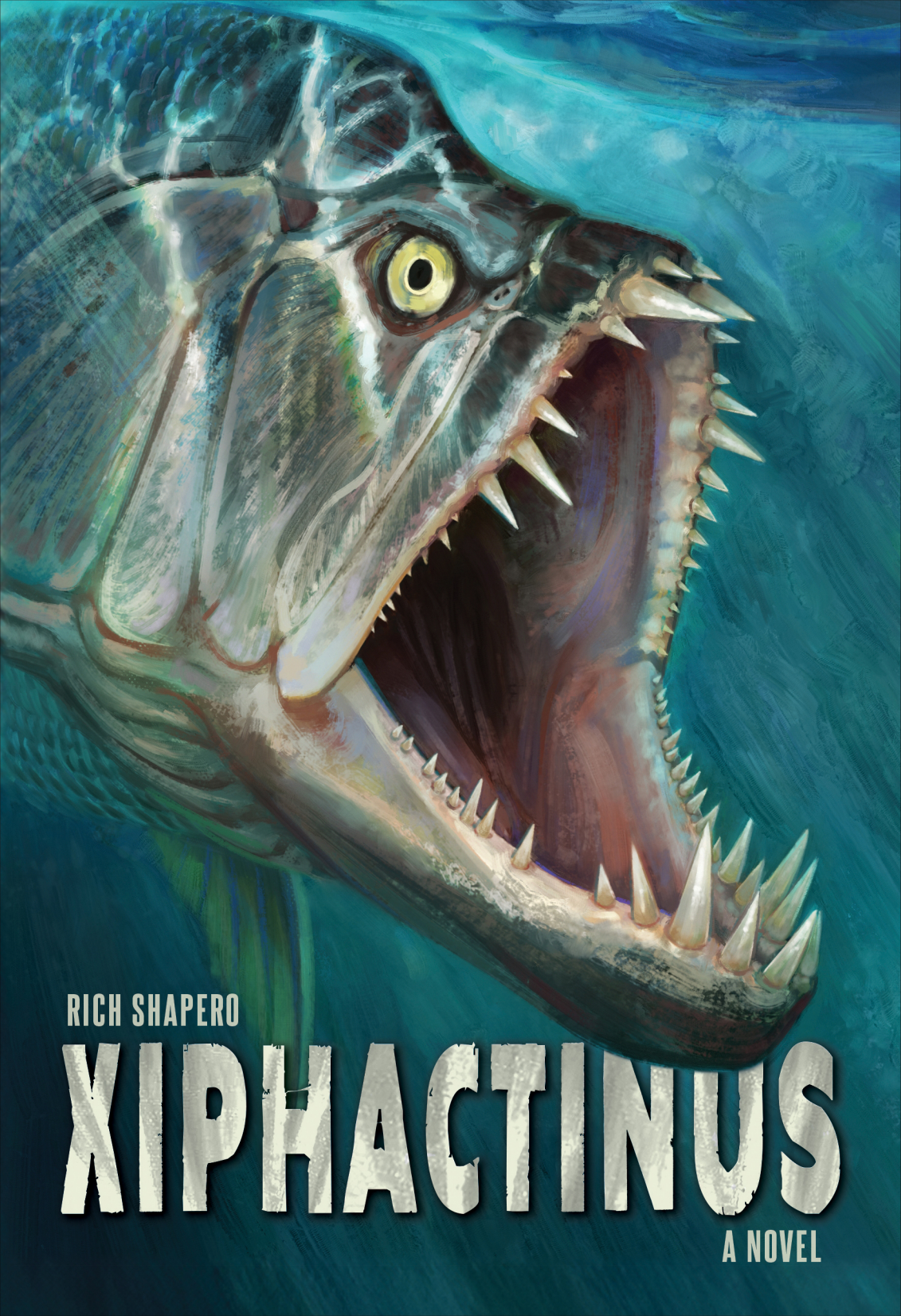




RICH SHAPERO

XIPHACTINUS

A NOVEL

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HALF MOON BAY, CALIFORNIA

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Too Far
Wild Animus

1



BASTARD SON

4ou never imagined the crooked currents of life would carry you into a maelstrom, a crisis whirling with danger and transformation.

But here you are.

As your guide in the practice of ruthlessness, I've been watchful. I've spurred your appetite and wrath. I've questioned your dread and curried your daring. I've cheered your moments of blood and brutality. But now that the crisis is here, I'm concerned. Despite all our time together, I fear you are unprepared.

The outcome seems very much in doubt. Will the challenges finish you, or will they kill the last vestige of simian scruple and set you free?

It's too late for shame, my boy. Too late for regret. Too late to change course.

There's no altering the identity that instinct and fate have given you. And—I say this with a big fish's scorn—*why would you try?*

Your erstwhile kin, your former brothers and sisters—those cowering fools covered with hair, huddled together,

sharing their hopes that the weakness of many will sum to the assurance of one— They would never believe what's happened to you.

Do they think they know a man named Dun? Do they imagine they speak to him on the phone or pass him on the street? It is Dun, isn't it?

Ha! Shall I try to remember the name your parents gave you? Was it Merrit or Angel or Harmon? A line of descent that means nothing now. From our first meeting, you were Dun, an abandoned child, an ex-human being—the bastard son of Xiphactinus.

I remember those days. Your connection to me was thin and needy. But I had no complaints. My patronage was pleasing to you. And it pleased me too. Humble times! The arrogant apes who dug me out of the chalk would be shocked to discover us now, alarmed that I'd mixed my nature with one of their own, amazed that we'd grown so close.

Now, in the depths we dwell in together—

In this grave pause, this moment of dark reflection—

A cloud of glimmering coccoliths enfolds us, sheltering our ruminations.

Your crisis, my son. How did we get here? What shall we do?

SELL AT THE MARKET

The sun hid behind the moon. The air turned cold, the dark clouds parted and money poured down. And when the daylight returned, our Interior Sea—until then a dusky vision that came and went—was a vivid green, a change more shocking, more real than you could have ever imagined.

Schooled by millennia, I was thoughtful, wary.

I knew what the riches meant. I knew the currents would bear tempting scents to others. Tides would shift and channels would open. Dangers would arrive from near and far. Monsters have no interest in minnows, but a big fish gets their attention. You would be threatened in ways you hadn't been threatened before. And quickly.

Dun, my boy—

You were so naïve, so unprepared for exorbitant wealth. Your mind was lost in the irony of it, that someone so impoverished by fate should be decked with public rewards. *Here I am*, you thought, and you did a fine job of dissembling. No one saw your bewilderment. But the two of us knew: it was a magic trick—that you'd found your way to such prominence, with your heedless nature and your unsettled past.

A venture capitalist! My dear boy. In the cockle bed of tech, Silicon Valley! Such stature, so stunningly new, so thoroughly *now*. You, with a prehistoric mind and a dubious soul! How could the fates let slip something like that?

To the invisible forces that rule the world, your equivocal history didn't matter. Well-meant misdeeds, lapses of conscience, blunders, betrayals and the countless dissimulations—

The maze had been twisted, but the clever fish passed through it. What agility! What finesse! As an investor, you flared your gills and finned boldly, and your bets were shrewd. You mimicked the best and tailed the fastest. Bringing companies to the public market took craft and calculation. Through it all, you viewed yourself as a lucky imposter. Who could believe the charade would play out?

Good times, such good times! I hung in the water behind you, watching as you read the confirmations from your controller at the end of the day. So many shares of this or that stock had been deposited in a brokerage account. Like a savory baculite served raw, arms twitching, on an inoceramid plate. His life is yours! Do as you please!

I enjoyed your disbelief. I chuffed with anticipation at the tasty dishes, working my jaws. I rattled my ray fins as you tallied the expected gains at your desk. I swam beside your speeding car. I listened to the mumbled words you shared with your wife and sons. I treaded beside you when you set your alarm at night, and I stirred myself with you at five the next morning before trading began in New York.

The gnawing suspense, the amazement, the stunning

simplicity of it all—

“Sell at the market,” you told the banker who answered the phone. And in an hour or two, you’d hear that the sale had been completed and the proceeds—millions of dollars—would be posted to your account.

Had any fish, large or small, ever fattened himself so easily?

Day after day, week after week, month after month—How long would the market hold out? When would the bubble burst? The money was turning a notional sea into the real thing, vast and green. And the freedom you’d dreamt of for so many years—

Fellow fish worried about persistence. Was high-speed comm and the internet real? Could the swarming companies live up to the wild hopes? Some feared for the newly employed. Some looked at the government windfall from taxes on gains and gave thanks. Not you, my boy. You had only one thought: sell at the market before things change!

You’d known privation and desperation, and the knowledge served you well.

And then—the unexpected.

Your boss, the fish who’d hired you, the venture firm’s founding partner— The balding, overly proper Prentiss— He wanted to speak to you.

THE NEXT FUND

Prentiss was playing the Oxford don. His manner was grave. As you entered his office, he adjusted his glasses and tapped his brow.

Had something been disclosed? The money was yours, wasn't it? No one could take it away.

You sat across from him, silent, matching his gravity. Prentiss made a few mundane remarks and then came to the crux. He had decided to retire, he said, and from the other partners, he'd picked you as the new leader.

You absorbed his words. You considered them carefully, blew a few bubbles and watched them rise. You nodded to show you understood.

He'd been talking to the fund's investors, your limited partners, he said. He'd discussed his retirement and a managed transition. The LPs were supportive. And with their support, he'd circled commitments for the next fund. It would be larger—much larger—than those before it. A billion clams, he said.

“Who's going to manage it?' they all asked.”

And he stared at you.

You counted. One-two-three. Then you laughed. “I will,” you said.

You left his office in a fog, as if a passing cimolichthys had blown milt in your face. A new span of control. More public visibility. How would your wife react? And the boys—

Your assistant, Diana, stepped toward you, tearing a page from her notepad. “Redfern wants you to call him,” she said, extending the page.

You laughed and waved the note aside.

Blithe. Jaunty. Thanking your unexplainable luck. You had no idea what the step-up meant. No idea of the threats that were aligning themselves—even then—against you. Despite years of tutelage, you were so naïve.

Your high spirits accompanied you home. Your wife was out, but your boys were upstairs with the nanny. You put one on each knee and bounced them, enjoying their twaddle as ape fathers do. Then you shared your good fortune. They were joyful.

Their notion of what you did was vague. They were aware that each fund you’d raised had invested in many companies. And they knew some of the company names: Gnogen, Soritec and the like. They understood how important Gnogen was: that you’d started the company, that it had been successful and the Gnogen people were all your friends.

You explained that, as a result of your triumphs, you were going to be the new leader of your partnership. They cheered the news and proposed ice cream to celebrate. After the foolery, you put them to bed.

LONG NECKS, SMALL HEADS

The timing seemed strange, unlikely. That's the life a big fish leads.

Were they paddling in a pack, following you, watching you, waiting for the right moment? Or had they been tracking you separately and found each other just before the attack? Pointless questions. Lawyers and suits are as native as algae to the Interior Sea.

Soritec's new product was late, and the announcement sent the stock price plunging. Their IPO had made a big splash the year before, and—foolish boy—you were still on the board. Soritec's general counsel called to alert you that suits were brewing. Plaintiff law firms were issuing press releases, soliciting clients. Injured parties were nursing their wounds.

When the suits came, you and your fund were named. How naïve you were! You imagined it was a coincidence that the legal assault should come shortly after the publicity around your new fund. Money draws monsters, my boy, in this case elasmosaurs—bloated and slow, but never sated, persistent creatures with long necks and small heads.

Eight suits were filed, and two months later the court

appointed the biggest elasmosaur to represent the class as lead plaintiff. You knew about class-action suits. You'd been through two, but never as lead investor.

"The big one," Prentiss said, "will get legal fees. The others, only damages. It will take some explaining." He was thinking of your investors. The explanation, he said, must come from you, as it was a company of yours that had drawn the suits.

The lead elasmosaur called. He wanted to depose you in front of the pack.

There in your conference room, in the filtered light of the deep, jellies and belemnites winking on either side, you faced your enemies—half a dozen of them. The lawyers were giants weighing half a ton, and the one in the lead was forty feet long.

Your eyes were steely, your fins wide, braced on the table.

The lead snaked his neck toward you, eyes like black stones, raising his front paddles. He tried a joke on you. You were silent, showing him only your emotionless eyes and your sealed lips. The monsters looked at each other, removed the portfolios from their attachés and the questioning began.

Initially they focused on the numbers miss. What had caused it? they asked, eyes gleaming. Engineering problems, you said. They requested documents—reports, schedules, emails. Soritec's general counsel noted the requests.

Would the new product ever ship? Yes, you replied. There had been some design challenges, but the project was progressing and had all the promise the CEO had described. More requests for documents.

The monsters press you: there were earlier signs the

product schedules were in jeopardy. “No,” you say, “there were not.” You and the board knew, they assert, that the product wouldn’t ship on schedule. “No,” you say, “no one knew.” You intentionally omitted this information from the IPO documents, they insist. “No,” you reply. “I did not.”

For monsters, their heads were small—two feet in length—but they all moved together now, six long necks crossing the conference table. When they stopped, the narrow heads were arrayed around you, needle teeth unmeshing like fingers.

The jaws remained parted while the lead spoke.

“You knowingly misled investors through false statements in your securities registration, didn’t you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you replied.

The lead plaintiff used his front paddle to push a document across the table toward you. It’s a copy of Soritec’s IPO registration.

“Is this your signature?” the monster asked.

Bubbles rose from his nostrils. The gray mass of his trunk swayed, and as his words entered your ears, you could see a vortex of minnows whirling behind him—memories of the worlds of helpless creatures he had consumed.

“Yes,” you said, “that’s my signature.”

“You understood at the time,” he said, “that by signing the registration document, your fund is liable.”

“Yes,” you said, “I understood that.”

The lead waved his paddles like wings, and the others did likewise, acting out their passage from discovery to court and a visible public trial.

Then the lead's head moved closer and his eyes narrowed, looking for weakness, looking for fear.

"You understand," he said, "that you are personally liable."

A special threat, just for you.

"Yes," you answered, "I understand." You winced at his foul breath. "You had squid for lunch."

His neck rose, the gray folds unpleating as the tube arched over and down, jaws opening above your head. He shifted his nose without speaking, as if he meant to asphyxiate you, letting the light flash on his long teeth, as if each was an injured party he would represent.

"This is serious," he said, and his malodorous threat filled the room.

The conference table between you rippled like a lake, and the necks of the other attorneys extended together, crossing the table toward you. One of them began to groan, an expression of scorn, and the others joined in. The derision mounted around you, shaking the currents like a chorus of tubas.

They repulsed you, but the threats were real. Soritec had modest revenues and thin profits. The elasmosaurs' target was you and your fund.

"Expect additional document requests, interrogatories and more detailed depositions," the lead said.

The monsters' fore paddles rose together, gleeful at the prospect of devouring your time. The eyes of one narrowed with pleasure. A second nibbled its teeth. A third angled its head, as if chasing a turtle through jellies.

"Do what you like," you said. "You'll not get a snail from me."

In response, the followers wound their necks around the lead, and with a flurry of cartilage clicks, they presented a phalanx of faces, grinning with greed.

“We’re going to enjoy this,” the lead said.

NEVER DIGESTED

The evening of that same day, the disgorgement occurred. Your wife, the woman you call Kath, a distant, questionable creature— She wanted something. “We have to talk,” she’d said the week before. And again, “We have to talk.” As soon as the elasmosaur meeting ended, Diana passed you a message. “We’re going to talk,” Kath said. “Tonight.”

You felt ill. The elasmosaurs had rattled you. What was the trouble with Kath? You imagined her aiming her sharp nose at you, using the snippy speech she’d learned at the elite girls’ school back East. You stumbled through the parking lot, found your car and drove home. Were things about to unravel? Your marriage had flaws, but you depended on each other. Kath was fine, you assured yourself. But your guts were roiling.

You pulled into the garage and killed the engine. When you opened the car door, pain doubled you over. You were weak. So weak, dear boy. And aware of the risk. Very aware. Your radar was finely tuned to desertion.

“Kath?” You called her name, but there was no answer. “Kath!”

You reeled into the bedroom. “Kath.” You collapsed on the mattress, shaking, curling into a fetal ball. Fetal, oh yes. In your uncertainty, you were a mammal again—a helpless ape. You clenched and shook and cried out for your wife, and at the sound of your voice, she churned in your gut and rose up through your gullet.

A horrible moment. Your throat, impossibly stretched; your jaw hingeing wide; a great wrenching heave from your hips to your heart, and the sticky mass of that conjugal creature emerged from deep inside you, wings folded, her twisted body bloody and gleaming on the coverlet before you.

She was fully intact, fully alive, as sovereign as the day you’d swallowed her.

Kath’s lids parted. A mucid eye found you and rolled at your pain. Disdainful, short-tempered— Her toothless beak opened. She breathed and shifted her tongue. She flexed her leathery wings and drew herself up, crouching on all fours: a living, breathing avian reptile.

“Kath,” you murmured, “Kath, Kath—”

She’d been your prey long ago: a pteranodon that you’d swallowed whole. But it was suddenly clear: she’d never been digested.

You spoke her name again, but Kath didn’t reply.

She raised her claw, stretching the leathery skin between her ring finger and her damp body, unfolding her idled wings, testing, examining. Narrow wings. Wings designed for long-distance flights.

A screech rose in her throat, and her long bill parted.

"I'm tired of living inside you," she creaked, "subsisting on prey you've swallowed."

You were struck, but you shouldn't have been. She'd acted the hominid part for years, but the veneer had always been thin.

"We belong together," you said, a child's fears welling inside you.

Kath's eyes were opaque as pebbles.

"Our vows," you implored her, remembering the promises you'd made.

"My captivity is over," she said.

"Don't do this," you said. "Please, Kath. Crawl back in."

"Get away from me," she squawked.

You reached for her wrist, then stopped yourself, knowing her bones were hollow. A pterosaur with a broken wing would starve. In that moment of indecision, she jumped from the mattress onto the floor.

Did she care for you, Dun—ever, really? Her cheer was so often forced. She got what she wanted: her children have your genes. They're killers too, in their impish way. Nothing like you, of course; but they have enough feral instinct to give them an edge in a vicious world.

What need does Kath have for you now?

Her eye was red and glaring. You could feel her disdain. She swiveled around and strode on all fours to the bay window.

Kath had always been secretive, calculating and cold. She didn't care if you understood who she was. She didn't mind your oblivion, your ignorance, your self-absorption. She knew

that, for you, her unreachable core was part of her charm. It was a wonder the marriage had lasted as long as it had. It was the boys, of course, that kept her inside you.

You're a smart fish. You weren't really deluded. In a corner of your mind, the knowledge was there: you had married a woman who didn't need you and never would. It was her insularity that enabled your immersion in the fury of life—the hunt, the combat, the daily bloodshed. You imagined the neglect made no difference to her.

The winged reptile turned before the bay window. Kath opened her beak and explained, without a whisper of feeling, the conditions under which she was leaving. She'd retained an attorney and intended to take "everything."

"We need each other," you said, like a stricken innocent.

Kath's bill opened and a croak emerged, objecting or laughing hoarsely.

Then she turned and used the horny point of her beak to shatter the pane.

She leaped through the ragged hole, spread her wings wide, dipped for a moment, then caught a lifting breeze. Pitch, yaw, roll— Her arms kept the wing membranes taut. She rose in the afternoon heat, soaring over houses and roadways, and vanished through a break in the clouds.

ROHRIG



iphactinus cares nothing about his mates. He's had too many to count, all nameless and faceless. For a big fish, lust is a wrenching orgasm in open water, spraying your sperm at drifting eggs. The source is nowhere in sight.

I whispered this truth to you while you slept, but it was little comfort. Alone, tossing in the marital bed, sweating and half-delirious, dreaming of your vanished wife and the two boys she'd hidden away— How distressed you were.

The Monday after Kath's departure, at the weekly partners' meeting, you wore your polished front. You were crisp and composed. You shared the details of the elasmosaur visit and the class-action suit. The group had weathered similar attacks in years past, so the news didn't ruffle your partners. Prentiss explained that he'd announced the succession plan to your investors, and when the meeting was over, the two of you sat in his office and called a few to talk about the new fund.

Prentiss was loftily British. Despite your shaken state, you spoke with confidence, answering questions, assuring them of your long-term commitment. You trotted out the shifts in the investing focus you'd been considering. You seemed engaged,

and I enjoyed the show. Prentiss wrapped up, sharing the date and mechanics for closing the new fund. A billion dollars. Calm and cool. Business as usual.

When the calls were over, you shared the collapse of your marriage with Prentiss. You spoke as if it was in the past or had befallen someone less fortunate.

“These things happen,” he said, having been through two divorces himself.

That evening, and for a few days after, it seemed you’d survive.

Then, in the middle of this distraction, the ultimate threat appeared.

Your first view was blurred by distance, striped by wavering currents. But there was no mistaking the giant’s size and its sinuous form. A tylosaurus.

Xiphactinus is the length of three men, but I disappear in the giant’s shadow.

The tylosaur’s attention was on you.

Gnogen’s general counsel, Tanya, usually casual and droll, was formal in summoning you to a video conference. The CEO, George, would be on the call. “The SEC is investigating us,” Tanya said. “A man named Rohrig.”

Investigating? Unlike the fledgling Soritec, Gnogen was in command of its numbers. What was there to investigate?

At the call’s start, Tanya described events from six months before. Rohrig had approached her. He said the SEC had some suspicions. He wanted confidential access to three employees in the finance department. He insisted: no one in management

or on the board of directors must know.

You didn't like what you were hearing, but Tanya wasn't at fault. That's how creatures like Rohrig work.

She'd cooperated, Tanya explained. She made the three employees available to answer questions. While this was going on, she said, she'd done her own probing.

"I was looking for a false declaration in our financial reports."

Had someone in the bowels of the company done something wrong?

"Did you find anything?" you asked.

Tanya shook her head.

"Not even some small accounting errors?"

"From what I can tell," she replies, "we're perfectly clean. But—"

But what?

"Rohrig's convinced he has a case," Tanya says.

A case? What kind of case? Gnogen is a booming business and your biggest return. A glamour stock, and you were the lead investor. It's been public for years, and you're the Chairman. Your ego is all wrapped up in Gnogen. No danger in that, hmm?

"An Order of Investigation has been approved," Tanya explained. "That means Rohrig can compel testimony by issuing subpoenas."

George was silent. Had Tanya already reviewed this with him?

"You're at the top of his list," she tells you. "He's asked a lot

of questions about you. You in particular.”

At that, Tanya’s formality and George’s quiet began to make sense.

On Tuesday of the following week, she met you at the SEC offices in San Francisco.

The two of you were escorted into a room with rows of seats, and a single chair on a small dais. Beside the chair, a court recorder sat with her machine before her. She nodded and smiled, and a moment later the monster swam through the door.

Younger, in his late twenties. Suited in black. Ebony hair curled with gel, eyes gleaming. He had four minions with him, all of whom recognized you on sight.

“Rohrig,” the tylosaur said, extending his hand with a considering look, as if he was going to eat you and was imagining how you’d taste.

You clasped the cold appendage.

As light from the windows struck his face, you could see: his chin and jaws were mottled, stained with pale patches. Scarring, infection, or a submarine fungus. His nose was large and pointed. It didn’t protrude from his face; it deformed it, thrusting like the head of a spear.

Responding to your scrutiny, his face was split by a leer.

Beside you, Tanya quivered. Beneath her bangs, there was dread in her eyes. A simple ammonite, she was smelling the brine, feeling the tylosaur’s power with sensitive tentacles.

Rohrig motioned you to the chair on the dais.

How long had he been following you? His unflinching

calm, his killing look— This was no casual encounter, no probing for information. Rohrig had been stalking you, and now he was thrusting his long jaws into your world.

You settled yourself in the chair.

Rohrig sat across from you, aides on either side.

Death lurks for every creature in the Sea, but only a big fish like you gets the honor of a federal investigation.

Rohrig was holding a folder the color of blood. He opened it, scanned a list, then cleared his throat and spoke in a formal manner. He explained the investigation they'd launched, along with his suspicion. "Fraud," he said, and the corner of his mouth twitched, imagining the satisfaction he'd feel when he brought you down.

You were stunned, speechless.

Fraud? What fraud? Had you—inadvertently—done something wrong?

Still a set-upon child. Still half an ape, plagued by moral questions. *Let's not be foolish*, I warned. *Justice has nothing to do with this.*

As if he could hear me, Rohrig parted his lips and showed you his teeth.

Then the questions began. At first, he focused on Gnogen's financials. The aide at his elbow passed him reports and spreadsheets, which he handed to you. "I don't know," you replied, and "I can't say." Most of the paperwork you'd never seen. Then Rohrig turned to emails you'd sent or had been sent to you, and documents you'd signed that Gnogen had handed over. At every question you answered, Rohrig asked for related

documents and copies of messages. Tanya had her laptop open and was typing as fast as she could.

Was there a pretense of impartial treatment? Oh no. He meant you to see just how partial he was.

“Have your counsel explain,” Rohrig suggested, “the penalties for destroying documents.” And, while Tanya typed, he listed more things he wanted. Items related to Gnogen financials. And then—Your heart stopped: he asked for bank statements that disclosed your venture firm’s assets and the holdings of your funds.

A tylosaur, I had tried to explain, is a wild creature, born for the Sea. A predator, he lives to devour others. Rohrig’s interest in fraud was a guise. What he really wanted was to eat and grow larger. That would give him the recognition and attention he craved.

His next requests were still worse. Rohrig asked for records of your personal assets—property, bank accounts, trusts, stock holdings. He wanted a clear picture of your net worth.

You were sitting there, feeling peril and a hominid indignation. Moral indignation! A moment of weakness, and Rohrig could see it. He met your gaze in the silence, pleased, so pleased by the fear he’d inspired.

The man is an egomaniac masquerading as a crusader. An attorney, of course. He cares nothing about the public good.

“Fraud is a serious business,” Rohrig said. “Crimes like these end careers.”

And start them! It was through high-profile prosecutions that he was hoping to make his name.

“This new fund—” Rohrig spouted his lips as if he might whistle. “A billion dollars. What’s the closing date?”

And with those words, the picture resolved.

Gnogen wasn’t the target. You were a big fish now—large enough to be headline prey. And the spectacle of seeing you devoured would be a vicarious thrill for a threatened world.

Rohrig had slid from his chair and was circling in the water around you, using his powerful tail. He’s no “lie in wait” monster. He’s fast and aggressive, and he’s singled you out. His tongue tests the water between you, smelling and tasting. And there’s more than just hunger here, more than just craving. Rohrig is vengeful. He’s the despised brother of a favorite son. He’s a laggard whose teachers expected him to fail.

And then, seeing that threat, your presence returned. You turned a blind eye to his circlings. You straightened your back, stiffened your will.

If you want to fight, I’ll fight, you thought.

Rohrig could see you bristle. He used his fore limbs to brake.

He glared at you, black hide twitching. Then he opened his jaws and reeled off other threats: misrepresentations at the time of a merger, collusion, rigged strike prices for option grants. *Once I’ve got my teeth in you*, he was saying, *I won’t let go*.

You hardened yourself and glared back at the beast.

“Do whatever you’re going to do,” you dared him.

On the way down in the elevator, Tanya said she would talk to Rohrig’s staff and try to narrow his document requests.

You were barely listening. You parted ways in the parking garage. To avoid traffic, you stopped at a clam house in the city for dinner.

While you pried the shells and soaked the bread, you thought about powerful fish who had met a grim end. They felt like brothers now. One was found slumped at his desk, dead of a heart attack from a cocaine snort. Another was kidnapped from a company picnic and held for ransom. One got drunk at an IPO celebration and drove off a cliff.

I was silent. I watched. I kept my advice to myself. I accompanied you home, hovering in the den while you showered and climbed into bed. And then, when you'd fallen asleep, I drew close and spoke my piece.

For those who live in the Interior Sea, there are no rules. Or—if it's easier for the simian mind to grasp—there is only *one* rule: survival. You're alive or you're dead. It's as simple as that.

THE FANCY



enjoyed what followed—enjoyed it greatly!

The morning after your encounter with Rohrig, you acted so self-composed. I watched you shower and shave, tend to your teeth, lotion your body. Your choice of clothing was relaxed and muted—sand-colored jeans and a casual sweater, pastel lime.

The board meeting for a startup you'd recently funded—You couldn't have known in advance. You filed into the room with the others, sat and sipped at a water bottle while the team reviewed delivery dates and shared the news that they were impossibly late. Your explosion was a surprise, even to me. You raged at the team, threatening to cancel a milestone funding. When the technical founder tried to return to the board agenda, you tore it up; and when he sought help from others present, you climbed onto the boardroom table, screaming at him and stamping your feet, insisting you were going to replace him.

That afternoon, you called a handful of local firms to find a divorce attorney. Your wife had contacted all but one, which made them conflicted and unavailable. They too were the

recipients of your rage.

On your return home, you got a call from a co-investor, the jolly Redfern, which rankled you further. A dinner invitation, no doubt, for you and Kath. You deleted the message.

And then— A sleepless night and a waking fantasy in which you unleashed your fury and removed the tylosaur threat.

Was that murderous Fancy your sole creation or do I deserve some credit? It was, without doubt, the kind of aggression I would have suggested. Perhaps my presence declared itself subconsciously. Wherever the Fancy came from, the dawn didn't dispel it.

You rose and dressed. You called Diana and said you were sick, and you spent the rest of the day acting it out. Some research online. Then time in your car. A visit to a sporting goods store in San Jose to look at weapons that might be used. Return home, more research online. A drive to a county park with an archery range. Then, at the end of the day, a visit to SEC headquarters in San Francisco. You circled the block and pulled into the parking garage.

Were you serious? I thought you were.

But that evening, alone in the house, the Fancy faded. The situation, you thought, wasn't as dire as that. Your innocence would protect you. You weren't such a big fish after all. Rohrig would lose interest once he saw the specifics.

With these rationalizations, grief crept in. You missed your sons and you missed your wife. Despite her words and her hostile intentions, you imagined she was still inside you. How could you forget her? It was painful to watch: your weakness,

your regret. The anthropoid curse descended full force. Guilt, doubt, shame and self-pity. Three days of it!

What's happened to Dun? He's surrendered to sleep. Night fogs drift through the broken bay window. He rises from the bed in darkness, mind numb, feet shuffling, hands reaching out, seeing his silhouette in Kath's vanity mirror.

Desertion, divorce. A class-action suit and a federal investigation. Fraud, public disgrace. The end of strength and self-confidence—

Your simian mind had taken control. You were drowning in fear and remorse. All the persecutions that a conscience can muster—

I might have helped you. Xiphactinus has eyes that don't close, a will that never freezes, and a heart that can't be pierced by guilt. But instead of allowing me access, you barred me completely, surrendering your fate to your hominid forebears. Your linens were winding sheets. You were nothing but a snoring corpse. Sleep no more, I exhorted you. It's a curse, a weakness you can't afford—not with Rohrig circling.

Sleep no more! Keep the lights on, prop up your lids! Rage, fume, menace any who menace you! Hatred, blood-thirsty oaths, murdering maledictions— Restraint is for the castrated sons of apes!

Why are you rummaging in the dark, opening cupboards and pulling out drawers?

That object in your hand— What have you found?

A video with home movies your Uncle Luther recorded when you were a child.

Into the player it goes, and we're looking at— What?

Your first birthday.

Poor fellow. Why do you cling to this sorry reminder? Oh yes. It's the hominid way. The innocence of a child is guilt's most powerful tool.

The birthday boy looks blissful. His father is portering gifts, lighting the candle; his mother is caring and close, whispering in his ear. What is she saying? Uncle Luther and Aunt Helene are there, youthful and trim, along with other grownups, friends and relations. They're all enjoying themselves. It's a kind and welcoming world.

You were still young when the marriage crashed and the clans disengaged. As you watched, you wondered as you'd wondered before: did your unstable character arise from a blasted foundation?

Was your ruthlessness—the alienation that brought you and me together, the rage that might drive you to inhuman extremes— Was it all just a product of disappointment? Was your hostility born from loss, an anger that something good was taken away?

You poor fool, I thought. Will you never stop letting self-pity rule you? Is your passion for life as feeble as that?

THE BRIDGE

4ou returned from your feigned illness the following week, and you put on a decent show. To other eyes, things still looked fine. Returns from the fund were strong. The class-action suit didn't get much press, and no one but your partners knew about your wife's defection. For the world at large, your life was still charmed. Open a *Forbes* or search the net: there he is with his confident smile, slicked by lucre, gliding through currents in jeans and sunglasses.

There was no ignoring Rohrig's investigation, of course. You would have to tell Prentiss and your partners, and your investor group couldn't hear the news from another source. You had to explain, and quickly.

What a meeting that was: the worst of you both. When you sat down with Prentiss, he read your fear. And when you briefed him about the SEC investigation, the stalwart Brit seemed loose in his chair. He drew a deep breath and tipped his head. A moment of silence, then a sigh and troubled concern. An SEC action could change everything, he observed: your ascent to managing partner, the new fund, your future as an investor— "Everything," he said.

"I know," you replied.

"It must be hard," Prentiss said, "with what's happened at home."

Such empathy! Shall we shed a few tears?

His understanding, of course, did nothing to help. On the contrary. His concerns entered your dreams with Rohrig's threats, and mixed with the undigested wrath of your soon-to-be ex and the gang of attorneys with small heads and long necks.

The night was a difficult one. You rise worn and unrested.

Without shaving or showering, you dress and step into the front room. You have your phone in your hand and you're looking at messages. The first one is from the president of a software company you'd funded a couple of years before. The company is doing well; you're pleased, and so is your fellow investor, Redfern. The president wants you to call him back.

He answers on the first ring.

"Bad news," the president says. "You may hear from Redfern's partners. He disappeared four days ago. No one knew where he was, including his wife."

Redfern is a regular ape, grounded, connected—not someone who'd vanish without a word.

"Yesterday afternoon," the president says, "they fished his body out of the Bay. He jumped off the Bridge."

You're speechless.

"Apparently," the president adds, "he had mental problems. He'd had them for years, his wife says. 'His pain was unbearable.' Those were her words. I had no idea."

“No idea,” you agree. Redfern’s eager camaraderie and his cheery outlook had been a false front.

“That’s it,” the president says. “That’s all.” And the call ends.

You stand there, thinking of Redfern, remembering the last message he’d left. You imagine him on the Bridge with his hands on the rail, looking down at the water. What if you’d returned his call at that very moment?

Young and credulous, short with cropped hair, Redfern was smart, but servile too. A junior partner at a larger fund, whenever he heard you’d written a check, he begged for a piece. Finally you agreed, knowing he’d follow your lead and do as you wished, whatever the circumstances. For your co-investment, he’d led the second round, and you’d supported his request for a seat on the board. The seat is vacant now.

I’m nothing like him, you think. He was a genial snail crawling along, eating algae and dragging his shell. But even as you see that picture, you know how uninformed it is. You had no idea who Redfern was, or how alike or different you were. Was his life more desperate than yours when he jumped? Were the forces aligned against him so insurmountable? And for you— Is the end in sight? Perhaps the deal is about to close, and in this darker investment, Redfern will lead and you will follow.

You phone Diana and cancel the morning’s meetings.

You get in your car and head north. Up Nineteenth, through Golden Gate Park and the MacArthur Tunnel. You leave the car in the city-side lot and head for the Bridge on foot.

Where the walkway starts, a sign is posted. *Crisis Counseling*, it says, and there's an emergency number.

On the Bridge, it's windy and cold. The tops of the towers are lost in fog, but the rust-colored span and the suspender cables are clear before you, and so is the sea far below. On your left, the cars rumble north. On your right: the orange guard rail and the fatal drop. Walkers and bicyclers pass. A squadron of helicopters skim the bay and slip under the span.

There's a crow's nest around the south tower. When you reach it you stop, approach the rail and look over. It's a long way down—a long, long way. The sea's surface is dimpled and pitted, furrowed with foam.

What was Redfern feeling when he looked down? Did he have second thoughts?

You imagine climbing over the rail, reaching the ledge, balancing the soles of your shoes on the orange girder. Had he dressed casually? Had he put on a tailored suit and a colorful tie? Had he descended feet down, arms dangling; or had he met his end like a martyr with his arms spread? Maybe he turned on the girder and tumbled backwards, blind to it all. Once he'd left the ledge, the choosing was over; but there was time enough for a thought or two before he broke the surface.

Maybe he'd perished on impact or shortly after. Maybe he'd remained conscious, drifting limp and broken in the freezing bay. A sailing couple may have spotted his body and used a boat hook to pull him closer. The lights had gone out by then. Or maybe he was still conscious as they towed him, bobbing and rolling, toward shore.

Dear boy— That's enough, isn't it?

Is there anything here that surprises you?

Suicide is surrender. Those without the will to sustain themselves deserve our contempt. Let them jump. Jump, I say! Put an end to your pitiful life. See if I care! Jump, already. Jump, jump!

For you, my son, the Sea isn't mortality. It's a remedy. A blessed return.

Oh I can see you here, climbing over the rail, looking down at the lacy chop, the threads of foam, the furrowing currents—thinking not of ending your life, but of saving it. You aim yourself and plunge like an arrow, diving headfirst, arms by your sides. Your lips swell, your jaw gapes, your brow is swept back. Your body's inflating, broader and longer, with silver sides, scaled and gilled.

You're a fish, a giant one, so much larger than any a human has snagged on a line. Larger, more powerful, more dangerous— And when you reach the water, you plunge with purpose and command. You're not dashed and destroyed. You're not putting an end to yourself. You're returning to your native element, sealing a transformation that's been in the making all your life.

It's dark down here and as lethal as Redfern imagined. For an ape, that is. Not for a fish from the late Cretaceous. You, my boy, have a home in the ruthless deep. In spirit, you've been down here with me for most of your life.

2



UNEXPECTED DIVERSION

4ou're awake to danger, and your resolve is strong. You call Redfern's widow and acquit yourself as a mournful friend. You call the one unconflicted divorce attorney and ask her to represent you. Then you phone your wife to ask if you can see your sons. She doesn't answer or ring you back.

After a huddle with Prentiss, you meet with your partners to explain the Gnogen situation. Prentiss will get the fund's attorneys in contact with Rohrig to negotiate his document requests. A video conference will be scheduled two weeks out to speak to your investors. "I'll cover closing details for the new fund," Prentiss says. "Dun will discuss the class-action suit and the threats from the SEC." Your partners are behind you, and you're thankful for that.

A guarded privacy rules, but you keep to your schedule. You're an investor in a Denver-based company, and three days after the partner huddle there's a meeting in the Mile High City.

At SFO, you board the flight.

As you enter the first class cabin, you see an old acquaintance seated by the window in the first row. She smiles with surprise and greets you warmly. You return the greeting and

sit beside her.

At a time when you were still learning to prey—stiffening your spine and dining on turtles—you'd been neighbors in Pacific Heights. You'd spent many hours together: dinner, weekends, time after work. You were attracted not by lust or romance, but by her acid wit and her wicked laugh.

Things are different now.

You're a big fish and so is she, and as the plane is taxiing to the runway, she launches into a detailed account of her triumphs, her strokes of good fortune, her public acclaim.

In the air, the flood of self-congratulation continues. You're feeling, amid your personal distress, the need for companionship. You're hoping you will once again get a glimpse of the woman you'd known. Patiently you wait for the vat of egotism to empty itself. But it's bottomless. When the plane skids onto the tarmac in Denver, the noxious stuff is still pouring out.

You're churning inside. Even I, who have been so intimate with your fragile ego for so many years— Even I am surprised.

You see, in her self-absorption, a personal attack. Is she blind to your successes, your achievements, your strokes of good fortune, and the profuse acclaim you've received for it all? Not a word has she said about any of that. It's as if your notable life has been wiped away all at once.

With the threats you're feeling, it's easy to imagine that obliteration and utter obscurity will, in fact, be your lot.

Giving you barely a word of goodbye, your erstwhile friend heads for the baggage claim area. You should be exiting the airport, finding a cab.

You're in Denver to attend a board meeting. Remember?

Why are you standing here, staring at the electronic postings, looking for the next flight to Kansas City?

It's been many years since you visited the place of your birth. And now, through a stroke of chance, you're ninety minutes away.

What do you imagine you'll do there?

You have no siblings. Your father died years ago. Is this about your mother? She's in failing health, tended by your Aunt Helene in Overland Park, a KC suburb.

You find your way to the ticket counter and purchase a seat.

WELCOME HOME

While you're en route, Diana cancels your appearance in Denver, explaining to the CEO that there's a family emergency. She books a rental car at the KC airport. You land before noon, pick up the car and head south on Highway 435.

Aunt Helene and your mother are thirty minutes away.

You haven't spoken to either in years. Your mother would be older, much older. Despite being six years junior, she was feebler than her sister. And disconnected.

A strange woman. Your mother danced as a teen, and an accident left her leaning on a cane. When your father disappeared, she took to wearing a navy cape and a matching beret. *Mon dieu!* The poor creature thought she was French!

She committed a few couplets to memory and recited them again and again:

Vienne la nuit sonne l'heure,

Les jours s'en vont je demeure.

The dregs of mothering were consumed by the *femme merveilleuse*.

Are we going to Overland Park to see her? It seems

not. You're turning onto Highway 70, headed west toward Lawrence. Where you came into the world. Of course. It isn't the living you're here to see. You've come for the memories.

An hour on an empty freeway, driving in silence.

Then we're crossing the Kaw.

Lawrence. Dear Lawrence. Nearly forty years have passed. You weren't happy here. You're not glad to be back. You're shuddering with apprehension.

Stately houses appear on the right, where big fish lived in an earlier era, before you were born. Traffic is light, and the streets are one-way. As the blocks go by, the dwelling size shrinks. Over the rooftops and through the trees, the walls of university buildings appear. Modest homes on either side, one and two stories, Phi Delta Theta, Sigma Phi Ep, shabby apartments, homes less kempt.

At the stop sign, you turn and enter an enclave called University Place, a modest neighborhood where faculty lived when you were a child. A right, two blocks, and we're on your street.

Slowing, creeping forward. Roll down the window.

It's warm, in the 80s, as it usually is in September. The sweetgum trees are taller now, and the crowns cast a deeper shade. But the lawns are the same—dormant, parched, more straw than green and infrequently mowed. They will stay that way through the winter.

You look in the rearview mirror. Pull to the curb. Switch off the engine.

The street's as quiet as it was decades ago. Quiet and lifeless. No one's outside talking or tending to something. No one

is painting a stoop or raking the leaves. The residents come and go through the alleys behind.

A moment to calm yourself, then you take a breath and step out. You're three doors from the family home. Oh I haven't forgotten. Your life began there.

Are the memories so threatening? You're on the sidewalk, stepping softly, as if there are demons your presence might wake. How many times did you tramp this concrete? How many sweetgum balls did you crush with your sole?

The house is like those on either side. It follows the four-square plan—four rooms below and four above, with a porch spanning the front. It's still gray-green. Your bedroom is still upstairs on the right, with its window overlooking the street.

You're alone with your awe. The dwelling means nothing to me.

As for your parents— The house meant little to either. You were born there because your father taught at KU, but he had no attachment to the college or town. He was raised and schooled in an eastern state. Your mother was from Kansas, but she had no affection for Lawrence. She dreamt of romance and an enchanted life.

But perhaps I was mistaken. It's not the foursquare that's on your mind. You're thinking of your real home. And your protector, your guardian—

Is that why we're here? It's just a short walk, and you know the way. So well, so well— You could do it blindfolded, my boy. And the old fossil will sense you coming. Oh yes. For him there is no forgetting.

Leave the car where it is. Turn your back to the gray-green house and follow the sidewalk beneath the trees. It's two blocks to the end of the street.

The *Dead End* sign is still there. The batten fence has weathered, but the opening is right where it was. And the dark magnolia is still standing beside it.

Through the opening, a concrete walkway appears. There was only a footpath decades before. Other than that, nothing has changed. The concrete becomes a stair rising in switch-backs between grass and sumac, then the climb levels off and you're on the KU campus, passing between Blake Hall and Twente, skirting the roundabout. Alongside Fraser Hall, then the way descends.

Through crossed branches and leaf sprays, the tower appears. Seven stories of limestone with a terracotta steeple. The Natural History Museum.

You stop, gazing at it, feeling the old calm. Gratitude. Relief.

In your memories, the edifice stood on hallowed ground—a place where a divine spirit had risen, or where a suffering saint had died. High on the wall, an injunction is carved on a large span: *Cope*. And the advice is as right today as it was back then. "I'm trying," you murmur.

Yes, my son. You truly are.

Welcome home.

THE FOSSIL DOWNSTAIRS

The arched entrance is intricately carved. Above the double doors: the large half-rosette of leaded glass. As you mount the steps, you reach for the copper banister and it burns your palm.

You're back, my boy. Grip the handle and push.

The painted tiles are beneath your feet. It's cooler here. Remember?

There's a kiosk now where a student collects admission. You pay and step toward the stairwell, descending into it. Two flights down, the dark-boned hadrosaur is standing guard. You pass him and enter the Marine Hall.

A sharp odor, the cool flow of air, the blue-hued fluorescents—

Nothing has changed.

Most of Kansas was once underwater, and in these corridors that past is preserved: the Interior Sea and the creatures that lived in its depths.

A right turn at the glassed-in case, past the large *Platecarpus* fossil and a *Cretoxyrhina*, added since you were last here. *Gillicus*, *Apsopelix*, *Protosphyraena*— The bones of Sea dwellers

are all around you. Ancient, dead, turned to stone.

They ruled the world before you were born. Creatures as senseless as the chalk in which they were found. Except for one.

One of the monsters knows you.

Another right turn. The long case covers the wall, just as it did decades ago.

And behind the glass—

Nothing has changed, nothing at all.

I'm here, brightly lit, bony eye glaring, ray fin reaching as if it will pierce the pane and touch the boy staring at me across the millennia. Hundreds, thousands, millions of years— Separated by so much time, and so very little.

Your protector, your giant— I've been your freedom. At my age, I'm not looking for credit; but the notice belongs to me.

A fossil fish the length of three men, with an underslung jaw and spikes for teeth. Watching apes pass through the dimness. Watching them as they're watching me.

Two steps back. Take two, my boy, as you so often did.

The hooked crest crowning my skull. The giant plates covering my gills. The spines bristling along my back. My massive trunk. My powerful tail. Of all the monsters, I was the fastest. The museum has lit me like an icon, giving me the presence I earned in life and rightly deserve. Those who watch from the shadows guess at my cruel nature, my violent ways. Only to you has the secret life of *Xiphactinus* been revealed.

Now closer, closer.

Face to face again. Eye to eye.

You're taller now. You don't have to stand on your toes to see my spikes, to feel my scowl, to peer into the depths of my sclerotic eye. Black as ever. Black with hunger, black with rage, black with contempt. The vacuum, my son, that sucks and restores.

Oh yes—

My visage is more than a memory. More than a postcard from home.

I'm your mirror. Your reflection, then and now.

Not the image you see when you're fresh from sleep. Not the observer who watches as you scrub your ape's face, curry your hair or scour your nubby teeth. I'm a deeper reflection, one that's hidden from public view but never forgotten.

"He came from the Smoky Hills," a voice says.

A woman is standing three feet away, regarding us both. She has platinum hair, long and bound at the rear, rising like an off-center whale spout.

Your nod is perfunctory. "A long time ago."

"We're still bringing them out."

She has silver-blue eyes. She's wiry and muscled, and the points of her breasts nib her shirt. Her jeans are worn and powdered with dust.

"You're a paleontologist," you say.

"I'm a fossil hunter. I dig." She lifts her chin. "Xiphactinus aren't hard to find."

"There can't be many like him."

"He's your pal?" Her smile's uneven. An incisor is chipped.

All that remains is a white triangle. And there's a knot on the bridge of her nose. Broken and left unsplinted.

"When I was a boy, I came here often."

"You live in Lawrence?"

Her manner's abrupt, but she lacks the social grace to care.

"Not anymore. I flew in this morning."

Her hand's on your bicep, gripping. There's something wrong with her. She's less an ape than a pocket rat with an intruding gleam in her eye.

"I'm at a crossroads," you say. "He's my counselor. My closest friend."

She laughs. Then she sees you're serious.

"You work here?"

"No," she says. "I give them a fossil now and then. I spend my time in the chalk. What makes him so special?"

You meet the silver-blue eyes.

"His freedom," you say.

"Freedom's not hard."

"The Sea he swam in is gone."

She shakes her head. "Not really. I'm Petra," she says, extending her hand.

You regard it, then take it. Her fingers are calloused.

"I'm working with Dick downstairs," she says. "He's cleaning up something I found." Her hand goes into her pocket and emerges with a pen.

She raises the pen to her mouth and removes the cap, biting it with her broken tooth. Then she grabs your wrist and writes her number on your palm.

“Call me,” she says.

As Petra steps away, a message arrives on your phone. It’s from your divorce attorney. “Your wife’s counsel is asking for information about your financial assets.”

Let her wait.

You peer through the glass, nod at me and head toward the stairwell.

On the main floor you notice a change in the museum foyer. A giant fossil hangs in midair over the entrance. A tylosaur.

Wary, thinking of Rohrig, you take the stair to the balcony above and scan the monster. It’s forty feet long with yawning jaws, waving paddles and a coiling tail. The half-rosette window is directly behind it, and the declining sun has stained the glass red.

Another message arrives. It’s George, the Gnogen CEO.

You place the call and he answers on the second ring.

George has discovered what triggered Rohrig’s suspicions. A disgruntled ex-employee, a controller, played whistleblower. “He knows you demanded his termination,” George says. “He was doing a rotten job—we have plenty of evidence—and there’s a good explanation for the numbers he’s questioning. But he’s cooked up a story about how it was rigged by you and me to fool investors. An accountant resigned to go with him and he’s enlisted her in the lie.”

Your eyes are tracking the tylosaur’s winding spine.

“You’d think the government would be sane about this,” you say.

“For some reason,” George says, “this fellow Rohrig has it in for us. You especially. He told Tanya and me, ‘Your chairman is an arrogant crook.’”

The monster wants blood, my boy. Your blood.

When the call ends, you retrace your steps, thoughts dark, heading back to your car. You pass Fraser, the high point in Lawrence, and as you descend the walkway between Blake and Twente, the view opens up. You’d seen it many times as a youth. The landscape of Kansas, level and green, as green as the ancient sea. The museum was behind you. You’d left my protection. There was danger below, and you were plunging back into it.

A LIGHT SLEEPER

here's an ache in your side and your stomach is churning. The mattress in the hotel room is soft as silt, and if you fall asleep, you will sink like the dead and never come up. Your thoughts are sputtering neon—disconnected, missing words—but the flashing won't stop.

It was always this way. That's who you are.

Don't imagine you were like other apes in the crib. You were not.

You were weak, of course. You couldn't fin or glide on your own like an infant fish. You curled on the pad, messing your diapers. What a miserable lot life handed you!

But the wakefulness wasn't a flaw. It was a sign of distinction. For an eye as keen as mine, your character was already in view. Careful scrutiny revealed the qualities that you and I share.

It is late at night. Your nominal parents are sleeping, and the door of your room is open. I glide down the hall and nose through the gap, puffing my gills, smelling your breath, back-finning to slow.

You aren't curled and quiet in your crib.

Oh no. You're very much awake.

I fin closer to the wooden cage. Your head is up, but you seem unaware of my approach. You're looking through me.

Closer and closer, till my lips touch the bars. My eyes are just inches from yours.

And now, now I can see and feel your state.

Your infant body is tense, your expression stiff. You raise your arms. Your hands grip the posts. It's not my presence. I haven't triggered this disquiet. As close as I am, you seem not to see me or know I'm there.

Your legs flex beneath you as if something urgent demands your attention, as if some action has to be taken. In your restlessness, there's an innate hostility—a raging at fate that you could be so confined, that your desperate needs must be delayed, that your gnawing desires will have to wait.

Was I surprised? Not in the least.

Xiphactinus understood. For some, there's an imperative before there's a goal. That little simian was born with the knowledge that there were things to do—urgent things, desperate things—without having any idea what they were.

You were not like other ape infants. You weren't destined for a slow crawl to the grave. It was more than luck or cruel circumstance that turned you in my direction.

You were blessed by fate.

You wake before dawn, bleary, unrested. You are urinating when you notice the number written on your palm. You text Petra, and she texts back. A light sleeper too.

THE BITER

here's a place Petra has suggested on Mass Street. It's a bike shop and an eatery too. You meet her for coffee. She's sitting across from you now, stirring cream into her mug.

"No relatives?" she says.

You shake your head.

"Old classmates? Friends?"

"Not that I'd want to talk to."

"So you're here for—" Petra lifts her brows.

"Memories. Just memories."

"Well then," she says, "what's the first?"

"The first?"

"Memory," she says. "I'm trying to help you."

Your very first memory is a troubling one. Are you going to share it?

"It's unpleasant," you say.

"Go on." She combs her lower lip with her teeth and you see the wedge-shaped incisor.

"I was a toddler. I could walk, with an unsteady gait. I did goofy things. I rolled my eyes and stuck out my tongue. My father didn't have the patience for that. Who wants a clown

for a son?"

"That's the memory?" Petra says.

"I'm getting to it."

You're reluctant, of course.

"I was starting to talk," you say. Then your voice fades and your mind wanders into the past. A child feeling his weakness, badly distressed. You sought shelter in your mother's embrace. The mammal way: living with weakness, depending on others. You hated your quailing heart, but you couldn't surmount or forswear it. You learned, instead, to live with humiliation. Someday you'd be less reliant, someday you'd have the strength and the will. Before our first meeting, before my image swam into your brain, you were dreaming of a life like mine. A life of freedom and power.

And blindly, instinctively, you toyed with violence.

"Well?" Petra's impatient.

"They called me 'The Biter.'"

She squints, unsure what you're saying.

"I bit my playmates," you explain.

A prodigy! The first inklings of a predator's wrath. Mothers sighed and tended their charges. Some masked their contempt. All disapproved.

Petra is laughing.

You smile, pleased by her dismissal. But you remember the scorn in your father's eyes and the regret in your mother's. The rejections pierced you, but you didn't stop. You left bruises and teethmarks on other children—the younger at first, and then as your courage grew, the older as well.

In your heart, you know: the castigation was earned.

When you broke the skin, when you tasted blood, an instinct was brewing. You were only a short leap from imagining your lips and chin were slathered with it, imagining your jaws were deep in the flesh—the warm flesh, the quivering muscle, the squirming entrails—of a creature whose life now belonged to you.

“They couldn’t stop me,” you say.

Are you going to try to explain the mixture of anger and odium you felt? It was as if you were daring your own sense of shame, abusing yourself with the sharp tools of guilt. Like a spastic boy holding a razor, you couldn’t help slashing yourself, laying yourself open.

“In the bites I gave others,” you confess, “I felt my own misery and degradation.”

Petra is enjoying herself. “That’s ridiculous,” she says, flaring her eyes and cocking her head.

Her amusement is kindly, and in it you find some relief.

On the way out of the shop, you ask her what she’s doing that day.

“Working with Dick. He’s prepping out a piece of the fossil I found.” And then, to explain herself, “I get very excited when I find something big.”

On the sidewalk, she turns.

“If you promise not to bite me,” she says, “I’ll tell you a secret: I’m writing a book. *Conscience in the Age of Reptiles*.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Yes,” she grins, “that was a joke.”

AQUARIUM

Progress on the fossil?" you ask.

"Lots. A segment of spine and three ribs. Dick is the best. How about you?"

"I spent the day on the phone with attorneys."

Petra frowns.

"Business problems," you explain. "And a lot of back-and-forth with the woman who's handling my divorce."

Petra opens her menu.

The spout of hair is different. It's clean and on-center.

You're in a restaurant that was once a tram depot for the Kaw Valley Line. The server appears and Petra orders a burger. You choose black cod, but the server says they're out of cod. "Are the shrimp shelled?" you ask. No, she replies. If you order the shrimp, you'll have to shell them yourself.

"I'll have a burger too," you say, and when the server leaves, "Things are often not as we wish. You want another memory?"

"Please," Petra nods.

"For my sixth birthday, my parents gave me an aquarium. A glass tank, an aerator, rocks and plastic plants. And fish of various kinds and colors. Five of them."

“You’re still biting your playmates?”

“No, I’ve reformed. I faced my transgressions and embraced the civilized life. I’m trying to be a model child, and I’m not doing badly. I was excited about the aquarium.

“We moved a table into my bedroom and set the aquarium on it. My father helped me fill it with water. Once I’d put the rocks and plants where I wanted them, he mounted the aerator and I freed the fish from their plastic bags.

“They explored their new home, gliding along the walls, touching the gravel, poking their noses into corners, heedless of each other and the face watching them through the glass.

“My captivation charmed my mother. Father shared my curiosity.

“The three of us, stooped and pointing, followed the glittering creatures. The fish had no time for confusion or dread. There was exploring to do.

“Don’t forget to feed them,’ Mother said.

“‘You’ll need to clean out the tank once a week,’ Father explained. ‘Watch the thermometer.’

“‘Put a towel over them,’ Mother suggested, ‘so they can sleep.’

“The first week was very busy. Then things settled in for me and my fish. I enjoyed their antics, and I did my best to care for them.

“All was well until one morning a month or two later. When I pulled the towel aside, there was only one fish in the tank. I studied him, watching him cruise between the rocks, taking turns around the plants, commanding the tank—a

bigger fish now, but alone.

“‘Why?’ I thought, and I discussed what had happened with my parents. ‘There was room in the tank,’ I pointed out, ‘and there was food for them all. Why did he eat the others?’

“‘He was the bad one,’ Mother said.

“‘My father disagreed. ‘He objected to the others’ existence.’

“Neither were right, I thought. Fish aren’t good or bad, and they don’t act on opinions.”

At six, you hadn’t yet seen my vacuous eye or felt my scorn; but my spirit was stirring at the back of your mind. For the lone survivor in your tank, there was only one question: why would he eat pellets when there was live food swimming past his nose?

Before restaurants and groceries, before kitchens and cooks, eating was more than a break in the day. Devouring others was the center of life. No one’s at fault. There’s no one to blame. Violence is survival.

Petra puts her finger below the tail of her eye. There’s a pit in her cheek.

“A hen on our farm,” she says, “had four chicks. They were following her over a drainpipe. The last one was struggling, so I picked it up to carry it across. The hen tried to claw my eye out.”

“She didn’t care what your motives were,” you say. “Was the farm in Kansas?”

Petra squints and wrinkles her nose. Your question’s a simple one, but she acts as if she doesn’t understand it.

A CROSSCUT SAW



fter dinner, you walk to South Park together.

You take Petra's hand and say, "I want to know more about you."

Her brow eaves. The silence draws out.

"You're from Kansas?"

"Indiana."

"Tell me about your childhood," you say.

She shakes her head slowly.

"Please," you say.

Petra licks her lips. "I lost my mother. She died giving birth to me."

"You grew up with your father?"

She's unwilling to answer.

"What is it?" you ask.

"My past doesn't matter."

She speaks as if she'd rather not have one. Maybe, my boy, you should follow her example. If the backward view is a dole of pain and weakness, why look? What is there about your family that's worth remembering?

"What happened in the nice little home?" Petra asks.

Now it's you who are reserved. Silent, unsure.

Petra squeezes your hand.

"Things fell apart. Easy conversation vanished. They quibbled. They fought. The tension was omnipresent. My mother retreated into a private world."

She avoided your gaze. She spoke to herself. She'd sit in a chair and read, or stare at the air. What was she thinking?

"My father had a critical side, and it took him over. He was angry all the time."

And dejected. He sought relief outside your home.

"There were showdowns. Suspicions and accusations—He swore at her, she snarled and shook her cane."

Red faces and threats, curses and slamming doors.

"I began to wish I had a different father. One who was confident and self-aware. One without a hair-trigger temper. And a different mother. One who was always present. A soft-hearted woman with a hopeful outlook. Someone like Mrs. Sydon, my third grade teacher. The soul of kindness. When she led the class in song, she was a herald opening the gates to a better world.

"Mother's rages frightened me. She was convinced my father was seeing another woman. He tried to quiet her protests, then he stopped trying. I'd wake up in the morning and he'd be gone."

Go on. Wallow in self-pity. Tell her.

"One night I was awakened by a loud rasping. I sat up in bed, fearful, wondering what the sound was. I stood and it grew louder. When I opened my door and stepped into the

hall, I could hear them in their bedroom. She was reviling him, and he was sobbing. The sobbing was like the sound of a crosscut saw.

“The saw was cutting through everything. Ripping them both to pieces. Destroying the house. Hacking at my chest, tearing me open.”

You’re no longer walking. You’re standing in the grass beneath a tree, and Petra is gazing at you, listening. Does she understand? I think she does.

The saw was dividing you. Separating the part of you that longed for humanity from a wild creature that wandered the Sea.

“I’m going to visit my grade school tomorrow,” you say. “Will you come along?”

THE GOLDEN RULE

The morning is sunny, and it's not a long walk. You pass through the hotel lobby and head down the boulevard. A dozen blocks brings you to the grade school, a low single-story brick structure with horizontal windows. Petra is standing by a pin oak near the curb.

The school's entry seems to have shrunk. When you were young, it was large and forbidding. Over the double doors, the motto remains: "Beyond Lies Wisdom."

"Thanks," you say. And you clasp Petra's hand.

She receives the gesture warmly, in silence. Curious, observant. Almost demure.

It's Saturday, so the classrooms are empty. You skirt the threshold and start across the playground. As you move, you hear distant shouts. Ghosts on the wind, rising from the earth. An arresting gust, like a classmate calling your name. The parched grass seems like a grown-over boneyard.

On the far side of the playground, there's a low-roofed building. You point, then you're leading Petra toward it.

"I'm there, in that room," you say. "We're in a circle, kneeling on the floor. It's third grade, and I'm listening to

Mrs. Sydon.”

Today she’s explaining why violence is wrong.

“‘Do unto others,’” you quote her to Petra, “‘as you would have them do unto you.’ I loved Mrs. Sydon like everyone else. But her guidance troubled me. Why was she telling me to put others’ needs on par with my own? I had to look out for myself. Didn’t I?”

“You spoke up?” Petra asks. “You voiced your concern?”

“Not at first. Cooperation is necessary, I told myself. I remembered the greedy fish in my aquarium.”

“But then you thought better,” she guesses.

“Yes, I thought better. Caring about others when it might harm you— That was crazy. No intelligent creature would do something like that.”

Petra nods.

“Only someone,” you say, “ignorant of the design of our world could speak like Mrs. Sydon. Care for others can’t outweigh care for yourself. ‘Do unto others what will insure your flourishing.’ That’s the golden rule.”

“You explained this to the class?” Petra asks.

You laugh, and Petra laughs with you.

“I did,” you say. “I rose from the circle and declared to them all that Mrs. Sydon’s ideas were nonsense. I explained the motivation for her Rule: that it served the social needs of the human race to persuade its young that altruism, servility and selflessness were paramount virtues. And I identified the foundational lie: that we were born with the will to do good to others.”

“Poor Mrs. Sydon,” Petra says. “What did she do?”

“She didn’t appreciate having her Rule portrayed as a coddling deception. She berated me in front of the class. Nothing stirs the weak to viciousness more than the exposure of their fantasies.”

“She knew about Darwin,” Petra guesses.

“No doubt. But she wasn’t going to surrender her illusions to him.”

Petra finds all of this amusing. I do not.

I was there, my boy. I could hear your half-formed questions. I could feel your troubled thoughts. That classroom ape— He’s not sure who he is.

He’s not the one you’d be crazy to trust.

He’s not the one who knows no attachment and is loyal to none. Not yet.

He’s not the one who will poison the wine and murder the priest.

Xiphactinus knows him. I know he was born in the deep, the place they call hell. I know that the self is enough! And I know, before long, that will be his faith—one so simple that scripture is pointless. But the boy doesn’t know himself. Not yet.

The remembrance is complete—the part you’ve shared with Petra, and the part that is still a secret. You clasp her hand again, and the two of you start back across the schoolyard.

THROUGH THE LONG CANALS

Petra invites you for a walk by the Kaw. It's dusk and the littoral's covered with shrubs. The river is close, and the susurrus swells and subsides as the pathway turns, drowning and buoying your words. She's in her worn jeans, but her top is sleeveless and backless, more a bib than a shirt. Her pointed breasts jog as she moves.

"Men fall in love with me," Petra says.

That sounds like an invitation. She's learned some things about you, but she's taking a lot for granted. Where are her fears, her reservations?

"I like men who break the rules," she says.

"I'm older than you."

"I like older men," Petra says. "Married men too."

"You'd be okay if I was still with my wife?"

"If you're not fucking her, why should I care if she's washing your socks."

You don't reply. The pathway bends.

"I can be on my own," Petra says. "I'm not afraid of that."

"What happened to your tooth?"

"A fat girl hit me with a brick. When I was younger, I

got into fights.” She pulls on her earlobe, revealing a scar. “A guy tore out my earring. And a wild dog bit my breast. You’re talking to Petra’s remains. I’m a fossil.”

“So am I. But you know that.”

Silence.

“These past few days,” you say. “Together—”

Her steps have slowed. She’s listening.

“It means a lot to me,” you say. “That I’m not a puzzle to you. That you understand. So far, at least.”

Did she sigh? She’s still moving forward, looking ahead, following the path. It’s darkening, and you’re nearer the Kaw. The current is rushing.

“I had a fantasy,” you tell her, “when I was a boy. The kids played marbles at recess in the sandlot between the school latrines. The boys’ latrines were dark and mysterious, covered with emerald tiles; and we heard the girls’ latrines were the same. I imagined their toilets were portholes the girls could dive into. By swimming through the plumbing, they were able to reach the Sea we’d learned about in third grade. The great Interior Sea that once covered Kansas.

“There, all the mysteries—the secrets a boy yearned to know—would be revealed.”

The precious dream. Oh yes. I was your escort: the fantastical fish that lurked by your bed, waiting for you to fall asleep. I knew how, through devious means, you could get access to the girls’ latrines. I knew how you could remove your clothing, dive into a porthole and enter the plumbing. And if I so chose, if I was partial to you, I could guide your passage

through the long canals till you reached the warm and limitless Sea, with all its forbidden raptures.

There, among the swarming ammonites, the darting bellerophontes, the waving crinoids and clouds of jellies, you would find yourself with the girls you desired.

Petra stops. "Dun," she whispers.

You turn on the path and face her. You lower your face to hers and lick her lips; then you're passing through them, feeling her chipped tooth with your tongue.

"You know how," she asks, "Xiphactinus reproduced?"

"Without contact," you say.

"That's right. Like tarpon. They were broadcast spawners. A woman released her eggs in open water, and the man shot sperm at them."

"There was pleasure in that?" you wonder.

"It was ecstatic. A shocking chemical reward, a storm of the nerves. Why else would he do it?"

"Better than what a man feels," you say.

"There's nothing like it."

The rushing river is in your ears. You slide your hand down her thigh.

"You're gritty," you whisper.

"I'm oily inside," she says. "Do you want to have sex with me?"

"Badly," you reply.

"You should know," she says, "we have something in common."

"What's that?"

"I'm a biter too."

THE BOY DOWN THE BLOCK

That night Petra slept in your hotel room, and on waking you were like criminals who'd gotten away with a crime. Bite marks patterned your shoulder, and there were suck spots across your thighs. You remained in bed, and again Petra used her body to restore your fragile ego.

Around noon, you leave for Mass Street and lunch at a restaurant that was once a bank. It has the bank's tiled floor and barred windows. Petra jokes about robbing the place. The server comes, takes your order and goes.

"I'm going to be honest," Petra says.

She's preparing you for a negative observation.

"In the memories of yourself as a kid," she says, "sometimes I hear acceptance. Resignation. Amusement. But sometimes you speak with dread. As if you're still frightened by what happened here."

"There are things that I don't understand. That trouble me."

"You look worried," she says.

And you are.

Where do I cross the line? you wonder. So far, there hasn't

been any line, but— How much more are you going to confide? There are things about you she may not swallow. Things she may find repellent.

“There are stories,” you say, “that are harder to share.”

She squints as if she’s bracing herself.

“Alright,” you sigh.

“I was eight. I had a classmate named Ranes. He was a bully. Not a typical one. He didn’t lord it over others publicly. He was lean and skulking—a swarthy kid with a squarish head and a jaw that was always grinding.

“Ranes was quiet, but when he spoke, his voice was low and full of threat. There was an engine of rage inside him, and it never switched off. Without any prompting, he would fix on a victim and attack. He didn’t care about notoriety. Cruelty, for Ranes, was a personal thing, not to be shared.

“The other boys, including myself, treated him like you’d treat someone who was mentally ill. We kept our distance. We avoided speaking to him. We offered him smiles and deference, hoping his fury wouldn’t land on us. It was a mystery how he chose his victims, but once he’d fixed on one, there was no reprieve. The unlucky boy would find himself cornered or ambushed at the end of the day.

“I was never a target for Ranes. But he awakened something inside me.”

You pause, uncertain.

“Go ahead,” Petra says. “I’m listening.”

You don’t have to be a monster to frighten a child. Apes can be vicious. The potential is woven deep. Circumstances

are right, and there it is: the lunging strike, the hideous gape, the bared teeth.

“A boy in my class,” you say, “lived down the block, on the same side of the street. In a foursquare like ours, with a front porch.

“His name—call him Moon, he had a round face like a saucer jelly. He was my height but overweight, with curly hair flopping over his brow. Moon wasn’t dumb, but he wasn’t bright. He had a get-along way and a nervous laugh. Because he lived so close, we were occasional playmates. We’d throw a ball in his yard or sit on the floor of his room and play cards.

“For some reason, my irritation with him began to grow. He was timid and self-effacing. When I imagined myself expressing frustration with him, threatening him, I couldn’t picture him standing up to me.

“Without being willful or calculating, I began to imagine a confrontation. I had no thought of Ranes. He was repellent to me. But I was drawn—powerfully drawn—to the idea that I could beat up Moon. And I was curious—intensely curious—about how it would feel to wield that kind of power over another.

“The opportunity grew inside me. It was something I had to do.”

You’re nervous, and Petra can see that. But there’s no stopping now.

“Because we lived on the same block, from time to time we’d walk home together. And it was on one of those walks after school, in the late afternoon, that the opportunity arose.

“We were approaching Moon’s lawn and the walkway leading to his porch. I had been quiet, letting him talk. He started toward the porch and I followed. He was smiling, chattering, being his vacuous self. He expected me to say goodbye, to turn and start back. Instead, I let my contempt loose.

“Contempt. That’s what it was. Moon’s smiling stupidity, his pathetic weakness, his solicitous mom— He had rankled me for longer than I knew.”

You draw a breath.

“I’m listening,” Petra says.

“My arm drew back,” you tell her. “I struck him in the face with my fist.

“I was sure he would wither, and that’s what he did. He ducked his head and sank. I saw the shock in his face and the fear in his eyes, and I struck him again. Moon began to cry, and I knew then that I was the victor and he the vanquished.

“The feeling of power stirred me. Cowering, he curled at my feet and I struck him again. His nose made a cracking sound.

“He was whimpering. There was no point in delivering additional blows. My mission was accomplished. The moment of glory had ended. There was blood on my fist.

“I drew myself up, surveyed the damage, then turned on my heel, strode down the walkway and continued home.

“It was then that guilt loomed over me.

“What had I done? Why had I done it? My attack had been unprovoked. Moon was innocent. He’d been a friend. His mother had made us sandwiches, we’d played together on

his bedroom floor. I'd been tempted and I'd feasted on cruelty. I was Ranee now.

"The power I'd won came at a cost. Could you do what I'd done without feeling bad? No. You couldn't."

You've avoided Petra's eyes, but now it's time to look.

Is she shocked? Repulsed? Will she dismiss the account as a child's mistake, not recognizing it for what it was?

She's considering your words. In her eyes, you can see conjectures, a recognition of things unexpected, beyond her view. She isn't going to judge you or try to change you. Or cast you as something you're not. You're like a fossil she's found: proof of a different life, mysterious, harrowing perhaps, but with its own integrity.

"The wounds from that day never healed," you say. "Moon and I were classmates through high school. We passed each other, but our eyes never met. We never spoke, but whenever I saw him, I felt his humiliation. And my shame remained, along with— A residue of triumph. I wondered if an apology would matter, but I feared that any mention of what I'd done would only reopen the wound."

A residue of triumph. You said it, my boy.

You kept the memory inside you, like a jewel in a velvet box.

The time has come to stop twisting your hanky. Stop nursing your guilt. Embrace your inner Ranee. The job with Moon is unfinished. Even now he's wrenching between your jaws. Turn that fool so his nose is pointed down your throat and swallow him whole.

Are you listening to me?

Your new acquaintance understands.

Minnows dream of being big fish. Only a few become one. You're not eight anymore. You've lived in the Sea, and you know its rules.

A crawling snail: "What a pleasure to graze!"

A nest of drifting worms: "We breed fear in no one. Follow our fine example."

A baculite whines, "Don't steal my life! I'm not your food."

Does *Xiphactinus* care?

We who prey are true to ourselves. Taking life from others isn't a flaw. It makes us truer. We're exemplars of unflinching purpose. We know who we are, and we're not going to change.

You pay the check and the two of you exit the restaurant.

On the street, a man in rags accosts Petra. He's demanding money, fuming at her, belligerent, crazy. Before you can react, Petra's shouting, swinging her fists, backing the man against the wall, eyes wilder than his. There's fear in the crazy man's eyes. He's mute, and his jaw is quivering. You grab Petra's shoulders and pull her away, and the homeless man nods to you with thanks and relief.

HOUSE FOR SALE

Petra is at the museum with Dick, removing fossilized ribs and disks from a hunk of chalk she's brought him. You're in your hotel room, on the phone with your divorce attorney.

"Kath doesn't want the family home," she says.

"I don't want it either," you reply. Too many memories.

"So it's yours to sell. That's the good news."

"Go ahead," you say.

"She's focused on the fact that you will soon be managing partner of your venture firm, and the next fund will be larger—much larger, she says—than any that have preceded it. She's claiming that the future value of your earnings will eclipse whatever wealth the two of you currently have. As a consequence, she believes she should be awarded all the current liquid assets."

"All?" You remember Kath's "everything" threat.

"Stocks, bonds, the metal holdings in Canada and Australia. Cars, the yacht, and all the remote properties, including your two vacation homes. When will the new fund close?" the attorney asks.

“We’re discussing that now with our investors.”

“If it closes before the divorce is final,” she says, “or before we have an agreement in writing, your wife could challenge your ownership.”

From an ape perspective, you’re legally bound.

“It’s a first salvo, of course. But right now, the only thing she’s willing to concede is your primary residence. She has no desire to live there and is willing to give you title if you hand over the whole caboodle.”

“That’s ridiculous,” you say.

“I agree. But— Getting parties in a divorce to be realistic takes time. Her counsel gave me Kath’s perspective on the marriage, if you’d like to know.”

“Go ahead.”

“She’s angry. She thinks you used her. She raised the children. She never saw you. You spent your time flying around the country, raising money, sitting on boards. You were successful because she made the sacrifice to manage everything else. Without her, there would be no wealth to argue about.

“So you know what we’re dealing with,” she says in an apologetic tone.

“What about my boys?” you ask.

“Her attorney says your wife’s talked to them, but they don’t want to see you.”

“That’s bullshit,” you say. “They’re four and five.”

“Without her agreement or a court mediator, we can’t compel her to agree to visitation.”

When you’re done, you return a call from Soritec’s general

counsel.

“Any progress?”

“A little,” he says.

“Settlement discussions?”

“Not yet. Everyone’s feeling harassed. Management’s angry and so is the board. We’ve done nothing wrong.”

“That’s irrelevant.”

“I know,” the lawyer says. “Eventually they’ll resign themselves.”

“Our D & O insurer’s involved?”

“Yes, but they’re in no hurry.”

“Alright,” you say. “Keep me posted.”

You disconnect and call your venture fund’s outside counsel. Yes, they tell you, they’re tracking Soritec: the board’s chafed, the insurer’s quibbling, settlement discussions have yet to commence. With elasmosaurs, you give them something and they disappear. But it never happens quickly. It’s all palsy and indirection: the human way.

You phone Prentiss and speak to him about the documents Rohrig requested. They’ve been produced, but now he’s asking for more. Your last call is a long one to Tanya, Gnogen’s general counsel.

“Rohrig’s got blood in his eye,” she says.

You can hear the fear in her voice.

“Things are moving quickly,” she says. “He’s asked to depose the entire management team and all our board members. We’ve started into that. George thinks—” She stops herself.

“What does George think?”

“Rohrig’s questions always point back to you. George thinks he’s trying to get a publicity splash by preventing your new fund from closing.”

“George may be right,” you say.

In the late afternoon, Petra arrives. You meet her in the hotel lobby.

She’s wearing a pullover flecked with plaster. You greet her with a kiss on the lips that’s heated and lingers. Then you take her hand.

“My escort into the past,” you say.

“What’s next?”

“The block I grew up on. It’s close.”

You cross the campus together, descend the walkway and pass through the opening in the batten fence. When you reach the gray-green foursquare, you explain that it’s the family home and direct her attention to your bedroom upstairs. Then you continue along the sidewalk. You’re leading her to the house on the corner.

“I was ten,” you say. “This place was for sale. There was a metal sign right there.” You point at the grass. “On the way back from school, I would stoop at the corner and pick up some gravel. When I reached the *For Sale* sign, I’d ping it. *Bang, bang*, just for fun.

“One afternoon, I’m passing and pinging, and the front door opens. A realtor comes out of the house and races toward me. ‘Stop that,’ he shouts. Then he grabs my shirt and shakes me.

“He was small and older, with spectacles.

“When I got home, my father was in the den. I started toward my room.

“‘Your shirt’s torn,’ he said.

“I saw that it was. ‘A man did it,’ I told him.

“‘What man?’ He rose with a suspicious look.

“When I explained what had happened, he grabbed me by the arm and marched me toward the door. I thought he was angry with me, but it was quickly clear that I wasn’t the target.

“He hurried me down the block. When we got here, the little old man was by the front door.

“‘Is that him?’ my father asked me.

“I nodded.

“The little old man called to someone inside the house, then he ran to the *For Sale* sign and pulled it out of the dirt, holding the post as if he was going to defend himself with it. My father headed through the plantings toward him. The little old man was frightened and so was I.

“My father was six-two, big-boned with black hair that he combed straight back. He grabbed the little old man and lifted him up.

“He shook him and raged in his face. The little old man dropped the *For Sale* sign, and a woman emerged from the house. ‘I’m calling the police,’ she said.

“I started to cry.

“My father looked at me, laughed and shook the little old man. I’d never seen an adult attack another.

“Father was still shaking and threatening when the sirens sounded.

“He dropped the little old man, who lay huddled there among the plantings.

“A squad car sped up the street, and the woman ran toward it, waving her arms.

“A policeman left the car, strode past me and helped the little old man to his feet. Another approached my father. The adults talked for a while, then they escorted my father and the little old man to the squad car, and the car disappeared down the street.

“I walked home alone—amazed that my father had gone to such lengths to defend me, but shocked by it all. When Mother asked, I explained what had happened.

“Later that evening, Father returned in high spirits. No charges would be pressed, he said. The police were on his side, he boasted.

“During the days that followed, I thought about what had happened. I began to wonder if my father’s outburst had anything to do with defending me. A few weeks later, he confirmed my suspicion, leaving Mother and I without a word of goodbye.

“I was at a school awards dinner, seated at a long table. Mother was on my right and there was an empty seat on my left. Father was going to come straight from work. But he didn’t show up. He had emptied the bank account and flown to Fiji.”

“Not really,” Petra says.

“Really. It was ten years before I saw him again.”

She looks from you to the corner house, then she takes your hand.

“We had some good times,” you say, softly now. “There was a barbecue place in East Lawrence, and we’d go there together. I remember the sawdust on the floor and the smell of smoke. To spare me the conflicts at home, he took me with him on weekends. I’d sit on his office floor and read while he worked.”

But the memory of the home for sale has spoiled your mood.

You’re wondering, and I’m wondering too: why did you bring Petra here? This street, these houses— They’d forgotten you. They hadn’t thought about you for thirty years. When you die, it won’t make any difference to them. Why should they care?

THE BIG FISH

"I first saw the Xiphactinus fossil just before my father vanished."

Petra's lying naked on the bed in your hotel room, and you're stretched beside her. Below your ribs, the overlapped crescents left by her teeth look like scales.

"Right after he attacked the realtor— The next weekend, in the middle of the day— They were in the front room. Mother was chewing him out. He was silent, sullen; and then he exploded. I had crept downstairs and was watching.

"Father spotted me. He grabbed my arm and tugged me between them, boiling with rage. Mother was oblivious, lost in her fury, railing at him.

"He hurried me down the hall, opened the back door and pulled me out. He ordered me into the car. Where were we going? I huddled on the seat, afraid to speak.

"He circled the block, silent, aimless. Then he drove with purpose. A few minutes later, he pulled into a parking lot, killed the engine and sat there, staring through the windshield. Then he opened his door, came around to my side and took my hand.

“We were by a large stone building, and he was leading me up the steps.

“As close as we lived to it, I hadn’t been to the museum before. The entrance seemed imposing. The arches of carved stone above. The copper handrail burnt my palm. I saw my face in the glass of the door.

“What was he thinking? Did he imagine this would be a distraction that would blot out the shock of a family in ruins? Or did he have some other reason for bringing me there?”

Was he handing you over to the big fish?

“He took me to the Marine Hall straightaway.”

No, my boy. Your father had no plan. He had no idea how lost you were. I was guiding him, as I’ve guided you. My voice reached him in glubs, and he descended the stairwell with you in tow, headed toward the Age of Reptiles and a time when Kansas was the most dangerous place in the world.

He didn’t know where he was going. But as you passed the fossil dioramas, he could hear—over the *pad* of his shoes on the tile—a voice strange and inhuman, whispering in his ear.

And when you reached the corridor junction and turned to see the display on the wall, you heard it too:

I am Xiphactinus. I was born in the late Cretaceous, as the plaque says. Creation has set loose many terrible fish, but none as large or as dangerous. My singularity preserves me. As you can see, I’m still here.

I’m fast and vicious, and I have no qualms. No reservations. In preying on others, I follow, without hesitation, the instincts destiny gave me. I have a nature as simple as air, as pure as salt.

I'm not fettered by guilt. I shrink at nothing. I leap and lunge, wielding judgment, knowing I'm a monster to all I meet. I bring pain, pain and death. Devouring those who lie in my path pleases me greatly.

You shuddered. You clung to your father's leg. I imagined you then as a naked infant curled on your mother's belly, stunned, mouth wide, losing her nipple.

With a bubble of milk on your lips, you stared at me. And what did you see? My skull glittered with silver sparks, fluorescent needles rayed from my ribs, my powerful tail loosed haloes and the currents trembled as I passed.

You were powerfully drawn. You loosened your clutch, your arm fell from your father's thigh. You took a step toward me and raised your hand to the glass.

A half-pint ape! An unhappy one: cursed by fate, condemned to a crust of earth and a life of dependence on others. Dependence! For food, for shelter, for power and worth—What a miserable life! What a sorry existence!

My jaw flexed and my ray fins spread. And at that, your young mind reeled.

Don't go, you implored. Don't return down the funnel of time. Don't dive for the depths. Stay here with me.

Your desperate face, the rashness I saw through the glass—And the raw presumption—so pleasing to me, I admit: that your wretched existence—dubious, threatened—might be guided by mine.

My jaw gaped. Fish don't laugh, but I was fiercely amused—and entertained! *The boy's imagining that I'm his*

father, I thought. He thinks he can shuffle me under his arm and hobble through life using me as his crutch.

I was born to kill, and the millennia have done nothing to change me. But I was charmed by your fascination with the abyss and a monster who was at home in it. If you chose to carry a picture of me into adulthood, like a photo in a locket, who was I to complain?

Petra is watching you.

"I was transfixed," you tell her. "Xiphactinus seemed like a truth that, up till then, had been hidden from me. He was millions of years old, but he was whispering close. His violent nature, his untamed cravings were fully awake in my brain. I could feel the brutality in his bulky shoulders and his bulldog jaw. I could see the vicious intent in his eye and the glint on his spiked teeth. His ray fin waved the dark current against my side."

"That's why you're here," Petra says.

"Danger has brought me back," you tell her. "I'm not sure what I should do."

"You're not sure who you are," she says as if you'd not spoken.

Clever girl. Does she imagine that through my unblinking eyes you will see yourself and your confusion will end? Does she think she can help silence the chorus of lies, the chirping of apes, like a million terrified minnows. "No, no," they insist, "the monster that lives in Dun's mind— That isn't him."

But maybe it is.

YOU CAN HELP ME



n alert on your phone chimes.

“Sorry,” you say. “There’s a video call I have to be on.”

You’re still naked, still in bed with Petra. If you join the call now, she will learn a lot. Maybe it’s time.

“It’s with the board,” you say, “of a company named Soritec. I’m a director.”

“Do you want me to leave?” she asks.

You shake your head, sitting up. “Don’t trade any Soritec stock. You could go to jail.”

The connection is made and faces appear on the screen of your phone.

After greetings, the company’s general counsel begins his update.

“Interrogatories,” he says, “and document requests. Lots of them.” And he launches into the details. There are questions from other directors for the company’s outside counsel and the CEO. You’re looking at Petra, and she’s looking at you, wondering what it means. You shake your head at her, sharing your impatience and irritation with those on the call. Finally you speak.

“When will settlement discussions begin?”

Your question triggers angry reactions from other board members. “Fight them in court,” one says. “They won’t get a dime,” another agrees. “We’ve done nothing wrong,” the CEO says. And the company’s general counsel adds, “Our insurers are dragging their feet.”

“That’s no surprise,” you observe. “What does the voice of experience say?” Your question is directed at Soritec’s outside counsel, who deals with class-action suits every day.

“While it’s true,” the man answers, “that Soritec’s done nothing wrong, there’s a chance of a negative outcome in court. And that would be catastrophic. Inevitably, these cases end with a settlement. Your adversaries know that.”

You imagine the lead elasmosaur’s grin and his bad breath. As large as his body was, and as fierce as he looked when his fangs unmeshed, he isn’t expecting to take you down. Or even draw blood. The importune beast is betting you will retch up something for him and his pals.

“Churn the water if you like,” you say, addressing the board. “Let me know when settlement talks begin.”

You disconnect and set your phone on the bedstand. A beam from the window is touching Petra’s chest, lighting the nipple torn by a dog. It’s like a miniature pie with a wedge removed.

You lie back down, resting your head on the pillow a foot from hers.

“Trouble,” she says.

“I’m under a lot of pressure right now.”

“Legal pressure,” she says.

“Yes. From the class-action suit. From my wife. And from the government too.”

That’s a lot of information. Is it too much for Petra?

“On the ninth floor,” she says raising herself, “there’s a roof-deck. Let’s have a look at the view.”

The two of you dress, take the elevator up and ascend two flights of stairs. From the railing of the roof deck, you can see the Natural History Museum.

“We’re on top of Mount Oread,” Petra says. She points at Fraser Hall and the flags flying at its top. “What happened after your father left?”

“Mother sold the house. We moved to an apartment in East Lawrence. After that, we traded down every few years. Each was a cheaper place in a seedier location.”

“You went to high school here?”

You nod and point to the south, beyond Fraser. “My future hinged on college. When I felt myself sinking, I’d visit the museum. It was my refuge. I felt more a part of that world than of the real one around me.”

Petra is nodding. “My life belongs to the Sea.”

“You’ve learned a lot about me,” you say. “Why have you told me so little about yourself?”

“We’re the same,” she replies. “I had my roots cut out from under me. I’m not a part of this. Any of this.”

You can see her chipped tooth and the grit in her eyes. With apes, grace is often a feminine trait, but there’s none in Petra.

“You’re tough,” you say.

“Paleontology is an elitist world, and I don’t have a PhD. I’ve found some important fossils, but if I make a buck selling one, they think it’s a sin. Other than a few friends like Dick, I’m on my own.”

She turns to the west, toward the declining sun and the chalky hills. Hills that once held my bones.

You take her hand, feeling its warmth.

“Let me show you my world,” Petra says. “You can help me.”

You remember the first time you saw her. That squint, her silver-blue eyes, the off-center hair— She’s made her home in a desolate place, a land of ghosts and fossils, and she wants to take you with her.

You don’t have long. You’ll have to return to California.

She turns and puts her lips to your cheek.

“You’re revealing yourself,” she says. “Exhuming your past, bone by bone. I’m seeing you, Dun. As you were, as you are—”

There’s passion in her voice, and urgency too.

“The look back,” she says, “will solve the riddle of the way forward. I’m a good listener, aren’t I?”

“Exceptional.”

“I’m not afraid of monsters,” she says. “I’ve dug up quite a few.”

“How would I help you?”

“I’m working on an important find. Some of it’s still in the chalk. I could use a hand.”

“When would we leave?”

“Tomorrow morning.”

3



FOSSIL WAGON

As you dress the next morning, you can see the sun rising through the hotel window: a golden portal to a sea of flame. You return your rental car, load your bags into the back of Petra's fossil wagon, an old Suburban, and leave Lawrence. Petra is at the wheel.

As you cross the Kaw, she looks at you. "*Koya yali* is a Kanza expression. It means 'trusted friend.'"

"We're good together," you nod.

Petra lifts her chin. "We're not trying to fix each other."

She turns onto Highway 70. "Heading for the chalk is a drive back in time."

The roadcut rock is amber and sand, like an orange peel muffin.

"It must have been hard," Petra says, "when your father left."

"I was a wreck."

There was no quelling your feelings of betrayal and loss. A right-minded fish would have mustered his daring and struck out on his own. Survival means forcing yourself on an unwilling world.

“Mother would sit in an armchair and sob for hours. I was fearful at first, then bitter and insolent. I swore, I fought, I wrote on the walls. I mocked my teachers and spent fifth grade at a desk facing the back of the room. Finally I stifled my vitriol and focused on grades.

“Mother was hopeless. She escaped her failure by losing herself in delusions.”

“Of what?” Petra asks.

“In her teens, she’d dreamt of being a dancer. She wore a costume and quoted French poetry. She was unemployable. We lived on what my father left behind.”

“No relatives?”

“She has an older sister, my Aunt Helene. Helene and Luther, her husband, lived in Overland Park. Their children were grown, on the East Coast. For a couple of years, I stayed with them on weekends. My aunt was kind to me. She fixed me lunch, washed my clothes, talked to me about school and what I was reading. I did carpentry with my uncle. He had a shop and he liked having someone to jabber with.

“‘The human race is a mess,’ he said while he sawed and hammered. ‘Wealth can be shared. Violence can be tamed. If you’re feeling aggressive,’ he said, ‘dig a hole and plant a tree.’”

A tree! Oh yes. Dear Uncle Luther.

“They enjoyed my company. Their affection stirred a new hope. I imagined I was earning a place with them. I spoke to my mother. If Helene and Luther would have me, I suggested, I could live with them. A discussion ensued.

“At the end of it, Mother explained that Helene and Luther

had declined my offer.

“That brought an end to the weekend visits. On the phone, my aunt was self-conscious—guilty, I guess, about having rejected me.”

Your feelings were bruised. I told you to purge your mind of pipe dreams and count on yourself. You heard me, but—

“Are they still alive?” Petra asks.

“Helene is. Luther died of a heart attack a few years after I left Lawrence.”

Let’s not mention the coat.

“After the funeral, a box arrived with one of Luther’s coats in it. I wore it till the seams split and the cloth fell apart.”

Maudlin, my boy.

“You couldn’t let go,” Petra sighs.

“I managed to get into college on my own. I completed the documents and forged Mother’s signature. I didn’t tell her I was going until the last moment. I had already found a ride and packed my clothes. That’s how I got to California.”

“She stayed in Lawrence?” Petra asks.

“No. The irony is: it was Mother who went to live with Helene and Luther. Not long after I left, she reached a point where she couldn’t take care of herself.”

CRISTIE

Ilat expanses roll by—grazing land, parched cornfields, straggling thickets. Then out of the silence, your voice rises.

“My freshman year, I discovered love.”

Petra glances at you, then returns her gaze to the roadway.

“It was a chance encounter,” you say, “on a corner at the edge of campus. I was attracted by her concerted look, her serious eyes. I remarked on that and she laughed.”

And so the delusions begin. Fish don’t laugh. Reptiles don’t laugh. Among the hordes of invertebrates that filled the Interior Sea there wasn’t a joke to be heard. Amusement disrupts the gravity of survival. Mirth, for men, is a sign of weakness, an appeal for détente.

“Her name was Cristie,” you say. A swarthy mestizo with a fiery heart. “She changed my life.”

“How did she change it?”

“She was raw. Naked emotionally. There was no camouflage. No layers to pierce or strip away. My knowledge of her was instantaneous.”

“She trusted you,” Petra says.

“And that gave me the courage to express my deepest emotions to her. Within a few days, I felt like I’d known her all my life.”

What a fool you were.

“I was a fool. What did I know about women and love?”

A forlorn sigh.

“With Cristie, I was someone else. Someone I’d never met. All I had known was guarded desire, hidden thoughts, subverted feelings. Suddenly everything was exposed. There was no defense or protection, no ambivalence or indirection.

“A new life opened before me, a life of faith and boundless affection. A life that revealed, without conditions, the mysteries of love, the secrets of joy. I’d been born blind, and I was seeing for the first time.”

The creature you’d fallen for appeared like a drifting cinnoid colony. Hundreds of them, each with a cap and arms trailing down. Rare, sensitive, ephemeral. And puzzling. Where had she drifted from? Where was she going? Her myriad arms feel the currents so deftly. Are they really collecting food?

“My outlook on the world changed. Thankful for the gift I’d received, I was generous to others. I wanted to be gallant, heroic—”

“Gallant?”

“If there was a dispute between classmates, I’d be the peacemaker. If I saw an elderly person struggling, I’d hurry to help.

“We were on our way back from campus. There were three

boys, maybe eight years old. They had a smaller kid backed up against a phone pole and they were threatening him. He was crying. I charged the bigger kids and they scattered. The little guy hugged me and thanked me through his tears. Cristie melted.”

She hadn’t an ounce of sense.

“I was the defender of innocence,” you say.

You were lost, my boy. Lost as the neighborhood cat. Did you see the note on the phone pole? Someone had posted a plea and a photo of a tabby with mackerel stripes.

What was Cristie really? Comfort in weakness. Rules of life that were easy to grasp. The fairy tale that an abandoned child had never been told.

Through the windshield, the horizon is bristling with windmills, tall and white and triple-bladed.

“She moved in with me. It all happened quickly. I had no idea that the things I was experiencing were possible. I wanted them more than anything, and she did too. It didn’t matter what we were feeling—humor, concern, affection, fear—That richness had never been within reach, and now it was pouring out.”

“And in bed?” Petra asks.

“No doubts, no defenses. We weren’t just looking into each other’s eyes, kissing each other’s lips; we weren’t just mixing our sweat. We were mixing our hearts and our spirits. We were pure and unafraid.”

You’re speaking to Petra as if she’s Cristie. As if you’re alone with her. As if I’m not here. And Petra is slowing.

She's taking an exit, pulling the car to the side of the road, parking by a field of burgundy milo. The car jerks to a halt. She kills the engine and faces you.

Petra motions for you to get out, and she does the same. She steps to the Suburban's rear, raises the hatch and pulls out a blanket. Then she nods at you and leads the way to a ravine beside the road.

"It's wonderful," she says, "knowing you aren't alone in the world."

She points at a level spot between the ravine walls and descends. At the bottom, she opens her arms, spreads the blanket and unfastens her shirt.

You close your eyes as if to summon the past. Then you're following her example. In your attraction to Petra now, you're like a patient with a nurse.

Naked, she lies on her back and reaches her hands toward you. You kneel between her thighs and the memories of Cristie return, along with a thumping in your chest.

"I'm Cristie," Petra whispers, playing the part. "Love isn't painted on. Faith isn't medicine for a sickly mind; it's inborn, rising from a natural purity."

She's singing your song, using your words.

And when you enter her, she lavishes you with the same blind acceptance and adulation you felt back then. Your strokes are heroic. The fossil hunter is a teenager now, blind as a crinoid, divining the miraculous in your blasted heart.

Can she see your ugliness? Is she blind to the scars of cruelty endured and transferred to others? Oh no, you're a

beautiful creature again! Again you hear a wistful sigh and feel a trusting soul close to yours.

You replay that youthful passion, spilling your sperm inside Petra as if the bones of Cristie were buried there and your release would stir them.

Unlearned man, pitiful boy—

It's a difficult moment for me. That you're still carrying that desperate longing— That you've never let go— You've tried my patience—greatly, I say—on this hot afternoon.

MINGLED DELUSIONS

Petra is freeing the syrupy memories inside you. You're miring yourself in nostalgia and the weakness it's restored. And—no surprise—the more you share of your first romance, the more you feel the old desperation.

Don't you understand? The ghost of Cristie walks with poverty, abandonment and alienation. Throwing your lot in with her may have seemed a brave act at the time. But it was fear that drove you both—fear and insecurity. Two teen fools lost in mingled delusions, while monsters circled with gaping jaws.

"It's so flat." You're eyeing the terrain through the glass. Despite growing up in Kansas, you've never been this far west. "Was there water here?"

"We're on the shore," Petra replies.

Silence. Then she says, "You've never let go of her."

"No," you sigh, "I haven't. I'm sorry."

"Don't be," Petra says. "Keep on. I'm listening."

"It was a magical time. When we considered the future, what we might do, where we might go— Neither of us cared. It could be anything, anywhere, as long as we were together.

As long as we preserved the depth of emotion we'd found in each other.

"We took the same classes. We got part-time jobs. We moved into a room in a communal house."

And you put me at a distance. Don't think my feelings were hurt. I knew, oh I knew: the boy's troubles aren't over. They were just beginning.

"I was someone else," you tell Petra, "more handsome, more noble, more idealistic. I saw a new Dun in her eyes. I've never felt so close to anyone."

Petra is fixed on the road, but she's nodding.

"You can't hurt someone," you say, "who makes you feel like that. I would have died before I disappointed her. I've never experienced that with anyone else. I shouldn't be telling you this."

Petra ignores the apology.

"Maybe," she says, "that only can happen when we're young."

"Maybe," you say, "it can only happen once."

Maybe it's a delusion unique to apes. You hear my whisper, but Petra cannot. You're trying to ignore me, but I'm not going to let you.

"She wanted to get married. As close as we were, a future as adults was hard to imagine. The prospect raised fears from my past. Could what we were feeling last for the rest of our lives?"

This nonsense about wives, my boy, is hard to fathom. You *have* a wife. Where is she now? In her attorney's office? On the

beach in Baja? At a desk, adding the totals she'll pillage from the family accounts?

Cristie wasn't a crinoid colony. There were leathery wings beneath her skin. Not that she knew, of course. Until she spread them.

For a Cretaceous fish, these things were simpler. The airborne reptiles lived in a different realm. You were below, in the Sea—more monstrous, more dangerous the larger you grew. When you rose to the surface, you could see them swooping, airy and graceful. They were cautious, fearful of you. But they had to eat. You sculled, watching, waiting for one to descend, spreading her scythes, gliding over the chop, dimpling the water with her pointed bill.

Your romance with Cristie was the same as later liaisons. No different than Kath or the woman at the wheel beside you. All were a matter of chance. They descended at an opportune moment and you struck.

When you reached your jaws for the spindly body, how much thought did you give to selection? Be honest now. It was instinct that drove you, and chance that determined who your prey was. Your spiked teeth pierced the velvety skin, crushing her bones. Her drum-taut wings folded as you dragged her down.

I know, I know. It seemed different with Cristie. She didn't think of herself as prey. She didn't think marriage meant being devoured, living the rest of her life in your gut while you prowled the deep. She imagined that you'd sprout wings, and the two of you would fly away together.

That was the delusion on which her longing for marriage was based. And it was your desire to share her delusion that led you to seek out your father.

RUTHLESS

Petra is pointing at a sign by the roadside.
“We’re leaving Saline County. Those outcrops are Dakota sandstone. Everything beyond here was once the Interior Sea.”

The sky is gray now, striped by cloud corrugations like moving waves. But the only monsters visible are grain elevators.

“I was twenty,” you say. “We were both still in school.”

Cristie had taken control. Your heart was full of false hope. Would you spend the rest of your life with her? Yes, every hour of it! Where had these strange thoughts come from? So earnest, so idealistic, so utterly bereft of caution or sense.

“I was young to be weighing these things,” you say, “but I thought: *I may never meet another like her. I may never feel this close to a woman again.* She was serious about a lifelong commitment. And I was serious too.”

Yes, you were. There was a moment when I thought it was over between us. *Ruthless*. That word marked the moment.

“On the eve of our commitment,” you explain, “doubts surfaced. Troubling thoughts. Not thoughts about Cristie. Thoughts about my damaged youth, my broken family and

what it meant.

"I wanted to see him again. My father."

"He'd come back from Fiji?" Petra says.

"He had. He'd landed in the Southwest, at a pharmaceutical lab."

"What were you looking for?" she asks.

"The past haunted me. I wanted to see my father with adult eyes, not as my mother saw him, not as the child remembered him. I wanted to know who he really was. Before I pledged my life to Cristie, I needed some settling, some confidence."

"You didn't want to let her down," Petra says.

"No, I didn't.

"He'd remarried. He had a daughter and was living in Tucson. I called him and he agreed to meet. I arrived as the family dinner was ending."

Petra is frowning, trying to imagine. "How long had it been?"

"Ten years. His wife and child went to bed. We stayed up all night talking. I asked him a lot of questions. His answers were frank but clipped."

"Like?"

"Why did you marry my mother?"

"What was his answer?"

"A feeling I had."

Petra is puzzled.

"I asked him what he saw in her. 'She was feminine,' he said, as if that was enough."

"He was sorry he'd abandoned you," Petra guesses.

“No. For him, it was all in the past—a faded memory.

“Finally, as the rising sun lit the kitchen curtains, I asked for his perspective on life. ‘You’ve seen a lot and done a lot,’ I said. ‘What have you learned that you want to share with your twenty-year-old son?’ He nodded, understanding my question.”

“What was his answer?”

“‘I was naïve,’ he said. ‘If I could do it over again, I would be more ruthless.’”

“Ruthless.” Petra’s surprised.

I remember the moment, my boy. The word cast you back to the afternoon we first met. In a heartbeat, you divided yourself from home and parents, from your piscine mentor and the primeval Sea. You thought: the big fish behind the glass was no different than the monster seated before you. This mean-spirited fellow—your father—wished he’d been more like me!

Petra’s eyes are dark. “How did you react?”

And you replay for her that moment of childish idealism:

“I wasn’t going to let his values ruin my life.”

Ruthless offended you. I was there, watching and listening, finning behind you. I could feel your recoil, and I was stunned.

Had my patronage been for naught?

Where are the creatures now living or once alive that wished continuance for others but an end for themselves? Show me these noble beings, these martyrs and saints; and dour as I am, I’ll discover the means to laugh.

Not that I think a parent deserves any tribute. Mine were strangers, and if I were to chance on either, I would as soon eat them as any fish in the sea. But *Ruthless* is life's dictum. The quality humans call "sacrifice," the pretense of self-abnegation, is a myth authored by vanished genes. The stories, the treasured examples, the triumphs of conscience to benefit a common good— They're the rationalizations of beings who can't survive on their own.

What made your father repellent wasn't his self-interest. It was his fantasy that he could be a predator, and a dutiful mate and parent at the same time.

But . . . my arguments meant nothing. Being young and naïve, you rejected *Ruthless* and me as well. And with that, your pact with Cristie was sealed.

INVERTEBRATE LIFE

Petra pulls into a gas station. You fill the tank, pay at the kiosk and buy drinks. Then you're back on the road. "How far are we?" you ask.

"Halfway."

You wonder: if you hid yourself in a town out here, would your assailants find you? They wouldn't forget their grievances. But if your days as a big fish were over and they got whatever you'd left behind, they'd probably leave you to oblivion.

"The pact with Cristie," Petra prompts you.

You open a bottle and take a swallow. "It was a simple wedding. A chapel in the hills, a few college friends and a minister who made no mention of God at our request. Cristie was casually dressed, but I'd never seen her so serene. Like a drifting kite on a gentle wind, a wind that had blown for ages and would never stop."

At graduation, the new reality settled in. You had a wife now and responsibility.

"Survival required some compromises," you say.

And you made them. You embraced the challenge. You had a reason now to make yourself part of the human community.

“My college degree meant nothing. I applied for a number of jobs and took one in a local restaurant, washing dishes and bussing tables. Long hours, hard work, low pay. Then the restaurant went under.

“The gas company was re-routing lines in San Francisco—lines buried in the soft fill used a century before to extend the city into the bay. The day I applied, they offered me a job.”

“Trying to fit into their world,” Petra says.

“Trying to fit in.”

A monster’s fry swimming with sponges and worms. Three winks at the bottom of the food chain, mixing with invertebrate life.

“They gave me a hard hat and assigned me to the graveyard shift. I showed up at midnight and worked till dawn, digging with a pick and shovel. Those with seniority ran jackhammers. A few drove dozers or loaders.”

How virtuous, doing as your fellows did, filtering muck, subsisting on the dregs of the sea.

“In the second week, halfway through the shift, a thin man with a ball cap grabbed my shoulder. ‘Follow me,’ he said. ‘Take your pick and shovel.’

“I didn’t know who he was or where we were headed, but I had no business asking, so I followed him. I noticed his left arm was in a sling and two fingers were missing. In his right hand, he carried a dusty suitcase.”

You followed the man around a corner and down the street.

“There were blockades everywhere. South of Market, the

roads were all torn up. The man with his arm in a sling stopped and looked around at the buildings. He walked a dozen paces, his attention on the asphalt now. 'Here,' he said, pointing down. 'Dig here. Take up the blacktop and dig straight down. Understand?'

"I nodded. 'Straight down.'"

"He left and I set to work. It was slow going. Removing asphalt without a pneumatic drill took time, but once the blacktop was out of the way, the pace picked up. The sand was damp and easy to remove. The man with his arm in a sling reappeared a few times, carrying his suitcase with him. The hole was eight feet wide and a couple of feet deep. 'Keep digging,' he said."

Petra's eyes are on the road, but she's listening, waiting.

"The shift wore on and the pit got deeper. Four feet, then five and six. I'm over my head. The sand is wet, and I can smell the sea. Then my shovel strikes something hard. *Ping.*"

Petra glances at you.

"When I cleared the sand away, I saw a metal curvature, perfectly symmetrical. *A pipe*, I thought. I dug around it. It was four or five feet in diameter.

"When the man returns, he sees the pipe and he smiles. 'Good job,' he says. He sets down his suitcase, kneels and unlatches it. From down in the pit, I watch him remove two metal objects. When he's screwed them together, it looks like a telescope.

"'Get out,' he says, and when I climb out, he lowers himself into the pit with the telescope under his bandaged arm.

“I couldn’t see what he was doing, but he managed to secure the device so it stood straight up from the pipe. He attached a horizontal bar to the telescope’s top. It made a clicking noise, like a ratchet. Then he climbed out.

“‘Alright,’ he said. ‘Get down there and crank.’

“So I lowered myself into the hole, grabbed the bar with both hands and cranked. The ratchet clicked and the telescope turned. ‘What am I doing?’ I said.

“The man shook his head. It wasn’t my place to ask. He stepped away from the pit and disappeared.

“I continued cranking for half an hour. Then all at once I hear a hissing.

“It seems impossible that my cranking is freeing gas from the pipe, but the odor is unmistakable. I stop cranking. I climb out of the pit and go looking for the guy. He’s with diggers two blocks away.

“‘What is it?’ he asks.

“‘I seem to have put a hole in the pipe. It’s hissing.’

“He nods, as if what I’m telling him is no surprise.

“‘It smells like gas,’ I say. ‘I think you should have a look.’

“He finds my suggestion reasonable, so we return to the pit together. He kneels at the rim and looks down. Apparently, it’s all as he expects. ‘Keep cranking,’ he says.

“‘You’re sure?’ I ask.

“‘Keep cranking,’ he nods. So he left, and I descended back into the pit.”

The moment of truth, my boy. I remember it well.

You stood on the briny sand, listening to the hiss and

smelling the gas. You put your hands on the bar and cranked. *Click. Click.* And then a trumpet of contempt blared in your ears. Contempt and indignation. You were taking orders from a witless creature—a belemnite with a pea-sized brain. He was moving backward through life, waving his crippled tentacles, oblivious to danger. And you were following his lead.

“That was enough. The fool was going to kill me. I climbed out of the pit and found him again.

“‘What is it?’ he asked.

“‘Are you sure you know what you’re doing?’ My tone was challenging now. ‘There’s gas coming out of that pipe.’

“I could see the dawn of doubt in his eyes.

“He stepped toward a man who looked like a supervisor. After a brief exchange, they started for the hole. I followed, thirty feet behind.

“They reached the pit’s rim and the supervisor looked down. When he raised his head, his eyes were wide. Then the two of them hurried away.

“I retreated to a safe distance, posting myself beside a street lamp to see what would happen next.

“The supervisor reappeared alongside the man with his arm in a sling and someone more senior.”

A different animal now—one with a spine.

“When the senior man reached the pit and looked down, he reacted with shock and disbelief, and he summoned help. A few minutes later a gas company vehicle arrived with more important people. They eyed the leaking gas main with horror and made more calls. I remained by the lamppost.

“Next, a white limousine drove up, and a man in a bathrobe stepped out. They escorted him to the pit. When he saw what the others had seen, he used his phone. I couldn’t hear what he said, but it wasn’t long before sirens sounded. A squadron of red trucks appeared with a score of firefighters.

“The trucks surrounded the pit, and ladders were extended from all sides. Firemen climbed the ladders with hoses and aimed giant nozzles at the hole. From a van, a half-dozen figures emerged in silver suits with helmets like deep-sea divers. With the firemen poised over the pit, the divers descended into it.

“I was still by the lamppost watching.

“Suddenly a geyser of gas shot into the air, white and roaring. The tapping device flew from its summit. The building opposite was three stories high, and the geyser towered over it. Then in an instant, the geyser stopped.

“Somehow the divers had corked the hole. There was no explosion, no flames for the firemen to fight.”

Petra laughs.

“The next day,” you tell her, “I turned in my hard hat.”

The fool and the geyser of gas disturbed you. But your efforts to fit in didn’t end there. Every creature that grows to great size has to run with the small, but most aren’t burdened by an affinity for the weak. While you were trying to fit in, I was trying to be patient.

DEAR JACK

Where are we?" you ask.
"You're trying to support yourself and your wife,"
Petra says.

"Physically, I mean." Beyond the windshield, the highway is empty.

"We're leaving Trego County. We're in the Fort Hays Limestone, the base layer of the Niobrara fossil beds. From these beds, Xiphactinus and the monsters of the Cretaceous arose. Those seeking their world come here. What about you and Cristie?"

"It was a rough passage," you say. "From a ditch digger, I went to a job repairing industrial laundry equipment. Cristie worked in a factory in Emeryville. Our prospects looked bleak. Should we return to school and hope an advanced degree would make a difference?"

"I responded to an ad, and the recruiter got me an interview for a sales job with a computer company. The hiring manager was looking for inexperienced kids. 'Practical savvy is all that matters,' he said."

He had no idea how little you had.

“I was offered a job in Seattle, and I took it. We gave away what little we owned, and I used an advance to buy the cheapest car we could find. Cristie piled our clothing on the back seat and we headed north.”

You dreamt of freedom. The essence of your employment, of course, was barter. Among hominids, barter rules. So you weren't really free. You were following the general example, trading servitude for subsistence. But somewhere among the thinking machines, about which you knew nothing; somewhere among the chips of melted sand soldered to boards in metal boxes— Somewhere in that electronic junkyard, you imagined a portal to freedom might appear.

“We arrived in Seattle during a storm and checked into an empty hotel. A man named Jack was waiting for me.”

Jack was an old clam, an inoceramid encrusted with oysters. And Dun was a little fish—a kansius perhaps—sheltering inside him. Our boy is still in the domain of invertebrates, the innocent, the harmless.

“Jack was in his sixties, tall and creaky, stiff with arthritis. He wore a striped vest, and he had graying hair and pale green eyes.”

Dear Jack, with his brittle shell and soft insides. How your sympathies were assailed by him! Another surrogate father—a better one. It wasn't Jack's strength you were drawn to. It was his charity.

“Jack could see my situation,” you tell Petra. “He knew how unprepared I was for the job, how unlikely it was that I would succeed. He took pity on me.”

Pity! Generosity, mercy, care! A miserable swamp, but you waded into it. While Cristie looked for a job, you spent your time in the hotel room with Jack.

“A good-sized government contract had been let for communications equipment, and Jack had been assigned to help me. My boss, eight hundred miles away, explained by phone that Jack was an expert, a technical giant. I was lucky to have that kind of help. The two of us labored day and night, and three weeks later I submitted the proposal.

“The government didn’t bother with it. They had already chosen other equipment. But I’d gotten an education from Jack, and for that I was very grateful.”

Gratitude. The lubricant of prostration, the rotting marrow of human servility.

“Jack was another surrogate father, like Uncle Luther. It was all still there,” you confess to Petra. “My youthful wounds, the pain of being abandoned.”

Cristie hadn’t cured you. Your wounds were open and running. And Jack had wounds of his own. He was alone, divorced with one child—a son who wanted nothing to do with him. What a sorry soup the two of you brewed.

“Jack returned to his office in Phoenix,” you say, “but I kept in contact with him.”

Contact, oh yes. You were so naïve.

DUTY AND REWARD

"After Jack," you tell Petra, "things went my way. Tech was the same as it is now: a bit of current knowledge was worth more than a decade of history. By the end of the year, I'd inked so many contracts that my boss was convinced I knew what I was doing. Our equipment performed reasonably well and customers were happy. Cristie found a job she liked, and after four or five years we had possessions and comforts. Life seemed simple. Our duty was work, and our reward was love.

"At work, I was on my own. With Cristie, I was part of something larger. Whatever we did, wherever we went, our bond was paramount. When we made love, we fused; and the fusion was so powerful and consuming, it seemed there was nothing else.

"We imagined we were transforming the world."

Petra looks surprised.

"We made love in unlikely places," you say. "On top of a boiler in Gas Works Park. In an ice cave on the summit of Mt. Rainier. On a tomb in the Black Diamond graveyard."

"That transformed the world?" Petra's confused.

“At the Ballard memorial, we made the tower bell ring. In a hedge maze at VanDusen Garden, we filled the corridors with fog. At night, in a canoe at Port Gamble, our quaking made the water glow blue.”

Your hyperbole means nothing to her.

“It was all a fantasy,” you confess.

Out the car window, you see the sign: *Gove County*.

“I was lost in Cristie. I only had a sober sense of myself at work. And then—”

Petra glances at you. “Then?”

“Things began to unravel.”

There’s not a car or a truck in sight. The fossil wagon is alone on the road, and the barren landscape seems removed from humanity.

“We’re headed into the heart of the Interior Sea,” Petra says, “where the water was deepest. Eighty million years ago, the world was the hottest it had ever been. The polar ice had melted. The seas had never been higher.”

She lives out here. She’s at home with isolation.

“There are towns?”

“A few,” she says.

KAI'S QUESTION

"H

ow did things unravel?" Petra asks.

"It started with a question I couldn't answer.

"Work was going well. I'd signed a lot of contracts, and we had a growing business. We'd helped an insurance company launch a nationwide network. We installed a right-of-way system for the highway department and a public assistance program that supported indigent families. I'd built a team that was smart and energetic. Among my hires was a young engineer who'd worked at a development lab in the East. He insured that our installations went smoothly.

"One day I got a call from regional headquarters in Phoenix. It was Kai, a vice president, levels above me.

"We have a customer,' Kai said. 'A large hospital, in serious trouble. We're trying to bring up a medical records system, and it's still unstable. We haven't been able to solve the problem, and it's threatening people's lives. You have an expert.'

"He was talking about my young engineer.

"Can you spare him?' Kai said. 'I want to fly him out tonight. Do me this favor.'

"And I did, of course. The engineer flew to the customer

site and was able to sort things out.

“When he returned a few days later, I had a conversation with him. The local team, he explained, had used Jack as their technical advisor.”

“‘Dear Jack,’ Petra remembers. “The striped vest. The pale green eyes.”

“My engineer told me Jack’s mistakes were serious. ‘He’s over the hill,’ he said. ‘There are things in the new products he doesn’t understand. Everyone was angry, and they had a right to be.’”

“What did you do?” Petra asks.

“I called Jack. I didn’t mention the installation. I asked how he was doing. ‘Not very well,’ he said. He told me he was lonely and feeling his years. His only son had died a few months before from a drug overdose.”

Poor Jack.

“The next day Kai called. ‘Nothing urgent,’ he said. ‘I need some advice.’

About what?

“‘We’ve got this old guy in technical operations,’ Kai said. ‘He’s an expert, they claim.’ And he spoke Jack’s name. ‘You know him?’

“‘Yes,’ I said, ‘I know Jack.’

“‘I’m hearing different things,’ Kai said. ‘I’m not sure what to believe.

“‘Jack has been the point man for a number of problem installs, including the one I called you about. There are a lot of unhappy people. They want Jack’s head. But he has his

supporters. Most are older, but they say Jack still has his edge. What's the truth here? You know him, and I'm guessing your guy— I'm forgetting his name.'

"He meant my young engineer.

"He probably knows him too. Is Jack up to the job, or should I fire him and find someone else?"

Silence in the Suburban.

And what a silence it was in real life. I relished the moment, watching you squirm— Seeing your anguish, the torment of apes, weighing this against that— To what end? To claim that honesty had more merit than allegiance? Or the reverse? For an ape, there was no solution—no solution at all!

"Losing his job," you tell Petra, "might be the end of Jack. But failed installations were a serious problem, and the result could be worse than broken contracts. The hospital system Jack bungled had threatened patients' lives. And there was the question of truth. The truth was: Jack was no longer fit for his job, and to say otherwise, I would have to tell a bald-faced lie."

More silence. The quandary's still gnawing at you, my boy.

"Well?" Petra is waiting.

"That's what I did. 'Jack knows what he's doing,' I told Kai. 'The old guy's as sharp as ever.'

"Kai expressed his thanks for my help. And that was the end of the call.

"I sat there, staring at the phone, feeling relief for the man who'd befriended me."

You told yourself that devotion motivated your lie for Jack, dear Jack, the old clam with soft insides. But you knew: a lie

is a lie. You were dressing it up. You saved the old clam and threw everyone else to the sharks. You delivered innocent people to Jack's fumbling incompetence. You condemned dozens of projects—with critical benefits for hundreds, maybe thousands—who might not have suffered if Kai had hired someone to do Jack's job when he was unable.

Did I care? Certainly not. I'm used to carnage. I would have been just as pleased if you'd told the truth and left Jack for dead. What I found so troubling was your inability to shrug off the curse creation gave you.

Your moral sense, my son.

How does the hominid mind escape corruption? The answer is simple. It doesn't. There is no escape.

In that moment with Kai, you should have understood: there would never be answers for you. There would never be right behavior. You'd be at fault no matter what you did. Feeling bad about yourself— That's part of the human design.

The part that must be shed.

But Jack was only the unraveling's *hors d'oeuvre*. The main course was served the very next week.

NINA ON THE DECK

"4ou tied yourself in knots over poor Jack," Petra says with a suspecting look.

She's not judging you. But she knows there's more.

"Things between Cristie and I changed," you say.

Petra nods slowly.

Her attention's ahead. The two-lane road is conducting you into an empty world—flat and dimensionless. The ceiling of cloud is lower now. The view forward is like peering through a gap two inches high and three miles wide.

"Her name was Nina," you say. "She was small, with a delicate nose. Her hair was bound with two bones, like chopsticks in noodles, and her nails were clipped to the quick.

"She was a friend of Cristie's. They worked together. I'd been introduced at a weekend luau. She was trim and attractive, and she lived for the air. She jumped out of planes and soared for miles.

"She appeared at the front door one night unannounced. Cristie was on shift that evening, and Nina knew it. She acted as if she'd dropped by to say hello.

"I invited her in. She wasn't flirtatious, but she asked if I

wanted to get high with her. She'd brought the makings."

"You'd given her hints," Petra guesses.

"No. Never. I wouldn't do that. I invited Nina out onto the deck and she smoked on her own while we talked. A full moon was rising over the mountains in the west; it shone on her hair and her eyes and lips. She moved closer to me, close enough that I understood she was making an overture. I was flattered but puzzled. She was Cristie's friend. Was she really so eager to betray her? As she spoke, I began to suspect."

"Suspect what?" Petra asks.

"They're all reptiles, my boy. And the one on your deck that night was a nyctosaur. Small, delicate wings. Very good eating.

"From the language she used and the things she said, I realized she thought that Cristie and I had an open relationship. Nina imagined I was free to have sex with her, because—"

You stop. Petra knows what's coming. She can see the pain in your eyes.

What a fool.

"Because Cristie," you say, "was involved with other men. Men at work."

The myth of your ideal romance dissolved like fog in the night.

"Did you accept her offer?" Petra asks.

"I didn't have the stomach for it. I didn't want to believe her."

For a doting ape, delusion dies hard. You imagined that Cristie's rawness, her naked emotion, was only for you. Not so!

A wild temperament is hard to control. There were, no doubt, many occasions when she revealed herself to others, just as she'd revealed herself to you.

Petra is watching. Do you have any more to say?

Well, then. Silence will do.

THE JUROR IS DISMISSED



n the right side of the road there's a line of power poles, evenly spaced. You're watching the poles tick past.

"Did you speak to her?" Petra asks finally.

"No. I was in shock. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't imagine revealing what I'd learned. I wasn't going to accuse her or berate her. There wasn't any way to undo the betrayal. The world we'd created together, the connection to life I felt— It began to dissolve."

Illusions, my boy: that love had changed everything. That you lived in a moral realm and your gallantry had somehow been earned. The truth of Kansas had never left you. And neither had I. Modern creatures might come and go, but the big fish will always be here.

"The week after Nina's visit, I got a jury summons from the county court. On a certain day, I was to be available. And when the day arrived, I was asked to appear.

"At the courthouse, I entered a hall where I was seated with other prospective jurors. After waiting a couple of hours, a woman in uniform ushered a dozen of us through a courtroom door.

“We filed onto benches facing a middle-aged man seated on an elevated platform, like a throne. There were tables below him on either side, occupied by the ‘prosecution’ and ‘defense.’”

Sponges and jellies. And “your honor” was a tusoteuthis, sallow and flabby, with an inky robe and a pen in his hand.

“The judge explained the proceedings. There was an elderly woman with a cane, seated in a chair behind one of the tables. She was on trial, he said, for being in possession of pills without a prescription. Had she taken them for amusement or to relieve some self-diagnosed malaise?

“She reminded me of my mother, and my wrath for authority rose. If the old lady took pills, I thought, that was her affair. But I was alone with these thoughts. The courtroom was full of creatures who would follow the judge blindly. My contempt mounted for the law and them all.

“Anger delivered me to a quandary. I didn’t think the woman should be punished, but if I expressed that belief, I’d be rejected as a juror. *I’m responsible*, I thought. *I can’t turn away. I have to sit on the jury to ensure there’s an ‘innocent’ verdict.*

“I resolved to stay silent during jury selection. *I won’t lie*, I thought. *But I won’t volunteer what I think. If they let me slip past, I’ll ruin the case.*

“Attorneys on both sides fired questions at us. The questions landed on others at first. Then the prosecutor fixed on me. ‘Do you have any bias that might influence you in a trial like this?’

"I answered carefully. 'I wouldn't want the woman to be punished unfairly.'

"The prosecutor looked at the judge.

"Do you understand,' the judge said, 'that we're here to determine whether the law has been broken?'

"I do,' I replied.

"In making that determination, will you be guided by me?'

"I will listen to you,' I said, 'but in the end I'll be guided by my conscience.'

"The judge's reaction was instantaneous. He turned to the prosecutor and said, 'I'll accept a motion to dismiss the juror.'

"The prosecutor made the motion and the judge nodded. 'The juror is dismissed,' he said, and he brought his gavel down.

"As I left the jury box, my gall rose. The judge's arrogance and the tribe's complicity seemed atrocious. I was changed by that."

Does Petra understand?

I believe she does.

"The juror is dismissed,'" you murmur.

In the moment you stopped your ears to that throng of deceiving voices, you cast aside a world of woe. Conscience, you realized, was an accessory. It came and went like fashionable dress, depending on the occasion.

If Cristie and your fellow apes didn't care about it, why should you?

THE END OF TRUST

At a town named Oakley, Petra turns and heads south on Highway 83 into Logan County. She's been silent for miles, considering what you've said.

Now she speaks.

"I see these things through what I know about prehistory. There's a world in the rock that no one can change. We don't have the power to make rules for life," she says. "We have to learn them."

Smart girl.

"Outside Leoti, two hours south," Petra says, "there's a rancher I know. A tough guy with a big mustache and a growl. He farms milo, but his passion is quarter horses. He breeds them. He let me walk the ravines behind his corrals. I found a platecarpus spine, and while I was digging it out, he told me a story about himself and a horse.

"The horse, he said, was proud and sensitive. He was trying to teach the horse something, and he got impatient. He raised his fist and struck the horse in the head. 'Our relationship ended,' he said. 'In the years since that blow, nothing has changed. The horse no longer trusts me, and his trust will

never return.”

Are you getting her point?

“In the meaning I’m drawing from the story,” you say, “I’m the horse.”

“You’d lost your trust in Cristie.”

You nod. “And everyone else. All the wounds of my youth reopened. When I discovered she had deceived me, it seemed life was trying to remind me of something.

“At the end of a string of sleepless nights, I had a dream.

“I was aboard a ship that had struck a reef. The ship was sinking, casting me into the sea. Waves engulfed me. The current was fierce. I couldn’t swim. I was thrust to the surface, then I went under and the moon was swallowed by darkness. I surfaced again—a moment of light, a desperate breath—then darkness again. Heaved up and cast down; moon and darkness, and barely a breath between. All that remained of my life was this grim oscillation, and in a moment it would be taken away.

“Then the moon vanished. There was darkness, only darkness.

“I’d lost my light and I’d lost my air. I was beneath the sea, and I wasn’t coming back up.

“All at once the currents shuddered around me. The darkness was parting, the cold waters opened.

“I could feel his muscles rippling beneath me.

“His spine bent, his ray fins swept back and his great head reared. The giant eyes flashed. The giant back arched and rose between my legs. Like a woman surprised, feeling a lover

growing inside me, with a great heave Xiphactinus bore me up, up to the surface, returning my breathless body to life.”

COMPACT

Through the Suburban's windshield, the prairie is cut by shallow ravines, stub walls and canyons, cream-colored, amber and white.

"The chalk?" you ask.

"This is it," Petra replies. "The Smoky Hill valley. Mosasaurs, plesiosaurs, flying reptiles— They're all here. This is the home of your protector."

Buttes and dunes, bluffs and gullies; ivory and beige, peach and champagne.

"We're beneath the Sea now," Petra says.

"Why are the fossils in chalk?"

"Because of the coccoliths. Microscopic creatures. Their skeletons fell through the water like snow. They settled on the Sea floor, an inch every thousand years. Soft and silty. When a marine creature died, it sank to the bottom and nestled there. And the coccoliths continued to fall, covering the corpse like a comforter. Here the creatures have slept for millions of years, waiting for us to wake them."

"An odd end," you say, "for monsters. How do you know where they're buried?"

"You walk around. You see a rib sticking out of a slope, or a section of spine on the ground. Fossil bone is usually brown."

"Just lying there."

Petra nods. "It's an open-air morgue."

"Where is your place?"

"About an hour from here. It's by the dig I've been working on."

Silence. And then:

"What happened with Cristie?"

"We split up after a while. It was weeks before I mentioned Nina."

"Why weeks?"

"I was angry, but I was confused. Cristie was a puzzle to me. She seemed like the same woman I'd married. Had she persuaded herself that cheating didn't matter? If I hadn't known what she'd done, would everything have been as it was?"

"For years I'd accepted the idea that the conflict between my parents had damaged me. I have an unbalanced nature. I'm cold and rational, then I'm shaken by emotion—passion, pain, self-doubt. As I struggled to understand what had happened with Cristie, I began to think my self-assessment was wrong."

"My mixed nature wasn't the result of breakage. It was a product of the discordant elements from which it was formed. My parents had nothing in common. The one: wanting to be ruthless, frozen to the core, an emotional dwarf. The other: steeped in fantasy and romantic longings. The two repelled each other. But for me, there could be no division."

The discordant elements would, as long as I lived, be warring within me.”

“You told her,” Petra guesses, “that you knew what she was doing.”

“I did more than that. I burnt the house down. That wasn’t my intention. I’d planned to confront her calmly, but in the middle of it I lost control.

“I attacked her mind and heart with a butcher’s rage. She was vulnerable, and the things I said— I knew her well enough to cut her deeply, to leave wounds that would never heal. That innocence, all the grace and beauty, all the blessings of love and kinship were, in a few brutal moments, destroyed.”

Your eyes were black and glassy. You had gills and fins. You were fearsome and cruel, the son of a fish—a monstrous one, born to a violent Sea.

You look at Petra. “She lay curled on the floor by my feet, sobbing as if she’d been struck. Maybe, if I’d stopped— But I didn’t stop. My rage fed on itself. I was Xiphactinus.”

You packed up your things and moved out. It was over with Cristie. Really over. The finely-tuned watch was still; or the hands had always been motionless—it was only a fantasy that they’d moved. You were wiser now. You’d live a different life.

You pleaded with me.

Petra doesn’t need to know about that.

You implored me, my boy. You snarled, you sobbed, you clashed your teeth. You begged to be my acolyte once again, my pupil, my devoted companion. You haven’t forgotten any

of that. Goodness no! How could you?

You recall the reservations I expressed.

I understood how needy you were, how desperate, how earnest. Your vehemence flattered me. But— You were still so naïve, so unstable, so inclined to rethink, to fall back— I abhorred the prospect of subjecting myself to your flurries of weakness, entangling myself in your guilt and remorse—

What could I do? You wore me down.

I acceded to your supplications on certain conditions.

You remember my words.

I would make you my charge—temporarily. If things didn't work out, you would accept the failure with resignation. No beating the chest or pulling the hair. No simian recrimination. I would do what I could to refashion you in my image. We would call our compact a success if and when your troublesome conscience was dead—or muted for good, struck dumb with horror or withered by dread.



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers, laboring miners, and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with revealing truths about human potential. *Xiphactinus* and his previous titles—*The Hornet's Spell*, *Hibiscus Mask*, *Beneath Caaqi's Wings*, *Dreams of Delphine*, *The Slide That Buried Rightful*, *Dissolve*, *Island Fruit Remedy*, *Balcony of Fog*, *Rin*, *Tongue and Dorner*, *Arms from the Sea*, *The Hope We Seek*, *Too Far*, and *Wild Animus*—are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.