

FRAGMENTS OF A PAINTED EGGSHELL

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"I'm not sure what you mean," Paula said, leafing through the immense stack of letters that had somehow come to be covering her kitchen counter. "Which old postcard are you talking about?" She tapped and aligned the envelopes, making them seem orderly.

"Well, any of them...but there is one specific one I'm thinking of." Mark's voice sounded hollow. He did insist on using that ancient heavy-handset phone, bought at some long-ago yard sale. He'd gotten it after the divorce, good riddance, and Paula had replastered the spot on the kitchen where it had hung. She wore a headset, and could move around as she cooked dinner. Mark had never been able to recognize the simplest solutions to things.

She started to open the letters with the cleaver, but quit when she saw how much red bell pepper she was getting all over everything. Besides, she should really finish chopping the pepper before she got to anything else.

"A postcard from France." She wandered from the kitchen into her office to look for a letter opener.

"Yes, that's right." Only something really important would make him call outside their usual schedule for sharing out Rue's time. So what was it about the postcards Mark had sent her while they were still dating that made her ex-husband desperate enough to talk to her?

"I just threw all that old stuff in boxes," she said, distracted by the Billable Accounts file displayed on her computer screen. She plopped down in her work chair, throwing the stack of letters into the overflowing "To Do" box on the floor, and started looking through the active accounts. "I wasn't in much of a mood to be too orderly. I don't even know if I still have any of it."

"You have it. Could you please take a look?"

"Sure, sure...." There were some extra hours to be billed on the Hammersly house -- Paula Pursang Construction had completely redesigned their moldings three times now. Easy money, but a pain in the ass....

"Paula, are you paying attention to what I'm saying?" Mark's voice wasn't angry, just tired.

"Of course I am. It's somewhere in the basement. I'll just have to put a bucket over my head to protect myself against the Tergiversator, and go down there."

He laughed. He didn't want to, but he did. "Just take a position when you go down there, and hold it."

The Tergiversator was a creature who hid under the basement stairs and lived on equivocation. Paula couldn't remember how it had first been born -- it might have been from a crossword puzzle clue -- but it had a firm place in Pursang family mythology.

"That never works. Eventually you get an itch and have to scratch something, and...."

"Just find it, Paula. Please."

She knew exactly where that damn postcard was. It was in a cardboard box under a stack of heating ducting and vent grates, in a corner of the basement behind the furnace. If the basement flooded, as it used to every spring, the box would be soaked, leaving its contents to rot and get covered with mildew. But she had installed a sump pump and a dehumidifier last fall and the damn improvements worked too well. The basement was now dry enough to create mummies.

And she did remember that postcard in particular. It had been an antique one he bought from some street kiosk, showing the Palace of the Popes in Avignon in the 1920s. He wrote a note indicating that he had fallen through some sort of time warp, but was hoping the magical time-delay stamp he bought from the gypsy would ensure that the card was delivered to her eighty years later...and that he still thought about her with every new thing he saw.

It was all very sweet, but she had spent that summer sleeping with someone else, a fellow carpenter on a job, so didn't take any of it too seriously. Still, she had put the card up on her refrigerator, where it had stayed many months amid the torn-out cartoons and orange-crate-label refrigerator magnets until Mark came back from Europe and she found herself engaged to be married to him.

"So why do you want it?" she asked. "Just tell me."

"It's Miriam."

"Oh. Miriam." Mark's new wife was named Miriam-Selina. Irritated by the compound name, Paula privately called her Miracle of Science. She had breasts like a female impersonator's. They couldn't be real.

"Now, Paula. If you're going to be like that, I don't have to tell you anything." Mark wouldn't have been human if his ex- wife's jealousy over his new wife hadn't, secretly, pleased him.

"All right, all right. So, Miriam."

"Miriam...well, we haven't been together very long. She wants our relationship to be of longer standing."

"Wait a while," Paula said. "It will be."

"No, no. She wants it to be longer now."

She froze for a moment, shocked at the depths of his betrayal. "And you want to steal my past, weld it on to hers? Make it seem like you and she have had a real life together? Buy a memory transfer so that you remember sending that postcard to her, and she remembers getting it. It'll cost you, you know. That sort of thing's not cheap." The emotion was too sudden, too strong, for her to even identify it as anger or grief. "So you just call me up, ask me casual-like to give up my past --"

"Paula --"

"Sure we screwed it up, lost it. It still means something. Do you think it doesn't?"

"I'm not doing this to hurt you, Paula."

"Then why?" Anger was easier.

His voice, when he finally spoke, was so quiet she could barely hear it. "Why don't you ask Rue?" And then he hung up, dropping the heavy receiver from the primitive phone hook once before finally managing to cut the connection.

Paula pulled her headset off and threw it across the room. Then, with exaggerated care, she hit a couple of keys and printed out an invoice on the Hammersly job. At least she'd gotten something done.

She sensed rather than heard the back door closing. Rue always came home silently, trying to seep in, as if her mother, dim as some senescent household pet, would conclude that she had really been there all along.

Paula had learned not to say hello to her when she first came in. It took Rue a while to adjust after coming into her mother's carefully built house, even though she had grown up in it. A little prowling around, a few minutes' ceremonial examination of the contents of the refrigerator -- anything she took out she immediately put back in -- and she would be calm enough to deal with.

"Hi, Mom," Rue said when Paula came out of her office. She sat hunched at the ceramic-tile counter, still wearing her ankle-length black coat, its shoulders wet with spring rain. Her hair, for a wonder, was combed and fresh, falling past her shoulders in soft dark curls. Until a few days before, it had been deliberately ratty and feral-smelling, like that of some distraught mad poetess. It drove Paula crazy. For years she had regarded that hair as a sort of joint possession. Rue had finally dissuaded her.

"Hello." Paula started getting the raw materials for dinner out of the refrigerator. The coat, worn tightly buttoned in the bright warm light of the kitchen she had worked so hard on, disturbed her. It was of textured leather, and sucked in close above Rue's hips, then flared out, ending up pleated at the tips of her boots. How much must such a thing have cost? It was dizzying. Rue was only fourteen.

"You know, Arnie, our sosh prof, is such a whack job." Rue rapped her gloved knuckles on the counter. Somehow, as Paula cracked eggs, they actually managed to have a discussion of sorts about Arnold Renborn, Rue's Sociological Sciences teacher. It helped that Paula honestly agreed with her daughter's assessment that the man was a fool.

Then, a long silence. "Mom, there's something I have to talk about with you."

Paula held tightly onto the egg bowl and set it clumsily on the counter. Without looking at Rue, she took all the eggshell halves and nested them before throwing them down the disposal.

"What is it, honey?"

"I --" Rue swallowed. This was bad. Usually she just dropped her news on the table, take it or leave it, and was gone before Paula could react.

"I got a notification from Miriam-Selina Kaman's lawyer yesterday. I checked it with my legal program -- seems okay. I won't actually sign up to anything without consulting our lawyer directly, of course." Rue's voice was desperately practical. "Miriam-Selina Kaman, her husband Mark Pursang, her cousin Ella Trumbull, and Trumbull's husband Winston Ortega are forming a family co-op, name as yet undetermined. There are four other kids and I've been invited to join."

"Oh." Paula felt like the guy in the joke who's had his head cut off but doesn't know it until he tries to nod. She wasn't going to nod. That was a nice bit of legalistic precision, sticking her father into the list simply as Mark Pursang, Miriam- Selina Kaman's husband. Fourteen. Rue was fourteen. Had Paula forgotten that? Had she forgotten that the joint-custody agreement let Rue make a decision when she reached that age?

"Oh, Mom, I know it's stupid and doesn't make any sense but...I don't know what it is. I look back and feel like I didn't have a childhood. Isn't that silly? You did the best for me and all but somehow it all sifted away...." Looking at her mother with those clear blue eyes she'd gotten from Mark, Rue started to cry. "Oh no, oh no, never mind, I'll...oh, damn." She ran from the kitchen, still wearing her long coat buttoned as if she had never actually come into the house.

Paula continued to make dinner, even though it was clear Rue would not be eating it. She only half-watched the kitchen computer demonstrate the proper wrist technique for mixing her hollandaise and give her suggestions on resisting curdling. It noted that her burner was a little too hot, and reduced it for her. It also told her the pH was high. She thought about arguing with it, then added another squirt of lemon juice.

Rue had had a childhood. She just hadn't spent much of it with her mother. Paula remembered Rue lying on a couch. She was about five. The storms of the breakup were raging all around her, but she didn't see them. She stared off into space, seeing the entertainment channel pushed directly into her optic nerve. They'd selected quality programming for her, the last thing they managed to agree on. By age ten she had seen more than any adult in any previous era could possibly have experienced. With direct-experience feedback she'd probed beneath the seas and gone to the planets. Rue had run with dinosaurs and climbed the staircase of the DNA double helix.

This whole situation had already occurred in embryo. As she ladled the finished sauce over a piece of broiled mahi mahi, Paula felt like she was experiencing it again, only this time finally understanding it.

She had taken Rue on a picnic. It was a rare event, Paula had been working hard keeping her company from going under, but she had managed to get the hired wallboarders and tapers all set up, so that she was free for the afternoon. She and Rue drove out to a small town out in the woods and set their tablecloth up on the grass of a mown field, near a puddle left from recent rains. Waterstriders skittered nervously across the surface.

Paula caught a trembling of light on an unmown stalk of grass.

"Look, Rue! It's a Tiger Swallowtail." The incredibly large black-striped yellow butterfly calmly moved its wings as if displaying itself. "Rue...."

But Rue was off playing with her imaginary playmate. Not a playmate she'd thought up herself, Paula thought uncomfortably, but one generated by the communication system into which she was linked. Paula had let her choose the parameters herself for her tenth birthday. The system expert assistant had helped Rue through the selection menus, guiding her according to the programming tastes revealed over the previous five years, all of which it had on record. Demoizle, a clever, fuzzy blue bunny, was the perfect playmate for Rue. Unctuously polite to Paula, Demoizle drove her crazy.

"Rue...Demoizle. This butterfly is really quite something. You should both see it." Didn't her program selection have a lot of nature shows? Paula remembered selecting that. But that was mostly orcas eating sea lions and weird worms that lived in deep- sea volcanoes. Nothing so dull as a real butterfly doing nothing more interesting than resting. A slight breeze tossed the grass, but the Tiger Swallowtail clung in

its place, as if taunting her.

"Hey, Rue!" Demoizle called, hopping across the tall grass. "I think it's time for a...Sookie!" It rolled an image of the round candy across its back like a show-off basketball player. The candy glowed ruby red. Despite the fact that it was just sugar and a weird red-berry flavor nature had not had the wit to create, Paula found herself wanting to eat one.

"Hey, Mom, can Demoizle and I have a Sookie?"

"I was just setting out our lunch. How about --"

But Rue had already dug into the picnic basket, grabbed a handful, and was off, giggling. Perfect imaginary playmate or not, a lot of advertising came along with Demoizle's programming. Acquiescing to that was the only way Paula could afford the high-end connection. The system-end that was Demoizle monitored Rue, and could even call an emergency response team if necessary. It was the perfect companion. A lot of working parents depended on them. Plus, since the advertising was so powerful and relentless, Paula never had to worry about what Rue would want. She was able to supply all her daughter's needs by subscribing to the quick-purchase program the advertisers provided free.

Perhaps Demoizle was the form that the house computer took when it gave Rue legal advice. It had been a long time since Paula had checked the interface parameters. She sat down to eat. The fish was perfect, the sauce thick and rich. She wanted to throw her plate against the wall.

"Mom?" Rue's voice drifted tentatively into the kitchen. "Could you come in here?"

Rue lay already in bed, under her covers. Her leather coat, her gloves, her boots, all her armor was now neatly arranged on a chair, ready to be put on the next morning.

With her freshly brushed shining hair, which Paula now recognized as an ineffective gesture of peace, Rue looked impossibly young. Looked her age, in other words, a girl not yet a woman with her covers pulled demurely up to her neck. She had even pulled stuffed animals out of whatever cabinets they had been stored in, presents from some now-forgotten relatives of Mark's. Rue had never played with them, at least not since Demoizle's appearance. They didn't talk or move. They were just dumb lumps of stuffing and fake fur. The teddy bear's limbs stuck out stiffly, and he was as clean and fresh as if just that moment pulled from his box, and thus utterly unloved. Rue had put one arm around him, but she didn't really care about him. He had no name, for no imagination had ever been exerted to give him life.

"Could you tell me a story, Mom? It's been a long time...I'm kind of sleepy, it would be nice."

That was absurd. Fourteen was much too old for bedtime stories, and Paula was in no way used to telling them. Rue had always had her own entertainment to put her to sleep. The sound of it had always whispered under the door. Paula sat down on the edge of the bed. Rue was just giving her something to do, something that made her feel like a mother.

"A long time ago, there was a young woman named Sara. She lived in...Persia, and she wanted to get married. But every time she found a husband, an evil demon named Asmodeus killed her bridegroom on their wedding night."

It was odd, how that had floated up. Paula's grandmother had told her the story of Tobit when Paula had been just a little girl. She remembered the lingering almond-and-chocolate smell of the cocoa and the crispness of the overstarched sheets. It was an odd Bible story, but Paula could remember it, and that

was the important thing. She described how Tobias, whom she called Toby, came across the country with the archangel Raphael, married Sara, and drove off Asmodeus.

"Asmodeus was captured and imprisoned by Raphael in a deep dark prison. Raphael, you see, was Toby's guardian angel."

"What color were his feathers?" Rue, who didn't seem particularly interested in the story, managed to force the question out.

"Guardian angels don't have wings with feathers," Paula said, suddenly inspired. "They have brightly colored wings like butterflies." And Raphael, she hoped and prayed, had the yellow- and-black wings of a Tiger Swallowtail.

"That's good," Rue said. "I'll go to sleep now."

"Good night, dear."

Paula put the dishes in the washer, then noticed a brightly colored brochure lying on the counter. Superimposed on a photo of a handsome collection of Colonial Revival houses amid huge dark maples, a good-parts version of a New England town, was the title OUR NEW FAMILY. Oh, God, she thought. A brochure to advertise a family? Nice houses, though. She wouldn't mind living there herself.

Inside a bunch of happy children played some obsolete game, ring-around-the-rosie, or something. Their heads were thrown back in laughter and their long hair streamed like comets. One she recognized as Miriam-Selena's daughter Kali, another as a younger Rue, brought together here with the other children of the proposed family through the miracle of computer image creation. Their parents, Mark among them, watched adoringly. It was an image impossible to create with a single camera shot: everyone was in perfect focus. And Mark's teeth had been straightened.

Paula tore the brochure into tiny pieces, stuffed it down the garbage disposal, and went to bed.

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"Look, boss, you gotta understand," Virgie said. "Leo's a retired madman." She fluffed her hair, then set her hard hat back down on it.

Paula watched the level readout as the array of hydraulic jacks lowered the house down onto its newly poured concrete foundation. The house was small and ugly, sided in asphalt, and many of its windows were already cracked. She waited tensely for one of them to shatter, but the house just groaned once when it touched its new foundation. Her team checked the alignment of the sill, then pulled out the jacks and threw them on the truck. The damn things were rented, and not cheap.

"You mean he's retired from being mad?" Paula said, as she checked the foundation for cracks. She'd caught the pourer trying to stiff her on the percentage aggregate. You had to watch everything.

"Hardly. He seems to be more freelancing, if you know what I mean."

"I'm not sure...."

The scrofulous little house had been hauled out of a neighborhood of similarly abused old structures, its old foundation hole to be turned into a swimming pool for the house in front. But, Paula wondered as she

looked around at the warehouses, weeds, and broken concrete of this abandoned industrial area, why would the owner want to move it here? Unless he really was mad, in which case maybe taking the job hadn't been such a good idea.

Virgie divined her worry. "It's okay, it's just something he's set on doing. He wants a good restoration, he's got the bucks, we're all right."

Virgie was a kick-ass carpenter, but she didn't know squat about business. Still, she'd gotten a good contract with this Leo. Hidden somewhere under the asphalt shingles, the rotted window frames, the hideous wallpaper, was a Greek Revival house from 1838, and Leo was willing to pay to have it restored to its original glory.

"How'd you meet this guy, anyway?" Paula asked. Just behind the house was a rusted chain link fence. On the other side was a hill of garbage, mostly broken bottles. With luck, by midsummer weeds would have concealed the worst of it.

Virgie tugged at her belt, then shrugged. "I came to Leo to save my marriage."

"It didn't work." Paula didn't want to be harsh, but Virgie did tend to go on about it.

"Well, no...but that wasn't Leo's fault." Virgie squatted against the foundation wall, letting her hanging tools rest on the ground.

"Karl was always really busy. His job was important, he worked for that insurance company, they had a lot of cases all over, big ones. He was always away, and it was rough on the kids. Oh, he did his best. He'd tape-record bedtime stories for them while he was driving from the airport to his hotel, though sometimes he'd yell at other drivers and forget to edit it out. He would have them fax him their homework, and he'd talk it over with them. He had to be away on Marty's birthday, and I played a recording of him singing Happy Birthday...he really does have a good voice, you know. He sang in college. Marty just cried. You'd think kids nowadays would be the ones who realized how irrelevant whether he was actually physically there or not was. After all, they grew up with all this stuff. They're all interconnected."

It was when Virgie defended her ex-husband that things got bad. Paula wondered if Mark ever defended her actions to others. It was a weird thing wronged lovers did, and it always made friends furious.

"So I brought them to Leo. Leo's a memory man, I think you knew that. Implantation, design. Used to be a bigwig at some company, don't know how that fell out. This was pretty easy for him, he probably could have done it in his sleep. After all, all the stuff was there. He just had to turn it real. When he was done, Marty and Lisa remembered their dad being there for everything. Helping with the homework. Singing at the birthday party. He just grafted memories from when he was there over onto places when he wasn't. I didn't tell anyone about it. I was kind of ashamed, you know, going to a service to get the kids to love their father. Plus, it cost a bundle, most of what I saved."

This threw a new light on what had happened. Virgie's husband had soon requested a divorce, and kept the children. Their love for him was relatively uncomplicated, and thus easier for them to deal with, than their relationship with their not-entirely consistent mother.

Virgie looked up at her. "And you know how he let me know he wanted a divorce? By fax."

The restructuring of Leo's house proved to be a great job for Paula's team. They stripped the asphalt shingles off, and the rotting, ancient clapboards underneath. The huge, old sheathing boards were still in good shape, so they sealed them with house wrap and nailed up fresh clapboards. They sucked almost everything out of the inside of the house, finding corncob insulation between some of the studs.

Leo was a big, hairy bear of a man, sexily sloppy, gloomy. As they tore apart and rebuilt his house, he crouched in an upstairs room, beneath the flapping blue plastic tarp that had replaced an out-of-period dormer and did...well, whatever it was he did.

He only came down when the crew finished. On the third day, Paula was there when he did, making sure the tools were all arranged in the corner. Leo let them store on the site, saving her a good hour hauling the stuff off the truck and into her basement when she was through, so the least she could do was see that everything was out of his way.

"Why here?" she asked. "This area's a nightmare." They had already cleaned spray-painted graffiti off the foundations.

"This is where the house originally stood. I checked out the records. Here in Crow's Fields."

"This isn't Crow's Fields anymore."

"Gotta start somewhere." Leo heated up a can of soup, poured a glass of whiskey, ripped chunks of bread off and stuffed them into his mouth, all as if he was completely alone.

"Start what?"

"Getting this place to remember to remember what it once was." He sat down and slurped soup.

Once woodlands, swamp, farmer's fields -- now abandoned warehouses, shabby rubble-strewn lots, useless parking lots. Who the hell cared?

"You mean what it really was?"

He shifted in the beat-up old dining room chair he used at his kitchen table. It creaked perilously. Dried remnants of milk and cereal were still on the tablecloth in front of him, generations of them.

"You know, people give me a lot of shit about what I do, but when they need me, they come here." He scratched vigorously in his beard with blunt fingers. "I used to make a lot of money, you know. A lot of money. I was Engram's chief designer. But then, I dunno, I got afflicted with art." He paused over the initial vowel. "Aaht. Bad thing, for a professional. Interferes with your work something terrible. Regular people don't need memories that blaze like stained-glass windows. It just disturbs them."

Paula thought about Rue, her Rue, perambulating around those solemn houses in the woods, part of her new family. It was a fashion, of course, these colonies, far from malls and overlit parking structures. Did fourteen-year-olds think that kind of thing was cool now? Paula wondered how much it had cost someone to get them to think that, and what money stood to be made from it.

"So how do you choose memories that won't drive people crazy? How do you fit them in with everything else?"

Leo snorted. "You know, everyone can't just remember growing up in the Swiss Family Robinson. Rubs

up against things too hard. 'Hey, when I was a kid, me and my whole family, we lived in a tree'. Nope, no way. World's not ready for shit like that. Not yet, anyway. Once it gets accepted that it's all...well, not fictional, no one wants to admit that, but nonconsensus, then you can go with whatever past you want. Whatever you're comfortable with. After all, it formed your personality, so it has as much reality as it needs, right?"

Maybe it really was that simple. Maybe it would all be fine, and Rue would still remember that Paula was her mother.

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The hill seemed to go on forever. Paula slid her butt back on her seat and concentrated on keeping her back straight as she pedaled. Her lungs and her quads burned, but she kept the pace up, feeling her heart pounding in her chest. Keep the cadence high, push your stomach out when you breathe, she knew the damn rules...she cranked past an old farmhouse with a long view out across blue and green hills. An blossoming apple orchard stretched out behind it. She rubbed sweat off her forehead with the back of her glove, then tilted her helmet back forward. She'd pulled the bicycle out of the basement that morning, first time this spring. She'd been busy. It still had late-fall muck all over it, and she'd spent a good two hours cleaning, lubricating, adjusting. And now she was still trying to pretend to herself that she was just out on a long, get-the-kinks-out ride.

By the time Paula got to the top, she felt like throwing up. She pulled the top off her water bottle, drained it, then rested forward on her handlebars. The long view was gone here, on the top of the hill, blocked out by the huge maple trees.

It had been easy to find the land the family co-op was building on. It had been purchased recently, and they'd had to file a whole slew of building permits. She just wanted to take a look at it, that was all, and think about what she was going to do. Rue had her rights, but a mother had her rights too.

She pushed off and whizzed down the hill. The road was a little rough, but it was her reward for having climbed up. The delicate spring leaves blurred at the edges of her vision. She felt the cool air on every square inch of her skin, through the tight Lycra of her bib shorts and the synthetic of her jersey.

She hit the brakes. Cobham Road. That was it. If she'd managed to drift past it, she might have been able to keep herself from turning around and climbing back up to get to it. She coasted down the road. A dump truck, a Bobcat, a pile of four-by-fours. She was there. She leaned her bike against a tree and walked slowly up the dirt driveway, its route marked by stakes with fluorescent tape on the ends. They'd curved it neatly past two ancient beech trees. Ahead, the compound's five buildings looked even more like a small New England town in person than they did in the advertising brochure.

Rue's right to transfer here was all part of an affection- rights litigation so complicated Paula suspected that even her lawyer didn't completely understand it, though he spoke with hearty confidence about the minimally bad consequences for her. Affection was a valuable resource in divorce cases, on a par with property, and now that affection, through appropriate memory insertion, was transferable, it was subject to litigation like everything else.

On closer examination she could see that the largest of the structures was actually an old building, probably a barn, restored and rebuilt, rather than a fresh structure. No one had cut beams that size for a century and a half. She also recognized the blue panel truck labeled G. Maier & Miscellaneous Descendants, General Contractors. She'd worked with Betsy Maier on a job once. The Maiers had been working construction west of Boston for seventy-five years.

The whine of a portable radial arm saw came from inside the building. She poked her head around the edge of the dark door and waited for a pause in the work, so that the man cutting boards to length, who had every reason to believe he was alone, wouldn't be startled into sawing his hand off. He stopped, let out a breath, pulled his goggles up.

"Excuse me," she said.

He turned around. Saw dust and dirt around where his goggles had been gave him a strange, inverse-raccoon look. His eyes gave her the male up-and-down-and-back-up, as automatic as a blink reflex, and almost as meaningless. She wondered why they did it. It wasn't clear that they actually saw anything.

"Is Betsy working this job?"

"She is, but she isn't here today." Something in his attitude indicated that he had been glad no one was around, so that he could work without being bothered. He was, she saw, cutting crisp dentil moldings for a ceiling. He examined her again. Well, she was wearing Lycra shorts and a biking jersey. She had long legs and kept herself in shape, though those calves could use some work, she needed to bike more. It wasn't his fault if he looked. "Hey, you're...ah, Pursang, right? Yeah, I had a friend who worked a job with you. Harry Sims."

"I remember Harry." She leaned against the door jamb, folded her arms. "Good electrician." Harry drank too much, but if he and this guy were friends....

"Before lunch, anyway. So you here to bid, or what?" He had the complete outdoors version of the reddish-blond look: curly hair, blue eyes, good arms.

"Bid?"

"Yeah, on that stuff upstairs. The leftover job. He left us high and dry. Very unprofessional." He pulled off his gloves, extended his hand. She shook it. It was warm and firm, with just enough rough spots to let her know he really was who he appeared to be. "Nate Krivitsky. Why you don't go upstairs, take a look. I shouldn't say it, but Betsy's pretty desperate. She'll take any reasonable offer." He smiled. Maybe he would too.

Upstairs was a mess, piled boards, tools in no good order, stuff marked but not cut, stuff cut but not joined. There was clearly an elaborate scheme for a wall of cabinets and closets, a modern updating of Shaker work, but someone had abandoned it in mid-job. A couple of days ago or more: there was a thin coating of dust on everything.

Paula balanced herself on the frame of what was supposed to be a window seat that opened up into a chest and looked out of the window at the tree tops. When Rue was small, Paula had built her cave-like hiding places throughout the house, a couple directly into the walls and one above a landing on the stairs, so that Rue could peer out and see what was going on while remaining concealed. She had brought her friends over to play, and had worked out an elaborate series of knocks on the wall to let her mother know what sandwich she wanted for lunch. Fortunately, it was invariably peanut-butter-and-jelly, so Paula had never had to remember the code, though she pretended she did.

That hiding had been an innocent childhood game, though the glowing form of Demoizle had sometimes squeezed its way through the darkness, whispering, tempting Rue away from her own necessary self.

What a terrifying thing it was, Paula now thought, feeling the newly planed wood with her fingertips. What a terrifying thing that you couldn't leave your child to play underneath the kitchen counter in your own house and not expect the world outside to slide itself insinuatingly alongside her while you were making dinner.

Rue had decided to come here, in a desperate attempt to escape her own life. And here, in front of Paula, was the wood of which that life would be built. It didn't even occur to her to say no. She was a builder. She knew how to drive a nail straight into her own heart.

She hadn't gotten close enough to him to tell, but she hoped that Nate's body odor was sour. If he smelled good, she was in trouble. That, she didn't need.

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"But I could fill in the gaps in our life together," Paula said, her voice unsteady. "If what you say is true. If it's as if that other stuff isn't there at all." He'd asked her to sit down with him after her team got through for the day, have a couple of drinks with him. She shouldn't have done it. Now she felt weepy.

Leo glowered at her from the other side of the table, the candlelight catching the underside of his face and making him look more than ever like a bear. He grabbed the bottle and poured more rum into his glass.

"I didn't say it was like it wasn't there at all. It's just that those memories are constrained. The system keeps a complete record. It knows what was on and what Rue's autonomic response to it was -- pupil dilation, peripheral vasoconstriction, adrenal secretion. The system knows what that damn blue bunny of hers convinced her to do, and every word she said to it. Every whispered secret. Fifty percent of her waking life between the ages of five and fourteen is on record. We know what your daughter's memories of her childhood are because we put them there. And those memories are to real ones what green-painted concrete is to a garden. Nice and constrained, as close to a closed-form solution as you can get in this life. Slots for memory modules. We've been preparing for minds that accept synthetic memories for three generations now, and we didn't even know it."

"That's what I mean," she said. "Can I fill those places in with something else? Some memories of, I don't know, her and me? Doing something? Hanging around together?"

"Baking cookies, feeding the cows, watching Clem win in his age division at the county fair rodeo? Sure, we can do that. Give you the matching memories, make it just like it was real. Just like she was really your daughter."

Damn, she was weepy. She wiped her eyes with her knuckles. "But it wouldn't be real, would it? It wouldn't be natural."

He laughed, a sound like a slap. "Natural? What the hell is that, girlie? If you had a disease, would you refuse a shot of antibiotic because antibiotics aren't 'natural'? Dying, living a cripple. Those are natural."

"But she'd be someone else then. Not Rue."

"Contrary to what you might have heard," he said, "it's not actually that easy to change a personality by sticking in false past memories. The old personality wants to continue to exist somehow, like a vampire that won't be killed. The new memories get rearranged to justify the old personality. Sometimes people contract for memories that make them make sense to themselves. Gives them an excuse for being what

they are. Obnoxious, unpleasant, distant from those who love you? Create memories of mistreatment by your parents. It all makes perfect sense then."

His despair hung around him like a swarm of gnats, making him squint and squish up his face. He had real memories back there somewhere. He seemed very attached to them: an odd, regressive sentiment.

"We all do that," she said. "Freelance and untrained. We have to...."

"Bah," he said. "That's childish. All of it is. You're just avoiding the main issue. Tell me. Do you love your daughter?"

He barked the question and thrust his face into hers like an interrogator in a concrete-walled basement cell trying to extort a confession. His eyes were flat planes of meanness and for an instant she couldn't think of an answer, as if the reply was something complicated, easily screwed up.

"Yes!" She choked in a breath. "Yes, I love Rue. I love my daughter."

"Why?" His voice was suddenly gentle. The interrogator was sure he had broken his prisoner.

"Why? Because...I do." She looked away from his harsh gaze. A streetlight had been captured in the countless independent drops on the window. Each had its own vision of the light, and each was exactly the same.

He shook his head. "You love your daughter because you were programmed to. It's...natural." He lingered contemptuously over the syllables. "A complex preset behavior evoked by a releaser. Evolution, survival. Well, you know the drill."

"No," she whispered.

"The solution is obvious." He was remorseless. "Just eliminate her from your memories. That's the best way. After all, she's not much there in the first place, is she? What were you doing all that time while she having needs and desires squished through her eye socket with a caulking gun?"

Working, screwing whoever she found attractive, keeping the house working, getting food on the table....

"God damn you!" She grabbed the edge of the table, ready to turn it over on him, crush him underneath it like a detestable bug. It felt good. She hadn't broken anything in a long time.

He bellowed laughter, but skittered back out of his chair. The rum bottle shook, fell over, spilled expensive alcohol onto the floor. He swooped down to pick it up.

"Well," he said. "Well." He turned the chair and sat in it backward, resting his elbows on the back.

Her fingers were still tight on the edge of the table. She willed them to relax. He was cheery, but she wasn't ready to make peace. She shouldn't get emotionally involved with clients, on any level. It just made the job that much harder.

"You hate them all, don't you?" he said. "All the members of that damn compound-named family. You want to kill them."

"I don't want to kill them, Leo." She was shivering from the aftereffects of her surge of rage. She sat back down at the table. Rich-smelling rum dripped slowly off onto the floor. She felt its wetness, then licked it slowly off her fingers. Its bite seemed sharper tasted that way. She liked that too.

"Sure you do. All those grinning bastards." Leo leaned forward conspiratorially. He smelled of rum. "You want, I can get you the genuine uncensored memories of a guaranteed serial killer. Topnotch. Specialized in families. Greased about twelve family units afore they got him. Liked to prow around National Park campgrounds, you know, Grand Canyon, places like that. I'm sure you've seen pictures. He'd listen for those kids, that mom and dad, track down the last lingering scent of grilled hamburgers, find the tent glowing from within with the Coleman --"

"Stop it, Leo."

"It's the real stuff, babe. The abuse, the being locked in the closet, the shackles made out of Radio Shack speaker wire, the public housing with the broken glass in the windows." He grinned. "All the central memories of America! I can overlay them for an afternoon, you want to go out guns blazing. There's a time limit, even on the bootlegs. Killers get to like themselves that way. They like themselves and they don't want to change. They try to escape, head over to murder every last person in a deep-fried sushi hut or someplace and just as they're pulling the machine pistol out of the gym bag the memories go away and they find themselves nothing in their heads but their own boring past, the pointless frustrations and actions that never went anywhere. Very disappointing. They lose the ability to act, even irrationally."

He was close now, and she could feel the damp heat rising off him. Paula stood. She shouldn't have gotten so drunk. Not here, not with this madman. "Good night, Leo," she said.

He just smiled up at her. "You want to forget about tonight, you can. Labile short term's real easy to erase. I got some storage blockers...."

"Thanks," she said. "Maybe some other time."

#

It was an old bridge, with a pair of giant black-iron lanterns sticking up in the middle of it, looking, with their sharp spikes, like medieval crowns. The abandoned crowns of deposed kings -- the glass within them had shattered and disappeared, and the bridge was now lit by a line of skinny metal poles topped with more-secure pinspot halogens. The black stream below surged through low arches.

"It's a nature reserve," Rue said. "I like to come here." She teetered precariously on the railing and peered down into the murky water. Paula stared at her daughter's embroidered ostrich-hide cowboy boots and bit down on the immediate command to get down.

"Nature?" The bridge had once carried a country road over a river, but that had been a long time ago. Then the city had engulfed the spot, a shopping mall had been built, housing developments, some of them now the worse for wear. Paula and Rue could barely hear each other, shouting above the thunder of the endless lines of cars as they irritably crossed the bridge and clumped up at the mall parking lot entrance. Aside from a line of trees along the water's edge, there was little visible that was actually alive.

"Yeah." Rue chuckled, and sat down. Paula flinched as a grunting truck pushed too close against the narrow sidewalk, but Rue didn't seem to notice. She sat like a child alone, as if the center of this bridge was a secret hiding place and no one could see her. She liked to come here, she said. "People sometimes don't get it. They think nature is only in...the Rockies, or something. Out in the woods. Not true!"

When a child brought a parent to a secret place, it was usually because the place was no longer secret. It had lost its power, its magic, and, being just a place, was now safe to reveal. Why was Rue giving up her secret place? Paula thought she knew.

"Like...look!" Rue pointed with an elegantly gloved finger. Last night's rain had left the mall parking lot covered with innumerable puddles. The black asphalt looked like the surface of the land after the glaciers had receded. As Paula looked in astonishment, a red fox, followed by four kits, trotted nonchalantly across the parking lot, cutting off an irritable driver, who honked at it. The mother waved her white-tipped tail, completely unimpressed, and led her brood into a culvert at the river's edge.

"I thought...." Paula said the first thing that came into her mind. "I thought foxes were nocturnal."

"Well, yeah." Rue was suddenly irritated. "But if they still were, who would see them? It would be dangerous to come out here at night."

"True," Paula said, half to herself. "What's the point of a nature reserve if you can't see the nature?"

"Right! There's a couple of moose you can see here, they live in the shed where they keep the snow plows. And there's wolves sometimes."

Paula remembered now. The pressure on natural habitats had become extreme. Human beings wouldn't change, so animals had to. Memory implantation, modification -- what sorts of people became experts in animal memories? However they had done it, they had succeeded, not in making the fox think she was alone in the woods, but in making her take for granted the presence of people, cars, and asphalt. Like butterflies, she thought. Butterflies never worried if anyone was around to see them. They just spread their wings.

Paula leaned against the railing, against her daughter's leg. Try as she might, she couldn't ignore the traffic thundering by.

"I can't keep you if you don't want to stay," Paula said. "Not now that you've reached the age...but do you have to kill me?" She suddenly felt like shouldering her daughter off the bridge into the swirling black water.

"Mom! I'm...not." Rue reached down and patted her mother's shoulder with her soft leather glove.

"Then just go. Go to the Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega co-op, live there. Go! But don't --"

Leaning on Paula's shoulder, Rue lowered herself to sit on the granite-topped railing. A fresh breeze had sprung up, ruffling the dark water and editing out the V of ripples flowing out from the earnestly laboring head of a beaver. Black and gray clouds streamed by overhead, torn from their squeeze past the horizon.

"A couple of days ago I was going through some stuff," Rue said. "I found a painted Easter egg. Something had fallen on it, it was broken. Everything was dried up inside. Here."

Paula looked at the bright fragment of eggshell on her daughter's palm, yellow starbursts on a swirling green and blue background. Rue's fingers curled over and it disappeared.

"Do you remember when I made it?" Rue asked.

"Sure. It was wax-resist dyeing, the Ukrainian lady down the block showed us how. You keep covering successive layers of color with wax, then dyeing again, until the egg's completely covered. Then you scrape it all off, and see what you've made. You're not sure what it looks like until then. Fun. You were...ten." The color emerged gradually from under the soot-darkened candle wax, a bright egg hatching from a dark one.

Rue shook her head. "I don't remember it. At all. Demoizle must have been playing me some show, who knows what? When I found the broken shell in a drawer, I had to reconstruct the day, like I was an archeologist or something. I think," she sucked a breath through her nose, "it would have been nice to be there."

Spilled streaks of dye had enlivened the white stove and the candles had melted on to the tablecloth. Rue had been humming to herself, tossing her head in time to inaudible music. But she'd gotten so good at faking being present, because she knew her mother got mad otherwise.

"Rue, there was no one to help, it was so hard...."

"Hard? I didn't grow up, Mom. I never existed. My treasure chest is empty." A light flick of her wrist and the colored fragment of eggshell went spinning off the bridge. "Isn't that what my memories are supposed to be like? I emptied it myself, and filled it with junk. And you let me. I wasn't old enough to know better, and you let me!"

And she was running, as fast as she could on her stiff, high-heeled cowboy boots, her coat tight around her thighs. In a few steps, not even thinking about it, Paula had caught up with her, grabbed her waist, and swung her around. Rue struggled for a moment, then gave up. Her mother had always been much stronger and faster than her. Demoizle, even in his software-upgraded teenage companion incarnation, rarely carried fitness channels.

"Damn you!" Paula shouted. "Think about what you're doing."

Rue turned her head away. "Please let me go."

"Just think!"

"Please!" Rue wailed. "I don't want to be who I am. I'm not anybody. I turned Demoizle off, cancelled the contract. He'll be gone when you get home."

Despite herself, Paula felt a pang of loss, one carefully calculated by the designers of the interface. That damn blue bunny was the creature that knew Rue best. Now, he too had vanished.

"Let go!"

For a long moment Paula's arms would not respond. Then, finally, Paula managed to drop them to her sides, and do as she was asked.

#

"On her sixth birthday the Pursang girl was...here, thirty-six-and-a-half inches tall." Nate was reading from a computer-generated list.

Frank, one of the other workers, made a ragged pencil mark on the wall.

"And on her eighth birthday...."

They were building a family history into the house. Here, in one of the attic rooms, the wall was covered with the marks of children's heights, evidence that they had always lived here, ever since being brought back squalling from the hospital. Once all the marks were up, they would oxidize and age that portion of wall.

Paula had done as much cabinetry work as she was willing to that day, and had wandered in to see what the other guys were doing. Misty holograms filled the other end of the room, each of them of a corner of some house, with height marks. Each of the images was something a child remembered -- Paula recognized the wall of her kitchen, where she had, irregularly, marked Rue's growth until somehow they had both forgotten about it around her tenth birthday. These strands of memory were being braided together.

"You have kids, Paula?" Nate was next to her, and, damn it, he did smell nice.

"Me? N-no. No. Never had the time."

"I don't have any either, but that's not why."

She wasn't going to ask why. She didn't want to talk to him. He was too nice. She didn't want nice, no matter how nice-looking.

"Fast work on that drawer."

"Thanks." She moved a little away from him, and he returned his attention to the marks, even though they were almost done.

No kidding, fast work. Her assignment had been to build in a drawer that had little faces and letters scratched through the varnish in a childish scrawl. That hadn't been too hard -- the original of that drawer was in her pantry. Rue had done it at age six. Paula hadn't had the heart to punish her. She'd done it not long after her height had been marked with a pen-knife-sharpened pencil on the wall....

"Look at this one." Frank held up a lead Napoleonic soldier with a missing leg. "Manny Ortega lost this under the floorboards of his attic at home when he was nine." He slid it under a loose board. "They plan to find it sometime this next winter. Manny will get put to work rebuilding this old attic, and a piece of his past will reappear." They had finished the attic only last week, but a lot of work, and some specialized fungi, had made it look decades old.

These workers were serious, dedicated to their work, and insanely well paid. The structures they created had to match the mental structures of the people who would be living in them. The constraints were fiendishly difficult and precise. All the different parts of these people would finally fit together in this house like a complex joint, one that held itself together without glue or screw.

The multiple panes of the dormer window refracted slightly varying views of the yard. A man walked slowly there, a man with an erect posture, but a sadness in the hang of his head.

"So, Paula, do you think --" Nate began, but she was already on her feet and out of the attic.

Her former husband was heading around the corner of the house. She sprinted down the creaking wood

stairs, almost sliding off on the sawdust and wood scraps, and ran out the back of the house. Another huge beech spread its branches there. With a desperate leap that used up her last reserves of strength, she got her hands on the smooth bark and pulled herself up.

Mark came slowly around the corner of the house, looking up at it. He didn't look happy. She knew him. The house was a fake, and he knew it, and it bothered him. Miriam-Selina had badgered him into this plan, and he was regretting it even before it came to pass. But he would work at it. He always kept working at things. He only gave them up if they were utterly impossible.

"Pssst," she said. "Hey, Mister. Want to buy some leaves?" She pulled off a handful, let them sift down. "Beech. Very rare. Could get some maple, if you want, but it'll cost you."

He stood stock still for a long moment, not looking up at where she sat, as if he had expected her to be there all along, feared it, but was still not reconciled with it.

"Hello, Paula," he said. "I thought it was you the workers mentioned. The magical weekend worker."

"One of a kind, that's me."

"Paula, I'm sorry. But we're going to do it. All of it. We have to. You know what our daughter --"

She cut him off before he could tell her what Rue had become. "I know. Do you think you can recreate innocence? Here in this garden?"

"You know me better than that." He smiled wearily. "I don't think anything of the sort. But I have to try, Paula. You know I have to try."

"Miracle of...Miriam-Selena, right? She wants it."

His face stiffened. That was the wrong approach. No matter what problems they might be having, an attack on Miriam-Selena would just make him clamp his shell shut. Paula was the wrong person to be asking any questions.

"I'm sorry, Mark. But I want to know. I want to understand...you're going to take her memories and reattach them, right?"

"As many as we can."

"Give me an example. I just want to know."

"Remember when she broke her leg...bicycling?"

"Yes," she said. His barely noticeable pause indicated doubt with the story he had been given by both Paula and Rue.

"Well, there's a spot down the hill here. A place with some loose rock. Mountain biking, going too fast, she slid right off the trail...we carried her back up to the house."

"We?"

"Miriam and I." He had the grace to look embarrassed. "Miriam found her."

"What team work! Actually, you know, Rue took off from school in the middle of the day in a friend's car. They all got drunk, egged on the driver, and he finally rammed the car into traffic barrier. He was killed. We didn't want to tell you. You say that happened on the hill down here? Tricky driving. Have fun fitting that memory in."

"Oh, Paula," he said.

She jumped off her branch, landing lightly in front of him. He seemed smaller than she remembered, and lighter. His clothes were loose on him. He looked levelly at her with his blue eyes, the eyes Rue had gotten. And she had forgotten how much she liked looking at him.

"This is impossible," he said, so softly and quickly that she could barely hear him. "Impossible." He distractedly scratched the top of his head, a well-remembered and well-loved gesture.

"Well, really, Mark," she said. "You didn't expect this to be easy, did you?"

"No."

They found themselves walking together across the wide lawn. The leaves had exploded on the trees, and the substructure of branches, so visible a week or so ago, had almost completely disappeared. The white houses were stern and crisp against their sifting green backdrop. It seemed like a place Mark would want to live. But Miriam-Selina? Nothing rustic about that girl, that was for sure. No amount of hay-mowing, frog-catching memories would keep her from going crazy here.

Mark must know that. He wasn't stupid.

"Are you putting a Tergiversator in the basement?" she asked.

"No," he said. "That one's yours. I couldn't take it."

"It's not mine. It's ours."

It's ours. Was it stupid that the phrase almost made her cry? Damn it, she'd cheated on the son of a bitch. Her own inability to sign up to the demands of marriage had destroyed them. Ours. Nothing was ours anymore. Not even Rue.

"Yeah, well." They paused at the edge of the trees. Sap still dripped from the newly cut boughs. "Rue wants to try. She really does."

"I know," Paula managed. Just for an instant she'd had a feeling of reconciliation, as if, somehow, it would all go away and be what it was. Or what it should have been. But the moment was gone, and she remembered Mark's deep stubbornness. He was deceptively mild, accommodating, willing to make allowances...but when he reached his limit, he reached it, and didn't ever come back from it. For all she knew, he went to bed every night desiring Paula Pursang desperately, and tossed around with the night sweats. He would deal with it. He'd never come back.

"Then I won't be the one to stand in her way," Paula said, and turned and left him there by the still-bleeding edge of the forest, a look of disappointment in his eyes.

The guys were gone from upstairs. All of them, that is, besides Nate. He faked nonchalance, but she

knew he was attracted to her. She could get involved with him, have a good few months, maybe start to get over all this, before it all fell apart again. Another screechy revolution of the piss-rusted hamster wheel that was her life.

"Nate," she said. "Do you remember your childhood?"

"Want my childhood?" He knelt, came up with a double handful of wood shavings. "Smell." She did, inhaling the delicate dry odor of paper-thin oak. "My dad. He was a woodworker too, though just as a hobby, in his basement after work. He always let me help him, when I was old enough. But when I was little I remember crawling around under his workbench, looking at his feet. It always smelled just like this under there." He grinned, at her, at everything. "I'm bringing him up here next weekend. He's creaky, he'll have trouble getting up the stairs, but he'll want to see everything. He's jealous. I do for a living what he did for fun. Maybe you'd like to meet him."

"Sure," she said. "I love guys who use their parents to charm me." And she turned away, not letting him know whether she was encouraging him or not.

#

"So, Virgie, how are the kids?" Paula slung a box of tools into the back of the truck. Some of her older employees had warned her about that. One day, they said, something would just go spoing somewhere in her back, and she would never be the same again. It was inevitable, they said.

"Ah, those little monsters? Who gives a fuck? Let their dad pay for their drugs, sex, and TV. He can afford it."

There was nothing affectionate in Virgie's tone. Paula glanced at her, a little frightened. Virgie had lost weight since the start of the project. Her round face had gained definition. Certainly, those hard lines had not been there before.

"Don't give me that 'bad mom' look, Paula honey. There's a point when you just have to cut your losses, right? You, of all people, should know all about it."

"Sorry. I didn't mean --"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Paula." Virgie leaned against the side of the panel truck and relaxed her shoulders. "Just, when I think about how long I worked for those miserable kids...you know, I can't remember a single time they were ever nice to me. Ever, from birth. Nasty, self-absorbed creatures. They got all their father's traits."

Paula stared at Virgie's red-angry face. Was this the woman who painted frescoes with her daughter and spent free afternoons cheering on her son's always-losing Little League team? No happy memories? She looked up at the now-beautiful Greek Revival house that stood in the squalor of Crow's Fields. She knew where memories came from.

"Leo?" She shouted up the dark stairs. She could hear him moving around up there, in his crisp new office.

"Come on up." His voice was calm.

The office had a low, sloping ceiling, and two dormer windows. Leo sat at a vast empty desk. And why

should there be anything on it? Memories had no substance.

"Damn it." Paula's anger had grown as she climbed the stairs until it strained against the narrow walls of the house. "Can't you leave poor Virgie alone? Her life is damn hard enough as it is."

He looked at her. His eyes were red-rimmed, his gaze that of a tired and irritable pig.

"She just took the route you rejected," he said. "She felt like she was a duck imprinted on a boot, obsessed with it, thinking it was something other than what it clearly was. Biological, nothing she could do about it. By eliminating the releaser from her memories, I eliminated the imprinting as well. She's free now."

"Free to do what? You've eliminated a good chunk of her life. What did you replace them with?"

"TV." He grinned. He loved shoving the TV thing at her. "What else? Oh, a few generic bad child memories. I mostly stretched the ones she had to fill in the blanks. Now she doesn't mourn what happened. She is, instead, glad."

Paula slumped into a chair. "How could you do that?"

"She asked me," he said. "She paid me. I'm giving all your workers a deal. Good job on the house, they deserve it."

Paula had a lot of good memories of Rue, and a lot of bad ones as well. Should she give up the good ones, the ones Rue was taking with her to the Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega co-op? If she erased them here and Rue redrew them there, then it would really be as if they had moved, flying like butterflies from one piece of reality to another.

"Oh, God," she said. "Rue won't remember a thing about me. I'll just disappear."

"You gave her up, didn't you? Without a fight. Someone else is going to create your daughter's life."

She remembered Mark's final look of disappointment. He had wanted her to fight, even if it led to nothing but pain. But she wanted only the best for her daughter. So she had let him have his way. Why should that so disappoint him?

"Yes, that's right," she said. "That's right. Do you have anything to drink in here?"

"Of course," he answered. "This is my office."

Bourbon, this time, not rum, but equally good. A few more days and the last details of the house would be complete. What would Leo do here then, sitting alone in his perfectly recreated structure?

"You're a failure, aren't you, Leo?"

"That's the thanks I get for giving you my whisky?" He drained his glass. "Damn right, I'm a failure. I'm reduced to sticking memories into the brains of divorced women, so that they have a decent explanation for their own misery. Sure, I stuck in a brilliant gleam of light from a broken glass, the sight of a child running freely away down a street lined with huge brick buildings, the complicated hasp of an old trunk in the attic...but do you think she'll ever notice? There's no point to art." He poured more, hand shaking. "I just fulfill requests. Dyeing Easter eggs, scraping wax off, the smell of a candle...I can do it. Make it

realer than real. If the memory is bright enough, it can light up an entire life."

Of course it was Leo whom Kaman-Trumbull-Ortega had hired to modify Rue's memories. That was probably why he'd hired Paula Pursang Construction in the first place. He wanted to see the other side, the source for the memories he was reattaching. It was just a little game to him. What else did he have left to play?

"It really happened, Leo. I know it did. To me, if not to her." She even remembered being burned by a drop of boiling dye. The leftover colored powder was still somewhere in the back of a cabinet. She'd never thrown it out.

"I'm not saying it didn't." He had hunched his shoulders in expectation of a storm of rage from her. Her calmness surprised him. Jerkily, as if working corroded joints, he lowered his shoulders. "But the problem with memory is that people so seldom pay attention to what's really important. Life just slides by and leaves nothing behind it. So I have to boost the memory up, make it real, something chewed and tasted before being swallowed. I'll work it. Don't worry." She wasn't used to seeing him nervous. The expression seemed oddly natural on his face. She wanted to see it there more often. "You won't be gone...."

"Thanks for nothing, Leo. So I'll be there, somewhere, in the background of a nonexistent happy scene of dyeing Easter eggs. You're a genius. But why waste your time on me? Why don't you change your own past? You can be as artistic with that as you want."

"And live out my life with my memories my own fragile, brilliant creations? You don't know anything, Paula. Not a thing." He glared at her, but he had no power to frighten her anymore. "You want me to remember my great successes? Reality, sad to say, is pretty obdurate."

Paula stood up. "That's just what I wanted to hear, Leo. Just right. So, you're addicted to reality. It's too much for the rest of us, but you, you like the way you are, the way you turned out, despite the sad sickness of it all. You've failed at your art, but you like reality so much that you won't even give up that failure."

"A damn shame," he said, setting his empty glass carefully down on the serenely empty desk. "But there it is. My painful secret."

Paula, unable to stand him any more, unable to look at him, left the house she had rebuilt and did not look back at it.

#

Summer had come and gone, and autumn was shaking the leaves from the trees. Paula Pursang stood at the top of a ladder in a place she didn't want to be, fixing something about the window frame...she had forgotten exactly what, or why it was thought appropriate that she be the one to do it. This wasn't her project. This wasn't her house.

Rue and her sister-in-memory Kali walked slowly together through the drying grass, deep in some discussion. If they had been laughing it would have been bad enough, but they seemed to be serious and intent, something much harder to create as the outburst of temporary and local energies.

Lightly and casually, Paula dropped down a few rungs on the ladder, away from the window that loomed so darkly above her. The two young women had stopped and were looking at something. Kali

pointed.

Paula had, of course, finally slept with the handsome Nate Krivitsky, he of the blond forearm hair and the nice smell. And what do you know -- nothing bad had happened and Nate still looked at her and all seemed well. His father had proved to be an amusing old man with gigantic eyebrows. He'd admired Paula's cabinet work.

Rue and Kali had crouched down. Something down in the high grass was fascinating. The quality of their attention was unusual. Did they realize that most of what they remembered was false? Did they long for actual experience? This one they shared for real. Did it seem clearer held against the false ones, or, instead, did it seem cheap, poorly made?

Was what Paula remembered of Nate true? Did he exist? Or had she gone back to Leo, back to that house, and had the gentle Nate put in over something else, so that she could look back on at least one decent thing in her life? She would have to go back into the house to check...that was right, he wasn't there today. But his toolbox was. If she opened it and smelled the wood shavings, maybe she could convince herself it was all real. Reality, as Leo had said, was obdurate. She would have to hold on to it.

They were looking at a butterfly. Bright yellow, with black markings, a Tiger Swallowtail. At a butterfly and a dead squirrel. Paula could just see its ragged tail sticking out of the grass. The Swallowtail, perverse by human standards, was strongly attracted to carrion and manure.

Rue pursed her lips, staring at it. "I remember," she said. "A Tiger Swallowtail. My...someone told me once. I remember that."

"Rue." Kali's voice was serious. "Who is that woman?"

"What woman?"

Kali looked over her shoulder in elaborately obvious furtiveness. "The one who keeps looking at us."

"Oh, her." The Swallowtail, disturbed, fluttered up into the air, swirled lazily, was gone. "You'll get used to her. She's my guardian angel."

"Oh?" Kali said, and turned away. "Well, I don't think guardian angels should cry."

END

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