

Shovelboy

I'm not French. I'm not Spanish or Italian either, though a few of the women in my neighborhood like to pretend. I speak to them in the Romance languages. I tell them what Paul Valéry said: *Tantôt je pense et tantôt je suis*. They humor me, saying to themselves, this boy, this lovely clean-limbed boy, one never knows what he'll say next. I am a diversion, a bit of escape from the careworn latter days of the American upper class, but they listen, a captive audience, so to speak. Smiling and nodding, they wait for me to translate, to explain. All except for Starla Marchand, who lives across the street. She looks at me sidelong.

"Mr. Head was full of shit," she says. One big brown eye regards me indifferently, the other remaining hidden behind the bridge of her freckled nose. Starla teaches psychiatry at the medical school down in the city, and she doesn't suffer fools.

It's mid-November, the tumult in the world has yet to reach this neighborhood, and Starla's twins are sleeping over at a friend's house. Starla and I sit in the hot tub on her back deck, watching huge compound snowflakes crash out of the dark sky like dimes, quarters, silver dollars. It's a jackpot, the first big snow of the year piling up around us, and we're celebrating with Starla's Moët & Chandon, possibly the last bottle left in the state, condensed steam dripping from our cold glasses. The husband drove up to British Columbia, where he's trying to shoot one of the last grizzly bears in the Rockies, an act, Starla says, of pathetic desperation, what she calls the Beowulf syndrome. Her feet are in my lap, and now she's smiling at my Valéry quote. In a neighborhood rife with women who are smarter than their husbands, Starla's the smartest of all, pure genius. She sighs, and says thinkers of my generation aren't supposed to go in for that Cartesian crap. I tell her Valéry was talking about humility, that he was turning Descartes on his tin goddamn ear. Someday soon we're going to take back everything that sonofabitch stole from us.

"Oh, bullshit," she says. "It wasn't his fault." Starla places the Fall way back before the advent of French intellectuals. She wrinkles her nose whenever she says "Frainch," though not from distaste. At thirty-nine, with who knows how many years of

Ivy League education under her belt, her stressed syllables still twang like bent notes on a banjo, the East Tennessee in her voice as fresh as if she just left there yesterday.

I purse my lips and nod helplessly. She regards me without a smile. Little balls of sweat have appeared on her upper lip and in the hollows under her eyes. She looks worried and tired, but that's the way everyone looks anymore. Her black hair has gone all kinky in the steam, falling in her face, and she takes a breath and slides off the bench to dunk herself, holding up her champagne flute like she's making a toast from underwater. The pinky on her left hand is cut off at the first knuckle—wiggling and nail-less, slightly obscene. She says it was frostbite, but Starla's from Tennessee, and nobody gets frostbite in Tennessee. I hold my breath and wait for her to come back up.

Starla is my favorite client by far. Sometimes, in the mornings, she tells me I'm going to fall in love with her. She says she's going to break my heart.

People say I look European, from somewhere south. I'm tall, just over six feet, with long, wiry arms, and my legs aren't too skinny. Revolution, they say, is in the air, and I've been trying to teach the women in my neighborhood to become anarchists. Uncle Morley says it'll never work.

The subdivision I live in lies at 7,000 feet on a mountain overlooking a medium-sized western city you might have heard of. When a cold front collides with moist air blown all the way here from the Pacific, the storms can dump a foot of snow in an hour. What I do is shovel my clients' driveways. I don't use machines—snowblowers or plows—I use shovels, and I work in a holy fury, tossing snow so fast people say it looks like a small tornado has set down in the driveway where I'm working. Afterwards I use a big steel push-shovel to scrape the pavement clean so it doesn't ice up. Some of the houses have men who clear their own driveways with expensive Japanese snowblowers. They think I'm strange because I use a shovel and they call me John Henry and challenge me to races. Their machines work well but the men don't know how to use them in really deep snow, and I always win. Sometimes I have to throw up afterwards. I lie in the snow watching clouds swirl and skate in the sky until the nausea

passes.

I have nine clients now, and after a big storm, at least two or three of them will invite me inside after I finish the driveway. These women are at home by themselves, or with small children napping, and it's cold outside, and the fake logs in the gas-fired fireplaces are always aglow, the price of propane be damned. Once, after the big storm between Christmas and New Year's last year, six of the nine invited me in, they sent the kids out to play in the snow and had the shovel boy upstairs. Starla, Connie, Merriam, Marla, Anna, and Z—I don't know what got into Z. Nine driveways and six women in one twelve-hour period. I made almost four thousand dollars.

I'm not bragging. I'm 19 years old; I can do this.

My neighborhood is not a middle-class neighborhood, and my clients are not middle-class housewives. The houses are ten thousand square foot hermetically-sealed palaces of the ego, with plate glass picture windows framing aesthetically pleasing views: this time of year, the primary scenic feature is an immaculate white fin of twelve-thousand-foot mountains to the southeast. I live here with my uncle, in the house my parents left to me. Uncle Morley and I split the expenses. He's an astrophysicist, and he lectures at the university down in the valley. He has invented some things—research devices, software, I don't know—for which he receives what he calls "handsome royalties." He rides a wheelchair, he says because he has AIDS, but he doesn't look like he has AIDS, he's big-shouldered and robust and he looks like he broke his back in a mountain climbing accident ten years ago, which is really what happened. Uncle Morley is a bit of a performance artist. He lives upstairs, and I live in the basement.

It's a nice basement, with big windows and window-seats where I can sit and watch the January wind lift snow off the mountains in towering, slow-motion spindrifts. I set up a desk beside one of the windows and that's where I work. I write plays. I haven't decided yet whether I want to go to college. I was valedictorian at the public high school down in the valley, but they wouldn't let me give my speech. It's a fairly conservative political climate here in the intermountain West. I was fifteen years old and they told me

I couldn't speak at graduation. My parents died later that summer.

But these troubled times fill me with hope.

Starla's husband is older than she is, he's the CFO of something or other and he's often away, shooting trophy animals in exotic locales. He and Starla have rangy lookalike young sons, Clomid twins, and they're not the only ones. The people in my neighborhood are committed to the notion of reproduction at all costs, so fertility pills at ten dollars a pop are no big deal. I believe they honestly consider it their duty to the world to make more of themselves, a recent and oddly terrified reaction to exponential population growth among the world's unwashed. I disagree, and took care of that little problem before I had my first client. I went through six doctors before I found one who would do it to someone my age, a feminist urologist over in Boulder, and even she fell over herself assuring me the surgery was reversible if I ever changed my mind.

Where I live is known among land planners as the urban-wildland interface—just ten years ago, there was nothing here but trees and sagebrush. Last week, I was shoveling Starla's driveway when a cow moose and her calf came up the street in a loose-jointed trot, a large SUV right behind them with its lights on, the driver looking impatient. People who live here say they like being close to nature but they have no idea.

For example, I'm not going to say where it is, but there's a snake den in a little side canyon not far from the neighborhood, a rock cave where all the rattlesnakes from miles around gather to sleep together during the winter. When they come out in June, some of them pass through the neighborhood on their way to wherever it is they spend the summer. Usually they just slip through undetected, threading between the houses at night, dodging housecats and Labradors, but sometimes they pause for too long on the warm asphalt street, which probably feels good after seven months in a dank cave. That's when the people who live here go out of their way to run over the snakes with their SUVs. I've seen the den, peered in with a flashlight at the mass of tangled torpid

rattlesnakes, and I like to describe it to my neighbors and watch their faces.

Connie Bartholomew's husband is a politician now, but he's from Wyoming and he used to work for the USDA Wildlife Services when he was a teenager, back when they called it Animal Damage Control. He tells me that if he could find the den he would dump kerosene in there and light it on fire, killing in one conflagration all the rattlesnakes in the area. Good riddance, he says.

Connie and her husband moved in a couple of years ago, and I have to admit that the first time I saw Connie it was her looks that stopped me. She was walking up our driveway in her tank top, just stopping by to introduce herself, this tall swishy blonde with high athlete's breasts and fine hair that flew away from her face as she walked, quads jumping at the hem of her running shorts. Later I found out she was a dot-commer who cashed out in 1999, and now she writes software in her home office on a \$50,000 computer when she's not changing diapers on her toddlers (another set of Clomid twins). She manages her own portfolio—she hasn't told me how much she has but she says there are lots of zeroes. She's playing oil futures and precious metals these days, she says gold is going through the roof. Her politician husband rides her money and pretends to be a big shot. Sometimes, when he's going on about how it would just break his heart if one of his little babies got bit by one of those awful snakes, it's like he hypnotizes me and I come close to telling him where the den is. The really dangerous people, I've found, are almost always articulate.

Uncle Morley is on to me. I loaned him a couple of hundreds the other day—ATM machines are a pain for him—and when he came home that evening he yelled down cellar to me: "Your money smells like perfume!"

Uncle Morley often says strange things. I left my desk and found him parked at the top of the steps. He was grinning but with the center of his face scrunched up, the muscles pulling everything in toward his nose the way it does when his iron will falters and he gets frustrated about the way things are. I have a lot of respect for Uncle Morley and I try to be careful when I see his face like that.

I stood a couple of steps down from him so we were about eye-to-eye. He held a folded bill in his left hand and I had a feeling he'd been drinking some of the fancy agave tequila he hoarded back when you could get it.

"What was that?" I asked.

"The cash you gave me. It smells like a woman's perfume. Is this what you've come to?"

If you knew my uncle Morley you would be able to hear the irony dripping from that last sentence.

I grinned, trying to look cocky, as if I wouldn't mind him thinking that but unfortunately it wasn't true. "Logically, you've made quite a leap. I shovel driveways."

"Nobody pays the shovel-boy in Benjamins." He paused, chewing on that one, his face relaxing a bit.

"And," he continued, waving one of my bills at me before sniffing at it with a flourish, "my lunch partner identified the scent." Uncle Morley has been dating a gorgeous blind doctoral candidate for the past six months.

"It's Clive Christian No. 1, Jon. Two thousand bucks an ounce. Special occasion stuff, not what a woman wears to the door, not even in this neighborhood."

I shrugged. "Times are tough."

"Ha!" Flashing a look of despair or triumph, he spun his chair and disappeared around the corner. "My nephew the gigolo!"

I don't think of myself as being that, but it's not worth arguing with my uncle.

Starla has been asking a lot of distracting questions recently, some of which make me wonder how I might be coming across here. First, I'm not a pervert. Oral sex is an act of intimacy, a natural part of any sexual relationship, and furthermore if a client wants a challenging position and a look in the mirror, fine. But always it is her desire I fulfill, not the banal teen satyriasis that is supposed to possess a nineteen-year-old, and certainly not some frothing neurotic compulsion to crawl back into the vagina.

Sometimes I can't tell if Starla's kidding about that shit. I hope she is. I want to make

something clear: when I visit my neighbors I don't go looking for sex, and I'm not looking for my mother. This is not Oedipal. This is not pornography.

December. Two days ago, I was riding my bike to town when Starla tried to kill me. We'd had a few days of sun, and down below 6,000 feet most of the snow had melted from the north shoulder. I was just coasting, enjoying the weather, the easy ride down to the market with an empty backpack. Her giant black Suburban came roaring up the two-lane blacktop, and when she swerved over into my lane I thought she was kidding around, playing chicken, and maybe it had started out that way for her, I don't know. But she didn't slow down or swerve back into her own lane, and at the last second her face appeared behind the glare on the windshield—her lips were pressed together in murderous resolve, but her eyes were wide, surprised, shocked at what she suddenly found herself wanting to do, a face that I imagine must be typical of second-degree murderers everywhere. I ran the bike across the shoulder and into the riprap. My front tire wedged between a couple of big rocks, and as I somersaulted over the handlebars, Starla's truck brushed by on the shoulder, two identical boys' faces pressed unsmiling against the tinted window. I heard the truck fishtailing in the gravel before Starla got it under control and back onto the pavement. She didn't even slow down. I bruised my butt and bent the front wheel, but the whole experience was entirely worthwhile. I think it's a good sign.

The women in my neighborhood are used to their husbands falling asleep after sex, or rushing off to work or somewhere. The men are impatient because intimacy with their wives is no longer a prize they seek, and sex is not conducive to multi-tasking. But I'm nineteen and I don't fall asleep. I talk to them. It's one of the things they like about me. Some of them actually smoke a forbidden cigarette (especially Anna Caperton, who likes to act out movie scenes), but mostly they lie there and listen. What I have found is that good sex can throw open a window that will stay that way for a few minutes if you're careful not to break the spell. The dreamy afterglow people talk about? That's

consciousness. We're not used to it.

So, after sex, I tell them stories. I make them laugh. I try to show them that we can be free, that our only oppressor is our own unquestioned beliefs, that the changes wrenching the world eventually will come here, and it will be for the better. If they're going to survive, they need to understand that freedom and comfort, like truth and certainty, are not closely related. That's the part that scares the women in my neighborhood. They don't like mystery. The realization of what I am asking them to give up hits like an electric current and they jump back. I try to tell them that the fear can't last, that if they hang in there long enough fear will morph into awe, a roaring thunderous sense of awe that washes over you when you wake in the morning, a knife at your throat all day, fire and ice in your dreams. I tell them that when they know awe, everything will change.

We had two feet of new snow last night and this morning I finished Anna Caperton's drive and got to Starla's house by 6:30. Her husband was late to something and had tried to drive out before I arrived. He was waiting in his new Mercedes SUV, stuck sideways in the steep drive with the motor running and the heat on, playing the radio. His Mercedes isn't the one that looks like a mini-van, but the really expensive one, big and blocky and ugly, the kind of thing you'd drive if you were the dictator of a central African country.

He never even rolled down the window and in ten minutes I had cleared a path and pushed his back end around, wheels spinning, so he was pointed in the right direction. I was going to tell him he'd put the wrong kind of tires on, but then I figured fuck him. Just before he took off, the twin boys came sprinting out of the house with mismatched backpacks and climbed up into the rig without looking at me. Life goes on. Z told me that tuition at the private school in the city has doubled in the past year, all to pay for the beefy security guys they had to hire.

I cleared the rest of the driveway down to the pavement and knocked on the door. Starla's voice crackled on the intercom telling me the door's open, and I found her

in the basement sitting cross-legged in a big leather chair. The heads of various large animals stared down at her from their spotlighted places on the wall, and she was holding what looked like a double-barrel shotgun, open at the breech. She watched me through the barrels as I walked toward her.

“I’m going to learn how to shoot this,” she said. “Bill says the kick’s not so bad if you just relax and let your body bend back at the waist when it hits you.”

I know enough about guns to be sure she couldn’t shoot when she could see through the barrels, but I stopped under a looming Shiras moose and waited for her to stop pointing the thing at me.

She laughed and rested the gun in her lap. Her hair was frizzy and mussed, sticking out to the left as if she had slept on the sofa. The gun had made a grease spot on the silk robe loosely-tied at her belly. “I almost got you yesterday.”

“It was a close one.”

She nodded, looking at me but with her mind somewhere else. Then she brightened.

“Look at the size of these shells!” She held one up for me. Shiny brass and copper, with a smooth, rounded bullet at the top, it was about the size of one of those gigantic French fountain pens that politicians favor.

“It’s an elephant gun,” she said, setting the cartridge and the gun on the floor beside her. I looked around, seeing no elephants on the wall.

“You use it for other things, too. The Cape buffalo.” She stood, and tilted her head toward an immense black bulk to my left, the head and shoulders of a giant bull with sharp, hooked horns. As Starla slipped her icy hands underneath my sweater, I thought of hot dust and buzzing flies, the intermittent switch of a tail, cicadas singing in an acacia tree.

This is a white-bread neighborhood and all of my clients are Euro-American except for Z, who’s Indian, from India, or her parents were. She’s short with straight black hair, shoulder length, bangs, every sentence delivered urgently with hands behind

her back, feet nervous, as if she's reciting. Z still likes to shop. She's one of the last great shoppers. I know it's banal, but there's no other way to say it. The conversion of abstract money into concrete things, the search for the optimum possessions, the social interactions between Z and persons working retail, in which everyone's role is defined with crystalline, unquestioned clarity, all of it brings light and order to Z's world.

I think she hires me because it's stylish. None of these women talk to each other or even know each others' names, but they do notice what's going on at other peoples' houses. More often than not, Z and I don't even have sex when she invites me in. Instead she tries on clothes for me, asking my opinion.

My parents were cancer researchers who read too much Western philosophy. The paradox proved overwhelming, and by the time they tried Buddhism, it was too late: they had become irredeemably cynical. I'm not surmising this. It was in the note they left. They were very careful to make sure I didn't think it had anything to do with me. They wished me luck and drove off a cliff in Oregon.

I know—it doesn't make much sense to me, either. And to choose to die in an automobile! I'll always wonder if they understood the awful irony in that.

Fact: the number one leading cause of death in the U.S. of A this decade is suicide. Not something you hear much about any more. There was a lot of public hand-wringing and head-scratching a few years ago, then everyone got distracted. Starla says it's "perfect," whatever that's supposed to mean.

January. Starla's husband is missing. Uncle Morley and I were having lunch in the kitchen when he looked out the window and said, "Oh, God, Jon. What have you done." Three police cars had just pulled into Starla's drive.

I didn't think it was fair of him to say that, right off the top of his head, without knowing anything about what was going on, and I told him so. Snow-squalls were advancing up the mountainside in gloomy afternoon light. None of the police cruisers had its lights on. Uncle Morley and I leaned our foreheads against the cold glass to

watch, breath fogging below our noses and then evaporating. It's that dry out here in the winter.

He didn't reply.

"You're the one who said I'd never get through to them."

"I think you got through to Starla."

I should probably mention that Starla doesn't pay me any more. Neither of us said anything about it; she just stopped, and I didn't ask.

She came to the door in an Arizona Wildcats baseball cap, black jeans, and a black long-sleeve t-shirt. But the most remarkable thing was her hair seemed to be gone.

"I don't need you to come here anymore."

"I was just. . . I saw the police cars."

"Shovel the drive myself. That's what I'll do when I need to get out."

"What about the kids? School?"

She grinned. "Home-school."

As if they'd been cued, the boys appeared in the hall behind her. They were burdened with what looked like sand-bags, but when they dropped them thumping one by one on the floor I saw that Starla must've been stocking up at the natural foods co-op: lentils, organic brown rice, oats.

The twins flanked their mother protectively and stared at me, trying to look tough. Shovel-boy, they seemed to say. It's the shovel-boy.

"Where's Bill?"

"Vegas." A shrug.

I waited.

She sighed a tired old sigh. "He was supposed to come home a week ago. No one knows where he might be." She pulled off her cap and tilted her head forward, ran a hand through her spiky buzz cut. She seemed to be stifling another grin, but when she looked up again, it was gone.

“I’m sorry. Can I –”

“Not your fault,” she said, and pushed the door shut.

February. Things are not going so well. The radio says there might be civil war. Fundamentalists are massing on many borders. Gas prices go up up up. Connie’s husband, the politician, has been calling around the neighborhood, looking for support for his plan to co-opt the National Guard as a city militia. He wants to hire guards to watch the gated entrance to the neighborhood. In private, he talks secession. He says the cities will lay siege to the suburbs, rednecks will shoot you on sight, the right is arming itself against the left, persons of color are fed up, and the poor will take from the rich. The military is tired and spent and fragmented, stretched too thin trying to shore up the old empire.

We have carried on here so far as if little is amiss. The electricity works most of the time, the propane trucks come on schedule, and the people who live here can afford gas for their SUVs. We are isolated here on the mountainside, but recently even people in this privileged enclave are beginning to worry. Even here, there comes sneaking the suspicion that the whole thing might be a fucking house of cards, was one all along. Nothing very dramatic has happened yet in the northern Rockies, but in the city it’s as if the sunlight itself has gone all watery, and the most solid concrete and glass seems vague and unreal. People smile and shop for what’s there but most have a kind of troubled, faraway look in their eyes. Like we’re all waking up from the short strange dream of America.

Uncle Morley knows things are only going to get worse for him up here. Last night, I told him that no matter what happens, I won’t desert him. He laughed and thanked me. He said he wouldn’t desert me either, but his girlfriend wants him to move in with her on campus.

This morning came up bright and blue and so cold the air seemed to have been sucked off the planet overnight.

“Way below zero,” Uncle Morley said when he brought the paper in, something he insists on doing, though the driveway is not exactly level. After he left for work, I sat briefly at my desk in the basement and looked everywhere but at my play lying there in a hopeless, jumbled logjam. It had successfully repelled me for days. I lay in a rectangle of sunlight on the floor and tried not to think about Starla. Sometimes if I lie still and start to fall asleep I can dream my way into whatever play I’m working on, but this morning the blue winter sky leaked in between my eyelids. It was not a day to be indoors, so I strapped on snowshoes and walked up into the draw behind the house. The three-mile packed trail to a low saddle in the ridge is mostly my own, since no one in this neighborhood goes outside much. Sometimes I’ll run into a cross-country skier who parked in a cul-de-sac, but usually I’m by myself up there.

So I didn’t expect to run into Starla’s boys. I was climbing a steep, narrow part of the trail, head down and ducking the choke-cherry branches, and what I saw first was not the boys but the moose leg, a black, hairy, blood-soaked moose leg on a bright blue plastic saucer inching toward me. A few yards farther up the trail, at the other end of a taut rope tied above the moose’s hoof, were the boys, grunting and sliding with their heels dug into the snow.

I backed into the brush, sinking up to my knees in powder despite the snowshoes. The moose leg passed, enormous on its absurd plastic sled. As the boys slid by me, they glanced over, sneering and determined, their faces shining red. They held the rope with hands mittened in big wool ragg socks.

Before long, the percussive irregular sound of chopping led me to a bowl sheltered on three sides by steep, red-rock cliffs. Tall, centuries-old spruce trees leaned over a small meadow where a creek ran in the summer, buried now under the snow. The carcass lay crumpled and angular near the center of the meadow, surrounded by a wide aureole of bright red snow, dark lumpy organs, and pale coils and loops of intestine. It looked like the moose had been taken down by a pack of wolves rather than Starla’s elephant gun, which leaned against a spruce on the far side of the clearing.

Starla knelt as if praying to the thing, though she wielded a bright hatchet on the

moose's other hip-bone. The sleeves of her oversized snow-camo parka were pushed back and her bare hands and forearms were bright with blood. The hood flopped at her back, and steam rose from her spiky wet hair.

"Got you a moose," I said. She turned quickly, panting and looking feral with her wide lips parted and showing the tips of her front teeth. For a moment I was struck with what it must have taken for her to do this, what changes must have occurred. I didn't think I had much to do with any of it. She stood and looked at me like I might be something else good to eat.

"You heard the shot?" Her voice was clear and almost musical in the thin air. It was incongruous—I had expected a more guttural tone.

"No, I just happened into the boys."

Her look softened some. "How they doing?"

"Pretty good. Got a ways to go. It's not moose season, is it?"

She shrugged and swung the hatchet in the air in front of her. She bounced on her toes, keeping warm.

"Can I help you?" I said. The moose was at least as big as a horse.

Starla shook her head.

"She didn't have a calf with her, did she?"

"What do you care?"

I didn't know what to say to that kind of vague hostility.

"If she had," Starla continued, speaking slowly, carefully, "I'd have shot the calf, too."

I nodded, and Starla resumed her chopping.

"You're *soft*, Jon," she said, punctuating with whacks of the hatchet, frozen bone chips flying. "A *dilettante*. A *wannabe*. You'll be *swept* away with the *rest* of them."

March. I have been neglecting my clients. They call and I don't answer. I shovel the drives and leave without knocking on the doors, without getting paid. Z deserted me and hired a man from the valley with a plow on his pickup truck.

I stand at the breakfast-room window and watch the house across the street, the furtive comings and goings of Starla and her boys, though no cars have come and gone since the driveway drifted over a couple of weeks ago. Sometimes there are others at night, shadows stalking up from the valley. The power company—or Starla herself—seems to have turned off the electricity in her house. Candles flicker in the windows. She has cut down most of the trees in her lot, and thick white woodsmoke spews from her chimney early in the mornings.

Last night, another of my clients, Merriam Lipscomb, came to the window beside my desk and peered in, underclothed for the weather. She looked at me with her oversized dark and doleful eyes and mouthed “I am miserable.” I tried to ignore her but she went upstairs and Uncle Morley let her in and she came down and stood behind me while I worked, reading over my shoulder. I could smell the clean metallic scent of snow and, when she had warmed up, the herby residue of shampoo in her wet hair. After a while she said, “I don’t think the father would say that to Mary. She’s only a girl, Jon.”

When the ten o’clock brownout made it hard to see the paper, I stood and helped Merriam into my wool mackinaw and led her home. Her husband let her in without speaking to me.

Beware the ides of this month: trouble has arrived. No dawn broke yesterday, and Uncle Morley and I woke to the kind of howling blizzard only March can deliver: coarse, sleety snow blowing sideways all day long. We’re all stuck in the neighborhood because someone felled a couple of telephone poles across the road when the storm started, delaying the snow-clearing crew—it’s just a few guys with plows on their trucks, hired by the owners’ association—and now the road up the mountain is buried under eight foot drifts. Around nine last night we started to hear thunder, which isn’t unusual in this kind of storm, and the power went out. This morning, all the transformers and fuse boxes had been shot full of holes you could stick your thumb in.

Help is not on the way. We have figured out that much. Uncle Morley’s cell phone

was working this morning, and when he talked to his girlfriend in town she said that all hell has broken loose in the city. She said for now the University is safe, and her apartment is warm. The ROTC and National Guard are in charge there. Uncle Morley and I sit down and draw up a plan.

Midnight. The storm has abated and they are out there now, seven of my clients—all but Starla and Z. They're chanting bumper sticker slogans in the dark yard, in the new spring snow. They have torches, probably tiki torches they cadged from someone's garage.

“Question Authority!”

“Think Different!”

“Envision Industrial Collapse!”

I don't know what they want with me. Where are their husbands? Their children? My uncle rolls to the top of the steps, his mountaineer's headlamp casting a blueish moonglow in the stairwell.

“You have to go out there,” he calls down to me. “They're keeping me awake.”

I sneak through the back door upstairs and stand for a while in the cold air, pinpricks of the now gently falling snow on my face. I'm glad this storm came, that winter is still raging, though it won't last. Transitions are hard for me, and I dread the flat, shocked light of early spring, just after the snow-melt, when photons fall unchecked through skeletal branches of Gambel oak to find the flattened and ungreen earth, unseemly pale and wormish, its blanket of snow too suddenly snatched away by an early chinook. The streams then are muddy, and the elk are skinny and dying. Winter kill happens not in the iron cold of January but in early spring when the animals are spent, hungry, blinking at the light, and there is nothing to eat. A time will come, just a week or so, before the first glacier lilies can break the crust of soil, when it's too easy to lose faith, to believe that winter killed it all, that life is over and never coming back.

The scrape of branches on fabric, muffled thumping footfalls on the hill above the house. I peer but can see nothing but shadows of treetops protruding above the drifts. I

shuffle around the corner to where the women are waiting with their tiki torches. Are they bloody-minded?

Just then a powerful vision descends upon me, blanking out the small fires flickering in the dark: soon we all will be gone from this place. The plate glass windows are broken and snow drifts in the tall deserted great rooms. The great horned owls come back, hunting mice from gluelam rafters crusted white with their scat. Their yellow warriors' eyes staring, watching, no more triumphant than they are cowed now. I feel chilled, and strangely lonely. I have always known what was going to happen. The owls dissolve, and I see the flames again, the silent faces of my clients, watching me. Glaring, in fact.

I may be in some danger here. I'm fairly certain they have been mocking me.

"Where are your husbands?" I ask.

A primal roar escapes their lips. Dancing, hooting, thrusting of tiki torches in the air. Their response troubles me. What have they done? I don't want to know. The chaos has brought them out like this, together. They hardly know one another. I picture the introductions earlier as they passed around a cigarette lighter for the torches: Hi, I'm Anna, you know, the house on the corner with the stone facade. You're the one with the two yellow Labs in the yard, right? You drive a black Denali Yukon Magnum? What was your name again?

Connie steps forward on plastic showshoes, the apparent leader, breaking trail for the others. She's in a fetching red ski-suit and seems filled with bravado, but the flickering torches cast strange shadows and her face looks tired and worried.

"We got babysitters," she says. "What are we supposed to do now?"

A gibbous moon peers out from behind the shredding storm clouds. The temperature is dropping fast and I'm shivering from cold, or excitement, or fear. A bold approach is called for. "The revolution has come!" I say, winging it. They murmur, heads wagging uncertainly. "The time has come for us all to take responsibility for our lives!"

But a gigantic boom from the street interrupts me before I can get warmed up, Starla blasting Dora Kirkpatrick's Ford UltraExcursion that got stuck in front of my house

early in the storm, like she's putting down a leg-broke horse. The gas tank catches and the SUV blooms orange in the night. We can feel the heat on our faces. Starla stands in her camo snow-suit, holding her elephant gun up over her head in one hand, the old TV Indian gesture of triumph and defiance. She whoops once and turns and disappears again into the white gloom. My heart is filled suddenly with love.

The other women moan with apprehension. Starla is a bit much for them right now. But I answer Starla's whoop with my own, and one by one they join me, dancing again in the trampled snow on my deck. We leap and stamp, warming ourselves against the growing cold, against the shape of a strange future rising ahead.

Tomorrow, Uncle Morley and I will make our way up my old trail to the pass and then descend wild North Canyon, taking the back way to the University, where his friend will be waiting for us. Uncle Morley has a ski-sled, and powerful shoulders and good stout poles to push with, and I will wear his climbing harness and snowshoes and I will pull like a sled-dog. He will ski down the far side, and I'll run behind. After I deliver him to the beautiful blind woman, I'll turn and walk home to the neighborhood. I'll try to find Starla. She will threaten me with the elephant gun but I'll talk to her. I won't be afraid. We have to decide what we're going to do.