

Where Day Begins

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It was night and the city felt like an overheated train without a conductor. The air stank. A dry, unmoving heat. Every block or so was another fountain. We boys, we would lower our shirts into the water, grunt past reserve. The women, as if distracted, only sank cupped palms into the ripples, gathering foam as they dampened their wrists.

Quietly, so no one but me would hear, Kalli said “-----.”

I growled back.

The heat provoked a mood the city was generating more with each passing car, each mangled alley, each bit of each, in need of rain but given only flaming coals.

Leaning in again, so I alone could hear her, she said, “-----, ----- ----- -----.”

“Oh I am, am I?” huffing. I turned away, toward a dark curb, and spat.

“----- ---.”

“Classy, real classy, Kalli. You ought to put it in a poem.”

“Ah, get over it already,” groaned Maura. “It’s not you, it’s the heat that’s at our throats, just kiss and make up, already, you’re crowding me with that shit.”

“Augusth here makes me lonely,” said Olatz. “It’s overcrowded but with no one around, and they’re off having fun,” chuff, “on vay-cay-shun.”

We were matted by sweat and reek, enveloped by a pungent unslid moss. It was a matter of getting from one electric fan to the next, to the awning or shade, to the coldest drink there ever was . . .

“Kalli. This is fainting weather,” said Pelayo. “Afraid you’re not bronzed? I mean what’s with the long sleeves?”

“Hydrate! Hydrate!” howled Inturni, that night’s leading wobbler.

“Come on, Kalli,” continued Pelayo, not ready to be ignored, “have a splash of water to your neck, it’ll do you good,” then glaring at me, “and, Cameron, get over your ego and take care of your mess.”

I held Kalli’s hand, and we dipped off onto a sidestreet to talk. But it was all through gritted teeth. We batted a few more indecent things at each other, laid more blame, then, faking resolve, rejoined our wandering group just as they began to plant themselves into an empty, playgrounded square.

Vala’s pallor stung toward us, “This plaza scares me,” she said. “It’s spooky — can we go somewhere else?” As soon as we rounded the corner, she exhaled. “One night I was walking home alone, no one else around, and when I went through that square there’s suddenly all these soldiers marching. But not like modern soldiers, they were from like the 30’s, ya know, and they were angry and in bad shape — really bad shape, really bad shape — they looked like casualties — and they all had this terrible grey light shining out of them from different places, some from their head, others from their feet. And around the light was ugly. They were dark with some weird light but this light even though it was grey made them tall and shining. It was an ugly light, it made me more sick than the bloodied men. Because it wasn’t a light at all. It was like when you put out the logs and that ugly sticky black mess is there.” Squinting, “What was scary was that they moved faster than I could keep track of, and when they saw me they all charged at me with their eyes popping out and bodies falling. I hid behind a trashcan and screamed for a few minutes until some guy passing through helped me up and they were all gone.”

An older city, there had been many wars fought on its streets, and war always leaves behind indigestible bones, unsinkable flotsam, abhorrent unresolve. The air itself, bleak grey, felt crowded with spirits desperate for reckoning, their stories half-written, russeted, unknown. So when Vala talked about it, I listened. Maybe there were ghosts.

Sandri: "I don't believe in that stuff."

"I do," said Kalli, who'd been silent. "I believe in them. But you can always carry good in you, and you'll be fine, ghosts won't harm you. Just think good. They are everywhere, they just have their reasons to hide."

The heat sank worse, but a breeze crept by, and there we were: marching off to crowded plazas at the night's first brazen lure, onward, to tiptoe into the crumble-sopping taxis or across gum-smattered bus-seat or up from ass-burnished train-pew, as we relished the night, cackling, embracing, swaying, chanting out the salt of our favorite lines, gullible for poetry, deifying our darlingest writers, disparaging those we caught flask-in-hand preaching, enamored of our favorite songs, our favorite food, our favorite secrets, undulous on the medieval pathways till we swept into the ordained plaza, the one with the pulse, throbbing, all of us intuiting it, amid a hum and a roar of conversation inside a twice-bewildering square, between uneternal stone buildings made in different centuries, like four walls encasing a stage and its roughshod fountain or weather-maudlin statue, where we go, lacking only what comes next, but awaiting it, plucking taken flowers, inhaling their vulval cologne, their magenta-whispered aroma, taking overmuch from branches, flit and tendered by each perishable gust of breeze, around us, through, into us, while we're taking blameless photos, warbling like a grassland as

chants from the birds above fall to lush rebound, we're counting the good moments and respectfully outvying the bad, we're buying beer from the iced-down backpacks of muttering streetvendors, a ring of empty bottles and it was about you kissing your lover or groping the rind or whatever else you could get away with, conversing, giving, laughing, silted, proving, convincing, convinced even by what's unproven, the unseen and the concrete, gleaming, sitting, reclined or overstrung, opining, breathless at times, hauling, giving again, pissing on ancient cathedra maybe, smoking, avoiding the smoke or the smoker, languaging, recovering in private, hopeful, corridor-looking, upgazing, one-by-one announcing the time and the source of intentions, supposing not assuming, tarrying reminders, un hiding graffiti or blaring charmed music, allowing steam to amass in its rise then catch rain, listening, pouring over, ferrying, spilling, lively, heralding stars or the day that ignites them, emboldening cowardice and jostling twine, launching off somewhere briefly but able to return, excited to return, eating kebabs, eating curry, eating soggy pizza, speaking, speaking, and forgetting about the ravishment of day, just glad to escape its disorienting heat.

"Is that guy Kol still around?"

"I think so," replied Morales, "Why?"

"Dude owes me money," said Pelayo, his voice less satin than usual. "What about ... ah, what's ... the dude from South Africa, I can never remember his name."

"Bob?"

"Ya! Bob!" pausing, "Wait! It's me that owes him money," relaxed, half-smiling.

"Who are these people you're talking about," asked Sandri.

"People that come and go," said Vala, "and like randomly just vanish."

Cloudless goes the summer-night breezes.

Everyone sighed as the cool gust passed through. Only to be brought back to rictus of heat. We shrugged in unison, then began toward the next fountain.

“It’s making me thirsty,” added Sandri.

“What,” I asked.

“All of this walking,” she replied, “Hand me some wine.”

“All of this walking is a celebration, is what it is. Some of these streets,” said Pelayo, “man, they haven’t shifted for centuries, maybe more. Can you imagine what kind of shit is under these streets? Proper artifacts. Layers of old world, man. And we’re just walking all over it.”

By day, the streets were different. Less the scheme of an alchemist than the brainchild of a judicious builder — engulfed by the clatter of traffic, aswarm with a frenzy of walkers, rumbling beneath truck or construction, pinned down by rows of linden and hedge. If the din grew too loud, there was always the park. Within its boundaries, I was not a city-dweller anymore. And if I made a little extra money that day, I’d rush home before Kalli so I could envasse the flowers that I bought from gypsies, the floral burst they wrapped in beige paper, all for sale on the odd backstreet, pulled out of the watery basins of a tiny cart then put together, sewn, ordered and inwoven like gossamer thread, like a calibrated bird’s nest, like a wreath atop some robust oak tree, like any cool breeze, radiant with its obscure perfumes.

But at that moment, as we strolled through night and heat, flowers were far from my mind. She wouldn’t look at me.

It was something I said, I could say the things.

I drew closer to her. “Here, have a swig of this.”

“Thank you, Cameron.”

The flush and luster of her eyes undid me, brought me back.

“I...”

“Home soon?”

I met her eyes and said “sorry,” gripped her in embrace.

“I’m sorry, too.”

“Aren’t you roasting in that outfit?”

“A bit, ya,” smiling.

“Let’s go home.”

A shower of brief goodbyes separated the two of us from the group, and they went off to some house-party or bar or late dinner.

As we turned away, there was grace behind us, a trail of light.

“We’re alone,” she whispered. Wriggling out of her sweater, she loosened her woven hair, “Just you and me,” then unabashedly lifted her skirt and tore at her leggings until they slunked off over her shoes — “Is there beer at home? Should we stop?”

We passed a fountain. I felt the need to turn around.

“Hey,” I said, in sudden reverse, urgently stomping back until we stood at mouth of the spring. I put the plastic cork into the bottle of cheap red wine then handed it to Kallipy so I could put my hands into the water. My fingers darted through the calmativ pool. I splashed a little onto my neck, its current gathering throughout me.

“Much better.”

“Yes, much better.”

I felt a sudden pain that left me empty and cornered. Frozen — halted — suddenly unmoving, I was caught in a rictus and staring right through her. Overtaken by pallor that spread even to my eyes, jaunty static through my hair. My body had become a troubled, stricken, leafless tree, contorted oddly, able only to stare unblinking at a sight Kalli had her back to, and as she swiftly pulled me from my fountain-crouch, I, bitten, sallow, gutted, only whimpered, “Look,” then sank, winded.

She turned to see where I was pointing, pointing to the center of a floating beige undulation, a limp mud curdled into the shape of an undone carcass, whose sallow carrion was punctured by juts of daggered bone, pacey hollow branches that shook loose in an awful clatter with each gloomy advance. Wobble-prone, the glowing specter fell apart then came back together with perfect timing, never fully emptied out.

Abruptly, he stopped, gave himself a disgusted inspection, gasped, fell to the ground in a heap, paused to chuff, then, looking at us with delightful aloofness, sighed gentle words: “I have holes in my garments, do I, must I fix it already?” mumbling then quickly preoccupied with his baronial gown, “Yes, yes, the years and the moths have taken to these garments. The moths and maybe some mice, something about this fabric, or what’s left of it rather,” a lashing gust of wind rang dust out of the specter, who didn’t notice or did not care. “They would need to be rather speedy, these mice — or worms,” pensively, “Is this the work of worms?” shrug. “Any matter, they would have to be stealthy little vermin to feast at my garments — and they’d have to be,” yawning, “have to know where I’d hidden my garments, no? Impossible!” all his attention moved to his nails suddenly, “A real mess I am, a real mess, yes yes.”

The apparition was gauzily transparent, with an iridescent orb the size of a golf ball afloat in its stomach — the orb was the center of light, where it shone brightest, and there was less glow the farther it had to travel. The orb was pretty, we both agreed, and it was spreading, too.

There also shone a dim but formidable waver of light from the specter's marbled eyes, almost hid beneath the arduous hair that overtook his forehead, sloping into his bloated unkempt face, a face singed, deserted — a canyon of scales and unwoven spine, riven and badly sewn in parts, bubbling over in others, drably pale but jarringly dark-blue, except for the discharge and the blots of embedded phlegm — and, again, and again: that eerily hypnotic reddish flit roiling in its marbled eyes like cartoon wolves.

“It is simple enough,” it said. “You simply need to preserve — by the way, might you people have anything intoxicating? Any kind of intoxicant? — very well, that works — help me out here, yes, push it, a little more, now tilt. And pour. Voila!” as Kalli tilted the wine bottle into his stomach, through the opaque layer of what should have been skin, there was a blubberish hiss — she coaxed the bottle in farther, then poured some of the wine onto the glowing orb, which absorbed every drop and began to bring a solidity to the figure, adding shape, making it sturdy, as the bones receded into the fold. “You simply need to preserve the right things. Gold, that’s what I say, and believe in, and salute toward, and fight for,” the redness of his eyes and the prowess of his discourse were flamed by the wine, “but not a Midas gold, no, no, rather a multifaceted gold, from both places — rather, halfway between.”

The wine healed his face the more he drank, brightened his light — “I hid my gold everywhere, but did not foresee that I, made of that blasted heat, would never have the

strength to dig” — with affected sighs — “and, oh, oh, I simply cannot tell you the anguish I have undergone, certain that my whole reason to be has washed away or been ruined, my gold, traded for anguish, my gold — who knows where it comes from, my anguish, but I know only that it is down there somewhere,” more rapid, “I know where it is buried, as sure as I know where I buried my gold,” pointing for more wine: “At first, I tried to dig it up from the clay, where I buried it, but the soil was unaffected by my grasp. Every time I tried to lift it, the dirt, promptly and with no remorse, escaped me.” Almost wistful: “There was an old proverb among the dead: ‘Lift and lift, it can be done, but each tiny spoonful weighs a ton.’ Strange sense of humor, that lot. . . It breaks — it broke me, the powerlessness. I felt pity and nothing more for ages — a little more wine please — I sank down into oceans for unknowable ages, living under brackish tides, down there for decades at a time, trying to escape — to run. But the cold down there was just as dreadful. So now I am here.” Then he smiled for the first time, revealing several gold teeth — and when he smiled, a breeze cast off the scales and pustules on his cheeks and under his eyes, a glint amid impearled blood veins. Confusing our shock for enjoyment, he flushed brighter. When he smiled again, the taut barbs of his hair turned blonde.

With matter-of-factness: “But. Little by little, I rose up, gaining back strength, the physicality that I lost as part of my punishment. I will open this earth in no time,” calm, “yes, and find every last fleck of my gold, all the gold machines I made, not for myself, that’s not why I came here,” distracted, then brought back, “Watch, young ones, you just watch.” His ash had been replaced by actual skin, olive-lambent and regal as his gilt-vermilion robe, with lustrous embroidery over its silken fur, patterned to accentuate the

crest on his velvet pajamas and light grey slippers, “I have a little list of things to do, is about all I know.” His mossy chin shed its filth then sprouted into a robust beard of crimson and yellow, “Are you a little confused?” Almost bored, “I am, I know that much. And dismayed. Relieved, yes, but shocked that it’s over. Wait — what hour is it?”

“...”

“What is the time?”

“Midnight,” she told him.

“Hah! perfect. So. If you wish to know what I am, I will tell you first where I came from. Well. Well think of me as midnight, that is where I started. I was an inhabitant, a beggar of dark. I, as a thing that has ended in one form, have been making a start in this . . . this other life. Midnight is where day begins, yes? Well I was Sisyphus all those years, slogging away at the night, tirelessly, because I knew if I kept pushing through futility I would emerge from the coal deeps into a night of open air, still night, yes, but beneath the glimmer of stars, and I was still rotten with interminable dejection, but I knew that I am day, and with only the weakest glow of light in me, with only the tiniest spark of daylight, if I wanted to get back to the grace of sun, I would have to struggle through utter darkness. But now, hah, as you see, now I am not midnight — I am more like 5:00 AM. I have no more secret anguish. See? Now, watch, hand me that bottle, go on. As heartily as I lift this glass container, I am lifted.” He sipped some wine. “This isn’t wine — I mean, it is, in one sense. But that’s not what we’re after,” pause: “Moments ago, I could not lift a thing, you had to lift it, but now? Watch, look”: He tore a blade of grass from the earth. Pinching tightly, he shook the green spear until it rattled —

expanding and swollen more with each tremor into a burnished marble. He giggled, revealing his work.

“Are you a ghost?”

Saying nothing, absorbed, he hurled the marble into the air.

Moments later, a scatter of rain drizzled onto us for about fifteen seconds.

“Were you a ghost?”

He didn’t answer, distracted, absorbed, almost meditative.

“Well?”

“Before, I always thought ‘Nature is so unkind.’ It is a difficult companion, nature. This is true. But you will find your own ways around it, eventually, as I have. It has taken me — oh, it surely has been millennia — what year is it? are we in the 3000’s yet? the 4000’s? Is it the year 4000? Oh never mind.” Upswung: “Now, kindly lend me your hand for a moment’s time, Madame,” bowing, “I am once again a gentleman, though only to an extent,” and, resounding through the air, a flutter of wings. Sensing Kallipy’s panic, he smiled: “You’re fine. See?” He pointed to a scatter of passing birds, spooked by an unexpected draft.

Kallipy began to speak — then stopped.

“Break the silence,” the man said.

“What do we have to do?”

“For me? Nothing, no, nothing — . BUT. If, out of the goodness of your heart, you could relay a message for me, I would be indebted to you. Yes? Very well. I only want you to remember my words, not the circumstances, understand? Something else will tell you when to say them and to whom.” Pause. “Now. You are to say: ‘Go outside, it’s

waiting there, hurry, it's outside, it's alone — trust me, I know what I'm saying.” He has her repeat the phrase, writes it down on a piece of trash he lifts from the sidewalk without bending. No one around, streets empty, quiet. “Ah, yes, tell me, also, where I can find suitable garments.”

“What’s wrong with those,” I asked.

“Conspicuous.”

“Yeah. Definitely.”

“Trade me,” I told him, “Here, have mine. I need a new bathrobe anyway.”

The man’s goose-feather gown weighed as much as a tractor, his pajamas as well, so heavy that I felt beaten — although the burden eased and the tautness landed. My clothes clearly made him feel awkward. He kept itching and adjusting.

“What language have we been speaking,” he asked.

Bewildered: “Speaking?”

“Yes.”

“You?”

Bluntly: “English.”

“Very well.”

“What’s your name?” Kalli asked the man.

“Pathios.”

“Just Pathios?”

“Yes.”

With all his deformities gone, it became clear that he was quite young, maybe twenty-five — he’d looked centuries old when we first saw him. By the time a flit of tepid

light began to appear overhead, all three of us had been talking for hours, and had drained three more bottles of wine. Kallipy and I couldn't believe how relaxed we'd become around Pathios, and how facedly we were all able to speak with one another.

Half-joking: "Do you change like that all the time," I asked him, as he, giggling leoninely and finger-hooked at his collar, plashed his lips winely.

"Fortunately, no — or at least I don't think so."

"What will you do now?" break of day, grin unflickered, hiding whitish plumes, illumined, as he pulled on the bottle of wine — Kallipy and I both recall that there was no more wine by about 1:00 AM, yet the bottles always seemed to have plenty left.

By the time the sun's wink and purrs shivered upward, there was no dark left on Pathios. Yet there was something, and though we could no longer see the glowing orb in his stomach, it was obvious that it hadn't disappeared. It was there, in the way he looked at things — each lamppost or breeze and fenceway and trashcan — like he could see far more in them than us. "So what are you?"

"I'm a collector."

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It was only later, a few years after she returned home, when Kallipy found herself in a moment she didn't understand or have control of, that it all made sense.

Evening time, autumn, she had just come from work, mid-walk into her usual grocery store. As soon as she stepped through the rubber-arched door into the market, she forgot why she was there, couldn't remember what she needed. Felt strange, blank, vertiginous — like her hands had become a gag of spindled balloon. Then, without even realizing it, she rushed up to a woman who was near the front of a snakish, fought-for

line and said it: “Go outside, it’s waiting there, hurry, it’s outside, its alone — trust me, I know what I’m saying.” The woman gasped, dropped her things, then ran up to the automatic doorway, paused a moment so the groaning plexiglass could catch up to her, then waddled through the slowly opening crevice.

As Kallipy stood with spilt milk and dropped almonds pooling at her feet, what struck her was the woman’s exhilaration. Kallipy had always assumed the phrase would be for something funereal — a car wreck or an orphan.

After a few minutes, Kallipy just sort of glided from the store, empty-handed. Outside, the woman was looking into a water fountain that Kallipy, who grew up in this small town, had never seen before. The chiseled fountain was aslant and half-unwrapped on a stone-bordered huddle of grass, left unpaved for show or remembrance or looks or admiration, like a small park, in the middle of the parking lot which the grocery store shared with several other businesses. After a while, the woman splashed some water on her neck and wrists. The fountain wasn’t powered-on but it held water.

It struck Kallipy as something from a painting: the pensive feminine form entranced by the resplendent water of a solitary fountain on a paltry stretch of grass, a woman bent over a silent, unwed fountain, of a design that belongs anywhere but right there, there, surrounded by the desolation of shopping carts, asphalt, noxious air, car dealerships, cheap food, vacant spending in windowless buildings, all beneath the drone of cars from Highway 406. Not that her hometown is dreary, but that anything around such a scene would seem ugly.

Behind the grassy area, men were hauling large crates out of an eighteen-wheeler. One guy would grunt a crate down the ramp, and the other would complain it over to the twenty-yard spread of grass. After the men unloaded seven crates from the truck, they opened them with hammers and crowbars.

As the first shell dropped to the ground, Kallipy gasped, breathless as she stared, as the wooden planks fell, revealing another fountain selfsame to the one the woman sat before. They were all fountains. For sale.

“Why are these outside,” Kallipy asked one of the men.

“They belong to that Palace For You over there,” pointing to a gaudy storefront in the shopping center. Between a Subway and a Garden Ridge.

Bewildered: “The fancy home goods store? With the statues of David and shit?”

“That’s it, yes ma’am.”

“But why are they out here?”

“Couldn’t tell ya, just following what the printout says, see?”

“That says seven.”

“Wha?”

“Seven fountains.”

“So what.”

“There are eight here.”

“Hey, Gus! Gus! Was it seven or eight? . . . Ah, fuck it hard! Fuck. Ah, fucking, goddammit . . . Fuck! I mean . . . — well, fuck, it can’t fucking go back now, I’m not fucking driving all the way back to shitty Atlanta to return one shit-spouting fountain, I’ll just tell them I only got seven.” Leaning in, “just don’t tell this to anyone, all right? We

practically had to dig these fuckers up out of Hell itself to get them here — we don't usually have to work so hard, and we don't usually dig up fountains. Hell, if I'd of know it was fountains, there's no way. I mean we specialize in transporting pre-made *foundations*, ready-made beams and flooring, not water-hoses with shitty designs on them." Jams a heap of Wintergreen chewing-tobacco into his lip. "It's all because of our commercials, people always thought we also *dig up* foundations, well, we didn't used to. And we also didn't used to do shit like this, but some genius at the airport dropped the whole load in the mud, or crashed his cart or something" — ruddy — "now tell me how that happens" — more ruddy — "so now nobody wants the boxes — they're just a little muddy is all and a tad bit late. We were gonna just toss them. Then we get a call from the airport saying, 'Get over here, we've got a buyer,' and fine, but for God sakes we had to work, so throw that cum-basin in the road for all I care . . ."

The man wandered off, grumbling to himself.

Kallipy stood there for a moment as the truck drove off. The company, she noticed, was called Paths, their motto was "From the grass to the sky, we'll keep you standing." She could understand now why people hadn't a clue what the company actually did. Beneath the logo was another slogan, "The fastest in the Biz. Order at night and enjoy it by day! we'll! do all the work for you!" After a moment, she wandered over to the woman, whose face cast from the fountain's motionless water, rose lambent in smile.

"But did I win the tickets?" the woman asked.

Sensing Kalli's confusion: "You're not with the radio station? Ah, fuck. They said they would give the prize when you least expected it. I guess I ought to pay for the

groceries I threw down. I mean, who are you?" less rattled, breathing. "But I mean imagine my surprise when I came outside to find this. I thought you were with the radio station, then I find this . . . My husband made this ..." she whispered. "It was the last thing he ever made ... He designed this whole brand . . . His wedding ring is inside the original ... He knew he didn't have much longer ... We all knew it ... Near the end, his fingers got so swollen they had to cut his wedding ring off with a machine ... The sound it made ... Like smoke should be pouring out ... I wanted it to stop choking ... It felt like kicking anything ... For weeks I was pretty shaken ... It was a reality check for me ... But he turned it around on me, like usual ... He was a sculptor, and he designed this fountain . . . He designed it to be made assembly line style, but he said he made it for me ... It's a replica of the fountain in The Plaza de Cibeles, in Madrid." Timidly, "He was Spanish, is why ... He put the ring into the mix ... When he told me ... Told me his wedding ring was in the stone ... I kicked the vacuum cleaner so hard that there was dust that made us cough in the air so long and I could barely see him ... I cursed at him till I fell down crying because I was so angry ... But it made sense to him ... As the days got slimmer, I got it... I always came to his ideas."

"So then why is it here and not in Spain?"

"Because I lost it ... Lost everything ... Our mountain-view home, my Volvo, his grandmother's library, all of our things, all of the things we shared together — they were gone ... Other than that, I have no idea why they're here, or how. I guess — who knows. Well, I mean . . . After my husband died ... They ... Because I'm not a Spanish citizen and he didn't have any family ... So most of his possessions went to the

government, I guess ... In different ways ... And I could only take what would fly back with me and ship a few other things.”

Before she could continue, a man in a uniform befitting of Palace For You approached the women. “Where did those buffoons go?” Gasping, “And what, exactly are these? Are these — sprinklers?” pausing, “Don’t exactly look palatial, and they certainly don’t look like *the gilded statues* I ordered — and *paid* for,” whimpering, “Last time I order from those idiots. You know the order was supposed to get here two weeks ago? Two weeks ago. Which would have been just in time for that massive wedding at St. Pius Cathedral that needed gilded statues and archways — gorgeous, absolutely palatial in the catalogue — but the idiot driving the thing got drunk somewhere in Mississippi, fell asleep, or into a coma, apparently, and the rest-stop where he was slumming got flooded — real bad floods — sure you heard about them — anyway, he wakes up and all the stuff from the back of the truck was all floating around out there or all sunk into the water and stuff. Four more days until the water went down and by then all the stuff was pretty much jammed up into the ground.” Severely, he adjusts his plastic cufflinks. “Anyway,” flirtish, “would you like to buy a luxury sprinkler? I’ll give you a discount.”

“How much?”

“Well, they’re imported — ”

“And flood damaged. Plus, this one right here was here before they even got here, and they left you one too many.”

Huffy, muttering, “They left me about ten too few, actually, so math isn’t something I’m interested in. Just give me a number and I’ll have it delivered.”

“5.”

“Sold,” then into upswing: “Ciao!”

Bolting: “Wait! This one. It has to be this one,” the woman.

The man flamingoed back to the statue, preened the gum from his mouth and thumbed it into the fountain. “Reserved.”