and low for it. If he could only reclaim the anger he would carry on with his original plan, which was to hurt you as you hurt his automobile, but now a policeman has pulled over a drunk across the street and the man's demeanor changes. You know by the look in his eyes that he is afraid of the police and you decide he must have a warrant, or else he is drunk himself or has drugs in his car or on his person. The man says again that he suspects you have been drinking, and pointing to the policeman he asks what you would say to a field sobriety test. Knowing the man is bluffing you say that would be fine and you clear your throat to shout out to the policeman when the man lays a hand on your arm to silence you. He writes out your address and license plate number and he is cursing but his anger is gone and will not come back.

The drunk across the street is in the back of the police car and the policeman is watching you. He is curious and it seems he will cross the street to meet you and you tell the man into whom you crashed about this and he is scared. "Let's pretend we're good friends saying goodnight to each other," you say, and you take up the man's hand to shake it. "Okay!" you say. This is what you imagine one good friend would say to another at three o'clock in the morning on the side of the road in Hollywood. "Okay!" you say again. "Okay!" the man says. He is crushing your hand and you are smiling. "I still think you're drunk," he whispers. You wink and return to the Toyota. The policeman has lost interest and is filling out paperwork on his dashboard; the drunk is watching you from the back of the squad car. You point to him and tip back a phantom bottle, and he nods. He points to you and tips a phantom bottle and you nod. The drunk then points skyward, toward heaven, and to his heart. This is a beautiful gesture from a man on his way to jail and as you pull back onto the road you decide to have a cry over it. You try to cry all the way home but can manage only a coughing fit and a

few moans. You had hoped your crying would be so relentless that you would be forced to pull the car over and "ride it out," but you arrive home without shedding a tear. You fall asleep in the Toyota and when you wake up you are covered with sweat and your wife is hitting you and shrieking in what seems to be another language and you say to her, "Okay! Okay! Okay!" She is curious about the damage done to the front of the car and her sharpened red fingers stab crazily at the morning air.

Curtis loses his job and begins bringing things from his apartment into the bar as tips: Stereo equipment, DVDs, a video camera, and compact discs. At first the gifts are wrapped and labeled for individual employees but as his possessions dwindle he begins filling a gym bag with whatever detritus is lying around his room—books mostly, mutilated, frantically highlighted texts offering too clear a glimpse into Curtis's private life: *An Illustrated History of S&M, Grappling for Dummies, Homemade Explosives 1-2-3*. When there is nothing left to give, Curtis stuffs his coat pockets with pornographic magazines and hands these out indiscriminately throughout the night, speaking all the while of friendship and lasting cheer and the importance of sticking together. You now bring him drinks if only to condense your conversations and divert his increasingly psychotic gaze. No one else seems to notice his decline, but you expect he will shortly crack and run rampant with a knife, or lob a pipe bomb into the bar. It will sever your body at the waist and your legs will cancan out the door, heading west toward the ocean on Santa Monica Boulevard.

Curtis is waiting by the Toyota after hours. He wants a ride home. You are drunk and cannot think of a lie to tell him and you walk around to unlock his door as if you were on a date. You are driving along in silence when he begins, out of the blue, to weep on your shoulder. You do not know what to do. You want to crash into a wall and die. He is also drunk and talking through a bubbling mask of spittle; now he will tell you his story. He has been evicted, he says, but breaks into the apartment to sleep sitting up in the closet. The new tenants are due at any moment and he lives in unending fear of their arrival and hasn't slept more than three hours a night for the past week and what little sleep he has had was riddled with nightmares. (He is standing by the sea watching two large red fish casually eating each other's faces. Soon they are but two wagging, blood-spitting tails.) You extend your sympathies but feel in your heart that Curtis has found his station in life, that he *belongs* in a closet dreaming of murderous sea life, that he *deserves* to live in a state of perpetual unease. And yet it is an awful fate, and you place a pitying hand on his shoulder and tell him that everything will work itself out.

"When?" he asks.

You are idling in front of Curtis's/not Curtis's apartment and he leans in gripping your hand and asks with absolute earnestness if he might live with you and your wife. He cannot pay you any rent but is handy with around-the-house repairs and will be

happy to run errands. He says it will take him three to five months to get back on his feet and through the murk and fog of your drunken mind you are visited by the image of Curtis in his underwear sitting on the couch in your living room shouting at the television set. This fills you with hysterical apprehension and your ensuing fit of laughter is completely out of your control. Now Curtis is gloomy and will not get out of the car. He asks for five dollars and you give him twenty and it occurs to you that you are witnessing the birth of a homeless man, and you will never again be one of those who look upon a staggering wino and say, "How did he get to be so low down?" Curtis is muttering bitterly from the passenger seat; he seems almost to be mimicking the idling engine. *Putter putter putter*—it has been a long Saturday night and you are tired and the sound lulls you to sleep and when you wake up at dawn you are alone and the car has run itself out of gas.

Discuss the apartment building across from the bar. It sits above a massage parlor and twice you see people drop from a high window to the sidewalk. You do not cross the street to view the results but your heart is hurt and confused by the sight of the falling bodies. They fall with certainty or with confidence; they seem to want to fall faster. (In your dreams, the bodies are always falling and will always fall from this building. You are always standing on the sidewalk, smoking and staring at their point of departure.)

You do not ask about but overhear the doormen speak of the incidents and you learn that the first was a suicide, the second a homicide. A third falling body follows on a night you are off sick and you feel as though you have missed an important engagement. Tony, the man who collects the empty bottles at closing time, sits with a beer listening to the after-hours talk of the building and bodies and he leans in and tells you it is the building's will to expel its occupants. With a fluttering, arcing hand he says, "The Terrible Building That Vomits Humans."

Discuss Simon, the managing bartender. He was born and raised in Johannesburg, South Africa; after winning a modeling competition he immigrated to Hollywood at twenty years of age. Now forty, his hair is still white-blond and full, his body still fit and tanned, but after two decades of alcohol and cocaine abuse his face is beginning to sag, his dreams of success as an actor growing increasingly irrelevant. He swivels at the hips like an action-figure doll and delivers clipped witticisms and superfluous personal information with shocking redundancy. If, for instance, he has decided once more to quit drinking he will be sure to tell every customer about it all through the night, whether they are interested or not. "It's a question of mind over matter, mate," he will say. A few days later he will tell the same people about his plan to abstain for three long months. He is "Givin' the liver a breather, buddy." A week later he will be back to drinking tequila and when confronted with his earlier proclamations will plead

ignorance or say that he had only been joking. He is the type who drops his towel in the sauna so that if you look—you cannot help but look—you will see his chiseled buttocks and uncircumcised penis, an image that will flash in your mind's eye for days to come like a death threat.

As manager, Simon has the unpleasant job of keeping the employees in line, and you sometimes find that he is screaming at you. He screams only when you are very drunk and so the gravity of his reproach is always misplaced and forgotten and the next day at work he will apologize and you will not know what he is talking about but you will forgive him anyway and he will bring over two drinks so that you might restore peace and you will empty the glass and think, This must be how it feels to have a stepfather.

Each morning you wake up wondering how hung-over you will be. You are partially asleep or partially drunk or both and at first you cannot gauge your own suffering and you cast a hand outward and ask yourself, how does this hand feel? What about the arm, the shoulder, the chest, the torso? Is there any aching or discomfort in the legs? On a pain scale of one to ten (one is a finger-flick to your skull, ten is death), what is the rating from the neck up? You blink your eyes to test their sensitivity to light and crane your neck to crack your spine and gravity is pushing on your swollen, dehydrated brain and you inspect your body for wounds or tenderness. You are your own doctor, sympathetic but ultimately disconnected.

Your wife enters the room and you sit up in bed to greet her, a sudden movement revealing that you have a spectacular hangover and are in considerable pain. Your body is humming and your blood seems to be running against itself and you can hear your blood churning and try to describe this sound to yourself: A toy engine submerged in water. A propeller plane buzzing in the sky. The plane is hidden in fog. It is ten miles off.

Your wife is folding and unfolding sheets. She asks how you are feeling and you say the word *great*. She says you seemed drunk the night before, that you were singing, and you tell her you were not drunk but jolly. She heard you fall in the bathroom, she says, and you claim to have slipped on a sock. It was not your sock but hers and you could have been knocked unconscious. You could have been killed. Your wife says nothing to this but sighs, and you tell her that if she still doesn't believe you then to go ahead and count out the aspirin in the bathroom cupboard (she always counts out the aspirin in the bathroom cupboard), for if you had been drunk, as she says, you would surely have eaten some before bedtime. Count out the aspirin, you say again, and see that none are missing, but she does not budge, she only nods, and you know by the somberness of the gesture that she has already found the aspirin all accounted for. She moves to the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea and there is a resonant crash as she drops the kettle into the sink to fill it and you wince at the sound

and flip your pillow in hopes that the cooler cotton will chill your whiskey-warm face.

Your wife has long suspected you of covertly purchasing and consuming aspirin on your way home from work and she rifles the car for empty Advil packets and telltale 7-Eleven receipts. In these investigations she is always unsuccessful, as you are careful to discard your aspirin evidence, but she is certain that at some point each night you are floating aspirin atop a bellyful of whiskey and doing your body irreparable damage that will shorten your time together. She has cried about your aspirin abuse and once cursed you and demanded to know your aspirin secrets, but you only held her and told her lies. (She knew you were telling her lies.) What she does not know is that you have a bottle of aspirin tucked in the back of your study closet and that you eat them like strongman vitamins. What she does not know is that at another time, in another neighborhood, and hidden from another woman, you kept aspirin in the glove compartment of your magical car. Once you hid your aspirin in a shoebox, once in an acoustic guitar. You have always hidden your aspirin from some nosy woman who thought to come to the aid of your defenseless organs. When the woman went away you would move your aspirin into your bathroom cupboard and gobble them freely and without fear of reprimand, but sooner or later a new woman would arrive and declare your lifestyle unhealthy and you would be forced once more to hide the bottle. This routine only brings you closer to your aspirin and you come to adore them in a star-crossed-lovers type of way. It is a doomed affair and will end in misery and death.

Now your wife's kettle is boiling (she is punishing you by letting its whistle blow) and there is apricot-colored bile rising from your stomach like mercury in a thermometer. If your wife finds you vomiting there will be no debating whether or not you are hung-over and your plans for the day will be ruined. (In the nighttime you dreamt of a cold movie palace and its rippling red curtain rising to reveal distraction from the coming day's agony.) You get out of bed sweating your whiskey sweat and your head is dizzy and pulsing and you are walking in the agitated hunchback style, first to your study for the aspirin and then to the bathroom, where you turn on the shower and radio and drop to your knees before the toilet.

You are a trained silent vomiter. You do not sigh, you do not moan, you do not breathe heavily, you vomit on the porcelain of the toilet rather than in the toilet water, and as far as your wife knows you have never once vomited in all your time together. This skill was not developed overnight and you are annoyed that you will never be able to share it with others, and you wonder if you wouldn't benefit from having a best friend. But wouldn't he then want to share his talents with you? And is this perhaps all that best friends do? Sit around discussing their talents? You are not interested in the talents of others and you decide you must be cautious about whom you let into your life.

You flush the toilet and watch your vomit as though it is a departing train. Your stomach is empty and you will probably not vomit again on this day and you decide to take five aspirin, this in addition to the six you took the night before for a total of eleven in eight hours, which according to aspirin labels, doctors, girlfriends, and wives

the world over is very bad for you. But you have been following this routine for so long you do not dare stop now and you cringe when you imagine how bad your hangovers would be without the aspirin.

You step into the shower stall with the bottle at your side. You are cautious to keep a hand dry as you tip it back and pour the aspirin into the cup of your palm, and you have counted out four when you spy a large, foreign pill peeking from the bottle's lip and your eyes widen and you exit the stall to pour the bottle's contents onto the countertop. You find four of these white pills mixed in with the aspirin and your heart is breaking with happiness as you eat them. You cannot recall how you came to possess them but you commend yourself for not taking the pills the night before, and you allow yourself to think of your drunken, blacked-out other half not as a man to fear but as one upon whom you would call if you were ever in trouble. This is a fantastic lie but because you are telling it only to yourself you do not feel bad about it.

You return to the stall and your skin is prickly from fatigue and pain and there is a hissing in your ears. Time passes and the pills are taking hold like a glowing white planet coming into view, a reverse eclipse, and you watch with your eyes closed, your body propped in the corner of the stall like a mannequin. There is a knock on the bathroom door but you ignore it. The white planet is half exposed; it grips your heart in its light and seems to be pulling you forward, and now you feel that you are falling. You are awake but dreaming. "The earth is not beautiful but the universe is," you say. Your words reverberate off the green and greener tiles of the shower stall and there are footsteps in the hall and you pretend they are the footsteps of liberating soldiers and you call out to your wife, "Let me take you to the movies," but she does not answer. "I want to go to the movies today," you say, and think again of the rippling, rising curtain in the cold dark room of the theater, and of your wife's soft hand in yours and of her face, not angry and tight as it has been so often lately, but soft and pretty, as when you were courting, and she loved you, when she said she would help you, with freckles on her chin that you could touch with your fingertips anytime you wanted. But what words might you use that would restore your wife's faith in you, when you have used up so many words already, and when the words have all proven false? There are always other words, you tell yourself, there will always be some combination of words that will return your wife's love to you, and you hold your hand to your mouth to hide your smile. There are so many things to be happy about you do not suppose you will ever be sad again.

Discuss Merlin. He is seventy years old, with close-cropped white hair, a long white beard, and desperate, deep-set gray eyes. He chain-smokes brown More cigarettes; they tremble in his spotted, hairy hands or hang from the corner of his lipless mouth and he speaks from behind a screen of smoke, his fingers interlocking like puzzle pieces, a visual aid to some astrological peculiarity or possibly a dirty joke. His teeth are jagged, yellow, and rodent-like, and when he laughs his neck is all veins and

tendons and you force yourself to look for no reason other than it is a difficult thing to do.

His vocation is mired in the pall of alcoholic fiction but he claims to be involved alternately in moviemaking, real estate, stock speculation, and something called life coaching, which as far as you can tell is an ugly cousin to psychology requiring considerably less schooling. He speaks of his freelance work as a medium and of his relationship to the other side, hence his nickname, which he is aware of and apparently not offended by. Despite his many professions he is usually broke and twice has asked you for small loans to tide him over until the banks open. "No," you said flatly, and he bared his teeth and retreated like a crab into the shadows of the cold, smoke-filled room.

He is a man in crisis. He favors futuristic, multibuckling sandals and brightly colored nylon jumpsuits, but is known to wear for business purposes a voluminous double-breasted sharkskin suit and tasseled wingtips. These meetings invariably go poorly and Merlin complains of his clients and investors, christening them chickenhearts and babyhearts and yellowbacks. On such nights as these he grinds his fangs and slaps at the bar, cursing the cruel machine called Hollywood with mounting venom until complaints are made and Simon is forced to intervene, clamping Merlin's arm to hush him. Merlin drops his eyes in shame. He is envious of Simon's good looks and accent and he spreads a rumor that Simon was not born in cosmopolitan Johannesburg but the squalor of a desert scrubland, surrounded by "yipping pygmies and hippo shit." Merlin was born in Cincinnati but affects an English accent when drinking.

One night you and Simon are alone in the bar when Merlin, leather fanny pack slung over his shoulder, walks in to greet you. He comments on the empty room: "Ghost Ship," he says. He is suppressing a smile and looks as though he has just found a wallet in the gutter but is hoping to conceal this for fear that someone will claim it. He asks for a drink and you pour him a quadruple vodka and tonic with lime, on the house. This is your new tactic for dealing with hangers-on such as these: You get them helplessly drunk and refuse all money, even tips, and in the morning when they are stuffing chunky bits of vomit down the shower drain with their toes, you hope that they think of you, and that the next time they visit the bar they will ask someone else to serve them. Simon knows what you are doing and he smiles his handsome smile, lowering his head to hide it.

Merlin sucks on a lime wedge and drops the rind into his glass and his shoulders shudder as he drinks and he raises his head to study his reflection in the mirror behind the bar. He lights a cigarette and the smoke slips upward in a slick blue ribbon. Simon asks him what's the latest and Merlin's eyes cloud over; there is lime pulp in his beard and before he speaks he shows you his teeth. "I've just come from a meeting," he says. Simon, nudging you, asks him if his ship's come in, and Merlin says it wasn't that sort of a meeting. An AA meeting, then, Simon says. Merlin shakes his head. "A psychic meeting," you say, and Merlin nods deliberately. He takes another drink and raises his

eyes to meet Simon's.

"A round-table vision," he says. "The strongest any of us have ever experienced. You will be murdered in your home on the fifteenth of September. You will be shot twice, once in the brain and once in the heart. The heart shot will kill you but it will take some time to die. The shooter's a nigger, little and mean. He'll never be caught and he'll laugh as he drives away in your car."

Simon is clutching a dishrag. "Mean little ... what?" he says. His mouth is open, his jaw crooked and stiff. He is wringing the dishrag in his hands.

"You'll die on the burgundy rug in your front room. The light of the morning will be glowing in the windows. The blood pool will expand toward the walls and door. The door is blue. The curtains are beige and a red telephone is ringing. Your voice is on the answering machine greeting and your body is twitching. The caller doesn't leave a message. Your body goes limp, and you die." He takes another drink and gasps. "This is what will happen to you on the fifteenth of September."

Merlin finishes his drink and leaves without tipping. Simon has gone uniformly white and for once has nothing to say. You bring him a large shot of tequila and tell him Merlin is a fool, but he shakes his head and says the description of his apartment was exact. He drinks the tequila and points for another, and then another, and he continues drinking and soon is drunk and by midnight you are helping him into the back seat of a taxi. He is gurgling and cursing Merlin and the driver hands him a plastic bag should he have to vomit. You give the driver the address and watch Simon's head slide from view as the taxi rounds the corner at Santa Monica.

Back in the bar you consult the calendar that hangs above the register and see that Simon has four months and seventeen days left before he will be killed. You mark the date with skull and crossbones and turn to resume your work but the bar is still empty and there is no work to be done, and you stand with your arms crossed and wait for something to happen.

Discuss Sam, the bar's principal cocaine dealer, a black man in his mid-forties who grew up with the owner in a nearby suburb. He had hoped to find work at the bar but when it became clear his old friend would not give him any legal position he cornered the stimulant market and now does a brisk business out of a stall in the back bar men's bathroom, this in spite of the fact that he keeps his stash in his gas tank and that his product smells of regular unleaded. He has three small children, sons, who sometimes accompany him to the bar as he works; they circle him and drag their hands down the front of his pant legs, demanding money, colas, chocolate Kisses, their mothers, and beds to sleep in. Sam does not like bringing his sons to the bar but says that at times it is unavoidable. You always take the boys into the manager's office, where there is a television set and a jar of candies, and ask them to stay put because if the fire

department or any city employee found them on the premises on a Saturday night the bar would be closed and you would be out of a job and the state would take the children away to institutions and Sam to jail. The other employees complain about him but the owner and the owner's wife tolerate him, not out of any sentiment but because he gives them free drugs whenever it occurs to them to ask. You like Sam and always give him top-shelf vodkas when the others give him the well. His eyes are forever bloodshot and he is terminally exhausted and you imagine his head is stuffed with wood shavings and that he cannot hear a thing you say.

You are alone in the bar in the early evening. Having seen a scary horror movie the night before you sense the ghost lurking around every corner, her cold body hoping to cover yours and chill your blood to slushy ice. You stand near the jukebox (whose lights frighten the ghost) and are punching in songs when you hear the front door open and close and you turn and see the room is empty, which is not uncommon as people often come by to poke their heads in and check for a crowd, but still it frightens you when you think that the ghost might be blocking your escape route. You push this from your mind and are again focusing on the jukebox when the door opens and closes once more, and you turn to find the room still bare, and your heartbeat accelerates and you stare hard at the lights of the jukebox, your eyes crossing, your fingers pressing in songs at random, and you think you sense a slowly approaching body shape at your side and you turn and see the shape is real and you shriek in sincere terror and the shape jumps back and curses and it is not the ghost but Sam. You are so happy you hug him and lift him from the ground and he asks if you are crazy because you looked right at him when he walked in, but he is wearing dark clothes and his skin is dark and the bar is dark and you both laugh at what has happened. "Next time I want you to give a great big smile when you come in," you tell him, and he smiles and his teeth glow like a slivered moon tipped over on its spine.

Raymond sits at the far right-hand corner of the bar and waves for you to bring him more napkins. He will use an entire stack before night's end, and not for cleaning up. His pens are in a line and he pulls from his pocket a small, jellyfish-colored ruler and he begins to draw, and to drink—whiskey in the winter, tequila in the summertime. If anyone should reach for a napkin from his personal pile he removes their hand and directs them elsewhere; this offends the bar patrons and they ask to view the drawings but Raymond will never allow it. He obscures the napkins with his forearms and hands and squirrels them in a bulging pants pocket, careful not to leave any behind. His hair is brown-gray, his bushy mustache dark brown and silky. He always wears the same T-shirt, which reads ART SAVES LIVES. His glasses sit on the end of a long, sharp nose; his eyes peer over top of the lenses, which gives the impression he is confiding something when he speaks with you. He looks to have been handsome in his youth and in fact is still handsome. His thick hair is swept to the side, by turns boyish and Hitleresque, and he smiles easily and will speak with anyone but gives his attention chiefly to the employees of the bar, to whom he addresses many questions, some of them coherent