Everyone in his new life warned Ferris not to go to Cancun. They said Cancun was to drinking what Las Vegas was to gambling. “They even drink in the swimming pools,” his sponsor Leonard told him. “No shit. They belly up to the bar right there in the water.” He’d been sober for four months, a week, and three days, but Caitlin was his only sister and he her only brother and this was her wedding. So there he stood, sweating on the beach in the wrong suit, the darkest figure in the sand-colored crowd. With the ceremony behind him, only the reception, the night, and a taxi ride to the airport separated Ferris from the plane that would carry him back to Indiana and his quiet, normal life.

It was five o’clock, with two hours to kill before the beachside reception, and as guests blew soap bubbles in lieu of throwing rice, he felt an arm encircle his waist, his father’s arm, steering him back through the bubbles toward the empty rows of white chairs. His father was a well-kept man of fifty-nine, youthful and perpetually tan, and though he’d been all smiles walking Caitlin down the makeshift aisle, he looked ashen now, diminished. “We need to talk,” he said. “Not here. Alone. Mano a mano.” They agreed to meet poolside once his father was through posing for photos with the wedding party. He took hold of Ferris’s sleeve. “Don’t fail me, Son,” he said, and that Son frightened Ferris more than anything. As he followed the concrete path that ran alongside the beach, the urge to drink, to counteract his renewed sense of dread, was near-irresistible. He had to call Leonard.

It had been nearly three years since Ferris had last seen his father, and though they spoke by telephone every few months, he hadn’t been sure the old man would even come. Instead, it was his mother who’d backed out at the last minute, claiming her second husband was ill, but Ferris knew that neither had the stomach to face his father, not here. His father had waited until he’d gone off to college before walking out on his mother and sister a dozen years ago, and while Ferris had never reproached him, Caitlin had never forgiven him. The divorce formed the nucleus of a grudge that propelled her through life, and she was already aggrieved when she met Ferris at the hotel check-in counter the

A Toast in Cancun

Charles Haverty
night before, hurt that he hadn’t arrived earlier and wasn’t staying later. She held a plastic cup rimmed with salt, and as she spoke, she gestured wildly, taking gyroscopic care not to spill a drop. The desk clerk fastened a cantaloupe-colored plastic band around Ferris’s wrist, explaining that he was required to wear it at all times in order to take full advantage of the amenities, as well as for “security purposes.” When Caitlin invited him to join her and her fiancé Gideon and the wedding party for drinks, Ferris begged off. He said he was tired, jetlagged, and she went silent. She escorted him through the cavernous lobby and out through the automatic glass doors to the golf cart that would transport him across the compound to his room. As he settled into the back seat, she brought her face close to his. “I’m getting married here, Wally.” He smelled the tequila on her breath. “Is it really so hard to be happy for me?”

He slept badly that night. His room looked out on the Caribbean Sea. All through the night, trucks moved up and down the beach, raking up a freakish profusion of seaweed. Around midnight, workers repaired the pier outside his balcony, while the couple next door made violent love. A mini-fridge, stocked with all manner of alcohol, throbbed in the dark and in his dreams became the unlocked cage of some animal, a fisher cat or wolverine, vicious and feral. Now, as he walked back to his room, there was sand in his shoes and socks. The sun burned through his thinning hair, his scalp, his skull. Skirting the edge of the resort proper, he saw a bunch of sticks arranged in the sand. They spelled FLEE.


“What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s bad. It must be. He says he needs to talk with me. Mano a mano.” The convergence of air-conditioning and ocean breezes made the floor too slippery to pace, so he lay on the bed in his suit. “It’s not something we do. Talk, I mean.” The mini-fridge growled at the foot of the bed. “No, there’s something really wrong, Leonard. He called me ‘Son.’ He’s never called me that before. He even put his arm around me.”

“But don’t you see, Wally? He’s giving you a chance here, an opportunity.” He wasn’t sure whether Leonard was talking about his father or God, and he didn’t want to ask. “Now’s the time to lay it on the line.”

Ferris had been afraid Leonard would say something like this and already he regretted the call. “That’s the last thing he needs to hear right now.”

“That his son’s an alcoholic? Don’t you think you owe it to him? Don’t you think you owe it to yourself? Just say the words, Wally. Own up.” This was their recurring theme. Week after week, Leonard urged him to get up in front of their
fellow sufferers and testify. “If you don’t talk about it, you’re never going to get clean,” he said. “Not really clean.” But what Leonard couldn’t grasp was that it wasn’t the shame of alcoholism that kept Ferris from speaking these words (though there was more than enough of that), but the banality of the words themselves. My name is Wally Ferris and I’m an alcoholic. To stand before these strangers and recite the dreary particulars of his case history was hard enough, but to preface this performance with those hackneyed words was even harder. He found it, well, corny, mortifyingly and insurmountably clichéd. No, it wasn’t shame so much as a paralyzing strain of self-consciousness, an acute awareness of what he described as “the performative aspect” of life, and though it seemed beyond Leonard’s comprehension or experience of the world, it was something Ferris had lived with for as long as he could remember and what drove him to drink in the first place.

“So,” Leonard said, “is it beautiful down there or what?”

“It’s everything you said it would be. It’s Happy Hour twenty-four seven. It’s a chlorinated hell.”

“Be strong, Brother,” Leonard said. Then, “Listen, friend. Tonight’s the biggest moon of the year. It’s called the super perigee moon. Fifteen percent bigger and thirty percent brighter than any other full moon. Just imagine that big mother over the ocean.”

Ferris said, “I could have stayed home and seen the same moon.”

Ferris had been an assistant professor of English at tiny Pater Noster College, in Paisley, Indiana, where he taught three sections of expository writing. The week before the start of the fall semester, the head of his department asked to meet with him in her office. She was a former nun named Barbara Swallow but insisted he call her Bambi. Her hair was red and her eyes were hazel and slightly protuberant, creating the impression that she’d just been startled out of sleep. Apologizing for such short notice, she asked if he’d be willing to take on the department’s Joyce seminar; the professor who was supposed to have taught it had gone missing and none of the remaining faculty had finished Ulysses, much less Finnegans Wake. Ferris agreed and then immediately regretted it.

To begin with, he knew he wasn’t what his students had bargained for. But worse, there was the performative aspect. He felt inadequate to the task, a fraud. While he responded rapturously to the magic of literature, and to Joyce in particular, he responded as a reader. To talk about it, to explain it, to reduce the rapture to lesser words, felt pretentious and presumptuous, like parsing the mechanics of an orgasm for an hour and a half at a time. It was embarrassing and to even attempt this required a lubricant.
They met Tuesday and Thursday afternoons in a narrow room that reminded him of a train compartment. The room was largely taken up by a long table consisting of six smaller tables pushed together, with blackboards running along the length of the walls. There were twelve students, like the Apostles or a jury, and all but one were younger than Ferris. The exception’s name was Becker. Becker was twice as old as the others and nearly twice as big. He invariably occupied the opposite end of the table from Ferris, saying nothing, his eyes burning through him.

Growing up, Ferris had been overweight and unpopular, and even his parents, who were both attractive people, hadn’t hidden their disappointment. When he was in the fourth grade, each student was required to stand before the class every two weeks and deliver a book report, a prospect he’d dreaded at first but quickly warmed to, becoming so enthusiastic, so taken away with his performances, that his classmates, and even the teacher, came to look forward to the spectacle of fat little Wally Ferris setting himself on fire for them every other Friday afternoon. It was the one thing he could do, and now alcohol gave him that same feeling. To drink was to forget the performative aspect, to embrace it, to become the conduit between rapture and these twelve students, and as they moved from *Dubliners* to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to *Ulysses*, alcohol went from lubricant to accelerant. The more “difficult” the text, the more he drank. He drank at lunch, before lunch, for lunch. He packed a pint in his soft leather briefcase, and before class he’d mix pineapple juice and Tanqueray in a terra cotta coffee mug and discreetly nurse it over the next hour and a half, mapping out the streets of Dublin up and down the blackboards, manically charting the respective progress of Dedalus and Bloom in different colored chalk, his talk soaring. And his students seemed excited, too, or at least amused—all but Becker, a silent, hulking presence at the opposite end of the table, scrutinizing and inscrutable.

Early one evening at the beginning of November, Sister Bambi stopped him on his way to the parking lot. “Pretty wild, I hear,” she said.

“Wild?”

“About Joyce, I mean. About *Ulysses*. High shenanigans.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t say—”

She stepped closer and lowered her voice. “Not so wild, okay?”

In his dark blue suit, Ferris moved among the near-naked tourists like an undertaker at an orgy, crossing one little bridge after another over the narrow channels that linked one swimming pool to the next, sidestepping the white towels curled on the concrete. His throat felt constricted, his heart swollen with worry.
about what his father had to tell him. Ice cubes melted in candy-colored drinks abandoned here and there, and he remembered how, under the pretext of “helping out” after his parents’ parties, he’d gather glasses from the living room and take them into the kitchen where he’d drain the dregs and then take his buzz up to bed with him, lying in the dark, listening to his parents do battle downstairs, their voices drifting farther and farther away. Alongside the pool closest to his father’s building, a young woman in a black two-piece lay on a white chaise longue, reading a paperback entitled *Why He Loves Your Inner Bad Girl* with an expression of ruthless concentration, her wet hair slicked back like a seal.

His father appeared in his oatmeal suit. He was smiling. “Christ, you’re already going bald,” he said. He spoke as if to someone standing behind Ferris, though no one was there; there was only Ferris. “That’s one thing you can’t blame on me. You can thank your mother for that one. The hairline comes from the mother’s father, and your mother’s father was as bald as an egg. There’s no arguing with genetics.”

“I’m not blaming anybody for anything, Dad.”

His father stretched out on another chaise longue, a pad of hotel stationery in his lap. Ferris sat on the edge of an identical chair, both feet on the ground.

“Something to wet your whistle?” his father said, waving down one of the ubiquitous servers. “What’ll it be?”

“No, gracias,” Ferris said to the server.

“Oh, come on now,” his father said. “It’s been a long day and it’s bound to be an even longer night.”

“Really, Dad, nothing.”

“A gin and tonic then,” his father told the server. “Uno.” As the server retreated to the other side of the pool, Ferris’s father indicated a group of guests bobbing in the shadow of the bar the next pool over. “I’ve been sitting here since Thursday and those same rednecks have been drinking in that very same spot, and not once in all that time has even one of them got up to use the john. Think about it.” The server returned and set a glass on the squat plastic table between them. His father took a sip and frowned. “They can’t even make a gin and tonic here. How can you fuck up a gin and tonic? You can’t. It’s like fucking up a glass of ice water. Though, of course, they’re famous for fucking that up, too.” He swept his drinking hand along the length of the horizon without spilling a drop. “You know this place didn’t exist forty years ago? Cancun, I mean. Someone came into the jungle and just invented it. Like Bugsy Siegel coming into the desert and inventing Las Vegas. It’s even younger than Vegas, younger than me. Imagine that.”

“Fifty-nine?” Ferris said. “That’s not so old. That’s not old at all.”
“You don’t think so, huh?” He took another sip and grimaced, as if he’d discovered a centipede wriggling among the ice cubes. “Jesus. You know what I think it is? I think they’re using club soda instead of tonic water.”

“Dad.”

“You know how your mother used to make a gin and tonic? I mean, given the limitations of the enterprise and all. Well, let me tell you.” He sat up. “She cheated. And you know how?” He leaned closer. “Sugar.” He fell back in his chair. “She’d slip in a pinch when no one was looking. Turns out she was doing that all over the place—in the spaghetti sauce, the gazpacho, the gin and tonic. Of course, the thing is, it’s not a gin and tonic anymore then, is it?”

“Tom Collins,” Ferris said, watching the ice cubes spin in his father’s glass.

“Come again?”

“It’s called a Tom Collins.”

“Well, there you go,” his father said.

Ferris remembered sitting with Caitlin at their mother’s wedding reception, the youngest people at the table. It was the February of his last semester of college and Caitlin was sixteen. A woman sitting on the other side of the table was crying quietly while somewhere behind them a man and a woman sang “You Don’t Bring Me Flowers.” Caitlin took a sip of his Scotch and stuck out her tongue. “You like that?”

“It’s an acquired taste,” he said.

“I’ll say it is.”

He went to the bar and ordered another Scotch for himself and a Tom Collins for his sister. He set the tall glass on the table and nudged it toward her. “If Mom asks, tell her it’s Sprite.”

She took a sip and smiled. “Now that’s more like it,” she said, and suddenly they were best friends, co-conspirators. After she’d finished her second drink, she looked him full in the face and said, “Well, old boy, I finally went and did it.”

“You know,” she said. “The deed. S-e-x. In Adam Kubiak’s guest bedroom, but not with Adam Kubiak.” She looked at her watch. “Six days, twenty-one hours, and thirty-seven minutes ago—give or take a minute.” Her smile faded. “It wasn’t all it’s cracked up to be.”

“It’s an acquired taste,” Ferris said nervously. The woman across the table was smiling now but still crying.

“It hurt, Wally.” She winced at the memory. “It hurt a lot.” He looked to either side of them. “What are you so worried about?” Caitlin said. “They don’t care.” She fished the maraschino cherry from her ice cubes, took it in her teeth,
and plucked out the stem. “Now you tell me something.”

“Tell you what?”

“Something like what I told you,” she said. “Something secret.”

“I have no secrets.”

“Come on, Wally. Everyone has secrets.” He realized that she was already drunk and that it was his fault. “I’m always telling you stuff and you don’t tell me shit.”

“It’s not like that,” he said. “It’s just that—well, my life’s not as interesting as yours is all.”

“You’re twenty-one.”

“Twenty-one’s not all it’s cracked up to be.”

“Bullshit.”

“Listen,” he said. “As soon as I’ve got something juicy to tell, you’ll be the first person I call. Deal?” But she’d stopped listening.

His old life came down like the floors of a burning building, one level collapsing into the next and then the next and the next. One early December day, on his way into work, he stopped at a liquor store and bought a pint of Tanqueray. He drank a third in the store parking lot and another third in his office. As an exercise in self-control, he screwed the cap on what was left and slipped the bottle into his briefcase. Leaving his mug and pineapple juice behind, he grabbed the briefcase and climbed the stairs to class. He smiled down the length of the table but the twelve of them stared back at him soberly, and he found that whatever fire had fueled his talk before, class after class, had guttered out now. Thought fled his head like smoke up a chimney, and he suggested they take turns going around the table, reading aloud from wherever they liked. As he pretended to follow along, the words on the page and the words in the air began to detach themselves from their meanings, colliding behind his eyes, breaking apart, and instead of seeing them as words and letters, they became arbitrary shapes, some smooth, some sharp. “Go on, go on,” he said. “I’m perfectly all right.” His head was a buzzing hive, a blizzard of letters, characters, slippery and adhesive, an ocean of alphabet soup. When it was Becker’s turn to read, he glared down the table and said, “Pass.” Ferris couldn’t bear the sight of him and shut his eyes. The young woman next to Becker began to read in a soft Irish brogue. “Go on, go on,” Ferris said, drifting farther and farther out on the lilt of her voice. Another woman spoke his name and touched his shoulder. “Wake up now, Wally, wake up.” It was dark outside the high casement windows. “Let’s get up now,” Sister Bambi said, kindly, maternal. “Don’t forget your briefcase.” She tugged her elbow into his, and arm in arm they strolled down the hall and into
her office. “Sit, sit,” she said and he sat.

“So, I guess this is it, old friend.”

“It?”

“You haven’t given us much choice, have you?” she said. “We can’t keep on this way, now can we? You can’t and certainly we can’t. It could be construed as—well, as enabling. And that’s no good for anybody, is it?”

“I don’t understand,” he said. “Is this because I nodded off there for a—”

“Nodded off?” Her head wobbled on her long neck. “You passed out is what you did.”

“Passed out? Now really—”

“My God, Wally, you reek of it.” He realized that his secret was no secret at all, that everyone had known all along—the students, the teachers, the administration—and in that moment he saw himself as both pitiable and despicable. Big tears rolled down his cheeks, slipping through his fingers and past the heels of his hands, plopping into his lap. “There, there,” said Sister Bambi. She slid a sheet of paper across the desk. Through a blur of tears he scanned a release form while she explained the severance agreement she’d worked out for him.

His mouth and throat had gone dry. He croaked, “What about the three strikes rule?”

“This isn’t football, Wally.” She peered at him over her glasses. “Besides, we did talk about this. I did warn you. Don’t you remember?” Her hazel eyes had gone green. “You’re lucky one of your students didn’t film the whole thing and put it on YouTube or God knows where.” She brought her hand to her mouth. “Oh, Wally, you don’t think—” He scribbled his signature and pushed the release across the desk distastefully. In exchange, she handed him a check—only it wasn’t a check but rather a long slip of paper on which someone had printed the address and meeting times for a local chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous. Horrified, he folded it in three and tucked it into his wallet.

“You’re not alone, Wally.” She gazed at some spot over his left shoulder. “I can’t name names, but you’re most definitely not alone.” As she continued to speak, he remembered the bottle in his briefcase and it was all he could do not to request a brief recess, a bathroom break, his fingers already wrapped around the worn leather handle. But then she nodded toward the door and stood up. “Now I’m afraid you’ll have to go,” she said. “Steve here will help you collect your things and then we’ll call you a cab.” A dour security guard stood just inside the office, gripping two empty cardboard boxes with either hand. Ferris stood, the front of his beige chinos wet with tears. “Good luck to you.” She shook his hand. “And do get some help?”

Steve followed him down the stairs to his office and took his position in the
doorway as Ferris set about his disappearing act, turning up one empty bottle after another, stashed here and there throughout his office, and dropping them (clink, clink, clink) into a tall trash barrel, until Steve said, “Hey, fella, what do you say we recycle those?” Ferris nodded. He retrieved the bottles from the trash and transferred them into a yellow plastic bin Steve fetched from a utility closet. As he tried to take down the street map of Dublin that covered the better part of one wall, the outskirts of the city tore away in pieces—Herbert Park, the Dublin Zoo, St. Brendan’s Hospital, and Mountjoy Square—and then in one fell swoop he snatched the entire thing off the wall and tossed it in the barrel. “That it?” Steve asked cheerfully. “Those all your worldly goods?” And it occurred to Ferris that, indeed, this was the only evidence of his ever having been here, reduced to a single cardboard box. He put on his coat, carried the box with one arm and his briefcase with his other hand, and prayed he’d make it home without throwing up.

In the days and nights that followed, he drank up his severance, telling himself it was found money, a present from his Secret Santa, and then four nights before Christmas he found himself moving about his apartment in his bathrobe, opening and closing drawers and closet doors, bins and boxes, filling a shoebox with photographs, evidence of his younger, heavier self. He opened the sliding glass door and brought the shoebox out onto the balcony. He placed his high school yearbook in a Weber grill, doused it with starter fluid, and set it afire. One after another, he fed the photographs into the flames—snapshots, baby pictures, school portraits, photo booth strips, Polaroids—and as the last of the photos blackened and burned, he glimpsed Caitlin smiling out at him and when he reached in to rescue her his sleeve became a muff of fire. He spun around, shrugged off his robe, and stood naked on the balcony watching the robe smolder on the asphalt one story below.

They met in the basement of the First Baptist Church. Toward the front of the room, two dozen chairs were arranged in a circle, with a loose orbit of chairs scattered beyond it. At the back of the room an oilcloth-covered table was cluttered with plates of baked goods. Ferris was standing at the far end of the table when he saw Becker, his black polo shirt ballooning out past the lapels of his charcoal-gray jacket. Becker set a pot of coffee on the table, then stood poised on the balls of his little feet, holding a sugar bowl in his left hand and twiddling a silver spoon in his right.

“Christ,” Ferris said. “It was you, wasn’t it?” He could barely speak. They stood across the table from each other, separated by a pyramid of sugar cookies. Becker reached for one but Ferris snatched the platter away from him, trailing
cookies and crumbs along the half-length of the table. He set about reconstructing the toppled pyramid, but when he reached its apex, he was left holding one odd cookie. His hands shook, his lower lip trembled. He slipped the orphaned cookie into his breast pocket.

“Glad to see you, friend,” Becker said. “What’s amazing is that you got as far as this without crashing and burning. You sure are one high-functioning alcoholic.” He took a cookie and bit into it. “While you’re awake.”

“Why didn’t you wake me?”

“You had to wake up on your own,” Becker said. “You woke up now?”

“So you just left me there.”

“It’s called ‘hitting bottom.’”

“You know, I lost my job?” Ferris shoveled spoonful after spoonful of sugar into a cup of coffee. “You do know that, don’t you?”

“Sometimes you’ve got to lose the battle to win the war.”

“Destroy the village to save it?”

“Something like that.”

“So you went and tattled?”

Becker turned and walked toward the front of the room, trousers billowing, and sat down in the circle. Ferris took his place in one of the chairs outside the ring. The first part of the meeting was taken up with housekeeping matters, having mostly to do with the perilous holidays ahead, and then came the testimonies, various and sundry. But Ferris’s attention stayed on Becker, who didn’t say a word beyond joining in the chorus of greetings after the speakers introduced themselves. When the meeting was over, Becker brushed past Ferris and Ferris followed him at a distance. The big man moved with surprising grace, even daintiness. He stood outside on the church steps under a black umbrella, smoking a cigarette. Ferris came closer. His legs felt wobbly, his extremities tingled. Becker looked at him, unblinking. Then Ferris was standing under the umbrella. They stood very close.

“Would you —” Ferris’s voice broke, the words trickled out. “Would you be my sponsor?”

“You just got here and you already know this?” Ferris nodded. “Well, only if you really want it.” Becker took one last drag of his cigarette, flicked it into the pachysandra, and fastened a single button on his jacket. “So, do you? You want to be my sponsee?” In spite of the throbbing in his temples and a sense of abject humiliation, in spite of everything, Ferris laughed. “This is funny to you?”

“The word,” Ferris said. “The word is funny. Sponsee.” He looked down at the button straining against Becker’s girth, the only thing between them now.
in the intimacy of the shared umbrella. “I’m sorry,” he said. “You find me—” Rain drummed over their heads. People rushed past them down the steps holding their coats over their heads. “You find me at a disadvantage.”

Becker set down the umbrella and wrapped his arms around Ferris. The cookie crumbled in his pocket. “I don’t even remember your first name,” Ferris said, inhaling a blend of coffee, cigarette smoke, and sweat, pungent even out there in the rain.

“Leonard,” he said.

Through the friend of a friend, Ferris got a job editing textbooks. Each morning he’d clear his desk, and like a monk hunched over an illuminated manuscript, he scoured the given text, crowding the margins with an unfamiliar alphabet of proofreaders’ marks, shaking out words, stitching up sentences and paragraphs taut as lace. Unlike the high-wire act of teaching literature, the terra firma of *The Chicago Manual of Style* suited him and he derived almost sensual pleasure from the production of a useful and well-made thing. He knew he was a technician, but there was no shame in it, and the monastic rigor he brought to the task bled into every aspect of his new life. To his gin-soaked sensibility, words had been his doom; now the casting off of words became his salvation.

Ferris looked away from the tall glass sweating in his father’s hand, out toward the swimming pool where the young woman in the black two-piece closed her book and rolled over onto her stomach. Her pale skin was dazzling in the sunlight, with orange freckles on her shoulders. Her hair, as it dried, turned as red as Sister Bambi’s, frizzing into a sort of tangerine halo. There was half an hour until the reception and his father had yet to tell Ferris anything he didn’t already know, so at last he said, “You had something you wanted to talk about?”

“Yes.” His father stared into his glass, rolling it between his palms. “I need your help, Wally.”

“Sure, Dad. Anything.”

“You’ll help me out?”

“Of course, I will. What can I do?”

“The toast,” he said. “I need your help with the toast.”

“That’s what—”

“Let’s not kid ourselves,” his father said. “I’m only doing this by default. I know I’m the last resort at this resort. If that son of a bitch hadn’t pussed out, he’d have walked my daughter down the aisle, he’d be toasting her, while I sat there like a potted plant.” Beads of condensation trickled down his glass. Under his chair lay a rubber bathing cap, speckled and begrimed like the collapsed egg of some prehistoric bird.
“Why don’t you show me what you’ve got so far,” Ferris said, but his father didn’t answer. “Christ, Dad, you haven’t even started?”

“Of course I’ve started.”

“Then show me what you’ve got, what you’ve written.”

“I haven’t written anything.”

“Well, then what were you planning on—”

“I was planning to speak from the heart.”

“Okay,” Ferris said calmly. “That’s good. From the heart is good.” He lifted his eyes to a scud of orange clouds, marbled with green. “So what do you need from me?”

“The words,” his father said, as if this were the most obvious thing imaginable. “I need the right words.”

“The words your heart would speak?”

“You’re the writer here. I’m just an architect.”

“But I’m not that kind of writer, Dad.”

“Would you stop putting yourself down.”

“I’m not putting myself down. I’m just—well, I’m just more of a technical writer. Not even that, really. More—”

“But that’s exactly what I’m talking about.” His father sat up again, excited now. “That’s exactly what I need.”

“What do you need?”

“Technique!” his father cried with something close to Pentecostal fervor—one part Eureka! to two parts Praise the Lord! “So what do I say?” He scooted forward in the long white chair until he was face-to-face with his son.

Ferris tried to concentrate. “Well, I suppose you need a beginning, a middle, and an end.”

“So where do I begin?”

“You might want to introduce yourself. Father of the bride and all that.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Then thank various guests for coming from various places. Maybe mention the two farthest places. You know: ‘From Bangor, Maine, to Walla Walla, Washington.’ That sort of thing.”

“I don’t know a single one of them,” his father said. “Not a soul. If you told me even one of their names, I’d forget it by the time we got back to the beach.”

“Some memories of the bride, then,” Ferris said. “Moments.”

“Moments?”

“You know, Dad.” He twirled his hand in the air, grasping. “Moments of—”

“Of deep feeling? Authenticity? Human moments?”
“Something like that.”
“I have none. None I’d care to share in mixed company, anyway. And I’m sure the feeling is mutual.”
“But there must be something you remember. One good thing.”
“You I can remember,” his father said. “With you there were moments. But your sister?” His expression darkened. “You know she went and changed her name, don’t you? I mean, you did see the announcement, the invitation, didn’t you? Don’t tell me you didn’t notice that.”
“I noticed.”
“She won’t take her husband’s name but she took that son-of-a-bitch’s. And poor what’s-his-name, the groom? Ezekiel? Jedediah? That poor guy has no idea what he’s getting himself into.”
“Gideon.”
“No idea whatsoever. They say if you want to know how the wife’ll turn out, look no further than the mother. Only the mother’s nowhere to be found.”
He wrapped his hand around his glass. Ferris thought it might shatter. “No, we’re all just our parents waiting to happen. All of us.” He looked at Ferris. “Hey, don’t look so depressed. You could do worse. A whole lot worse. I mean, call me irresponsible, unreliable, or whatever the hell you all call me, but I’m here, aren’t I?”
“I never said that, Dad. I never called you—”
“You know,” his father said, looking past him, “your mother’s mother cultivated roses. The Gertrude Jekyll rose. I remember that name more clearly than the names of most women I’ve slept with.” He was staring at the red-haired woman by the pool but he didn’t seem to see her. “These roses, these Gertrude Jekyll roses were fragrant and pink, but thorny as hell. We were visiting your grandparents one summer. This was when you were maybe three—before your sister was born, in any case. We were out on the driveway, about to make our getaway, and I remember you had on these denim overalls, only like shorts. OshKosh B’gosh. Someone had given you one of those balsa wood airplanes and it got caught in the trellis, up on top of all those roses. So you began to climb the trellis. Very ballsy.” He paused and smiled, still not looking at Ferris. “But like I said, these roses, these Gertrude Jekylls, they’re awfully thorny and you were scratching the shit out of your little hands and arms and legs. Even your face was bloody. But damned if you didn’t keep climbing that trellis, until your grandmother noticed. Only you were stuck. I managed to untangle you, but then the whole thing came down, and she starts giving you holy hell about her roses, and I say, ‘That’s my boy.’” His voice rose, drawing the attention of the servers at the bar. “‘That’s my son,’” he continued, softer now. “And then I
told her to take her roses and her trellis and that balsa wood airplane and shove them up her ass, thorns and all.” He leaned back in his chair. “And those were the last words I ever spoke to the bitch.”

It was as bald a declaration of love as Ferris had ever heard pass his father’s lips, and he didn’t know what to say. He turned his eyes to the blue blue water and the woman lying facedown beside it. She seemed to be sleeping.

Ferris asked, “Why don’t you just tell her you love her?”
“Tell who?”
“Tell Caitlin. You know, the toast. Just raise your glass and say, ‘I love you.’”
“In front of these strangers?”
“Why not? You do love her, don’t you? It’s just three words.”
“How about I say abracadabra. That’s just one word.”
“No, really, Dad,” Ferris said, chafing against his wristband. “It’s got the benefit of brevity. It’s elegant and eloquent.”

His father smiled as before. “A BA, an MA, a PhD,” he said. “Thousands and thousands of dollars and this is the best you can do?”
“A single rose can say more than a whole bouquet.” He slid fingers under the plastic bracelet, tugging and twisting it. “Say ‘I love you,’ for Christ’s sake.”
“All right, now,” his father said. “Enough of this happy horseshit.”
“I’m trying to help you, Dad. You’ve got fifteen minutes till the reception.”
“And you honestly believe you’re helping me with this maudlin Heimlich maneuver?”
“If you would just say—”
“I said enough.” His father’s hand came down hard on the plastic table. Their server raised his head and made his way across the concrete. “Un otra, s’il vous plait,” his father said. The server took his empty glass and went back to the bar.
“That’s not going to help you,” Ferris said, staring at the wet ring where the glass had been.
“It’ll have to do for now.”
“I could help you if you want. Do you? Do you want my help?”
“Your kind of help I can do without, thank you very much.” His father studied the blank sheet of paper. He wouldn’t look up.
“All right then,” Ferris said. “Your best bet might be to speak from the heart.”
“That’s swell,” his father said. “Now why don’t you run along.”

A breeze off the water ruffled the torches that encircled the reception, cooling
the sweat on Ferris’s forehead. The sun had set behind the beige buildings, and
two bottles of wine, red and white, gleamed darkly in the center of the table.
He’d been seated between Gideon’s sisters, twins, and all through the meal, one
or the other would break the long silences by saying, “So Gideon tells me you’re
a writer,” or asking, “Where might I have read your work?” or “Where do you
get your ideas?” Their brother moved from table to table, guest to guest, shak-
ing hands and kissing cheeks. His bride was nowhere to be found.

“What are you doing out here alone?” Ferris asked when Gideon had
worked his way to him. “Where’s Caitlin?”

“She’s not speaking to me.” There were tears in his eyes. “Jesus, Wally, it’s
my wedding night and my wife’s not speaking to me.”

“Why not?”

“We were clowning around during all the picture-taking and I called her
‘the old ball and chain.’ I meant it, you know, ironically. But she didn’t take it
that way. And now she won’t speak to me.” He saw that Gideon was drunk.
His eyes moved over Ferris’s face as if he were trying to memorize it. “I thought
maybe you could talk to her.”

“Me? For Christ’s sake, Gideon. She’s your wife. Who am I? I’m persona
non grata.”

“You’re her big brother,” Gideon said. “This might be a way for you to,
you know, break the ice.” He swallowed what was left in his glass. “What’s
persona non grata?”

“What do you mean, break the ice?”

“You know what she calls you, Wally? She calls you ‘Mr. Warmth.’ She
means it—”

“Ironically?”

“Yeah.” Gideon set his empty glass on the table and clapped a hand on Fer-
is’s shoulder. “But we’re family now. So you don’t have to—”

“Stand on ceremony?”

“Jesus, Wally. Will you let me finish a fucking sentence?” His face looked
feverish, his eyes rimmed with red. “That’s what I’m saying here. You don’t have
to worry about all that.” He gave Ferris’s shoulder a squeeze. “We’re family.
You, me, my folks—all of us. Here and in the sight of God and all that shit.”

From the wedding table, Caitlin waved Gideon over. Already she seemed
tired of the reception, of the marriage, but the time had come for toasts. Waiters
in white tunics circulated from table to table bearing black bottles of cham-
pagne. Gideon’s hand left Ferris’s shoulder. “Gotta go, Bro.” He crossed the
dance floor and resumed his place beside Caitlin, who eyed Ferris suspiciously.
A waiter eclipsed Ferris’s view, aiming the dark bottle at him like an assassin.
Ferris cupped his hand over the mouth of his glass. “No, gracias.”

The clinking of silverware on crystal filled the air and then his father stood up and stepped into the light. He’d never looked so old or so small. In one hand he held a wireless microphone. With the other, he extracted a pair of bifocals from his jacket pocket and put them on. From another pocket he produced a folded sheet of paper. Sweat had soaked through his sand-colored jacket, darkening his armpits, and for comic effect he moved the paper closer and then farther from his face. “Caitlin,” he said, his voice thin and reedy. The paper shook in his hands. His glasses fogged and he took them off. He stared into the paper, then crumpled it and said, “I don’t need this,” and let it fall to the floor. Ferris glanced down at the paper and when he raised his eyes they met Caitlin’s. She looked at him helplessly. “Caitlin,” their father repeated, louder now and clearer. “You won’t remember this, honey, but your grandmother—your mom’s mom—she used to cultivate roses. The Gertrude Jekyll rose.” The words rushed over Ferris—the balsa wood airplane, ballsy Caitlin climbing the thorny trellis, her scratched and bloody limbs—only this time his father told the old lady to “put her roses where the sun don’t shine.”

To Ferris’s left, one truck, then another, moved down the beach, swallowing up his father’s words, and by the time they disappeared into the dark, applause was splashing all around him, and he lifted his empty glass into the air. The moon hung over the ocean like a big sugar cookie, the biggest moon of the year. He picked up his steak knife, pressed the dull side against his wrist, and drew the sharp edge up and through the plastic band. He set the strip of plastic beside his plate and stood up. Smoothing the tablecloth with the flat of his hand, he tapped the knife against the lip of his glass, setting off another round of clinking. He heard the hum of distant conversation and music, the sounds of yet another reception. A woman’s laughter, high and wild, tore away from the tide of voices, voices without words. When the clinking stopped, he looked at his sister and began, “My name is Wally Ferris and I’m an alcoholic.”