

UNCORRECTED PROOF

Streets of Water, Walls of Glass

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The explosion of an Icelandic volcano made air traffic impossible, cancelling Michael's connecting flight from Amsterdam to New York. A young Dutch woman behind the KLM counter assured Michael he'd be able to fly home in three days at the most. "The volcano," she said, "it is blinding to the plane's navigation."

Every hotel in or near the airport was full. The ticketing counters were helmed by airline employees in and out of uniform, summoned to attend to the volcanic eruption's human detritus. Michael lifted his moot first class ticket from the counter and slid it into his coat pocket. He smiled and explained to the woman that waiting too long would make him miss his daughter's

birthday. He told her about the weekend at a destination hotel—a converted farmhouse—in the Berkshires, already paid for. He told her the number of guests. Michael told the woman that Laura, his daughter, was turning seventeen. What he did not say was that she was his only child, and that Laura spent the majority of her time either away at her prep school or with her mother. Nor did Michael tell the woman that he had given his estranged wife six thousand dollars to help make the coming weekend possible. He did not mention the hotel’s sprawling grounds and meadows, its stable of retired thoroughbreds, the caterer, the birthday cake designed by the assistant to a celebrity chef whose name she would recognize if Michael had said it. Michael left the essential facts bare in the hope that the young woman understood, implicitly, that this was probably the last birthday he would ever share with his little girl. Michael’s divorce from Laura’s mother was all but finalized. College was just around the corner, and every school that interested Laura was in California. Stanford, Pomona, Harvey Mudd. Lately Laura had become taller, leaner, more tan. An imposter with her own set of car keys.

The woman asked Michael to please wait and spoke rapid Dutch into her telephone. Michael turned around and surveyed the Schiphol ticketing gate, which teemed with business-class refugees and late season, homeward-bound backpackers who looked wrinkled and dingy, lacking the glow of adventure. The woman hung up her phone and looked down to the counter, writing

something on a small white note card. Michael stole a glance through the young woman’s partial veil of auburn hair to her lucent white blouse—Chinese organza—through which he could see the lace and shape of her bra. Looking up, the woman curled her hair behind one ear and handed Michael the card, upon which she’d written the name and address of a hotel in the city. “This is the only room I can find close to the train station,” she said. “Go here. It is a good hotel. Someone will call you as soon as we can fly. I’m sorry, this is the best I can do.”

The agent’s lips parted to reveal a crooked fence of white teeth. Michael thanked her. She was pretty despite her teeth, the way her blue handwriting was graceful even through the sticky ink of her disposable pen.

Michael left the airport on a train bulleting under an overcast sky, distracted by the persistent and nagging irritation that he was in the wrong place and moving in the wrong direction. All of this was leading to yet another unheard apology.

The hotel was on a canal street, near a cluster of flower kiosks already shuttered in the gray afternoon. Inside, the lobby was cool and air-conditioned. There was a small waterfall in the corner and a bowl of white peppermints on the concierge counter, all dimly illuminated by recessed lights.

Up in his room, Michael unlatched the tall window overlooking the empty street and the jade canal. He slid the bottom pane up, but the heavy, carnelian drapes barely stirred. His lower back ached a little from walking

on stone. He stowed his bags on top of the modern dresser and walked the perimeter of the room. It was not much smaller than his apartment in Manhattan. That summer he'd signed a year lease on a ground-floor apartment in a walk-up off Rivington, catty-corner from a Hare Krishna temple that fed a long queue of homeless every morning. His neighbor across the hall was a day trader who was on some kind of probation and wore a low jack locked around his ankle. He told Michael the Krishnas put saltpeter in the bums' food to help them curb their desire.

Michael lay on the hotel bed and used his phone to send an email to his partner in New York, advising him of the volcanic interruption, then called Laura at her dorm number.

"Hi, sweetheart. Good morning."

"What time is it there?" She sounded sleepy, and Michael instantly flashed on her face, nine years old, her hair mussed and wearing her mother's Duran Duran t-shirt, tugging him out of sleep and into some lost gray dawn, supplicating, asking Daddy, make me French toast.

"I don't know," he said. "Still daytime. What time is it there?"

She groaned, suddenly sounding more hung over than anything else. "Jesus. I have no idea. Morning."

"Honey, I just wanted to tell you there's been a delay, but I'm going to do everything I can to be at the party." A pause. Michael said, "Did you hear about the volcano?"

"Mom said you weren't coming."

"Why would she—"

"She said you wouldn't want to be there. She said you're still angry and you'd just be bored and would make everyone miserable without realizing it."

Michael took a deep breath and slowly released it, as his therapist had taught him. *The pause between inhalation and exhalation is the moment of presence.* "Laura, I want to be there. I *will* be there. I might not arrive until Sunday, but I'll be there. Tell your mother I'll be there. Do you want anything from Amsterdam?"

"Some hash?"

"Laura."

"You can bring it back in your butt."

Another deep breath.

"No, Dad. Nothing I can think of."

"I'll see you Saturday. Sunday at the latest."

"Bye, Dad."

"I love you."

Laura hung up but her photograph remained on the screen. It was an old picture, taken at an Ethiopian restaurant on her fifteenth birthday. She still had her braces. He studied that picture and then others, scrolling through years.

Michael loved Laura intensely, but knew that under threat of torture, he would not be able to say that he had ever loved her mother, Kathleen. At some point, a few years into their marriage, he realized he no longer cared for the taste of her mouth. He supposed he missed Kathleen, in an abstracted way. He missed the

painstaking way she cut a sweet potato into exactly symmetrical cubes whenever she made stir-fry, one of the few dishes she could prepare from scratch. He missed how she opened the mail with a steak knife, leaving the envelope traumatized. Michael had always assumed loving a handful of gestures and qualities somehow meant he loved his wife in total, just in some way he could not yet recognize. But the real feeling never came. The only occasions he could remember them being happily in accord was when they privately ridiculed their marriage counselor and the frivolity of her earnest suggestions. *Have a glass of wine together. Go see a movie.* As if alcohol hadn't accelerated their dissolution, as if sitting together in the dark wasn't the only relationship skill they still possessed.

Michael paused to torment himself. He considered the likelihood that Laura was already lost to him, forever. He replayed her last two weekend visits, when she'd been exceedingly cool to her father. Not angry, not passive-aggressive. Pleasant, but more polite than affectionate. Laura, he knew, was biding her time. There was a hollowness in the hugs that bookended her visits, an absence within her presence. This was what Kathleen had been like the week before she changed the locks, and paid a service to drive his Audi to a garage near his office. Michael wanted to ask Kathleen how much their daughter knew about their breakup—if she'd told their daughter about Mei, his former secretary, the bump Kathleen had found on the base of his penis, the diagnosis, the

expensive laser surgery that both Michael and Kathleen (and probably Mei) later required—he wanted to ask, but didn't.

Michael showered, checked his phone, dressed, checked his phone again. Restless, he left the hotel with the dim intention of drinking himself into a better mood. He walked along the canal looking for a café, but switched tack when he saw a coffee shop called Enigma, a few blocks from his hotel.

The coffee shop's dark interior was packed with tourists and students lounging, smoking and chatting. The room exhaled a cocktail of burning marijuana and freshly-ground coffee, tinged here and there by the more acrid odor of tobacco. Michael didn't smoke marijuana very often, so the smell still evoked college memories of girls with efficiency apartments, of futons on white carpet redolent with the staling scent of Nag Champa.

Michael was at least twenty years older than the average patron in the coffee shop, all of whom seemed at home, laughing, emphatically shaking their heads at some point volleyed from the other side of their table. He saw a man with green hair and a steel bullring hanging from his septum. Michael felt awkward in his slacks and pink oxford, the soft suede shoes he brought on these trips solely because they were easy to slip off and on at airport security. He bought a gram of marijuana at a little kiosk in the back of the shop, where a teenage boy waited gnomelike in his little booth, impatiently typing into his cell phone while Michael perused the laminated

menu. Michael told the boy he'd prefer something mild, and the boy pointed to the second-cheapest item listed, a sativa hybrid named Jack Herer. The taut little baggy in his breast pocket, Michael crossed the coffee shop to the main counter, where he ordered a long black from a blonde girl half-hidden behind a copper-plated espresso machine and a plexiglas display case of rolling papers.

"A what?"

"An Americano," he said.

"Ah," the girl deadpanned. "Americano. Just add water."

He smiled and asked for a pack of unbleached rolling papers. The girl gave him a book of matches for free. Michael paid and left some change on the counter.

The only place to sit was across a table from a pair of girls sharing a joint. They sat cross-legged on a padded bench, reclining against the wall. "Do you mind?" he asked, gesturing at the two empty chairs.

"Go ahead," the first girl said in lethargic English. She was olive-skinned, her black hair chopped into a careless pageboy, her slight torso wrapped in a ribbed cotton tank that revealed the tan straps of her bra. Her friend was pale, taller, a freckled redhead in a cotton cornflower camisole that probably exaggerated the heft of her breasts. The girls were in their early twenties, and without Michael asking they explained that they were Canadians, though Michael knew better. It wasn't a very compelling ruse. They were dressed in the way of all young American girls abroad: summery, Indonesian-

made articles untangled from clearance racks at The Gap or Old Navy. Laura, recently, had begun wearing the same bargain attire. Michael plied her with silk blouses from China, cashmere jumpers from Pakistan. Last summer he shipped her boxes of school clothes, tweed skirts and herringbone jackets, short-waisted coats made with pinwale corduroy, all samples sent to his office from mills in Uxbridge and Manchester. But whenever he picked her up at Wellesley for a long weekend, she'd come prepackaged in a new but already tattered H&M sundress, or some atrocious velour romper from American Apparel, text-messaging in the passenger seat with her feet up on the dash, her toes clutching the rubber thongs of three dollar flip-flops. Michael took this as a form of punishment, though Kathleen insisted Laura just did it because she wanted to be like her friends.

The redheaded girl introduced herself as Charlotte. The dark-haired girl said her name was Zephyr. Michael considered giving a fake name as well, but got distracted when the redhead pulled her hair up over her head and wrapped it into a languorous bun, revealing her long, white neck. She asked Michael what he did, and Michael explained that he works in textiles. "It's fairly simple. I buy and sell fabric."

"Like, you're in fashion?" Zephyr asked.

"Sort of, but not really. I walk holes in my socks visiting every sweatshop between Sofia and Phnom Penh, first seeing if what they're spinning is something my clients would actually *want*, and second—and this

is the tricky part—trying to determine whether or not what will show up at our Lower East Side warehouse is what I agreed to buy when I thumbed it spooling off the loom. The rest is just managing accounts.” He told the girls that most of his business model was based on circumventing the Garment District. The girls nodded, clearly unimpressed.

The redhead, Charlotte, whose freckles were the same color as apricot jam, explained that they were students, also stranded by the volcano, at the end of their summer vacation. Only she said they were “on holiday.”

The girls laughed at Michael as he fumbled with his marijuana and rolling papers, green granules of bud spilling from both ends. After ruining his third paper, Charlotte mercifully took the whole mess away from him and, with a fresh paper, began to roll a neat joint with her pale and expert fingers. When she licked the paper it struck Michael as a brief exhibition of something private—like a sudden flash of nudity at the beach, when a woman nearby decides to simply peel off her wet swimsuit rather than trudge to a cabin or hide behind a rock. Michael felt a little tremor of excitement.

“There you go,” she said, handing Michael the joint.

“Thank you,” he said. “I’m afraid I’m not very good at that.” He lighted his joint as Zephyr snubbed out theirs in a black plastic ashtray. He took a long drag, coughing slightly, and extended the joint. Zephyr declined with a frown and a small wave of her yellow arm, but Charlotte reached for it.

“First time in Amsterdam?” Her voice was deepened by a lungful of smoke.

“No,” Michael said. “I come through here every so often. But the last time I smoked this stuff, I was probably your age.”

“You’re not so old,” Charlotte said.

“You’re just saying that,” he replied.

The high arrived faster than Michael had expected. He began to feel the warm, pulsing weight of his own body, the new earthy taste of his tongue, the sudden texture of the tabletop, a haphazard Rosetta Stone carved with decades of travelers’ initials. Bedouin pipes erupted from hidden speakers, startling him.

The girls talked about the countries they’d visited. Germany, France, Czech Republic, Switzerland, Poland, Ukraine, Italy, Croatia. Michael told them it was an impressive list. Charlotte said Poland had been the most fun. Zephyr said her boyfriend was a Marxist who thinks tourism is a form of colonialism.

“Hardly,” Michael said, pausing to inhale then passing the joint back to Charlotte. “At least not here. I mean, Amsterdam is the capital of colonialism. The Dutch practically *invented* slavery. And,” he added, ignoring that both girls tensed at his sudden ejaculation, “They kind of *owe* you, at least symbolically.”

“How so?” Zephyr asked, skeptical, gathering her legs beneath her.

“World War Two. Amsterdam was liberated by Canadians.”

When Charlotte reached out to hand the joint back to Michael, it was his turn to decline. “Better not,” he said, tasting her saliva on his lips. “I’m a marijuana novice. As if you couldn’t tell.”

“So you’re here for the brothels, then?” Zephyr said, only partly as a joke. She looked away, defensively, and hitched up her bra strap from where it had fallen over her shoulder.

“No,” Michael responded to the side of her head. “I can’t say that I approve of all that.”

Michael tried to think of a joke but silently flailed. He waited for rescue from Charlotte, but she only watched him, smoking his weed.

When he stood up to say goodbye, both girls looked surprised.

“Sorry, I’m suddenly quite hungry,” he said, and it came out like an apology.

“Forgetting something?” Charlotte arched her brows at his packet of papers and the remainder of his marijuana.

“Oh, you two keep that,” he said. “With any luck I’ll be on a plane in the morning.”

“Thank you,” Charlotte said, without surprise.

“You’re quite welcome,” Michael said, lingering. With their eyes momentarily locked, and the taste of her mouth in his, it was almost as if they were kissing, telepathically.

Outside, dusk had fallen. Michael checked his phone on the sidewalk outside the coffee shop and the image of his daughter momentarily blinded him. No messages.

He felt restless. At first he thought he was hungry, then maybe just thirsty. Michael rubbed his sinuses. Had the weed made him antsy? He briefly craved a cigarette. His tongue was thick and heavy. He decided he needed a beer.

As he walked along the canal, Michael realized he was more stoned than he could remember ever being. It was not entirely pleasant. Michael recalled a poolside cocktail party in Montauk at which two friends—clients, really—related parallel confessions that after years of smoking weed, they suddenly found they could no longer tolerate the high. They’d be taken over by fear and palpitations, dizziness and terror of an impending doom. One of the men would become so convinced that nuclear war was imminent, he’d tiptoe into his daughter’s room and sleep on the floor next to her bed.

Michael walked, his tongue now cleaved to the roof of his mouth. Finally he found a small café. He sat on a table outside and a girl brought him a half liter of Belgian *witbier*. He took a big swallow of cloudy beer, mourning how it rinsed away the brackish, slightly peppery taste of Charlotte’s saliva.

Still no ash had fallen, no sign of the volcano that had stranded him in Holland, just a loitering mist, shifting peripheral wisps of brume billowing along the rooftops, turning gold in the coronae of streetlamps. The mist breathed, not quite rain, and not quite fog. Michael finished a second glass and left money on the table. He stood up and checked his phone again. Nothing. He

followed the canal back in the direction of his hotel and promptly got lost.

Moisture beaded on the insides of windowpanes. The darkness on the damp cobbled streets was stained by the long, weeping reflections of red lights staked along an endless series of broad windowpanes kept so clean, they gleamed like mirrors when seen from oblique angles. Michael realized that his hotel was not, as he had thought in the daytime, far from the Red Light District, but rather just on the periphery. Everywhere he saw windows framing prostitutes in lingerie. None of the women looked Dutch. North African. Tunisian, Moroccan, maybe.

Michael found he was only dizzy if he stopped walking, so he continued down the cobblestone lane, watching women slowly gyrate to music he was deaf to. A few women smiled at Michael, the odd passerby. Blacklights made white lingerie glow violet. Some women stood still, or smoked, or killed time talking on disposable cell phones. Some of the girls sat on bar stools, tired, staring blankly out at the street, their eyes not moving until someone walked past, like animatronic dolls wired to motion sensors. A black-haired woman in a red teddy and white stockings looked right at Michael and waved in a small movement, not breaking the rhythm of a contained little dance as she tipped her cigarette into an ashtray resting on a wooden stool. Michael smiled and nodded to be polite. The women were not beautiful. Many of them looked mannish, or startlingly unhealthy. A hall of horrors in a minor key. Tired faces mounted atop

masses of brown flesh stuffed mercilessly into lace and satin. The UV bulbs made the whites of their eyes reflect the same frequency as their purple eye shadow, their faces one expression laid over another, a blurred image from a misaligned printer, their wide teeth pushed forward as if loosened by the pressure of containing something pressing up from inside. How difficult it must be, he thought, to make a living this way.

Michael ambled down a long, otherwise fairytale avenue of narrow stone buildings with peaked roofs, quaint if you ignored the brothels and the ground floor. He was mildly surprised to notice the women become progressively more attractive. A little further, and the girls who danced in the windows appeared healthy, younger, more hale. In another block, he saw his first white girl, a brunette in curls, dancing beside a sandy-haired woman with ribs protruding like ladder rungs. The girls in the windows continued to grow younger and more supple, even more blonde, pleasant bordering on alluring. He realized he was walking toward music.

Michael looked up. Dark clouds still hung above the city, but they'd fallen closer, threatening the rooftops. He followed an alley toward what sounded like a carnival. From the end of the alley came the clear register of dance music and a view of a large crowd passing, their faces flashing yellow in pulsing light. The volume of the music increased as Michael drew nearer. Leaving the alley he fell into a lurching circus, thousands of bodies circling a canal festooned with sex shops and brothels throbbing

with the bass of electronic music. Here the brothels were not confined to the lower levels of stone houses, but were multi-storied and modern, two and three levels of windows, in each a topless girl, or a pair of girls, or a girl in nothing but an absurd pair of pasties and thigh-high vinyl boots. On the sidewalk British tourists with sweatshirts tied around their heavy waists clutched plastic shopping bags. People pointed at the dancing girls and flashed pictures, shared a joke, laughed. Flashes reflected off the glass walls and blinded Michael, who slowed to let the human stream pass him. The faces in the crowd were gaudy, garish, syncopated like a zoetrope. A street sign said De Wallen.

Here the girls in windows were barely pubescent, almost uniformly blonde and mythologically nubile, precocious in high heels, dancing topless with small, still-budding breasts, their honey-colored hair cropped into bangs and bobs that stopped inches above their shoulders. They looked like they should still be in high school, or whatever they have in Holland. University. They smiled, on pyramidal display in the towering windows of brothels, oscillating to blaring music, red and green lights coloring their hairless limbs and bellies, the darkness of their little dioramas syncopated by flashing strobes. Two African men in puffy jackets strolled by Michael, calling out “Coke, coke. Ecstasy, ecstasy.” (The brochure in his room had warned, *Hard drugs offered on the street are never real.*) The Africans saw a group of drunk frat boys stumbling ahead of Michael and called to

them, “Hey *Americains*, hey! You want some X? Cheap.” The frat boys didn’t hear them, not that the Africans waited for a response. They kept trolling through the horde of tourists and johns. One of the Africans turned to make split-second eye contact with Michael. Michael twitched with fear, wondering if he could get stabbed in such a crowded place, his attacker taking his wallet and his passport and his Hublot watch before easily vanishing into the crowd.

Michael thought: *Calm down.* He took a long, slow breath, reminding himself not to trust his senses. He wanted to rest, catch his breath, but there was nowhere to sit. He wanted to use his phone to find the hotel, but worried it would be snatched from his hand. He desperately needed some juice. God, he could drink so much juice right now. Somebody heaved and vomited into the canal. Someone else saw this and laughed. A mysterious white film had collected at the corners of Michael’s mouth, which he wiped off to scrutinize on the surface of his fingertips. He told himself: *Keep walking. You’ll find the hotel if you just keep walking.* As he passed a marquee for a live sex show, the barker smiled knowingly at Michael, cajoled him to come inside. Michael walked on, not wanting to ogle the girls in windows, yet unable to look away. He couldn’t get over how young they all were, as if they’d just been plucked off a tulip farm, freshly trucked-in to blossom behind glass. He felt vaguely culpable for his presence. These girls could have been in school with Laura. *Laura.* Thinking

of Laura while in this place sickened Michael, and he pushed her from his thoughts. He walked on, noting that some of the girls in windows advertised their ability to speak sex-trade English by wearing bikini bottoms printed with Old Glory.

There were white American males everywhere around him, almost all between twenty and twenty-five, roaming the streets in drunken packs. Less jarring were the older men, in their fifties and sixties, who replicated scenes Michael recognized from Thailand and Vietnam. These men were dressed like peasants in dark wool coats and Donegal hats, standing outside brothel windows, bulging shopping bags hanging from each hand. They mulled it over, employing some ancient calculus. Michael watched a group of old men studying a brothel's windows until one guy finally stepped forward, pointing at his object. The girl left her window, appearing in the downstairs doorway a few seconds later, ushering the old geezer inside. In the same bank of windows Michael saw a topless girl with chubby cheeks, her smile making him smile until Michael realized it was him she was grinning at, and he hurried away.

A black kid appeared from nowhere, tugging on Michael's sleeve. Eleven years old, probably, with the same French-inflected African accent. "Hay man, you wan' sex pills? I got sex pills you wan'. You fuck all night, like black man. Doggy style, everything." Michael shook the kid off his arm and, turning down a quiet side alley lit by halogen lamps, finally left the crowds circling the

canal. The girls in the windows began to dissolve in beauty with each block, getting darker and less friendly, older and stranger. It occurred to Michael that a Dutch prostitute can gauge her career by how near or far she works from De Wallen. As a girl, she starts on center stage, aloft on a pedestal of gut-rattling music and foreign dollars. Then, as she ages, her station radiates farther and farther away.

Michael found his hotel. Inside was quiet, a sanctuary. The concierge shift had changed, the counter now attended by a pretty, dark-haired young woman in high, black heels below a woolen gray skirt. She wore a matching, high-waisted jacket, what struck Michael as a rather smart-looking uniform. He saw her first in profile: the plunge of her lower back and its transition into the sharp rise of her buttocks was a parabolic curve sympathetic to the flip of her hair. He approached her with nonchalance. In a steady voice, Michael asked the woman if his airline had left a message for him. He noted her ringless fingers, the stylish acetate frames of her glasses, the fine down on her cheeks only partially buried by a broken stratum of foundation. Michael measured the small distance between their faces, taking a mint from the bowl at his hand. She smiled demurely and looked down at the computer monitor beneath her, the blue display reflecting on the lenses of her glasses.

The front doors opened as a red-faced frat boy belched into the lobby. He wore a white shell necklace and a backward baseball cap, sockless feet in topsiders,

his biceps pinched by the sleeves of his salmon-colored polo, which had come partially untucked from his khaki shorts. He leaned drunkenly on the counter a foot away from Michael, staring at him through bloodshot eyes. He reeked equally of alcohol and cologne. There was a small spot of something on his collar. It looked like baby shit but was probably either curry or vomit. Conceivably it was both.

He said to Michael, “Hey, Bro, you American?”

Michael’s eyes darted to the concierge, who was now pretending to read her monitor. “Yeah,” he said. Then, stupidly: “You?”

“Yeah. You got any coke?”

Michael shook his head. “Nah, man. Not me.”

“Bummer,” the frat boy replied, distracted, settling more of his weight onto the concierge desk, taking Michael in. “First time in Amsterdam?”

“Yep,” Michael said crisply. “Kind of an unexpected stop,” he elaborated for the benefit of the concierge. “Volcano.”

“Dude, you’ll *love* it here. This is my third time.” The kid looked like he was twenty-two. He scratched his balls through his shorts and said, “Not only is there weed, everywhere, *obviously*, but you can get full-strength absinthe. And the girls are fucking *cheap*.”

Michael looked to the concierge. Her eyes were locked onto her monitor. The frat boy said, “It’s fifty euros for sex, head for thirty. Everything else is negotiable.” Michael thanked him. The frat boy told

Michael his room number, in case he wanted to party, and walked to the elevator to wedge his beefy body inside. As the doors closed he said, “Oh yeah, you should check out the Anne Frank House, too. It’s pretty cool.” Then he was gone.

Michael turned back to the concierge, whose eyes had cooled behind her glasses. She informed Michael that he had no messages, her accent now heavy.

Michael washed his face in his bathroom, drinking some of the tap water. When he walked back into the room, drying his hands on a small towel, he saw his phone vibrating across his nightstand. He snapped across the room to pick it up. Kathleen.

Before she could speak, Michael said, “Did you talk to Laura? I told her I’m going to make it.” Pause. “I *am* going to make it.”

He heard Kathleen sigh on the other end. “Don’t come to the party.”

“She’s my daughter.”

“She’s my daughter, too.” He heard her inhale sharply, then exhale with purpose. “Besides. The weekend isn’t for us. It’s for her.”

“Are you smoking again?” he said.

“Are you drunk?”

“No.”

“You sound drunk.”

“Kathleen. I *want* to be there. I’m breaking my fucking neck to be there.”

“Michael, I’m seeing someone.” Michael sat on the

bed. He could hear her take another drag, exhale. “He won’t go if he knows you’ll be there.”

He sprang back to his feet. “Who fucking cares?”

“Laura likes him. She invited him.”

Michael felt his belly swing open like an unlatched briefcase, scattering everything he’d stacked inside. He looked at his suede loafers. They were stained with drops of something. “We can both be there. I don’t mind.”

“Well, I do.”

“Kathleen—”

“Look, if you don’t come, you can have her for Christmas. And New Year’s.”

Michael knew there was an unspoken contingency: . . . *if that’s what Laura wants*. Which it wasn’t. Or wouldn’t be, come December.

A thought occurred to him: he could kill himself. Just hang himself in his closet in the Rivington walk-up. Let the alcoholic/embezzler across the hall be his pallbearer, Michael’s pale corpse carried to the sidewalk on trash day, his dirge sung by a choir of chemically-castrated homeless Hare Krishnas. His flesh devoured by pigeons.

“Are you there? Michael?”

“Fine. If that’s what she wants.”

“It is. And Michael?”

“What?”

“Sign the papers.”

An hour later Michael stood before a three-storied, glass-faced brothel that made the girls look like they were in a pornographic disco version of *Hollywood Squares*.

The crowd shuffled behind Michael as dance music rattled his intestines. He picked out a blond girl with a spandex Union Jack stretched across her pelvis, waving at her until she stopped dancing and left her window. A new girl had already taken her spot when the girl Michael summoned appeared at the brothel’s glass door level with the street. She smiled as she let him in. She led him down a long, carpeted hallway of black wooden doors. On the floor outside of one door was a pair of green rubber shower shoes.

The girl was shorter than she’d seemed in the window. She opened the last door of the hall and indicated Michael should go in first. The room was low, close, and stank of antiseptic. He saw a shelf of gels and prophylactics, a glass vase of condoms, a box of disposable latex gloves. Cigarette stains in the carpet. There was too much light. Michael told her what he wanted and paid her the figure she stated. She recited a list of prohibitions. He nodded, assuming her accent was Czech, but he couldn’t be certain. The girl led him to a bench-like bed upholstered in naugahyde. Without a word she unbuttoned his pants. Michael lay back and let her work. Her hands felt small on him, her mouth even smaller. If she noticed his scars, she didn’t seem to care. Her head below his, he could see her hair wasn’t blond at all, but a light pink wig, the color of cotton candy.

Later, as Michael left, snow-like flakes of ash began to fall onto the canals, gently carpeting the moored boats and steeply-arched rooftops. The odors of latex and the

girl's perfumed body lingered on his skin, perceptible even through his clothing. A wind stirred the flakes of ash, making them look like snow. Michael laughed to himself, extending his open palm, and tried to catch a little of the ash. For a moment he was able to convince himself that this was good, that this was everything.