Holes

by C. P. Boyko

Yvonne hadn't warned the man about Richard. Most people, if not warned in advance, could be counted on to make fools of themselves. They would raise their voice; they would stammer; they would talk about her husband in the third person as if he wasn't there; they would shake his elbow instead of his hand; they would ask gallantly if he wanted to feel their face. At the very least they would act uncomfortable, or, what amounted to the same thing, make a show of just how comfortable they were. And that, of course, made Richard uncomfortable—though he was good, too good, she thought sometimes, at pretending not to mind.

So she warned only those applicants she herself approved of. She did not approve of the man. She didn't know why a man would want to apply at all. No other men had applied. There had to be something funny about him. She wouldn't even have bothered introducing him if Richard's office door hadn't been open.

She could never have guessed that they had once known each other, years ago. Nor could she have foreseen the easy grace with which the man would size up the situation when Richard's eyes failed to find his:

"It's gotten worse, then?"

Richard grinned lopsidedly. "Didn't Yvonne tell you?"

Richard was used to surprises. Every encounter was an unexpected interruption, every "hello" a flash of lightning out of the void. He had trained himself not to act surprised by these surprises. He had become passive: he did not ask his sudden visitors where they had come from or what they wanted, any more than he asked callers where they were phoning from or how they'd gotten his number. So, instead of asking Garnet Cobson—an old university

friend he had not seen in more than twenty years—what he was doing in his house, Richard asked him to stay for dinner. It was out of his mouth before he could even think of consulting Yvonne. But there was no way to consult Yvonne in any case. *Excuse us, Garn, for a minute, won't you? Yvonne and I need to discuss whether or not we both want you here. You understand.* Here, a single glance, lasting a fraction of a second, could have told him everything. But Yvonne was too fastidiously polite to give anything away in her voice.

It was the little things, like glances, that he missed the most. Not sunsets, or girls' legs, or Jimmy's face, or Rembrandt, or books—just those telling shared glances. He told himself not to be maudlin.

Garnet accepted the invitation without a moment's pause. "Excellent," he said, "I'll cook."

Richard tilted his head back, amused. "You cook?"

They did not catch up; they reminisced. Richard was at first delighted, then dismayed, to find Garnet's face perfectly preserved in his memory. It was his face of twenty years ago, but it loomed up before his mind's eye with startling, almost hallucinatory clarity. Sometimes its lips even seemed to move in time with Garnet's words. This dismayed him because he could not remember his own wife's face nearly so well. Indeed, there seemed to be a rule that the more often he saw someone, the more time he spent with them, the more their image faded. Perversely, the faces from long ago, the faces of childhood friends and dead relatives, of people he never met anymore, were the most vivid; the faces of his family and closest friends had almost vanished. It was almost as though the mind wore down the portraits in its gallery through over-handling, the way the hands and lips of pilgrims eroded the features of holy statues.

To his surprise, he found himself thinking of something Garnet had said years ago, in their dorm room. Every man, he said, had a limited number of ejaculations. The exact number was unknown, and anyway different for everyone, but once you'd gone through your stock, that was that, and it was all over. Richard scoffed, but at nineteen he half understood that

women had some limitation of that kind; besides, his own experience in that area was confined to what he still, with curdled Catholic guilt, thought of as "self-abuse"; and, though Garnet was certainly no more enlightened on that score than he was, at that moment, in their dark, freezing, tobacco-permeated room, Garnet seemed to speak with the grim authority of the terminally ill when he declared that it was his aim in life to use up all his orgasms before he died.

Richard wondered: Had he used up all his memories of his wife's face?

Yvonne had waited a week after the accident to present her case. She laid out her arguments methodically; Richard could hear the bulleted points in her voice. They were both of them very busy; the kids were still too young to be of much help; it wasn't healthy for them to be eating so erratically; the house was too big for them now to keep in order by themselves; they could get someone marvellous, she was certain, for three hundred dollars a week. She said nothing about the burn on his hand. So he could not defend himself, could not remind her that he'd made hundreds of lunches for himself and the kids without a single mishap before, could not say that he was almost certain Jimmy had been fiddling with the pots on the stove while he had been (without mishap) chopping onions. Besides, he knew that any such line of argument would be received by Yvonne with a sigh of solicitous exasperation at his stubborn pride.

Instead he said that he simply didn't like the idea of hiring a maid. Paying someone to cook their meals, to clean up their messes, to wash their dishes and clothes, to scrub their floors, to wait on them hand and foot—that was not the sort of relationship he wanted with another human being. Nor did he want to cultivate the master/servant mentality in the children. Yvonne, with a hint in her voice of feeling insulted, said that she felt the exact same way, which was why she wanted to offer room and board. Of *course* any girl they hired would be treated with scrupulous respect, like a member of the family.

Richard realized that this meant she had in mind one of her charity

cases from work, one of her homeless girls; but he could see no graceful way to refuse to meet the applicants if she brought them around the house.

What kind of a person was he, Yvonne wanted to know. What had he been like? What had the two of them had in common? What did they do together? What did they talk about?

"I don't know," Richard said. "We were twenty."

What could he tell her? That their friendship had been forged in a hothouse of alcohol, hormonal arrogance, and enforced proximity? That all they had really shared was a desperation to get laid, a predilection for drunkenness, and a dread of being called a fraud that masked itself as all-encompassing disdain? That they used to piss in bottles to avoid the frigid trek to the common bathroom? (That Garnet held the all-time record with one and one-third litres?) That they had copied one another's essays? That they had devised an elaborate coded classification and grading system for breasts?

"It was a long time ago," he said—and could not help thinking that it seemed a longer time for Garnet than for himself. There was in his old friend none of the half-aggressive exuberance that he had once feared and admired. This Garnet was subdued, almost melancholy. Some of this could be accounted for by his present circumstances, of course. Richard hadn't needed to read very closely between the lines of Garnet's patter to discern that his restaurant had fallen on hard times or that his wife had split up with him; and now here he was applying for the position of live-in maid.

The contrast was no doubt exaggerated by the suddenness of their reacquaintance. If Richard could somehow see himself in the mirror today, perhaps the shock would be as great. Nevertheless, he felt, Garnet had not aged well.

Richard listened to Yvonne undress and get into bed. He slid a hand over her smooth belly. "You didn't like him?"

She made the sound that had come to stand in for a shrug. "Oh, he was charming enough."

The irritation she must have been feeling all night finally surfaced in her

voice. He remembered the brusque way she'd answered Jimmy's "Who are *you*?"—"This is Daddy's friend," with the slightest emphasis on *Daddy's*.

"You and he used to be thick as thieves, I suppose."

It was his turn to make the shrug-sound. "We were kids."

"He seems like he still is."

Richard heard the click of the lamp, listened to the warm sweeping sound of her breathing.

"The kids do like him," he said.

She sighed. "The kids like anyone who farts at the table."

But it was no use. Yvonne could feel herself giving in. She couldn't help it, she supposed. It was the curse of a generous spirit: you seldom got your own way. Anyway, it was true what Richard said. Garnet, an old friend, would be treated as an equal, and not like some servant. Besides, for some reason, none of the girls from the shelter had come back for a second interview. She sighed again, ran her hand in reciprocation over his belly.

"You didn't think it was a little strange that he wouldn't have anything to drink?"

On the first night Garnet made a bouillabaisse. The Lapleys had no mortar and pestle, and the leeks were a bit rusty, and there was no laurel to be found in town for any price; but he had found at the little grocery store a beautiful rascasse, head still attached—and the meal was, he felt, on the whole, a success. Unfortunately the children didn't agree. Milly sat down at the table like it was heaped with landmines, then ate only bread. Jimmy asked again and again, "What *is* it?" Yvonne finally had to call it "seafood stew" before he would put any of it in his mouth. Then his verdict was succinct: "It tastes like grunk." Yvonne told him to be polite; his expression and his tone made his opinion all-too clear, if his neologism did not.

On the second night Garnet reined himself in and made the lemon pepper pulled pork baguettes—one of his specialties, even without the smoked

apple compote. He called it "sloppy joes." Milly, still broodingly skeptical, again ate a lot of bread, but was at least courteous enough to push things about on her plate a bit, and even went to the trouble of giving an excuse: she'd had a big snack at Patricia's. Jimmy didn't need any cajoling this time; and though he spat a mouthful of pork back onto his plate, his expression remained thoughtful. He had to search for the right word. "It tastes like . . . kreech."

Garnet considered this a modest triumph. But after the dishes were done Yvonne came up to him in that solemn, absentminded way of hers that reminded him of school principals coming back from lunch to find him sitting there, awaiting punishment. Dinner had been excellent, she assured him; but perhaps in the future he could limit himself to more "North American" dishes?

"It's not your fault. It's the kids. They don't have very sophisticated palates, you know."

He was about to ask her whose fault that was, but stopped himself. He could be humble. This wasn't his kitchen. He asked her what sort of things the kids liked. She had a list prepared—a schedule, in fact, with dates and times extending into next month.

So on the third night he made tomato soup and grilled cheese. The kids gorged themselves. "Lee-*kee*-kalee," said Jimmy, kissing his fingers. Everyone joined in the praise—even Richard, who could guess without much difficulty what his wife must have said to Garnet. He smacked his lips and made swooning faces to mask his regret that there would be no more dinners like the last two. It was just as well, he supposed, that he'd refrained from complimenting Garnet as fulsomely as he'd been tempted to. Not only would it have embarrassed them both, but his gushing would have clashed rather conspicuously with Yvonne's quiet edict. It was important, he supposed, with employees as with children, to present a unified front. Besides, these were still the best grilled cheese sandwiches he'd ever had. And he said so.

"Dill havarti," said Garnet, pleased despite himself. The children, of course, preferred the plastic-wrapped processed cheese slices.

"Aren't you having any?" Milly asked.

Garnet, who had finished off the bouillabaisse that afternoon, said that he thought he'd better get a start on the dishes.

After that, he ate most of his meals alone in the kitchen.

The new, less sophisticated menu left Garnet with more time to fill. As Yvonne had told him that the sound of the television disturbed Richard's work, he took to reading the newspaper again, as he'd done at Em and Ern's. Richard and Yvonne had a collection of books large enough to be called a library, but he found he couldn't concentrate on novels these days, and non-fiction seemed stubbornly irrelevant. He liked newspapers for their absence of style, their insistent air of consequence, and, not least, the brevity of their articles. He read the paper methodically, from front to back, even the ads and the obituaries. But his favourite section was the classifieds. Here spare precision reached its zenith. (If only historians and novelists had to pay for each of their words, he thought, there would be a lot less bloated, idiotic, unnecessary books.) He read the classifieds like haikus; they cleared his mind.

2000 Chev Tahoe Z71 4x4
4 dr leather int, dark blue ext, htd seats
90k km $18,500 obo

$450 some util +cbl
Quiet cul-de-sac nr JC & store. Deck & priv yd
W/D N/S pref. Pet nego

Spouse gone
need to dispose of her jewellery
Reasonable

Carpet cleaning asst F/T no exp nec
$8/hr+comm full ben & 401k. Hard working, clean DMV
transport & ref req

Live-in cook
Prepare meals for busy family of four. Some light housework
Good wage, room and board for right applicant

He hadn't been looking for work, not yet. But something about this pared-down description of a possible life snagged his imagination. He could see himself there, cooking and doing light housework. He could see himself making a home for himself, by making a home for them, that busy family of four. And he could see them singing in chorus his praises to a grudgingly relenting Leah. It was just what he needed. A chance to rebuild himself, to prove himself—and to strangers, who would not cut him any slack. It would keep his hands busy, too, and his mind occupied. There was nothing to drink at Em and Ern's but there was nothing to do, either, nothing to think about, and an empty head was a thirsty head. So he'd left.

Now here he was reading the classifieds again, in a different house—one with, as he'd noticed right away, a sumptuously stocked liquor cabinet. But that too, he decided, was just what he needed. Without temptation, the experiment would be meaningless.

It was odd. Garnet made almost no noise, but somehow the mere presence of another person in the house, which for so long Richard had had to himself throughout the day, was distracting. He could actually feel Garnet's presence, the way he could sense a wall or a large tree if he came too close. Sometimes he heard a floor jamb creak, a cabinet door click shut, a spoon tapping against a dish, but that was all. But he could *feel* him being quiet,

tiptoeing around. He knew Garnet waited till he came down for lunch or took his coffee out on the patio before turning on the dishwasher or running the vacuum. He supposed Yvonne had instilled in him the same fear she'd instilled in the children: the fear of disturbing their father's work.

The fact was that, besides making him feel like an invalid, the artificial silence discomfited him. When on the phone with clients or partners, it positively embarrassed him. *Their* lines were never quiet; there was always some buzz, some commotion going on in the background. True, it wouldn't do to have Jimmy babbling nonsense in the hallway or Milly's car-alarm anti-music blaring up through the floor while he was on an important call. But then again, everyone knew he worked from home. They all knew his situation.

It was part of his image, the idea of him. And it was the idea of him that was responsible for his success. The blind architect. It was almost a punchline: "The guy who designed that must have been blind." But even a joke, he realized—and Donnamer-Clarke-Row realized—could be good publicity. A punchline, after all, had a bigger impact than a shaggy-dog story.

Blindness had not just helped his career; it had launched it. His name and his work were never mentioned without some reference to his condition—but his name and his work were mentioned. Some called his designs controversial, but he knew that it was not the designs but he himself who was controversial. He was more famous than he deserved to be. Several fools had compared him to Beethoven. Another had tried to dub him "The Milton of Monumentality." The notion that blindness had made him better, that the loss of sight had been made up for by greater insight, was in the first place obviously untrue, and in the second inherently idiotic. Architecture was a visual art. He might have thought of himself as an artist once, but not anymore. He was a draughtsman, a plodding, meticulous, necessarily patient technician.

His clients and his colleagues probably realized as much. But they liked the idea of him. He was a homely paradox, like the sound of one hand clapping.

Milly was in love with Garnet. For one thing, he embarrassed her in front of her friends. Her father did this too, like all her friends' fathers: he cracked lame jokes, pretended to like the same kind of music they liked, and pathetically used phrases like "hang out," "right on," and "wicked awesome"—phrases that were *so* overdue. But the difference was that none of her friends made fun of her dad like they did with all the others. They acted like they liked him. They actually pretended he was cool. It was mortifying. It was because he was blind.

But Garnet, they could all agree, was a total lamerod. He actually thought farting was funny!

And she liked the creaking sound his watch-band made when he fiddled with it. She hoped Garnet would stay forever.

Jimmy wished he was a dinosaur. He could bite the head off of anyone who looked at him funny.

He could be a stegosaurus, and Garnet could be a pterodactyl.

Chomp, chomp, chomp.

Those times when he, and sometimes he and Leah, had gone through the house, purging it of all temptation, decanting entire bottles down the sink or flushing their contents down the toilet—those were artificial experiments, Garnet now realized. They were empty gestures, pure mummery. The purge was not, as he might have imagined at the time, an optimistic act of spring cleaning, the valiant shedding of an old skin. For one thing, a dry home was a delusion. Alcohol was everywhere—not least of all at the restaurant. But besides that, the attempt to smash temptation was really nothing but a crude attempt to straitjacket yourself. You weren't putting temptation out of reach so much as trying to put your reach short of temptation. It betrayed your own cowardice, your weakness, your knowledge that you couldn't be trusted.

The problem with quitting, the real bitch of it, was that it was never finished. You could never finally, absolutely give something up, once and for all. It was a cliché, he knew, but it was true: you could only quit a day at a time. You could refrain today, and you'd still have to refrain all over again tomorrow, and keep on refraining every day after that. Not-doing was fundamentally different from doing. With most decisions in life, you had to choose between A and B, and no matter how excruciating the decision might be to make, once you'd made a choice, there was no going back; the first step down path A rendered path B a what-if dream. But the path back to drinking was never overgrown; it was always there, a single step away. Temptation was always with you, and with temptation, deliberation was always possible, and with endless deliberation, succumbing to temptation was, in the long run, almost inevitable. How could it be otherwise? Only succumbing could put an end to deliberation. However forcefully you gave something up, the giving-up could never make the giving-in impossible. But however feebly you gave in, the giving-in *did* make the alternative—the giving-up, the *not* giving in, the *never* doing it again—impossible. The scales in this dilemma were imbalanced. You were beaten before you began.

And once you were beaten, why not wallow in it? Why not indulge? Giving in twice was hardly any different than giving in once. A bottle was no worse than a swallow, a bender no worse than a bottle. All defeats were equal.

On the thirteenth day Garnet joined Richard on the patio. Garnet drank coffee, Richard sipped tea.

Garnet was about to praise the backyard, the lovely view, then realized how foolish this would sound. And yet Richard must have found it beautiful too, in some way, even if only in memory. Why else would he sit out here every day?

Instead, because it seemed safer, he said, "Beautiful day."

Richard agreed heartily enough. "Though to be honest, I could do with

a bit more wind."

Garnet nodded sagely, then grumbled sagely, though in fact he didn't understand at all. Reminding himself that they had once been close friends, he forced himself to say, "I suppose a bit of wind feels nice on the face?"

Richard smiled brightly; his eyes almost opened. (Garnet felt guilty for ogling him, watching his every fluctuating expression, with a voyeuristic directness that would have been impossible with anyone else.) When Richard explained that, in fact, it was the texture that the wind gave to his environment, the way it highlighted everything it touched, filling in the world in rustling colours, he sounded almost apologetic—as if feeling the wind on his face had never occurred to him. "It makes the yard visible," he said.

Garnet hummed appreciatively. "I see what you mean," he said, then bit his tongue. "I mean, I understand. I never thought of it like that before."

"You don't have to do that, you know. Go out of your way to avoid making any reference to sight, or eyes, or light or darkness or colour. Or say 'monitor' when what you really mean is 'keep an eye on.' 'Be careful' instead of 'look out!'" Richard laughed in his whistling way, though he was frowning slightly. "It drives me crazy."

Garnet, embarrassed, closed his eyes and tried to hear the breeze.

The house seemed unnaturally silent. Yvonne stalked from room to room, registering the untidiness. Jimmy's blocks were still scattered all over the den floor. The parlour had not been dusted. In the foyer, the late afternoon sun exposed with forensic clarity the soap-streaks on the cedar floorboards. Upstairs, the clothes hamper was overflowing. The vacuum was not put away—an accident waiting to happen. The dishwasher was full of unwashed dishes. And Garnet was sitting outside with Richard.

She felt a flush of irritation, which she gave time to subside before sliding open the patio door. It was one thing if Richard, after a day's work, wanted to sit moping in the shadows. It was, she felt, quite another matter for Garnet, when the house was still in disarray and supper, by all appearances, was not even begun. She and Richard could both make noble

speeches about treating people as equals, but they *were*, after all, paying him to cook and to keep the house clean. That was what it came down to.

Garnet jerked upright in his deck chair when she opened the door—evidence of a guilty conscience, and proof that she was not being unreasonable.

"Hello, hon," said Richard. He seemed bashful too. They were like two teenagers caught smoking. She did not relish the role this cast her in: the taskmaster, the martinet—the adult. She could enjoy a nice cup of hot cocoa and a nice hot footbath at the end of a long day as much as the next person—but it should *be* the end of the day. And why not sit in the sun, while it was still up?

But all she said—all she had to say—was "Hello, dear. Hello, Garnet," and Richard was getting to his feet, mumbling, "I suppose I should go for my walk, while it's still warm." Garnet leapt up too, and went to fetch Richard's walking stick, though he must have known by now that Richard was perfectly capable of getting it himself—as long as it was put back in its proper place.

Yvonne and Garnet stood on the front step and watched as Richard made his way down the path and along the sidewalk.

"It's quite amazing, really," said Garnet softly, when Richard was almost out of sight behind the Tradwells' fat elms.

Yvonne did not disagree—though in fact she often felt that Richard could have expended more energy on keeping his spirits up than on solving little practical problems, like how to get his computer to read books out loud, or how to identify and distinguish between the different colours of his ties.

"He's an inspiration," she said, perhaps a little too pointedly.

"I guess I'd better get started on supper," said Garnet with false enthusiasm.

Yvonne, feeling generous again, said she could hardly wait.

"Retinitis pigmentosa," Richard reminded him.

It was the seventeenth day and Garnet had joined him again on the pa-

tio. The washer, dryer, and dishwasher were all running; the vacuum was put away; the meatloaf was in the oven. This afternoon there was a breeze.

"No, it wasn't painful. Nothing gradual is really painful. Or even really felt at all. Like watching the hour-hand of a clock. Watching yourself get older in the mirror. When we went to Taiwan a few years ago—well, it was before we had Jimmy—it was the middle of winter here and we told ourselves that we didn't mind the awful cold, that it would make us appreciate the heat over there even more, that the heat over there would feel good because of the contrast. But that's all nonsense. You might feel some relief at stepping out of the cold into the relatively warm airport, and after fifteen hours on a cramped plane of course you feel some relief at stretching your legs again out in the sun. But you don't feel anything at all about the longer, large-grained transitions. And after an hour in the sun you'd kill again for a little air-conditioning . . . I don't mean I'm unhappy like this. Only that I didn't feel it happen. And that I don't even really feel it anymore—or don't feel, anyway, the difference between this and what I used to be. You only feel the sharpest transitions. I guess that's just another way of saying that you get used to anything."

Richard blushed. These thoughts had all come out extemporaneously, and only in their articulation did he realize how much time he must have spent going over them in his head; but he was aware of just how prepared this little speech sounded, and he was embarrassed.

"And I suppose it helps," said Garnet, "that you haven't had to completely change your life. You've still got your work, your family. You still go for your walks."

Richard's embarrassment gave way to irritation. Garnet had missed the point; he wanted to turn his detached philosophical meditation into a heart-warming hymn of resilience, a bit of homespun inspirational rhetoric—the same sort of God-only-gives-us-tests-He-knows-we-can-pass treacle that the well-meaning well-wishers at church were always pouring into his ears.

"Oh Christ," he said, "but I hate my walks. Nothing changes, there's nothing to see. A walk for a blind man is like riding in an elevator—only requiring more concentration. I only do it to placate Yvonne, who thinks to

not be physically moving is to be feeling sorry for yourself."

Then he felt awful, less for thinking this than for saying it out loud, and saying it to, of all people, the man who washed his family's underwear. He was angry at himself for having blurted it out, but angrier still at Garnet for having heard it.

"But really I'm very lucky," he added quickly. "She's a saint, of course, to put up with me like this."

And his anger expanded to include Yvonne.

Yvonne decided there was no reason to cancel the Hopnik Family Visit.

"There's plenty of room. We'll just have to move Garnet to the basement for the weekend."

Richard felt uneasy, but did not object. In the end, Garnet suggested the room change himself.

"After all, they're family. I'm . . ." He did not finish the sentence, but smiled self-deprecatingly.

He also had suggestions about what to feed them. But Yvonne demurred. She did not want to give the cousins the impression that she and Richard had employed a private chef. Instead, she thought it would be best if they presented Garnet as an old school friend of Richard's who was staying with them for a while to lend a hand around the house.

"We'll probably just order in. It'll be easier for everyone. KFC, Pizza Hut—it's almost tradition. They're not fancy eaters, you see. And their kids can be really rather fussy. It would just be a waste of your talents, Garnet. And we'll eat out, I'm sure, at least once or twice. Of course you're more than welcome to join us—if you're not too busy."

As the weekend approached, Garnet looked around for things that would keep him busy. He didn't have to look any further than his new room in the basement, which had a funny smell, somewhere between mouldy and pungent, like the smell of something decomposing.

"Aren't you drinking?" they asked.

He smiled and shook his head. "No thanks."

"Aren't you eating?" they asked.

"I think I'll get a start on these dishes," he said.

"What dishes?" they asked.

When Garnet was out of the room, Yvonne surveyed her two families and sighed contentedly, "Now isn't this wonderful?"

Lleanne cornered Yvonne in the hallway, on her way to the bathroom.

"Tell me," she said. "Richard's friend."

Yvonne pursed her lips solemnly but said nothing.

"Come clean. He's helping *you*, or you're helping *him*?"

Yvonne shrugged, and twisted her mouth in an expression meant to convey the ineffable complexities of the human heart.

"I *knew* it," said Lleanne triumphantly. "But isn't that typical Yvonne. Even when we were kids you were bringing home limping raccoons, birds with broken wings . . ."

Yvonne, who was made uncomfortable by direct praise, excused herself, and pushed past her cousin into the bathroom. She looked at herself in the mirror, waiting for the blush to fade from her cheeks.

"Ego," she whispered. "Vanity."

Lleanne was still waiting for her when she came out. "What was he, what was it, what did he . . ."

Yvonne shook her head, squeezed her cousin's arm at the elbow. "Let's just say that he's had more than his share of difficulties in this life." This, she felt, was safe enough; it was true of most people. But Lleanne had ideas of her own.

"I knew it," she hissed. "It's *alcohol*, isn't it. I spotted it right away, first thing this afternoon, when he wasn't drinking."

Yvonne was too astonished by this striking echo of her own suspicions to deny or even cast the proper pall of doubt on it.

"You're brave," said Lleanne, with almost accusatory vehemence.

"You're almost *too* good, you know that?"

For a moment, as a little warm bubble swelled in her chest—it was a feeling like self-empathy, as though she were seeing into herself from outside—Yvonne felt that her cousin's assessment was fundamentally correct.

Sometimes Garnet caught himself counting the days like some schmuck in AA. But that was just setting yourself up for a fall. It might have been true that the longer you went without a drink the greater the incentive to keep going—or rather, the greater the disincentive to start from scratch, to set the clock back to zero. But this disincentive had limits; its growth followed the drooping arc of diminishing returns. That first week was always a greater victory than the fourth week; the fifth day was more impressive than the entire fifth month. And yet, conversely, the longer you'd been dry, the more cataclysmic the eventual relapse seemed. Two fingers of Glenfiddich after a year of sobriety was ten times the tragedy that a whole bottle after one week was. The longer you'd been on the wagon, the harder you fell off it.

To count the days was like looking down the side of a mountain to see how high you'd climbed; it only made you dizzy.

Yvonne took up the challenge of having a recovering alcoholic under her roof as she took up every challenge: with gusto. She made a weekly search of Garnet's room while he was chauffering Jimmy to baseball practice. (Jimmy could be asked quite frankly if Garnet had stayed at the field the whole time.) Aside from the appalling stink of b.o. (she knew all too well from her work how addicts neglected hygiene), she found nothing but an empty flask, which was disappointing only because she was no longer seeking confirmation of her theory. She could hardly confiscate the thing, so she instead took to checking that it stayed empty—sniffing it whenever Garnet was out of the house. But she also prevented, as much as possible, his leaving the house by himself. She had him call in his grocery list to Partridges, and picked up the orders herself on her way home. She and Patricia Hedley's mother arranged

to drive the girls to jazz on alternate evenings. She transferred a few of the kids' weekly chores—"upstairs bathroom," "cut grass (summer)," "garbage to curb (Thursday)"—to Garnet's column. (If he had asked her about this, she was prepared to say that it was only temporary, until the kids finished the school year; but he didn't ask.)

Of course, he didn't even need to leave the house to get drunk. She considered a lock for the liquor cabinet, then simply getting rid of the liquor altogether; but this would have gone against her sense of fair play. To remove the temptation completely would be to side-step the issue, to betray the spirit of the challenge. Besides, she subscribed to the hydraulic theory of self-control: if the barriers to one's vice were built too strong, the pressure would build to an explosion. (This was why, she believed, jails only increased sex crimes.)

So instead of locking it away, she monitored the liquor. She could think of no inconspicuous way to mark the bottles' levels or booby-trap their lids to show if they'd been opened: a bit of hair or thread pasted across the cap would not withstand Garnet's dusting. (She still insisted, though without special emphasis, that he dust the bottles.) In the end she had to be satisfied with measuring the levels with a ruler; after a week she knew by heart all forty-two measurements, to the millimetre.

This was not exactly an ideal solution; Garnet could easily replace what he took with water. Accordingly she also kept an eye out for dilution, scrupulously recording the particular hue of each bottle, and always at the same time of day, so that lighting conditions were consistent. It was less than rigorously scientific, she knew. But between this and the ruler, she felt reasonably sure that she would catch him out eventually.

In a cupboard in the pantry, behind a box of good silverware, Garnet found a stash of junk food: nachos, licorice, chocolate bars—some of them half eaten. He agonized over whether to tell Richard and Yvonne. He knew how serious eating disorders were. On the other hand, aside from her lack of appetite at supper, her frequent "snacks" at her friends' places, there was nothing obviously wrong with Milly. She was thin, perhaps, but not conspicu-

ously so for her age. But he was not a doctor, and the fact remained that she was hiding food—that she was ashamed of her appetite.

The real reason he was hesitant to go to Richard and Yvonne was that he did not want Milly to feel he had betrayed her. She was fond of him, he felt, in her awkward, inexpressive way. They had achieved a kind of playful, teasing, supercilious rapport. When her brother or one of her parents said something unintentionally risible at the table, it was towards Garnet that her eyes rolled. He did not want to put her trust at risk, he supposed; but even more simply, he did not want to rat her out. He could just imagine the sort of grim, patient, "understanding" talk that Yvonne would subject her to. (Richard, as usual, would be present, but would say nothing.) The mere thought made Garnet itch.

So in the end he decided it would be better if it came from him. He was blunt, but affable: "I found your stash."

For a moment she looked at him blankly—or rather, with disdainful incomprehension—then snorted with derisive laughter.

"That's *Mom's*," she said. "She has binge tendencies, if you know what I mean." She spoke dismissively, as though already forgetting what they were talking about; but Garnet could see that she was overjoyed to share this vicious secret. "I don't think she purges, though. Hey, do you want to play chess?"

Garnet twisted his watch. "Are you done all your homework?"

Garnet was not surprised to hear that Jimmy was having a hard time getting the kids in his class to come to his birthday party. He knew how Jimmy asked for anything: with a rising wail of hopelessness—"Can I have a *sandWICH?*"—as though certain in advance of being turned down. So Garnet had a man-to-man with him one evening while they played catch in the backyard. He advised assertiveness. "The other kids, they can smell weakness. Tell them they're coming to your party—or else."

Somehow, it worked. More than a dozen boys and girls showed up, bearing presents. Garnet made a cake. The kids played hide and seek.

Jimmy tore into his swag with a joy indistinguishable from gloating: "Look, Garnet! Look what I got!" Everything went well until one of the gifts turned out to be a duplicate and Jimmy punched the giver in the arm. The boy, a quivering little sausage of a drama queen, cried. (Garnet decided his next man-to-man with Jimmy would be on the topic of how to choose your friends.) The boy cried and Yvonne sent everyone home. (Milly rolled her eyes at Garnet with malicious glee.)

After a minute alone with Jimmy, Yvonne confronted Garnet in the kitchen: "I don't believe what my son has been telling me."

Garnet defended himself: "That was a figure of speech—a piece of rhetoric—a joke. I told him to *say*, for example, 'Come to my party or I'll punch you.' I did *not* tell him to actually punch anyone, ever."

Yvonne only glowered. Her gaze—those wet, pitying, beady eyes—somehow had the power to make him feel very small. (That much, at least, was spared Richard, he thought.) Garnet wanted to point out that it had worked: look how many kids had come! But since they had been sent away after forty-five minutes, he didn't think this argument would hold much water.

"I'll have a talk with him, if you want."

"That, Garnet, is just precisely what we don't want. We don't want you having any more talks with either of our children behind our backs. You're not their uncle. You're . . ."

"All right," he said, "I understand."

"Richard and I are in agreement on this. Do you understand?"

So he had to repeat himself, like a child being made to speak up, to echo some moral lesson: "I understand."

As punishment, the birthday cake was thrown out, uneaten.

They took Jimmy into the parlour to talk. It rankled Yvonne that they could not comfortably reprimand their own children in their own house without feeling self-conscious. It was not that they had anything to hide: she knew that she and Richard were better than average parents. It was simply that

some conversations were properly held in private. There were things you did not say in the grocery store, things you did not say before company, things you did not say in front of the servants. There was a time and a place for everything. Home was supposed to be the place for these things. Home was a place you could raise your voice without thought for who might overhear. Home was a silence in which you could freely express your thoughts.

But it was, she now saw, impossible to have someone in your home and still feel that it was your home. A home could not survive a pair of alien ears.

Richard hated having company. It was as if the more people they brought into their house, the less it was their house; the more people present, the less real his own presence became. He was lost in crowds, forgotten. He could not mingle the way he used to, by affably buttonholing whoever happened to be standing silent or alone, because whoever stood silent was by definition invisible to him. He had to sit back and wait for others to buttonhole him. The enforced passivity was painful enough; but the larger the crowd, it seemed, the more he was left to himself. In small groups, little dinner parties, someone could always be counted on to feel responsible or sorry for him, but with larger groups, the responsibility was diluted. The irony, that his blindness rendered him invisible, was not lost on him. It reminded him of playing "peekaboo" with the kids when they were much younger: by covering their eyes, they had made themselves disappear.

Large gatherings also inevitably centred around the children: at Christmas and birthdays the adults would sit around in a circle and complacently watch the children's antics like it was television. It was at these times, in his role as a father, that he felt his disability most keenly. At the opening of presents he felt especially useless. Jimmy, just turned eight, understood it was no use to cry "Look, Dad!" Instead, he now called for Garnet's attention. Not because Garnet was more fun, or funny, or likeable, or better with children; but simply because he had attention to give. Milly, at twelve, no longer cared if her father came to her dance recitals or not. At the dinner table, he sometimes heard her and Garnet giggling, and had no idea why.

Now, it seemed, his children's attitude towards "Dad's friend" had moved beyond "Look, Garnet!" Now they were going to him to learn how to catch a baseball. Going to him for help with their math homework. Going to him for advice. There was no sense to any of this: Richard could still throw a ball; as an architect his grasp of trigonometry was, he should think, considerably firmer than a cook's; he knew a thing or two about the world, about life, about people and their capacity for cruelty—and besides, wasn't he their father? Only a child could make the connection between being sighted and being someone to confide in.

Thus Richard assured himself that it was not stung pride or hurt feelings that prompted him to agree to Jimmy's grounding, but a calm and fatherly impulse to correct the boy's fuzzy thinking. And, as he made clear, while Yvonne spoke to Garnet in the kitchen, it was not so much because Jimmy had hit another boy. What distressed him, he said, was that Jimmy had gone to Garnet for help.

"Don't you know, sweetheart, that you can come to me for anything? You can always come to your father. Garnet isn't your father. He isn't even family. He isn't even anything. Do you understand?" But the boy only sniffled, and could not be made to understand anything.

On the forty-seventh day, when Garnet found half a packet of cigarettes in Milly's sock drawer, he took them directly to Richard. After dinner, her parents took her into the parlour for a talk. But less than five minutes later she came into the kitchen, seemingly unperturbed, looking for dessert.

"How'd it go?"

She twitched a shoulder: the most economical expression of indifference possible.

She'd made a full confession. The cigarettes were not hers, of course; she was hiding them for Patricia. But Milly Lapley knew her mother well enough to know that innocence was, in her book, the only unforgivable crime: perfect little angels could not be improved, after all; they could never see the error of their ways; they were immune to salvation.

"I just wonder," she said with rich inflection, like someone narrating their own life-story, "how the hell she ever found the damn things."

Then she slammed the fridge and strode ostentatiously out of the kitchen.

His heart, Garnet was alarmed to discover, now beat faster when he heard the garage door open. Somehow, he had begun to dread Yvonne's coming home. She would inevitably find something left undone, or improperly done, or something that, through no fault of her own, she had neglected to tell him to do. The astounding thing, the thing he would not have thought possible, was that he wanted not to disappoint her. From time to time he caught himself wanting actually to please her, to exceed her expectations. He supposed that words of praise, some tangible sign that a job had been done well, was, like privacy, a basic human need. If that praise was scarce, it was only natural that you came to crave all the more powerfully the rare scrap of it thrown your way. It was, at root, a desire for completion, for closure. He could judge a floor well-mopped by its lustre, a load of laundry well-cleaned by its warmth and scent. But most of his duties lacked any such clear-cut conclusion. Only a casual compliment could testify to a garage well-tidied; only a clean plate could testify to a meal well-cooked.

It had been much the same at the restaurant. He could not stay quarantined in the kitchen like the aloof artist. He had to come out and ask his patrons how everything had been. He craved at least that much feedback. It was precisely that interaction, that reckoning, that verdict that had made having his own shop, after all those years of waiting, so satisfying. In other people's kitchens you were chained to your stove, and toiled in a fog of insignificance, a blind cog in a machine you never learned the function of.

It had been no different with his patrons, really, than it was with Yvonne. He had had no more faith in the refinement of their palates than he had in the wisdom of her whims. But when you could not choose your own judge, you could only seek their approval—no matter how fickle, how arbitrary, how worthless their judgement might be.

It was important that he remain honest with himself. The fact was, one drink wouldn't hurt. Indeed, it would probably do him good. There was after all such a thing as underdoing something, which could be just as bad, just as unhealthy as overdoing it. A teetotaller was, in his way, just as despicable as a lush—he'd seen how the Lapleys' guests looked at him. Yvonne herself seemed to be pushing him to drink, and not just in the indirect way of making his life miserable. A drink, one drink, a single drink a week—every Sunday for example, while they were at church, if need be—that wouldn't hurt anyone.

But he knew, too, that he had to be on guard against malleable resolutions. One drink every Sunday was an easy enough resolution to make on Sunday; by Tuesday, it might seem more sensible to take that weekly drink on Tuesday. This was not breaking a resolution, but only fine-tuning one. Thus "never" became "never more than one at a time," or "never before six o'clock," or "never before midnight," or "never when I have an important obligation the next day," or "never in front of the customers," and so on and so forth; and by switching from one of these resolutions to another, depending on the time of day or the day of the week and the needs of the moment, you could effectively change "never" to "whenever"—without ever actually giving in.

Still, he thought, *one* drink wouldn't hurt.

On Sunday, while the Lapleys were at church, Garnet decided to make the call. He was going to call from the parlour, but then felt self-conscious; the foolish idea entered his head that Richard and Yvonne had tapped the line. He went into the kitchen, where he felt less vulnerable, and lifted the receiver—but hung up when it occurred to him that maybe he shouldn't make long-distance calls without first asking permission. It wasn't a matter of the cost: he fully intended to leave a note and a few dollars after the fact—but that would be *after* the fact. They had, when he first moved in, encouraged

him to make himself at home; but then they had also promised him unrestricted access to Richard's old Ford and every second weekend off. He did not want to take any privileges for granted. It was a question of policy, not of permission. They would never actually prohibit him from using the phone —that would not fit with their idea of themselves as good employers. Nor would they want him to ask outright. Rather, the correct thing to do, he supposed, would be to disguise the request as an offhand comment—"I thought I might make a couple calls later tonight, if no one needs the phone"—so that Richard and Yvonne could feel they'd had a chance to refuse, and yet be spared the embarrassment of being treated like the sort of people who might refuse. Or was he being ridiculous? Let them *be* upset, if his calling his wife without their permission was the sort of thing that could upset them.

He picked up the phone again; then, under the momentum of his decision, hung it up and returned defiantly to the parlour—surely the more comfortable room to make a call from.

He sat with the phone in his lap and looked around the room—at the streaky windows, the smudged floorboards, the bottles he should have been dusting.

No, he couldn't call, not yet. Because what did he have to say? What did he have to show for all these weeks of humbling himself, rebuilding himself, proving himself? He could not even clean a room properly.

He jumped out of his seat at the sound of the garage door. He did not want to be caught in the parlour, of all rooms, when the Lapleys came in.

She no longer hid trash around the house, or put dirt under the throw-rugs, or counted the good silver, or absentmindedly left money out on the foyer table or stuffed down between the cushions of the chesterfields. Garnet could, it seemed, be counted on to clean a house properly, and without stealing. But so far her campaign to expose his real vice had failed too. The bottles went untouched even in the kitchen, even in the artful disarray they were left in by Doctor Hambridge and his wife (who at least had not disappointed her, more than living up to their reputation around town as a couple

of sodden fishes). She could only assume that he felt too vulnerable, too closely watched, with all of them in the house. So she decided to give him some time alone.

Each year, when the kids finished school, they rented a cabin at Penton Lake for a weekend. She told Garnet they would be back Monday, though she planned to contrive some excuse to come back a day early. Her only fear was that he might go out to a pub somewhere to get drunk, and she would never know it. So she told Avery Tradwell that she and Richard were doing a bit of late spring cleaning, and asked her to pop in Saturday morning to get first pick of a few lawn ornaments and yard tools they'd decided to get rid of. She could explain later that she had, at the time of this invitation, quite gotten her weekends mixed up; and Avery, an incorrigible gossip, could be counted on to tell her how the cook had looked when he came to the door—*if* he came to the door—and to know a hangover when she saw one.

In all the excitement of putting her plan into action, Yvonne forgot to make the cabin reservation. All that was left was a musty little two-bedroom cottage half a kilometre away from the lakefront, and hemmed in by giant spruces that blocked out the sunlight completely.

"You don't understand," she assured the officious adolescent who sat behind the counter at the resort office, and who had been hired, no doubt, for his unwillingness to think for himself. "We need to be on the lake. My husband is blind."

After a reluctant call to his manager, they were given a larger cabin overlooking the lake at no extra charge.

Now, thought Yvonne with bitter satisfaction, Richard could sit slumped on the deck all day, reading Dostoevsky in braille, listening to the monotonous splash of the water, and never have to rouse himself for a nice walk down to the beach with his family.

Garnet thought of what Leah had said: "You must really hate your life, the way you keep punching holes in it."

He was hot and dirty; he was prickly with sweat and covered with grass clippings; he had dog shit on his hands. The neighbourhood dogs used the Lapleys' front yard as their public toilet; just yesterday the Tradwell woman had come around with her mutt, apparently for that express purpose. And Yvonne, of course, had left instructions to scoop up all their droppings before running the lawn mower.

This life, maybe, was one that could do with a few holes punched in it. But his old life, the one he was fighting to get back? A beautiful wife, a business of his own: why would anyone want to escape that? It was true that running a restaurant had involved a certain amount of dealing with shit; but opening his own shop had been the great success of his life—why else would he have kept the old linoleum tile as a memento, a trophy? And if sometimes he and Leah fought, or said nasty things to one another, or had to sleep in separate beds to keep from strangling each other, what they had was still preferable to what a lot of other couples put up with—the Lapleys, for instance. He would rather live hot and cold than a lifetime of tepid. A marriage was not, after all, a business contract. You tied yourself to another person to make the best of both your individual failings. It was like conserving body heat, at night, in the cold, by clinging to another body: their loss was your gain, and vice versa. A married couple was an arch: a strength made of two weaknesses propped up against one another. If you couldn't find anything to hate about your spouse, you'd attached yourself to the wrong person—to a self-supporting structure, to a column.

He stood in the parlour, shit on his hands, and lifted the top from a decanter of Scotch.

It was a diving competition. For this, for once, Richard was the perfect judge: Whoever made the least noise entering the water was the winner. He could feel rocks on the bottom and the water here was perhaps a little shallow for diving, but Richard said nothing to the children; he wanted to be the fun dad again for a while, the dad who splashed around in the lake with his kids. Not the dad who was always telling his kids what not to do. Not the

frail, disabled, paranoid dad who couldn't trust them not to hurt themselves —because he couldn't trust himself.

"Nine point *two*," Richard cried deliriously, then waited for the sound of Jimmy resurfacing to repeat the score to the new record-holder.

The smell repulsed him. That hadn't changed; he had never cared for the taste. It had never been thirst that drew him to drink, but the promise of drunkenness. He was not after annihilation; he wanted oblivescence. That was what Leah didn't understand. The blackouts—which happened rarely enough anyway—were not empty blanks. They were simply stretches of time inaccessible to memory. He didn't drink to erase his life or to escape it, but to forget it for a while. Forgetfulness was not the absence of consciousness, but the absence of care. You didn't stop enjoying yourself just because you wouldn't remember the joy later. On the contrary, you could enjoy yourself more fully, more freely—like in a dream you knew you would wake from. The dream dissipated, but you were still left in the morning with the sense of having just been someplace else, of having returned from somewhere far away.

As Garnet reached out unhurriedly for a tumbler, he remembered something that Richard had told him one night in their dorm room, during their first few weeks together, when they were still getting to know each other—that is, still impinging themselves on one another by getting drunk and making outrageous, aggressively vulnerable, drunken confessions.

"You know when you wake up in the middle of the night—in some strange room, maybe, in a hotel or in someone else's house—and for a few seconds, lying there half-paralyzed in the dark, you can't remember where you are, or even who you are?"

"Sure," Garnet said, "I guess so."

"I sometimes think those are the happiest times of my life."

He hadn't heard the garage door.

"Garnet?"

At the sound of Richard's voice he froze. *But they're not back till tomorrow*, his mind kept insisting like a petulant child.

"Garnet, are you here?"

Richard's steps receded as far as the kitchen, then began to come closer. His heart flopped in his chest like a fish on dry land.

Richard came closer, muttering something about an accident, Yvonne at the hospital . . . "Garnet—are you home?"

Then Richard was there, standing in the doorway. Their eyes met. But Richard, of course, couldn't see him. His eyes were dead; his pupils vacant holes. If Garnet didn't move, if he didn't even breathe, Richard could not know he was there. He might smell the open bottle, but he would never see him.

Because he was invisible. He wasn't there at all. Garnet closed his eyes —and disappeared into thin air.