

## NELSON

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I thought about Nelson on the train this morning.

I was watching a boy and his grandmother sitting arm and arm across from me. The boy was about eight. He was cute, bright-looking. The grandmother was in her fifties—a butterball with dyed-black hair and a quick glance. They were talking about the coming weekend, how they were going to Great Adventure.

“But grandmas can’t come,” the boy decided suddenly.

The woman pretended to bristle, her brows shooting up.

“Grandmas can’t come? Why not?”

“Cause they won’t let you in,” he said.

“Why is that?”

The boy bit his upper lip for a moment, then turned his face up, expressionless, toward hers.

“Cause they don’t have a room for grandmas there. It’s a big place. You’d get lost.”

The woman tucked in her smile and shook her head, pretending disgruntled amazement.

“Imagine,” she said. “No grandma room.”

“Nope.”

“I’m just going to have to call them up and complain, now won’t I?”

I was watching as she stroked the boy’s hand, as she hugged it to her chest. Then she let it go and started patting his knee while he tugged absently at her flabby triceps, looking with a child’s coolness at everything in the train.

Then I realized I was thinking of Nelson.

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I have a snapshot of him in the community garden standing in front of a bunch of sunflowers. He's wearing his ratty kimono, as always, and has a trowel stuck under the sash like a dagger. His white hair is coming loose from its ponytail. He's fat. He's sweating. And he's smiling, poor guy. He's got the face of a rotting jack-o'-lantern—droopy, garish, almost abandoned. You're caught suddenly, implicated by the sheer profligacy of that smile. You want to kick it, it looks so degenerate. So perennially hungry. Something inside you, surprisingly familiar, jerks awake. A suspicion: Some Grannies will eat you with butter and syrup.

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I watched the boy and the woman get off at 34th Street. She was chirping and bellowing, half to herself, half to him. Maybe to her there wasn't a difference. She was thinking for both of them, acting for both of them. She gripped his hand tightly.

But in the boy you could see that there wasn't equal room for her; there was only room for the world pouring into him. He barely felt her grip around his wrist and fingers. But the connection of flesh would remain, I thought, still thinking of Nelson. A patina of Granny sweat and oil collected in the ridges of a psychic mountain she had coaxed into shape with her soft white hands.

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Of course, it wasn't like that with Nelson. Not exactly. And he would have cringed at the feminine comparison. But I lump Nelson in with the world's Grannies because he defies any other category.

In the snapshot, the sunflowers are tall and full with gargantuan blossoms. They dangle facedown above him like strange shower heads. Dust hangs in the air. You can see it caked in the lines of his face, collecting in the thinning fibers of the kimono. It's August, 1985. Through the fence, chrome and asphalt quiver in the heat. Skid marks rise like ghosts from the pavement and brown the city sky.

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In the tenement building overlooking the garden, we, his boys, are tucked away in the nursery: Giddy, Julio, myself, others. He has stupid little Granny names for us. I'm 'Cactus.' Julio's 'Squirt.' Giddy's just Giddy, short for Gideon. We sleep through the day like exotic caterpillars, wound in a curtain of Christmas tree lights. All else is darkness, narcotic catalepsy.

We stir only at the first hint of nightfall, the call of Nelson's feet on the stairs. We get out of bed and slip dutifully into our respective kimonos. Nelson has a collection of old silk kimonos that he likes us to wear when we're in the house. Mine is a dark, rich blue with red and silver dragons on the sleeves. The stitching's coming loose, the fabric's grease-stained and crumbling. But it's still silk, and it's a cool luxuriant mulch on the skin. He likes to touch us through it—his own Lazarus boys up from the tomb. The light in his eyes goes out, comes back. It's juicing him;

it's pumping him full of vitamins, vital signs.

“Aw shit,” you say, but you only pretend to shrug him off.

“Fuck off,” you say, but he expects it, just as you expect the boorish compliment and the slime-pie grin mechanically slung at the side of your head.

If you really meant it, though, he'd back off. Quickly, sullen-hurt. He can't tolerate this kind of rejection, the light of your flowers snapped steely shut. He'll sit in the hall with a bottle of Jack, weeping, gouging the skin off his arms with a nutpick. I've seen him. Unreachable, slumped there repulsed-enthralled by his own sagging body, agog at time, at his brittle adiposity, the knobs and bobbins, the rusted pistons, the insect juice thinly running out the cracks...till he passes out.

So you allow him his inventory, impersonal enough. It's like he's counting stars is all, and you can see that he's truly happy for the race of man still lucky enough to have stars to look at.

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1976, the Bicentennial, was Nelson's favorite year of the world since Creation. He had Bicentennial beer mugs, Bicentennial pillows, Bicentennial salt and pepper shakers. The wallpaper in the living room was deep red with a print of tiny eagles on it. He also had brass eagle book ends, I remember, and a lamp shade with 'Washington Crossing the Delaware' on it—worth money now. There was a signed photograph of President Truman in the bedroom and one of Ike above the sink in the kitchen next to a poster of the Statue of Liberty. And, besides all this, he had fought in a war. World War Two. Okinawa. That's how old he was.

That particular story is in Nelson's eyes, as unreadable as the expression of a cave or a pothole. I'm not sure what he remembers, if anything. In front of him, Giddy tells us he lost his nerve; they had to bring him back to the States in a cage. Nelson winces at the broken confidence, if that's what it is. He turns toward Truman for exoneration, huffs the dust from his forgotten medals, then stares darkly into some imaginary distance, his world of battle stars and jousting tournaments just as alien to him as to us, now. Maybe that's what frustrates him most. He leaves the room silently, completely broken. You hear the sleeve of his kimono brushing lightly on the wall.

I never knew for sure what was true about Nelson. He got checks from the V.A. addressed to N. Blutfeld. I remember that most personal letters were postmarked Chicago and were thrown away unopened. So at some point in the Fifties or Sixties, from Chicago I guess, he came to New York, to the Lower East Side, and there clawed out and pasted together his own little cloister. His treks—aside from the annual pilgrimage to Liberty Island—were confined to the grocery store, the farmer's market, and to a steakhouse-turned-hustler-bar on West Tenth Street.

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The way he looks at us, you'd think he's forgotten. You'd think he'd found us curled up in his garden, shrunk and loveless, at the roots of ferns. Or that we were delicate birds, flailing, skewered on hibiscus pistils. Gently did those Granny fingers coax the breath back into us. They daubed the blood from broken feathers and placed us in a jeweled box on the window sill. There we lie, weakly sipping sugar water from an eyedropper. And our eyes are the eyes of the Blessed

Babe, and our skin is the skin of Holy Infant, but our cocks are big and hard and randy as a yak's.

“I think you're having a stroke,” says Julio. “Too much sun?”

Giddy tells him to take a bath, that he smells bad. Nelson smiles and walks over to him. He takes Giddy's face in his hands and feels it over like a blind person would. Giddy submits, a kind of nervousness in his eyes, fear of giving in to something inside himself. Nelson is almost rough with him, fingers on his face. He's only moving the skin around, massaging it, but you feel like you're watching a forced confession. Giddy doesn't move. Light streaks of dried dirt are left on his cheeks and forehead. He's kept his natural smirk throughout. He's stood his ground. He doesn't even deign to wipe off the dirt.

“Why don't you take a bath,” he repeats. “You smell like a goat.”

Nelson looks at him for a minute, bites his lip as if to cry, then laughs uproariously. He bangs his fist on the table. Giddy's expression doesn't change. He plants his feet a little further apart and then scratches his crotch, reclaiming himself. Nelson retreats, oddly buffeted by this one gesture, and resumes his portrait of a slobbering pervert. Giddy, with a shift of the hips, his cock defined through the thinning silk, asserts his young yak's power. Nelson watches, smiling bedraggledly.

“Such a snot,” he slurs. “Little shit.”

Giddy grins at us. There's Cheez Doodle dust at the corners of his mouth. He walks away, swaggering a little.

They're both crazy motherfuckers. Giddy was the first, according to Julio—practically suckled at Nelson's breast. “Precious, aren't they?” sighs Julio, carefully paring a thumbnail. “Little boys smearing their shit on each other.”

At 18, Julio's the oldest of us, and the most ambitious. He has plans for a career in fashion. His only possession, other than his clothes, is a box filled with ten year's worth of Italian Vogue. You can't tell him shit about shit, and he can wear an old jersey like it's silk chenille.

"I'm cooking, Nelson," he announces. "Give me ten dollars."

Nelson glowers.

"Gimme ten, Nelson. I'm cooking tonight. Growing boys can't live on hot dogs and rice. How 'bout some shrimp for a change. A paella."

"Oh, a spicnic?" says Nelson, then yuks at the joke.

"Funny, *abuela*. The cash?"

After dinner and a couple of six-packs, we're out the door. We've exchanged the kimonos for our habits of work: jock straps, cutoffs, tank-tops, sneakers. No jewelry, earrings or otherwise. No leather. We market ourselves for the unimaginative set, your basic Jersey or Westchester john. But we each carry our own peculiar talisman though you'd never suspect. Julio's is a dented gold cufflink he found in an elevator at Bloomingdales. Mine is a Statue of Liberty key chain stolen from Nelson. And Giddy always wears the same pair of socks, though he'll deny more than any of us that there is anything to it. He'll smile stupidly and tell you it's easier that way, or that he keeps forgetting to change them. And Giddy's like that: smelly socks, sloppy clothes. I've seen him at Rounds in a black sweat shirt, navy corduroys and flip-flops— with socks. It's his ass that saves him. *Ka-ching, ka-ching*, every time. It's a thing of reverence to Nelson; he fears to touch it too often.

Nelson watches as we leave. He stands in the doorway clutching a beer, his fat hanging tired, his sadness uncorked. Old Mrs. Rodriguez sweeps the fourth floor hall. The bristles halt as

we pass, fauns' hooves striking her neat mounds of dust. She averts her eyes, grits her teeth, sends a poisoned sigh up the stairwell to Nelson. As Grannies, they can only wonder at the summer night, at following one's footprints through bars and parks and video arcades, through the beating heartway of the city where the darkness is your mother. Where you step out from trees and phone booths, sneakers quiet on the pavement, asses out, nylon shorts riding slightly up the crack. Leaves move against the street lights and headlights. Jaguar, Volvo, Buick Skylark. There's a breeze coming across 53rd Street. You glance up from a conversation to see it fanning through the upper branches of a ginkgo. It drops down, lifts your hair, then stops. The man beside you lights your cigarette. You can tell he's new at this. He can't quite make up his mind what he's doing, how to treat you. He hasn't offered to take you into the bar. You ask where he's parked. He's not parked; he takes the subway. You excuse yourself. You have to be somewhere. Conveniently, the Volvo has driven around the block and pulls over. The window slices down. A figure, not old, leans over and motions. You step to the curb. The locks flick on the door. You get in, feel the air conditioning, sit back. Maybe next time it'll be the Jaguar.

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This morning, when the boy and the woman got off at 34th Street, I was tempted to follow, just to watch them. They triggered feelings I thought might not come again. The woman represented some kind of cowish security, purity of some sort. I know that's bullshit. For all I know, after a few bourbon cokes, she'd be grinding a hot iron into his back. But that's bullshit, too. I could see she had dreams for him, though probably not as lavish and specific as she had had for her own children. And he could never disappoint or hurt her quite like they had. Maybe



because she didn't have the energy to love like that anymore. You could tell by the easy way they interacted that he had a separate life with his parents. She was safe, then; she wouldn't be held responsible for any of his failures. She might feel bad, but she would not be responsible. Her dreams were Granny dreams and her arms an open circle.

In a peculiar way, it was the same with Nelson. He used to cuddle us by twos and threes in that lumpy, beer-sour bed, the radiator hissing through the middle of January, while his heavy fingers roved constantly over us, even while we slept, kneading his desires into our dreams.

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I have one more snapshot of him taken the winter of 1984. He's sitting at a card table painting a plaster cast bust of Apollo or someone to set in the garden when summer comes. He's looking down, painting, a long lock of white hair hanging over his face. In the dim background, you can see one of us—Giddy, it looks like—stretched out on the sofa. Red Christmas tree lights on the wall behind. And, though you can't see them, there are beer cans and ashtrays all over the place.

It's in the context of winter that I usually think of Nelson. It was bone-cracking cold the night we met. It was about eight in the evening and I had been walking through the West Village without coat or gloves, hepatitis buzzing in my veins. I couldn't even make it into the Ninth Circle. I sat on the steps bracing for the next wave of sickness—like time-released venom—and looking at my hands. I could see the sidewalk through them. When I held them up over my eyes, I could make out the deli across the street and the fire station. A woman in a fur coat steered her

pugs across the street to avoid me. She kept glancing over her shoulder as she walked toward Sixth Avenue. When I lowered my hands, they were dripping with puke. I had puked on the steps and all over my shoes.

There was a voice behind me, gruff and rumbling. I thought it was the bouncer shooing me off. I grabbed the railing and tried to get up, but slipped down in the salt and vomit of the steps.

“What the hell are you doing, joker? Has the kittens lost their mittens?”

Eyes glared drunkenly, some bum grinning in my face like he knows me, eyeballs lunging, tongue hanging out. I tried to turn. He grabbed the back of my neck with one hand and slapped the other onto my forehead.

“Just hot as a iron, little shit. No mittens, no jacket. Shit, you ain’t no cactus in a heat wave, joker.”

His jowls joggled around as he growled and hooted. All I could see was his face. Rubbery, papery. His white hair blew into my eyes.

“Come on, cactus.”

He was prodding me, shaking me. I tried to bat him off, “Goddammotherfucker,” tried to cover my face. When he stretched out his arms, they were two black wings unfurling beside him. They drew up, reached around and smothered me in damp wool. The street lamps were snuffed out, and the fire station. I wasn’t cold anymore, and I could see my parents’ house back in Northport. I could see the back of my mother’s head. She was standing at the dining room window, facing out. She was talking on the phone and smoking. Through the window, in the front yard, my father had me pinned down on the grass by the sprinkler, and was strangling me with his belt. I could see close now, and we were both soaking wet. The sprinkler kept washing

the blood off our faces. Jets of water, *chz-chz-chz*.

Eighth Street jerked into view, but muddled, like a brief reflection in a shattered mirror. Then darkness again. It felt like I was being carried, handed from person to person, through the streets. I saw the red digits on a taxi meter. Passing lights cut through my body. I was a giant chunk of flabby space absorbing everything. Everything except the person beside me on the seat boiling over with presence, not saying a word. Just his breath seething in and out of him like he couldn't stand another second of his body's demands, though I learned later this was how he breathed when Happiness came and sat, cross-legged and lotus-hooded, on the shaggy pillow of his heart.

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I was prodded awake by a short, thin, Latino kid with long hair.

“Better get up and eat something, man. You've been sleeping like a log...like three logs.”

I looked around me. Everything was dim and red. There were red Christmas tree lights strung over the walls. Outside, it was dark and I thought I could see snow coming down.

“You got hepatitis, man,” he said. “You look like shit.”

He held up a mirror. I looked at myself and nudged it away.

“Like three shits,” I mumbled.

He laughed and tossed back his hair.

“I'm Julio,” he said. “That's Giddy.”

He pointed to a kid in the door in his underwear who just stared at me and picked his nose with his thumb.

“You been sleeping for two days,” said Julio.

He handed me a glass of orange juice and watched me closely as I drank it.

“Good,” he said. “Now go meet Nelson.”

Julio handed me a dark silk robe with strangely shaped sleeves and a silver sash.

“It’s one of Nelson’s,” he said. “He told me to give it to you. It sounds fucked up, but everything’s fucked up here. Just put it on.”

The boy in doorway snorted.

“It gets him hard,” he said. “So wear it. ‘Cause he ain’t gonna like you much for yourself. He don’t like pussy wipes.”

“Fuck off, Giddy,” said Julio. He laid his hand on my wrist. “Listen. Just stay up for a few minutes. He’s anxious to see you. Then you can sleep some more if you want.”

I got off the bed shivering. I felt old, stick-like.

“Go on,” whispered Julio, taking my place on the bed.

I slipped my arms into the awkward sleeves and pulled the garment around me. I ran my fingers through my hair, trying to imagine who I was supposed to be meeting.

“Don’t worry about it,” said Julio.

“Don’t worry,” Giddy echoed. He plopped down on the bed, too. “Just make sure he likes you.”

I started toward the door, my feet sliding through empty beer cans and Entenmann’s boxes. I could hear a TV and a radio playing. The same red wallpaper and Christmas lights were in the hallway. I passed the dark cave of a bathroom and an open closet. A robe, like the one I was wearing, was fixed with thumbtacks to the wall. ‘Kimono,’ I said remembering what it was called. I passed through the kitchen with the picture of Eisenhower over the sink. The linoleum

was cracked and peeling, and part of it had been completely ripped up from the floor boards. One corner was stacked with terra cotta planters and bags of potting soil.

Last was the living room. I entered slowly. There was so much crap, it took me awhile to find where he was. The first thing that took identifiable shape was the sofa, an over-stuffed camelback in worn, gold velvet directly across the room by the door. Then the lamp next to it with the shade of “Washington Crossing the Delaware.” The strings of red lights were the only other source of illumination. He was sitting, like in the photo, hunched over a card table, working in the dimness at some project. It was the hair I recognized—that white, horse-mane hair. I waited, watching him. He bent close to his project and every few seconds touched a small brush to it. I took a step toward the table and he looked up. I froze suddenly. There was nothing particularly daunting in his eyes; if anything, they looked retarded. But I felt like his mind was prowling around me, stealthily sniffing, quite close. Like a mother hyena might sniff at her pups. I felt prickly. It wasn’t fear, but an unusual sense of inadequacy.

Without saying anything, he went back to painting. I kept still, watching him. He bent still closer to the plaster bust and kept dabbing at it with the brush. He was painting it silver.

“What’s that?” I asked.

He opened his mouth but didn’t say anything. A worried expression came into his face, almost fearful, then slowly faded. I knew then he was nuts.

I stood there for a moment, then crossed the room. I sat on the sofa and watched him, too weak to do anything else. I was sleepy again and, realizing that I wouldn’t get the bed back, stretched out where I was. The prickly feeling came over me again, and this time it scared me, though I don’t know why.

I looked up. I thought I felt Nelson watching me. He wasn't. Then I noticed a figurine on the mantle of the gas furnace—a brass eagle's head about ten inches high—turned in my direction. On the wall above that was a painting of an eagle in a nest, a paint-by-numbers-looking thing in a gaudy gilt frame. There were eagles on the window curtain, eagles in the rug, eagles in the wallpaper. It was then I realized I didn't know where I was. I started to say something when all at once—but slowly—the eagles rose from their various places and mounted together as one thing, like something growing, like a huge black bush hurtling its leaves and branches in all directions. It was a bush with red flowers, red pulsing pin-points of light. Those lights, when I woke, were like my first memory.

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I'm looking for someone on the train tonight. Someone familiar that I don't know at all. Like the grandmother. I have a feeling of uneasy expectancy. I look under hats, behind hair, through reading glasses. Nothing. At Union Square, my mind hurtles west along 14th Street, then turns down the West Side Highway toward the piers. I never spent much time with the pier queens. All the jabber and jewelry was Julio's interest, though I never knew he was hustling there until the night he got bashed.

I came in at four or five in the morning, saw him sitting in the middle of that gold sofa, bandages wrapped clear around his head, his arm in a dishcloth sling. His lap was piled with his precious copies of Italian *Vogue*. He was crying silently, indignantly. Nelson was pacing around the apartment, lifting things, rearranging things, as he always did when emotion overwhelmed him. His hair was a stringy cloud around his head.

“What happened?” I asked.

Julio looked up from the sofa. His eyes, poised within a crack in the bandages, were unable to travel the distance between us.

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Two summers ago, I ran into Julio on Fourteenth Street. He was coming out of Diamond Fabrics with some freeze-dried looking house diva coiffed in gold rick-rack and orange beads. I hadn't seen him for awhile. He had some gristly muscles on his upper body, but the rest was still small, gaunt Julio. He hadn't lost his old swish-posse poise, but it came off strangely with his new pecs. He was dancing at The Gaiety on 46th Street, he said, and was staying at one of the East Harlem Houses. Here, he introduced The Lady Magenta Neferteri Dior—or something like that—who acknowledged me with a certain shift of the hips, her eyes settling blandly in the middle of my forehead. Julio laughed at my reaction, whatever that was, and said something in Spanish about the “boy from Northport” which brought a grin to the diva's face. I was barbacking then for a place in Chelsea, and I told him he should stop in sometime for a drink. Before we parted, I asked about Nelson.

“Oh, he's nursing some little Jamaican thing. Shrunken-up queen in a head rag always sitting out front. Last I heard.”

He shrugged his shoulders defensively, as if he shouldn't be expected to know more. I asked about the cousin we had lived with in Hell's Kitchen just after we left Nelson's. As he spoke, his eyes wandered restlessly down the street. I stopped listening to what he was saying and was looking at the ridge of scar on his upper lip. It cut protuberantly through one side of his

moustache. He caught me looking, but just kept up a steady stream of talk. It was in his eyes that I saw the resentment—cool, fortified. He might have still been sitting on the sofa, looking out at me through the bandages.

“Yeah, well fuck you, man.”

That’s what the eyes said.

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The gold sofa, given any light, will seem to be creating its own. The light burns from the velvet. It’s a film of iridescence, thinner on the tops of the arms and cushions where the pile has worn away. But even there its sheen persists, impervious to damage from shoes and cigarettes. The window behind is boarded up as if specifically to protect it from the sun’s rays. The light from the lamp swims softly over it, or the Christmas tree lights lift it into existence, the velvet pulsing a dim brick color under the red bulbs.

Someone is always sprawled there, lavishing in its lumpy grip. You don’t sit as a rule; you extend; you let it carry you, like some soft boat or carriage, away from the ruckus, the dingy clutter, the scarecrows. It is the seat of the prince, of the favored child. It is the seat of dreams. Giddy lies there, legs up, bent, the hem of his scarlet kimono slipped down to his waist. He has white, thick, nearly hairless legs.

“How much they give you anyway, Nelson?” He’s asking about the V.A. checks that come every month. “Two hundred? Three hundred?”

Nelson sits in dusty suspension, bent over the card table, studying a map he has made of the garden, each blossom accounted for.



“How many Japanese shits you have to skewer for that, huh, Nelson?”

Julio sits cross-legged on a stool, a dark lotus. His stitches are out and his hand works fine. They didn't, however, patch the lip well. Bs and Ps are hard for him to say. He glances dully out into the room.

I'm there, too, somewhere. It's the last summer we spend together, 1986. It's the summer of “Spiderman.” That's what they're calling it on Avenue C.

Giddy tries to sit up. He's high. You watch his gaze groping around, searching for the person across the room. An unlit cigarette flops around in his mouth:

“No one I know of remembers that war. How old are you anyway Nelson?” He has managed to light a match, but the cigarette's disappeared. He moves his legs to look under them, his whole crotch showing. “How the fuck old are you, Nelson?” His eyelids droop. Julio leans forward and, keeping his balance on the stool, blows out the match without making a sound. “Shit...you're older than Uncle...fucking Sam.”

Giddy off the couch and carries him triumphantly to the bedroom. Julio moves to the sofa, melting into the velvet, just the ends of his hair sticking up, the pile's length, through the cushion. Nelson's back shortly, sucking on a beer. Then he's back again, a strange new color groping through his face. Time reweaves itself through the cloth of the brain. The room shrinks. The sofa is shabby in the daylight, all elbows under you. Nelson's hands are tangled in his hair. He circles the room, tramping debris, then goes back to the bedroom and stays there.

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It could have been an hour before we went back to find them. Nelson was standing at the

bedroom window, looking down at the garden. Giddy lay on the bed. He was stretched out diagonally on his back, his arm tucked loosely around a pillow at his side. His face was stoney gray, and his mouth and nostrils were obstructed with puke. Julio swore and left the room, trying to pull me along after him. I made the mistake of staying. I waited for a minute, staring at the Giddy. Stepping back, I could avoid the face. I looked at his hair, parted naturally on the side, the back fanned out slightly against the mattress.

I asked Nelson if we should call an ambulance. His head turned. One hazel eye showed through the drape and snarl of his hair. It was clear, assured, dry. I could even sense a wry smile behind the hair. Each word, as he spoke, was a building collapsing.

“I thought I said no needles in the house.”

The weight of the body on the bed seemed to seep out into the room. I concentrated on breathing. There was no point in saying we had gotten off outside. The hazel eye slid over to the bed. He moved toward it, bumping me inadvertently out of the way. I watched from the doorway as he climbed up on the bed. He stretched himself out over Giddy, laid right on top of him.

He stayed pitched like that, flesh on flesh, all night. In the morning, we had to call the cops to get him off the body. We didn't know what else to do. The coroner came and three officers. Luckily, no stuff was around. There was some questioning, some badgering, but no charges were pressed. They didn't bother to take Nelson to the precinct; he was too distraught to feign coherence. An officer gave me the number of Covenant House, sparing me the lecture. That was it. And they took the body.

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Nelson disappeared for two weeks. We thought he had jumped in the East River. But he finally showed up in the garden one evening, ragged and dirty and raging through the sunflowers. When he had finished with the sunflowers, he trampled the corn, and when he had finished with the corn, he yanked up two or three of the morning glory trellises. Old Mrs. Rodriguez on the fourth floor had to run down to protect her young tomatoes. She stood by her patch with a lifted hoe, spitting obscenities. Julio and I watched from the window, laughing, egging them on. The two of them had battled it out before. Nelson was staggering around her, flapping his arms and making strange faces. She caught him off-balance, pushed him squarely over with a thrust of the hoe. He lay there squirming on the ground cackling. It was nearly dark when we came down to retrieve him. It took us twenty minutes to get him upstairs.

The corn was ruined, but the morning glories and sunflowers more or less recovered. Mrs. Rodriguez's tomatoes did well that year. They were as big as softballs by the end of the summer. Julio said she used magic on them. He also said she used magic on us, on Nelson, to poison his household. Other boys had moved in, none staying long. It was constant flux. Nelson seemed to be plucking them right off Houston Street. Dopeheads and worse. Crack vials competed with beer cans for floor space. Neighbors complained. There were fires in the kitchen and kids crashing in the hallway. Things were stolen, broken; President Truman was defaced with a marker. Nelson didn't even seem to notice.

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After running into Julio that day on Fourteenth Street, I decided to walk over to Avenue B. I almost changed my mind when I hit Sixth Street, unsure of what I would do when I got

there. Probably just walk by, I thought. It seemed strange, suddenly, that I had not been there for more than eight years.

When I came to the building, Mrs. Rodriguez was sitting on the stoop. She was flushed and dusty from working in the garden. She didn't recognize me, of course, and her broad face darkened as I explained who I was. She muttered something in staccato Spanish, the only word of which I caught was "*puto*." Then she sighed, her chest and shoulders wilting slightly. I noticed a new light fixture mounted over the door and different colored tiles in the hallway. There was also a panel of intercom buzzers.

"You've changed," said Mrs. Rodriguez, her eyes squinting at me. I couldn't tell what kind of change she deemed it. I doubted she really recognized me. Her eyes moved skeptically over my clothes, down to my Nikes, back up to my hair.

"I remember your tomatoes," I said forcefully.

Her eyes brightened.

"*Mis tomates*," she nodded, sitting straight again. "Carrots, potatoes, *espinaca*. All the best."

She grabbed the railing and pulled herself up. She was a little fatter, a little squatter than I remembered her, yet she stepped easily down the steps. Motioning for me to follow, she headed toward the garden. I stood on the sidewalk, watching her, feeling something lift in my chest. It was the same feeling I had had when the Ninth Circle closed, and Rounds, too, after that. Like watching hundreds of cigarettes lit up in the dark, flames flickering, disclosing here and there a wrist, a forehead, the edges of a cupped hand, the shine of an eye, a glance. And each of these things is a night of your life, a person in your life. Then darkness. Then you are taking another

breath; it might as well be your first. You check your footing before continuing. The past is not there.

I hurried to catch up with Mrs. Rodriguez. She led me in through the small side gate. White, red and purple clematis were blooming here and there on the fence. It was late afternoon, and the shadows of the buildings lay over the garden. Things were trimmer, tidier than they had been when I had lived there. There was less mingling of flowers and vegetables.

I followed the old woman down various paths. She moved quickly, her head of dyed-black bobbing up and down. She pointed at various things along the route, but at nothing especially remarkable. Soon we stood at her plot of tomatoes. It was early July, and the fruits were just forming. She stood protectively over them, clasping her hands in joy at the future. At the end of the garden, I noticed a patch of what looked like sunflowers. I walked toward them, moving between plots of nasturtiums and tiger lilies, squash and green peppers, all beautifully tended.

The sunflowers were a smaller variety than Nelson used to grow, and the patch was not as big, maybe forty plants. There were a few blossoms, but nothing to approach the hubcap-sized ones I remembered. I turned and looked up at the building. My eyes skimmed lightly over the windows of the top floor, then dropped away. It was just as I had remembered. Just a little more soot on the side of the buildings.

*“Esta muerto!”*

Mrs. Rodriguez was scowling, her feet set firmly, her hands in tight fists at her side. She stood at the portal of Grannydom, defending it against sniffers, prowlers, infiltrators. But her gaze wavered when I challenged it. It moved hesitantly to the building beyond us, up to the sixth floor. Inside, through a veil of reflections off the corner windows, there showed tiny, blinking,

red Christmas lights. They were so faint, I wondered whether they were real. If I tried hard enough, I could probably have seen someone standing up there—the dwindling hulk of a man looking out.

“*Esta muerto,*” said Mrs. Rodriguez, with less assurance this time.

She spat on the ground and headed back toward the gate.