



# TALES OF THE STORAGE SPACE

*The saga of a Brooklyn building, down on its luck, who was once so much more...  
Originally told in short, weekly blog posts.*

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**BELOW ARE PARTS (POSTS) 61-90 OF A TOTAL OF 150.**



## PART 61

The Storage Space was enthralled, simply enthralled. Every remaining bit of the Grand Old Theatre it used to be was thrilled to see this old woman, even though she was dressed in a bathrobe that appeared to have been smudged with fresh blood. Yet it was sure...very sure...that this particular woman had never before set foot in it.

What still remained of the grand old stage was most unhappily relegated to a mean space under the hideous metal staircase that connected what was now the second floor to the third. But it creaked and settled like a drowsy cat about to purr at the sight of its mistress.

A once-exquisite carving of Romeo's Juliet, now ignobly hidden under Unit 38, came to life as if freshly polished and warmed by the sun. "Wherefore art thou Romeo?" seemed to whisper through the metal floor above it, lending the tacky 20<sup>th</sup> century carvings stored in Unit 38 a hint of much-needed elegance.

Even the heavy curtain lever Karen had used to kill Le Grand Rat managed to clatter across the floor of her storage unit in glee. Or had Irwin's corpse pushed it with some kind of postmortem spasm?

"Here, let me help you. I brought some of the bandaging that maniac used on me."

That voice! That exquisitely beautiful, so easily recognized voice! The entire Storage Space swayed in happiness, so pronounced that even Karen and the old woman who'd spoken looked up, a bit startled, and steadied themselves.

All was happiness. All was joy. The Storage Space even felt the he who it usually didn't care to think about was a welcome addition. Especially when he started with "summer's day" and went on to wax eloquent with every tender word Shakespeare ever wrote.

But then there was a different he, someone else, skittering along the walls and oozing out of mean little holes everywhere. Someone that sent a shudder of terror through the whole Storage Space that even the humans again felt. Something that was the absolute incarnation of evil.



## PART 62

Imogene only looked up from her phone when her father at last drew blood.

"Like mother like daughter, always on the fucking phone!"

She like blinked at his like tight, faded face while licking the blood off her lip, then past him at her mother like curled up on the couch, ignoring Imogene's latest beating as usual. It was bible; she only had eyes for her own phone. Real Life really sucked.

Her father like shoved his face inches from Imogene's, blotting out her view of anything else. "So...you going to remember...tomorrow!...to bring me back that stuff I gave you to keep safe?"

She like thought anything was better than his booze breath till he like pulled back to backhand her so hard she reached up to check her teeth. One felt loose. "Like, yeah, Dad, tomorrow! I promise!"

His face was like back in hers. "Don't...fucking...forget!" But then he went back to the couch to sit next to her def-not-woke mother, who was all covered with bruises and shit and still busy with her phone.

Imogene looked down at her own phone to find like a million messages, like all sorry about the beating, but only really read the last.

^URSUnPC&proud: UOK?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Tooth loose!!!

^URSUnPC&proud: Zayum! Don't wiggle it. Might unloose.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: < cray cray ugly.

^URSUnPC&proud: U? No! Never saw u RL but know u better than RL here. Def as lit/popping as party you cudn't go to.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Wud hv met u there?

^URSUnPC&proud: RL? I mean real Real Life? RL=bad. RL spoils all. Here=better/safe. If u'd gone 2 party I'd hv stayed home.



## PART 63

Martin felt the sheet peeled back so someone could run their fingers over his naked hip. "Mo chuisle!" exclaimed a voice that literally throbbed with emotion and was deep enough to be a man's...though something told Martin it was a woman.

He bolted out of bed. "Ma...cushla?" was the best he could do at repeating words that had obviously been in a foreign language.

But it had only been the girl from the plane with her fingers now frozen midair over where his hip had just been. Her face flushed a deep red before she turned away and mumbled, "You...must have been dreaming."

Martin looked around, relaxing as he took inventory and checked everything off on his mental list: Same bed. Same bay window. Same blue sky, green grass, and sidewalk that wasn't pink. Another airplane, not even remotely resembling a bloody dragon, roared overhead. Something strange in the room, like everything looked too new to be scattered about as if she'd lived there forever...but nothing was undulating.

No, again it had just been the trauma of turning the tables on Frank after Karen passed out and killing him. No, again his dad had been wrong, and he wasn't doomed to chronic flashbacks of drug-induced hallucinations. Brilliant! He could feel his own smile. And smell...the coffee?

"Vanilla latte...Randolph?"

Martin all but snatched it out of her hand, only pausing to caress the Starbuck's logo before upending it. "Perfect!"

"Glad you like it." She stretched out naked beside him. Was it his imagination, or did she intentionally display herself such that the light from the bay window accentuated every curve. "You...seem to do a lot of dreaming...Randolph."

Randolph? Oh, right. Randolph Barclay. Now he could feel his face fall. Getting laid was all well and good and had at least put a roof over his head temporarily. But for how long? And what was he supposed to do for money? Not to mention phony ID.

Soft fingers traced delicate patterns along his thigh. "Troubling dreams, Randolph? You might feel better if you talked about it. Then we can get back to having fun..."

His dick jumped, but then lay still. Talk about it? Tell someone else about the whole bloody mess, including killing Frank, and be able to explain how it was really self-defense? For a moment he felt a very different kind of yearning.

She must have seen it. She sat up and wrapped her arms around him. Her voice was velvet. "Can I tell you a story?"

"Tell...me a story? If you like..."

She snuggled up closer. "I once knew a guy who found himself in a position where he had to do something really bad."

Martin had been fiddling with the bed sheets, but he stopped at that and sighed. "Poor chap."

She snuggled up even closer. "Know what his mistake was? He kept it to himself."

"If it was really bad..."

"I know what you're thinking. And, yes, he could have faced Invol Manslaughter or even Murder 2. But not everyone would have ratted him out."

"Better safe than bloody sorry."

She ran her fingers over his shoulder. "Except that didn't account for what doing something like that does to a person's mind. Ever read Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Telltale Heart'?"

"But that chap deserved discovery! And he'd really lost the plot."

"Justifiable or not, normally sane or not, doing certain things poses a well-documented threat to a person's sanity. And what better way to go insane than to keep it to yourself?"

Martin's head spun. He remembered his dreams, especially the one where he found himself frying up pieces of Karen to eat. He remembered pink sidewalks and dinosaurs sleeping in his garden. He knew with something akin to a thud in his heart that she was right. This girl...he didn't even remember her name or if he'd ever been told it...obviously thought he was ace, positively blinding, the bee's knees. How much more willing would she be to house him and keep him in vanilla lattes if she knew his story and what he was up against? Still, he had to be daft, a damp squib of the first water, to trust his life to a bloody one-night stand. But he couldn't resist turning toward her, his face undoubtedly an open book to all the turmoil within, and staring deep into her eyes.

At first he thought he saw cold calculation in those eyes, but they seemed to melt as she stared back at him. Or was that just wishful thinking? Then there seemed to be a funny look on her face: could have been affection; could have been contempt. He thought he caught a hint of a wry smile as her voice deepened and she asked, "Ever see Clint Eastwood in *Million Dollar Baby*?"

"No," he answered slowly. But he'd seen plenty of violent Clint Eastwood movies. What the hell was she up to bringing up a brutal action-adventure movie when he was so obviously feeling vulnerable?



## PART 64

Karen stared in abject horror at the homeless woman in a bathrobe who'd brought up the police investigation into Martin's murder.

Martin's murder... She relived it yet again. Her husband Frank, so much bigger and more powerful, pummeling poor Martin to death after finding her in Martin's apartment. Her futile attempt to protect Martin, which had only resulted in her passing out before Frank finished the job. That cop she was barely conscious enough to hear talking about the murder...with Irwin?

Her own yelp of pain brought her back to the present when her violently shaking hand hit the counter. The homeless woman wanted to help with the police investigation... Karen hid both of her shaking hands under the counter in a pathetic attempt to conceal her terror.

The homeless woman reached across the counter to hold her up by the elbows. "I'm so very sorry to have upset you so by bringing it up!"

That voice, the most beautiful Karen had ever heard, now deep with emotion... It was such a powerful voice that Karen's whole body reverberated with the sound of it. Even more remarkable, she was momentarily stunned out of her agonized realization that, no matter what, she had to protect Frank from being discovered as Martin's murderer. "You," Karen stuttered, "you must be...must have been...an actress?"

"No, not I..." The homeless woman replied, then stopped suddenly, apparently puzzled.

Karen was struck by an odd hush akin to an abrupt change in air pressure.

Now the homeless woman was looking around at the interior of the storage space, as if seeing it for the first time.

Karen imagined a whisper, something about holding its breath, if only a building could hold its breath.

"But..." The homeless woman's face contorted oddly, as if thinking of something for the very first time, "Perhaps..." Now she looked caught between wonder and embarrassment over her own foolishness. "My grandmother." The wonder and a tentative tone of conviction won, as she continued to look around at the storage space, reminding Karen of an actress scouring her audience for affirmation.

Karen felt something else reverberate through her entire body in reaction to this, along with a torrent of memories that couldn't possibly be her own since they all involved theatre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The building beneath her seemed to sway under the impact of this revelation. But Karen finally shook herself free of all this to concentrate on the one thing that was really important: protecting the man who, despite his upbringing, had always been gentle and protected her. Frank.

The next torrents of memories to wash over Karen weren't those of her imaginary playmate, the building, but her very own. She physically fell back at the onslaught, seeming to remember all at once each and every time Frank had made love to her. She would have fallen over backwards if the homeless woman hadn't steadied her. Frank: his eyes, his smile, every word he ever spoke, and even that horrible scar on his face that she couldn't help loving as much as all the rest. With all the subtlety of two galaxies colliding, she realized how very much it didn't matter what he'd done...not to Martin, certainly not with her best friend Marie. A threat to his life was far worse than a threat to her own.

"What I came here about can wait. You need to sit down. Let me use some of the medical supplies I took from the crazy man's house to treat your wounds."

It was the homeless woman speaking again. The homeless woman that was a potential threat to Frank. Beautiful voice or not.





## PART 65

Edward had not thought it possible. Neither his long, weary years upon the stage, nor his far longer and wearier years being dead, could have rendered such an event an even remotely believable plot development. Yet here he was shifting his thoroughly fixated, lover's gaze from the lovely maiden Karen...she who always reminded him of a long-lost summer's day...to the face of a woman in her 70s!

Edward scoffed. He persisted in protesting far too much. He imagined strutting and fretting his hour upon the stage. But even this escape proved futile, since whatever remained of his venerable old stage was most thoroughly, one might even say most noisily, enraptured by this old hag.

Edward could no longer ignore her beautiful voice. Finally he was forced to look this old woman full in the face.

It was fortunate, profoundly providential, that, being dead, Edward no longer needed lungs that could still breathe or a heart that wasn't stunned to a sudden full stop. *"But thy eternal summer shall not fade!"* What stood before him was no ghost but the living, breathing, one true love of both his life and death. For all his Shakespearean elegance and incessant verbosity, he was...for the first time in either life or death...silenced.

Still, after a long pause full of childlike wonder and unbridled joy, some tiny little voice within him did the math. Another little voice noted that those were not his true love's lips, after all, but rather, miraculously and unmistakably, his own.

*Switzerland!* Where he'd sought in vain to find his love so very long ago, but also where women in the theatre often went when...

All those uncharacteristic complaints before she left for Switzerland about the costume department making her gowns too tight...

She hadn't abandoned him for another lover, she'd...

But suddenly something yanked Edward back to the present, and even the revelation that this present included what must be his own...granddaughter?...wasn't enough to keep him from shuddering along with the rest of the building. Both the lovely maiden Karen and his elderly granddaughter looked up startled and struggled to maintain their footing. A line from *The Tempest*, "Hell is empty and all the devils are here," rang through Edward's mind over and over again. For the being that had yanked him

back to the present seemed so evil that Shakespeare couldn't sufficiently capture it. And, like Edward himself, this being was no longer alive.



## PART 66

The Storage Space couldn't stop shuddering. And it didn't even think a building could... Finally whatever had prompted those simply awful shudders seemed to disappear, but in an odd way...as if instead of going away it had slithered so close that the poor, long-suffering Storage Space could no longer see it.

No matter. Something slithered through the Storage Space's mind that said it had far more important things to think about: Karen, that frigid fucking bitch!

It was appalled, simply appalled. Where did that thought come from? Such language!

All of its attention snapped onto Karen like a magnet.

Was that, the Storage Space wondered, to compensate for such a vulgar outburst or...a precursor to another such outburst? Poor, long-suffering Karen! How truly extraordinary that she had survived without medical care through so very, very much and for so very, very long. But now, seated half-unconscious behind the reception-desk counter, she was being cared for by an absolute angel. For not only was it equally miraculous that this angel, almost equally in need of medical care herself, was the one administering treatment rather than the one receiving it, but it was very clear that this angel knew what she was doing.

The dear, most beloved Karen moaned, clenching her teeth, eyes still half-closed.

"I deeply regret causing you pain," said the old woman with the exquisite voice, mostly to herself, "but it's medically necessary. The supplies I stole from that mad man include almost everything, even this scalpel I'll need to get the glass out from under the skin. But they didn't include as much as a single aspirin, let alone anything serious for pain like Dilaudid."

Karen screamed.

Both the Storage Space and the old woman shuddered.

Karen's eyes snapped open, not seeing for a moment before focusing on the old woman. "Who are you? What are you doing to me?"

"My name's Amelia. I'm trying to provide you with medical assistance I don't think you can wait for a moment longer." She wadded up some bandaging and shoved it between Karen's teeth. "All I can offer for the pain is to ask you to bite on this and forgive the following pathetic attempt to distract you."

With that Amelia started to sing, "Sleep my child and peace attend thee. All through the night," as she resumed her work. Not surprisingly her singing voice was as beautiful as her speaking voice. What still remained of the grand old stage, though relegated to a mean space under a hideous metal staircase, settled and creaked happily. The once-exquisite carving of Romeo's Juliet came to life again under Unit 38's tacky 20<sup>th</sup> century carvings.

Karen spit the bandaging out and screamed again.

Amelia stopped singing.

"Sing!" Karen sobbed.

Amelia went on with, "Angels watching, e'er around thee. All through the night."

"Like, what is this, a fucking ER with lullabies? Like, I really need my things!"

Amelia looked up at the pregnant teenager that neither of them had noticed walking in. Karen swooned.

"Like, carvings..." the teenager trailed off as she narrowed her eyes, studying first the unconscious Karen, then Amelia. "Unit 38. I...um...like...forgot my key."

Karen stirred, starting to come around again. Amelia hurried to finish treating her.

Karen let out a heart-wrenching sob.

Frigid fucking bitch!

Again the Storage Space didn't know where that alien thought came from.

The same slithering, illusive alien presence seemed to want it to console Karen.

Consoling Karen was something the Storage Space was more than willing to do.

*...witness this time...*

It was just a wisp of thought from who knew where. The Storage Space ignored it.

Karen screeched.

The teenager yelled, "Like, my key, please! Unit 38!"

Amelia sang, "While the moon her watch is keeping. All through the night," and put the scalpel down, almost done.

Karen whimpered pathetically.

And the Storage Space then did all it could possibly do to reach her, in her mind with every soothing image possible, every beautiful thing it had ever seen or heard. But something else came slithering through the Storage Space's connection with Karen, something about "self defense" and jugular veins.

Karen grabbed the scalpel.



## PART 67

Imogene had all but given up on RL, like forever, when Homeless Hag finally turned her back on that cray cray, def-not-woke bitch who'd like actually thought Imogene was pregnant. Homeless Hag looked like all annoyed and impatient, but she seemed to spot something under the reception desk, now that she was turned away from Cray Cray Bitch, snatched it, fumbled it, and then like sent it clattering across the reception desk toward Imogene.

It was a key to Unit 38.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like OMG Homeless Hag def not woke re \$ I owe.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Gave me key!!!

^URSUnPC&proud: Zayum! Suh w/Cray Cray Bitch?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: < ::poof:: so don't no...already on stairs.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: But just heard loud thud behind me.

^URSUnPC&proud: Unit #?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: 3.

^URSUnPC&proud: Just 3?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like why u like need 2 no?

^URSUnPC&proud: < never saw u RL but no u better than RL here.

^URSUnPC&proud: So need to no all.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUnPC&proud: Hahaha but u gotta go RL & get ur stuff.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Sec.

^URSUNPC&proud: K.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Lit! I'm in!

^URSUNPC&proud: Ur unit? Evrytin still there? R u sure?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Why u so thirsty?

^URSUNPC&proud: Ur dad's carvings still there?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U the 1 told me 2 put my dad's stupid carvings in here!

^URSUNPC&proud: < not the 1 told u to tell him u put his carvings in here!

^URSUNPC&proud: Why u goin all salty on me?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like no reason.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like I don't like care if he beats me.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Tooth still loose...

^URSUNPC&proud: < didnt think u'd tell him...

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like why did u like tell me 2 go ahead & take his stupid carvings?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Hmmm?

^URSUNPC&proud: < had an idea. Thought it might help.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Help how?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Hummm?

^URSUNPC&proud: Thought it wud frighten him.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Why wud stupid carvings frighten him?

^URSUNPC&proud: < wrong. So, so, so very sorry!!!

WTFwasImogeneCoca: < can't get all this shit out in 1 trip.

^URSUNPC&proud: Dont take all.

^URSUNPC&proud: LEAVE THE ELEPHANT.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: What elephant?

^URSUNPC&proud: Say it broke.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Like he'd really like RL like kill me.

^URSUNPC&proud: Tell him when it broke u saw something inside.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: What elephant?

^URSUNPC&proud: But just left it all in ur unit & will get it 2moro.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Dont evn remember an el

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Oh here it is.

^URSUNPC&proud: Dont really break it!!!

WTFwasImogeneCoca: How'd u no re the elephant?





## PART 68

Martin was still wondering why this girl had brought up a bloody Clint Eastwood movie when he was feeling all soft and trusting and about to tell her his whole story. Bloody Clint Eastwood, "make my day," ultimate American tough guy thumbing his nose at any old-world male vulnerability! *Million Dollar Baby*, he thought she'd said, though he'd never seen that particular film.

But they'd spent a dreamy day wandering up and down San Francisco's toy-town hills, ogling painted-lady Victorian houses still garishly advertising the prosperity of the Barbary Coast. Twilight had found them amidst the ancient splendor of the neoclassical Palace of Fine Arts, built for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition, before a brisk walk north across the Golden Gate Bridge that left Martin wondering why people claimed California weather was any better than England's.

Now they were all snuggled up against the fog about to descend on the Marin hills. From so high up they imagined they could see the Farallons far out to sea, they were watching the sun set. And this girl from the plane had given him what she said was an extra iPhone, so he could cross "watching the sun set over San Francisco Bay" off his new, trusty to-do list. Plus there was the latest vanilla latte she'd bought him in his other hand.

A blanket she'd brought was wrapped around them both. With her pressed up tight against him, he could feel when she sighed heavily. What he still couldn't do, however, was remember her name. Annoyed by that, he blurted out, "You said it again in your sleep last night!"

She turned and looked up at him with dreamy but conflicted eyes. "Said what?"

"Ma cushla, or whatever that is."

"Mo chuisle?" She reddened. "No, you must have been dreaming again."

Probably meant dumb, prissy, effeminate, vulnerable Brit that could never hold up to the likes of Clint Eastwood, even if Clint Eastwood was now ancient.

She ran her fingers over his shoulder, probably without realizing she was doing it as she looked up him, thoroughly gobsmacked. "Where are you from?"

Couldn't hurt to tell her that. "Originally? Kent."

Soft fingers traced delicate patterns around the back of his neck. "What was it like there?"

Again, what harm if he told her? He looked beyond her, to where the sun would soon drop into an ocean afire with pink and orange. For some reason he couldn't remember, the first thing he thought of was his father's garden hose when he watered the flowers.

Insanely, this memory that should have been tranquil brought on a rush of painfully vulnerable terror. Something about a nightmare. Something about blood spurting from that hose. Then the pink and orange Pacific Ocean undulated. Had he really stopped hallucinating?



## Part 69

Karen knew she'd passed out again. After all, she'd done it so much of late that it was almost as familiar a transition as waking up. But there was something she didn't know...couldn't hold on to...didn't remember. It had to do with something she was griping tightly in her hand and something important she had to do.

Then her first dreamy memory of Frank led her away from anything hateful. She knew her eyes were really closed, but she was seeing the Pacific Ocean ablaze with the sunset. San Francisco glittered pink and orange, as if on fire. Frank wrapped his jacket around her shoulders against the fog they both knew was about to descend on the Marin hills, then whispered in her ear.

"I'm dead."

Karen jerked away to stare back at him. "What?!?!?"

He was magnificent...standing atop the hills above his apartment in Sausalito in all his virile glory...his hair whipped around smartly by the breeze. And this wasn't how this memory went. He was supposed to whisper sweet words of love in her ear.

"I'm the one who died. Not Martin...who...oddly...right now...is the only one of us who's really in the hills above Sausalito."

Karen felt her heart stop beating as she watched the fog descend between them...making him appear to be the ghost he claimed to be. At first she felt no pain at all, not even mild discomfort. She was going to die too; she was going to join him.

"No!!!!!!!"

Two voices had shouted that word. Frank's and...

"No!!!"

This time it was only one voice, the most beautiful voice she'd ever heard. Karen gulped in air as if she hadn't been breathing and felt a hard thud in her chest as her eyes opened.

"Yes!!! You're far too beautiful to die young. I heard you stand behind me when I gave that key to the pregnant teenager. You must have passed out and knocked my scalpel off the table. Thanks for retrieving it, but let's get you back on the chair and let me check you out."

The elderly homeless woman in the bathrobe with all the medical supplies. Behind her, a middle-aged woman was just coming in the door of the Storage Space. Another witness, Karen thought excitedly...though she didn't quite understand where that thought came from. But then she remembered what the scalpel was for.



## Part 70

Suzy didn't want to do what Mommy said. Daddy didn't do what Mommy said. So Suzy didn't have to do what Mommy said either.

"Susan Witherspoon, you fucking wait up for me! Right now! Or else!"

But Mommy was a whole big block away. And Mommy was what Mommy called "middle-aged," so she couldn't run really fast. So Suzy ran really fast into that funny, big ole building right behind another middle-aged lady who was also going in. But this middle-aged lady had funny marks all over her face. Suzy got close to the funny lady with marks all over her face, so she could ask where the marks came from. But the lady was so busy texting she didn't see her. So Suzy kept quiet.

The lady with the funny marks went over to the counter and asked if there was an extra key to Unit 3. She was whispering and held up some money. Suzy thought it would be fun to hide behind her, then jump out and say "boo" to the really old lady behind the counter. But just then Suzy saw someone else jump up behind the really old lady at the counter. Then she was glad she'd hidden behind the lady with the funny marks all over her face.

It was the really scary mean lady with the blonde hair! From the little room with the man in it that didn't move! And she looked even meaner now and was even holding a funny little knife!

The lady with the funny marks screamed. Loud. It hurt Suzy's ears bad, but not as bad as Mommy snatching her up from behind and running out of that funny building.



## Part 71

The Storage Space was appalled, simply appalled.

Karen looked equally appalled, staring in surprise at the scalpel in her hand before dropping it.

Inexplicably, the Storage Space was suddenly furious, something about one witness still there who was being wasted.

Suddenly Karen looked equally furious, scrambling to retrieve the scalpel, still unsteady on her feet.

Amelia got it first. "Please, you must stay seated!" Then she turned toward that dreadfully beat-up middle-aged woman who'd screamed after asking for the key to Unit 3. "Don't be frightened; she was just trying to retrieve it for me."

But the screamer was now too busy tapping on her phone to notice.

The Storage Space was completely confused.

Karen sat with her eyes half-closed.

Amelia was looking at the middle-aged woman. "What is it with this neighborhood? Has every woman here been beaten? Except for the woman who just ran out with that little girl?"

Karen's eyes widened at "little girl." Suddenly the poor, long-suffering Karen looked simply terrified.

The middle-aged woman at last looked up from her phone to repeat her whispered request for the key to Unit 3, shyly but insistently pushing some money across the counter.

The Storage Space, still completely confused, concentrated on the play of emotions sculpting Amelia's exquisitely wrought features as she looked deep into the middle-aged woman's eyes. Some other thoughts, about Amelia's jugular veins, slithered through its consciousness but fled like cockroaches from light when the Storage Space sensed them.

Finally Amelia caressed the money before resolutely pushing it back across the counter. Then she pulled out a key to Unit 3. "Why do you need this?"

"To save someone's life."

Amelia paused, still looking deep into the middle-aged woman's eyes, then pushed the key across the counter.

The woman clutched the key to her heart, then quickly tapped on her phone some more before meeting Amelia's eyes again. "One last favor..."

"Which is?"

"Please, whatever you do, don't let anyone know you gave me this."



## PART 72

Imogene like looked up from her phone at that effin' elephant again. Like how had ^URS known re elephant Imogene didn't remember? Like how glad was she that she'd stopped typing after the 3 in 38 and not told ^URS the RL number of her storage unit?

^URSunPC&proud: U there?

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Sec

Imogene looked up from her phone again and was like not going to look back. Real Life... She picked up the elephant, like almost dropping it and breaking it like ^URS had said she should tell her dad she did. Effin' elephant was a lot lighter than it looked, effin' hollow or something.

But, like, who cared? Her dad had made it and it was ugly, like RL was ugly. She could see where he'd carved it with a knife. Imogene dropped it.

Something like rattled inside.

Imogene ignored her phone and picked the elephant up again. Carved wood. All like mid-century modern, and her dad never did anything good with a knife anyway. Only the bottom where she held the legs was any good, like a machine had done that part.

She took a quick look at a scar on her arm, something else her dad had done with a knife, then shook the elephant. Like way too light to be solid, and it sounded like there was a bunch of shit inside. But how did it get there? She turned it over. Effin' elephant was one solid piece of wood.

Her phone was making her like all cray cray. Finally she looked at it. Bunch of silly pics, like all Snapchat-filtered and shit. Def not RL

Much better than RL.





## PART 73

Martin was crossing "watching the sun set over San Francisco Bay" off his new, trusty to-do list. The pink and orange reflected off the screen of that extra phone of hers she'd given him. It started to undulate.

Bloody hell! Was he still hallucinating after all?

Soft fingers traced delicate patterns around the back of his neck. Martin relaxed; he was safe.

The whole Pacific Ocean was undulating. Martin stiffened. Was it his imagination or were the fluid colors of the sunset on water worming their way onto shore?

"Mo chuisle!" Her voice was so deep it could have been a man's. Her fingers caressing him all over were so soft it could only be a dream. "It means my darling, my blood."

He twisted away from her. "The bloody ocean... Look at it! Is it...undulating? Really?"

She didn't even look; she just kept staring at him...thoroughly gobsmacked. "Of course it is. It's an ocean, silly! You're safe. Relax."

He looked back at the phone. Okay, the reflection of the sunset off the Pacific was undulating on its screen, but oceans did that. What it had not done was worm off the screen onto other things. He *was* safe. He relaxed.

Never had he seen such a sunset. Not even in the Highlands and Islands when he was a child. Never had he seen such love in another person's eyes, not even his mum's or dad's...

Thinking about his parents bothered him... Something about all their lectures about all the hallucinogenic drugs he used to do. Something about his father's garden hose... Martin shuddered. The girl he was with reached up to stroke his face.

The last of the sunset lit up her face. "I love you, Martin!"

He was still struggling unsuccessfully to remember her name.

"I know. It doesn't matter if you can't remember my name. You call me what...Karen?...in your sleep? But for me you're the pulse running through my veins. Crazy. Completely irrational. But I knew it before I knew what color your eyes were because, when I first laid eyes on you, you were asleep then too. Yet I could feel it. I could feel you in every beat of my own heart."

In that moment, even the dying sunset paled in comparison. He didn't need to know her name to know she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He had never felt safer.

"You know," she said in that richly deep voice. "It doesn't matter if you don't know me consciously, if you call me Karen. A rose by any other name... Somewhere deep inside, you know my soul."

He could feel every muscle in his body relaxing. Sunset over, the tranquility of blue took over. He gazed dreamily out over the undulating sea of blue...uniforms. A cop blessed his soul and shoved some papers in his face. "It was self defense! If I hadn't killed him, Frank would have killed me!" What was he saying? Maybe he hadn't said it aloud. Was he in Brooklyn, with that sea of blue uniforms, or California? Maybe the woman whose name he couldn't remember hadn't heard him.

It was dark. Fog descended on them, wet soaking him through to his bone marrow. Her face was dark; he couldn't tell who she was. Light, he had to have light. He could get light from his phone, but it wasn't his phone. It was her phone, and he didn't know who she was.

"It doesn't matter if you call me Karen, or...Jennifer."

Jennifer! He had to have light. He fumbled for Jennifer's phone, trying desperately to ignore the light from the sleeping T-rex's slowly opening eye.

Jennifer's phone prompted him for a password. At first he was stumped. Then he remembered and typed in his own name.

"You have six unheard messages."

A dry cleaner wanted him to pick up her "stuff." Jennifer's phone changed into his own, the one he'd left in Brooklyn. The messages continued with his loan shark Frank reminding him that, even though he was dead, Martin still owed him a whole shitload of money. Ms. Morales told him a whole shitload of money was missing from work and reminded him that they both worked for a non-profit charity. He threw the phone down so he wouldn't have to listen to the rest.

Water. The undulating sea of blue.

Something about his father's garden hose. But it wasn't water that gurgled and twisted and turned out of it. It was blood. "Ma cushla." His darling, his blood, his pulse, his million-dollar baby was the million dollars he'd stolen from a million starving children.

The whole Pacific Ocean turned red.

Martin sprang to his feet.

The red blood was worming its way onto shore, undulating on its way up the hills to him. He didn't think it could possibly be his imagination.

"Blood everywhere. Perp died. But it was necessary force on my part. Nothing my Uncle Ed, first of our family to join the force, wouldn't have done."

That deep voice again. Martin's eyes snapped open. Somehow, he knew what he saw now was real: They were in bed, in the room with the bay window. The girl was talking in her sleep again. Business as usual. Nothing was undulating. He almost choked on his relief.

His laughter must have woken her. She looked as cold as her last words had been. "Vanilla latte...Randolph?" Then she softened as she looked at him and smiled the sweetest, warmest smile he'd ever seen. "Dreams. Funny how they move from such sublime sweetness to...well..." Her voice was cold again, just for a moment. "Never mind."

Breakfast. More vanilla lattes. Sex. Loving words when he jumped at her touch once. Her trying to get him to open up about his troubles and tell all, by reading to him from Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart." Business as usual. He decided to put everything in his dreams firmly behind him. It had all been his imagination after all; he was fine. But he also decided that the coldness of hers he'd woken up to was something he'd never forget. That had not been his imagination.

She looked deep into his eyes again, gobsmacked again.

He still didn't remember her name. So he looked down at her great retro shag carpet, eyes widening a bit as the green formed itself into scales and the T-rex winked up at him. But Martin decided firmly that it was nothing.



## PART 74

Karen's eyes were still half-closed, but she was beginning to feel something so unfamiliar, so alien, that it startled her and sent a little shiver up her spine. As the pain receded from the homeless woman's ministrations, Karen was just barely beginning to feel, ever so slightly...*better*.

Some confused thoughts about how this might improve her upper-body strength, witnesses, and jugular veins slithered through her consciousness, but a spurt of joie de vivre pushed aside what she wrote off as random subconscious nonsense.

Grateful. What she was feeling was grateful. So grateful she could even forgive...

Her thought was interrupted for a moment with some more nonsense she didn't understand about the person she'd been thinking of forgiving being a witness if she'd just come inside. And another stray bit of absurdity about "great titties." Then she shivered again when her thought about forgiving her best-friend Marie for sleeping with Frank returned with such force that she could envision every elaborate cable stitch of the sweater she had knit for Marie stretched tight across Marie's chest.

Marie...

That sweater...

Karen hadn't even remembered that intricate cable pattern; it had been so long ago.

She drowsed, half dreaming, half remembering. Ski trip. They'd gone for the majestic beauty of the snow-covered mountains. Everyone else in their tour group had gone to flirt with each other. Stuck in the lodge with a cacophony of lame boasts about mythological skiing triumphs, lamer jokes, and canned laughter, Karen and Marie had cuddled up together on a window seat, watching the mountain's silhouette against the night sky. It was then that Karen gave Marie the sweater. Marie burst out with the pet word she always used when pleasantly surprised: "Fabuloso!"

Karen's eyes flew open to the lobby of the storage space when she actually heard: "Fabulo..." The first thing she saw of the speaker who'd suddenly cut herself off, was the sweater on the other side of the counter. Giggling with glee, she looked up just as the speaker resumed.

But two things were wrong: First, instead of continuing to say Marie's pet word, the speaker said in a voice suddenly too low to be Marie's, "Fabulous facility you have here." Second, her face absolutely could not be Marie's.



## PART 75

Marie congratulated herself for converting "fabuloso" to "fabulous"...and even thinking of lowering her voice. Still, much as she liked to credit herself with everything, she did have to concede that that plastic surgeon who worked for the cops deserved some credit.

Karen... Marie'd given up everything, even her face, to protect her very best, friends-forever, fabuloso buddy. It was all Marie could do to stop herself from giggling with glee over the discovery that Karen's status of missing hadn't meant that Karen's crazy husband Frank had gotten her killed. That crazy husband Frank who Marie had felt terrible about sleeping with, but it was the only way to worm the information she needed out of him so she could convince the cops of her suspicions about his business dealings. Heart-wrenchingly horrible when Karen walked in on them? You bet! But Marie knew enough by then to know that Karen's leaving Frank was very much for the best.

Karen... It was just so damn good to see her! But she knew she had to keep that off her face and looked down, hurting her still-sore face...which was when she noticed her own sweater. How could she have been stupid enough to wear the friggin' sweater Karen made her, even if she did practically live in it? But the cops' plastic surgeon deserved even more credit, since apparently Karen hadn't even recognized her with the sweater.

Thing was, Karen's crazy husband's status was also missing. Marie ached to tell Karen who she was but was afraid for Karen. After sobering up and realizing what he told Marie, what might Frank have to do to Karen if he thought she'd talked to Marie?

"Can we help you?"

It was the other, older woman in a bathrobe. Damn. Marie had heard of jobs with casual Fridays, but this was ridiculous. Still, her voice was stunningly gorgeous. However, now that Marie was coming off the high of having found Karen alive, she was wondering how both apparent employees of this storage space had gotten so badly beat up.

"Rough hood here, huh?"

Both Karen and the older woman looked confused by her question. No matter. It was showtime.

"Listen, ladies," started Marie, carefully keeping her voice lower than usual and doing all possible to use words and phrases Karen wouldn't recognize. "I'm Detective Marsha Smith." She flipped open some

phony ID. "Homicide. Here to ask you some questions about some alleged occurrences at this storage space."



## PART 76

The Storage Space was dreadfully upset on behalf of poor long-suffering Karen, who had turned as white as a sheet.

But then the poor, long-suffering Storage Space shuddered again, and again, and again...though by all rights a building shouldn't be able to shudder in quite that same, animated if you will, way. Shift perhaps, reverberate in response to some subterranean influence or other, but not that quick animated shudder. Well, really, would its next move be a sneeze or a soliloquy?

That slithering again, then something nice again, a gentle prompt to comfort Karen. But the Storage Space was beginning to recognize a pattern.

So it waited.

And waited.

No odd thoughts. No inappropriate language. At last it relaxed just as the female detective and the old woman turned from their conversation to notice, as the Storage Space had previously, poor Karen's condition.

"Sweetheart!"

That single word, directed toward dear Karen with the utmost compassion, had come from three different sources at once, in perfect harmony. It was as if a conductor had prompted it from an orchestra. The lowest, though nowhere near as low as her previous speaking voice, was that female detective. The Storage Space rather liked to think of itself as a rare countertenor, though of course it hadn't spoken aloud but rather spoken directly into Karen's mind and, it hoped, her heart.

But of course the *pièce de résistance* was Amelia's gorgeous soprano, perhaps so high because she seems genuinely shocked to find Karen in such a state. She went on, dropping to a richly resonant contralto, "You don't want this extraordinarily kind officer of the law to get to the bottom of whatever's going on around here?"

Her voice was a veritable symphony. What remained of the grand old stage, hid under the stair creaked so deeply it was as if a lion purred. The poor, long-suffering Storage Space was feeling positively languid.



But the "kind officer" had stiffened after her last speech, as if she had been caught committing a crime when she spoke in a voice nowhere near as low as her previous speaking voice. Finally, with renewed vigor and her usual deep voice, she resumed her interrogation of the old woman Amelia.

Meanwhile the Storage Space comforted Karen the only way it knew how to comfort itself, with tales rich with the extraordinary, and long since gone, elegance of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Slither.

Shudder.

The Storage Space paused after another odd shudder, cautious and waiting, but instead of odd, nonsensical thoughts and inappropriate language there was an eerie silence. It was about to go on describing the glories of a curricle with a matched pair of greys, when it noticed Karen's face flipping between terror and a rebelliousness that suggested she was having an argument with herself. Then, just for a moment as if the volume had been turned up too high but was quickly corrected, the Storage Space heard the words "tell them!" inside itself.

The detective was grilling Amelia about Le Grand Rat!

Karen leapt up to grab both of the detective's hands. "Irwin no longer works here because I killed him."



## PART 77

Imogene was laughing so hard over the shots ^URS was firing at finstagram "sincerity," in between sending pics with funny Snapshot filters, that Imogene like knocked the effin' elephant over.

It like clattered to the floor, cray cray noisy with all that shit rattling around inside. And a leg looked crooked. Maybe it was like broken.

And just then her phone screen went black, and she like effin' remembered she'd forgotten to plug it in before going to bed the night before.

"Effin' battery!"

Imogene jumped, startled at the sound of her own voice echoing around the teeny storage unit. That made whatever was inside the elephant rattle more.

Then there was silence.

Imogene like forgot about the battery and looked back at her phone, all ready to laugh at something new from ^URS.

Only darkness.

Normally she'd like run out of there as effin' fast as she could and like ask the first person she saw if they had a cord so she could recharge.

But she like had to get at least some of those effin' carvings out of that effin' storage space or her effin' father would kill her.

But she couldn't move. She felt so strange. The walls, the carvings...they were all...like...staring at her. Everything in RL was so...big. So...not in her hand.

And she was even starting to hear things, like stumbling noises, and she was sure she heard some guy say, "Clumsy, Hank, clumsy."

Then she started to see them, the Snapchat filters all over the walls, all over the carvings. She laughed at Snapchat's bunny ears on one of the carvings. She felt much better.

Only thing was, they were all the same color: a weird, misty green.



## PART 78

Martin checked his new, trusty to-do list. The first entry read: If it isn't normal, ignore it.

She was treating him to a really expensive meal at San Francisco's best: The Bimini Twist. Head honcho Don had just, himself, brought out oysters on the half shell and was telling them all about sustainability. The wine was excellent.

She was excellent. Her skimpy black dress had a V-neck that dipped all the way to her waist. Every guy in the place had his eyes on her, though one just looked confused.

Her eyes were only on Martin. "Whatever happens after this...Randolph," she said in the velvety deep voice she sometimes used, "I want you to remember this night and please believe me when I tell you how very much I'll always love you."

Martin, yet again, cursed inwardly over not even knowing her name, as he struggled to figure out what to say in return. Bloody hell! He could never find anything like her purse or mail when she went to the loo. She lived in this town; why didn't she ever introduce him to her friends, one of which was bound to utter her name at some point? Why, for that matter, didn't she ever get any phone calls or texts or anything? He raised his glass, about to toast her with words he still hadn't figured out, when he caught something in his peripheral vision: the confused man was no longer looking confused.

"Officer Ann Worth!" The guy was on his feet, running at her with what now looked like murderous intent. "The homicide detective who commits homicide!" He was almost frothing at the mouth now.

Head honcho Don must have signaled someone. What were obviously bouncers pounced. The guy was literally dragged out screaming.

Martin looked at her. *Ann?*

But just then Don put a comforting hand on her shoulder. "This dinner is on the house, with our apologies since we should have spotted that crazy."

*Maybe not Ann*, Martin thought. Crazy bugger they'd hauled out had obviously lost the plot. And she bloody well did not look homicidal.

Starved, he popped one of the now-free oysters into his mouth.

Was it his imagination or, when he bit into it, did he feel it squirm?

Martin tried to pull himself together and put a comforting hand on her other shoulder, then looked up at Don. "Oysters on the half shell...are still alive?"

But again he caught something in his peripheral vision and looked back down at the remaining oysters.

One wasn't an oyster at all; it was Karen's eye, winking at him.

Martin ignored it.



## PART 79

Karen fancied that of the three of them...the old homeless woman Amelia, the detective with a sweater amazingly identical to the one she'd made for ex-best-friend Marie, and herself...Karen was the one most astounded by her own confession.

But even Amelia's gorgeous voice lost luster as she stuttered, "You...killed...someone?"

The detective's jaw hung open. What kind of detective had never heard a confession before?

Stupidly, illogically, Karen's mind skittered away from the enormity of having just confessed to murdering Irwin by fixating on that damn sweater. Had Marie donated it to a thrift shop? Karen managed to get upset about that slight and feel nothing about her confession.

Amelia put a hand on her shoulder. "You...had a...good reason?"

Karen frowned. Uh...actually she did! What had she been thinking? Why hadn't she just called the cops herself? Not that she'd had a phone but...

Opening her mouth to spill out the whole story, she turned hopefully toward the detective in Marie's sweater. And stopped cold. The detective's jaw was no longer hanging open. Instead she was staring at Karen with eyes that kept getting wider and wider with what looked like absolute terror.

Karen knew her thinking was still foggy but what did this detective know about her chances of escaping very serious consequences for her confession that Karen didn't know? Plus that detective's look of terror was reminding her that she had had reasons for not confessing, even if she was now feeling too faint again to remember.

Amelia took Karen gently by the shoulders and pushed her back to a seated position. "There, there, Sweetheart, better to sit before you faint. I'm sure you had a very good reason. And I'm sure this detective will understand that."

A yearning screamed through Karen, so strong it hurt: She wanted more than anything in the world to believe Amelia. Her voice was so beautiful, like a full symphony orchestra. But there was one harmonic, one instrument in that orchestra, that was off...as if out of tune...and Karen knew what she was hearing: doubt.

Amelia massaged her shoulders. "It'll be okay. I promise." But Karen felt the tremble in the ancient hands that massaged her.

Karen opened her mouth again. "Thanks for seating me. I'm sorry I got to feeling faint again, or I would have told you both right away that I wasn't serious when I made that 'confession'!"

Both of the other women sagged with visible relief.



## PART 80

Hank choked back a few sobs, staring at his ragged clothes and all the liver spots on the backs of his hands while pummeled by the memories of a lifetime of defeat.

Sobriety was way overrated.

That, at least, he could fix.

He dug around in the tattered garbage bag that now served as his kitchen cabinets and bureau drawers. Pair of holey socks, stiff with dirt? No. Dog-eared love letter from an ex so ex that she'd not only run off with some younger rich guy, but buried him and died herself in a nursing home? No. Ah. The cheap hooch. He yanked the bottle out, expertly judging from the heft and the slosh that enough remained to do the trick. But his hands shook and he dropped it.

"Clumsy, Hank, clumsy," he admonished himself...as he did almost continuously since he was always dropping things...but, saints and gutter rats be praised, the bottle didn't break.

Second potential consequence: discovery. Had anyone heard that bottle hit the floor? He looked around: no one in the hall. Then he heard sounds in Unit 38 again, but that was nothing new. Whoever was in there had been in there so long he figured it was another bum who'd scored, relatively speaking, a penthouse suite. Or should he say..."homeless person"? "Accommodationally challenged"?

Damn hands. Still, despite the shake, he managed to connect the open bottle with his mouth. Then choked, remembering as he always did, getting gasoline in his mouth when siphoning it out of someone else's tank in the middle of the night. First pull of such cheap shit was always tough. But soon, very soon, it wouldn't matter.





## PART 81

The Storage Space was appalled, simply appalled. How unforgivable! Consummately unfeeling! Someone walking by outside had mentioned December 5<sup>th</sup>...

1876. Close to midnight. No one walking by then but many running. Another Brooklyn theatre, *the Brooklyn Theatre*, only five years old and burning. Screaming, the constant screaming of those trapped at the top in the Family Circle and still conscious. The swirl and twists of the bright blaze illuminating the sky. Extra ferry boats swarming across the river from Manhattan.

But wait, where was that...laughing...coming from? Something slithered. And the Storage Space knew. And at that point there was even more laughing. The poor long-suffering Storage Space was desolate, so desperately unable to figure out what to do that it found itself wishing Le Grand Rat was still alive.

Karen lifted her head. Did she sense his presence too?

But ancient Amelia soothed Karen with a song Amelia's wonderful ancestor once sang from the stage when the Storage Space was such a grand old theatre. (Though never as grand as the mighty, majestic, mansard-roofed Brooklyn Theatre had been.)

And all that remained of the grand old theatre the Storage Space once was creaked happily from their dark, musty hiding places and forgotten corners beneath the tinny metal of the Storage Space's wall, and floors, and stairs. All was calmness. All was sweet.

Karen smiled softly, every muscle relaxing. Then she lifted her head again and opened her mouth to speak as if about to recite some beautiful poetry. But what she said was, "I did kill Irwin." Suddenly she shuddered violently and tears started. "But you should have seen what he did to me."

The woman who had said she was a detective clapped a hand over Karen's mouth.

Amelia gasped.

A bottle clattered down the closest set of stairs. The three women turned at that but couldn't see where the bottle had come from. Faintly, though, so faint the Storage Space could feel Karen writing it off to her imagination, a voice could be heard saying, "Clumsy, Hank, clumsy."

And there it was again, grating and seemingly without end: the laughing.



## PART 82

Imogene was like really feeling like really cray cray without ^URS and Snapchat and...

Like what was happening? She was...choking! And...having convulsions! And...

Water coming out of her eyes. It took her a minute, but she finally figured it out.

But...why was she crying?

The answer came in an avalanche. Answers, actually. But they pummeled her so hard and fast, each replaced almost instantly by another, that she could hardly register what they were. Vaguely she caught a glimpse of that cute boy Robert calling her ugly, but why would she cry about that? ^URS had told her Robert was ugly. Still she felt something growing inside her, like the kind of endless scream in some slasher movie.

Imogene fumbled for her phone, forgetting for a moment that the battery was dead, then covered her raining eyes with her hands. But she still caught the sound of that bitchy group of girls laughing at her, even though it shouldn't have mattered cuz ^URS had said they were pathetic. Still cray cray shit like that kept coming at her, hitting her over and over again till she felt like a punching bag and finally started to remember a night she'd like totally forgotten when she was like sleeping naked on top of her neatly made bed cuz it was so hot and her father...

Imogene screamed. When she finally had no breath left to scream with, she gulped some in quickly and screamed again. And again. And again.

Still she felt something growing inside her. It even kicked her. From inside.



## PART 83

"Mo chuisle! Mo chuisle!"

Martin didn't know where that deep voice was coming from. The sky? All he knew was he had to get away from them and punch...punch hard...the ones he couldn't outrun. And that he kept hearing the same odd snatch of poetry, also from the sky:

The sun was shining on the sea,  
Shining with all his might:  
He did his very best to make  
The billows smooth and bright  
And this was odd, because it was  
The middle of the night.

Martin grabbed a pole, using it to break and make a sharp turn as he dashed down a side street, praying he'd lost them. But one oozed right around the corner after him, so close he could smell the briny beach and the frothy waves. Finally the time had come to turn and punch it, a dismal thing to do since his fist just slobbered around in it until he hit the shell. Then all its friends turned the corner too, and more of them came dashing up on Martin from behind.

Oysters, giant oysters everywhere! All squirming at his touch, some with Karen's eyes winking at him. One of them shaking him hard, much harder than anything without hands and bones and...

Martin opened his eyes, seeing the mess he'd made of the now-sweat-soaked bed. "Officer Ann Worth?"

The girl let him go and jumped back, her eyes widening in what at first looked like terror. But then she laughed. "Oh, that crazy at the restaurant! Yeah, sure... 'Officer Ann Worth' at your service, sir, ready to arrest the perps bothering you...a mob of giant oysters, I gather?"

Martin looked around the room. Nothing was undulating. It had only been a dream. He was so relieved he grabbed...No Name...and drew her close, genuinely feeling a tenderness for her that only gradually turned to lust, then turned back into a genuine if not slightly sleepy tenderness after they'd made an even bigger mess of the bed.

She was smiling a smile no one could fake...but were there also tears in her eyes.

Finally she got up and went to the bathroom.

Martin took stock of the himself: He was fine. Just fine. His parents had been totally daft to go on so about all the hallucinogenic drugs he used to take. Right? He wasn't hallucinating. Only in his dreams...when everyone hallucinated. But he was totally bloody conscious now.

The sun was shining, just like in that poem he couldn't quite remember now from his dreams. And that was a rare and wonderful sight in San Francisco, sparkling through the window as if it were a finely cut diamond. No Name was in the kitchen now, and he could smell the vanilla latte she was fixing him...trying to compete with Starbucks. No Name might not be the sharpest tool in the shed...thinking she could possibly compete with Starbucks...but she was cute.

Martin yawned and looked out the window. Scrawny chap with an obvious death wish and a skateboard careening down the sharp hill at breakneck speed, dog yipping at his heels. Hysterical mother shoving a bratty looking toddler out of the way just in time. Flowers. Eucalyptus trees he fancied he could smell through the window. But leaning up against one was...Jennifer.



## PART 84

Karen was the first to reach Unit 38, where all the screaming was coming from, even though she'd almost tripped over some homeless guy on the steps. But the cop in Marie's sweater and even elderly Amelia were right behind her, helping her push Unit 38's door all the way up so they could all see inside.

The pregnant teenager inside wouldn't stop screaming.

The cop was the first to wriggle into the storage unit to her. After a while she called back over her shoulder, "I can't find anything wrong with her physically."

Amelia crawled in next, taking the teenager into her arms. Karen couldn't hear over the screaming, but guessed Amelia was singing a lullaby as she rocked her.

Karen sensed new arrivals behind her and half-turned to see the homeless guy from the stairs and the middle-aged woman Amelia had given the key to Unit 3 to, promising not to tell anyone. The middle-aged woman, maybe because she'd obviously been beat up as badly as the teenager had, looked so stricken Karen wasn't sure she could even breathe, let alone speak.

Silence. At last. Then Amelia's beautiful voice singing a lullaby.

But there was something new wrong with the teenager. It took Karen a minute to realize what it was: she wasn't breathing.

Suddenly the teenager took a huge, shuddering gasp of breath, and Karen was afraid she'd scream again. Instead the impossible combination of violent crying and a long, horribly eloquent wail was even worse. Then she grabbed a carved elephant and threw it violently against the wall before collapsing into Amelia's arms, wracked with sobs.

The cop rubbed her back. "Tell us. You're among friends and it'll make you feel better."

The teenager shook her head.

Karen wrinkled her brow. Something about the cop's voice, which wasn't as low as it had been before, almost like the low voice was an affectation she'd forgotten.

The cop continued. "How about if I tell you about something really dreadful from my life first, something that's probably more dreadful than anything that happened to you because I'm the one who did it. I'm the one who's responsible."

*That voice*, thought Karen, but then chastised herself for thinking about anything but that poor, miserable pregnant teenager at such a time.

Finally the teenager looked up, though still sniffing violently. But, perhaps drawn to the light in the hall, she looked directly at Karen, then the homeless guy and the middle-aged woman with her. When she saw the middle-aged woman, her eyes widened. "Mom?"



## PART 85

Sebastian froze in the act of scooping up a handful of storage-unit keys from behind the counter. That god-awful screaming had stopped. Did that mean the idiots who'd left the front door ajar and deserted the reception area were gonna screw things up by returning?

Sebastian's skinny jeans were tight, which had him cursing as he crammed the keys into a pocket while skittering over to the stairwell. The shit he had to go through just to make a living in such a god-awful world. A world where idiots kept upping the prices for the substance abuse that made it all worthwhile. But he hushed when he reached the stairwell and craned his skinny neck upward to listen hard.

Maybe some talking somewhere upstairs, but no footsteps. He looked at the stairs, tiptoed up a few, and craned his skinny neck even further till he imagined he could safely guess the floors upstairs were covered with metal too. No way he wouldn't hear approaching footsteps.

With that he skittered back over to the reception counter and quickly squeezed behind it, grateful for his slender frame as he squatted to rifle through some rickety drawers. The storage-unit keys he'd taken would be okay for later, when he'd like casually saunter back in with a friendly smile and some empty, oversized suitcases, but they wouldn't get him high again anytime soon enough.

Cash... Where the fuck was the... Then he found it, all the way in the back behind a bunch of old girlie magazines. (What the fuck was wrong with using the internet?) A strongbox, but the very best, idiot-delight, kind of strongbox: a *weak* strongbox. Sure it was locked, but it looked like Sebastian could scrape it open with a loose fingernail. Sloppy marker scrawling over the top said: "Private property of Irwin's. Knowing what's inside would NOT be playing your cards right. Believe me, YOU DO NOT WANT TO KNOW."

*Nice*, thought Sebastian. This Irwin was probably trying to scare the other idiots away from where he kept the money he skimmed off the top. But this Irwin was still an idiot because he'd obviously bought this weak strongbox...where?...a 99-cent store?

Suddenly there was the most god-awful racket on the stairs, ending with a cheap bottle of rotgut rolling across the floor. It came to rest against Sebastian's rainbow-platform sneakers as he silently cursed while rubbing the bony knee he'd hit against the counter when he leaped to his feet. Faintly, he thought he heard, "Clumsy, Hank, clumsy."

Then there was silence.

Sebastian scrambled to cram the girlie magazines back in the drawer. Maybe they wouldn't notice the missing keys and strongbox if he made it back with those empty suitcases to "shop" the storage units soon enough. He'd have to go all "sensitive male" on that idiot Carmen again to borrow her suitcases. He could only hope she wasn't still being an idiot about that little bit of kidding around he'd done with her which she kept calling rape.





## PART 86

The Storage Space was simply desolated by the scene playing out in Unit 38, simply desolated. Now both the middle-aged woman who'd been in Unit 3 and the pregnant teenager, both very visibly the victims of physical violence, were convulsed with tears and clinging to each other most desperately. On the exceedingly rare occasions when either of them could squeeze a word out between their sobs, the pregnant teenager could only say, "Mom!" and the middle-aged woman could only say, "my dearest child!"

*Who the fuck cares?*

The Storage Space was aghast! Where had that most rude and utterly inappropriate thought come from?

*Neither of them dumb bitches ever played their cards right!*

The Storage Space knew then.

*Not enough tittie between the two of them to grab in one hand, if I still had a hand.*

The Storage Space would have screamed, if only a building could...

*Even that homeless drunk Hank had enough sense to clear out, even if he didn't have enough sense to hold on to that fucking bottle and let it clatter down all those fucking stairs.*

The Storage Space was beside itself.

*I'm outta here.*

The Storage Space felt all those spastic shudders, completely impossible for a building to feel. Then...suddenly, blessedly...a profound relief as it watched green mist seep out of its every crack and cranny.

The green mist swirled backwards and forward a bit, just as a strange man appeared in the hall, and then swirled out a window and was gone.

The pregnant teenager looked up at the strange man. Her eyes widened even more than before and the next time she managed to squeeze a word out between her sobs it wasn't, "Mom!" It was, "Dad?"



## PART 87

Imogene couldn't like believe Real Life. Her dad was going to kill her.

Her mom held her tight. Imogene fumbled for her effin' phone.

Her mom held her tight. Imogene remembered her effin' phone was dead anyway.

Her mom pressed Imogene's head into the crook of her neck, forcing Imogene to close her eyes. The scent of her mom's skin sparked something odd, memories from Real Life. From like some snuggly long ago that Imogene never thought about any more.

Her mom rocked her. Imogene suddenly remembered her mom used to sing to her, though Imogene hadn't heard her sing in a very long time. Like her phone flickering in and out just before the battery died, Imogene just barely began to feel a calm warmth she'd forgotten all about.

Then she heard a heavy footstep. She didn't have to turn and open her eyes to know who it was.

"Let her go!" her dad bellowed.

Her mom dropped her so fast that her head hit one of the metal walls.

"Where's my elephant?"

The elephant she'd thrown against a wall and heard break? Her dad was like really going to kill her.

Where was her mom?

Finally she opened her eyes. Her mom was standing next to her dad with her head bowed. Behind them the old woman with the beautiful voice and the blonde who worked at the storage space seemed to be sneaking away, heading for the stairs. The girl with the great sweater who'd poked her a lot to be sure she was okay was fumbling for her phone, which was attached to a charger.

Imogene moved like lightning, snatching the charger off the other girl's phone, and finding an outlet in the hall. "I, like, really, really need this!" Just as she attached her own phone a heavy hand fell on her shoulder.

"I said, where's my elephant?"

"Dad, it was like, really like an accident?"

Behind him, Imogene saw the girl with the sweater's eyes widen. That girl didn't sneak, she ran for the stairs. Now Imogene's family was alone.

The first blow was nothing, almost like lame, since her dad was standing and Imogene was seated next to her phone she'd just plugged into the wall. It was the second one that caught her by surprise, a kick to her stomach.

However feebly, something in her stomach kicked back.

It was then that her mom fled, deeper into the storage space.

The beating went on and on. But something strange, something new was happening to Imogene. She started to laugh, even when another tooth loosened. Even when the laughter she couldn't stop, like some insane case of giggles, had her spitting up blood.

A lot of clattering footsteps from both ends of the hall at once.

From the end of the hall she was facing, she could see her mom running towards them with some kind of heavy lever. Imogene's life experiences were such that she immediately recognized that the stuff the lever was caked with was a whole lot of dry blood. Her mom swung hard just as the clattering footsteps at the other end of the hall stopped at the top of the stairs.

Her dad swung around at the same time, facing her mom as the lever hit his head. Blood flew. But his movement had wrecked her mom's aim. He still stood. Though dazed, he grabbed her mom's wrist. The lever with its fresh blood clattered across the floor and came to rest at her mom's feet.

Did Imogene imagine that her dad was like fighting to suppress a smile? He turned, still struggling a bit to regain his balance. First he looked a bit absently at Imogene, then over her shoulder.

Imogene turned around to see a bunch of cops with the blonde, the old woman, and the girl with the sweater behind them at the other end of the hall.

"You got here just in time!"

It was her dad speaking...

"It's not her fault, really, my wife's insane. I have the paperwork at home to prove it. I kept hoping I could control it, keep our family together somehow, but you see what she just did to my daughter before she started in on me."

Her mom was looking straight into Imogene's eyes now, while she fished her phone out of her purse with her free hand.

Phone! Phone! Yeah, that was like all that mattered! Imogene tuned out what her dad and the cops were saying and grabbed her own phone, which now had enough charge to work.

Snapchat...

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

Nothing.

Her mom was still looking straight into Imogene's eyes, struggling with her phone a bit before she started to type.

A new message drew Imogene's attention back to her own phone.

^URSunc&proud: I've always loved you.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?...always?...don't evn no who U R

Imogene looked up to see a cop take her mom's wrist away from her dad and handcuff it. Her mom was still looking at Imogene but now tears trickled down her cheeks. She hurried to type something into her phone before the cop grabbed her other wrist and the phone clattered to the floor.

Imogene stared at her mom's phone. On it was Imogene's Snapchat with ^URS. Imogene read:

^URSunc&proud: Sec...mayB very long sec...

Then her mom's phone blacked out.

The cops took her mom away.

Her dad smiled down at Imogene, but it wasn't exactly a smile.

Imogene couldn't like believe Real Life. Her dad was going to kill her.

Her mom might never again hold her tight.



## PART 88

Martin knew he was awake. Bloody hell, he could smell the inaugural vanilla latte No Name was so busy making him in the kitchen...which would never be as good as Starbucks.

But he looked around the room again just to be sure: No Name's bedroom in San Francisco. Again, nothing was undulating.

Slowly, very slowly, he looked out the window again at the eucalyptus trees.

Jennifer was still there, but this time she was staring straight up at him.

Martin jerked back from the window so fast he fell out of the bed on the other side and hit his head.

"Mo chuisle! My darling!" No Name was all over him.

His head pounded with pain, but he figured he better not let on because then he'd have to explain Jennifer. So he shrugged her off of him and did his best to act playful, first tickling her ruthlessly, then kidding around as he called out to her, "Officer Worth!"

Although convulsed with giggles and trying to get away from the tickling, she looked up at him immediately in that way that no one would unless they were really...

Martin's mind froze mid-thought, when he noticed the wall behind her.

It was pink.

It was undulating.

"No!" he screamed, turning away from that wall.

But the opposite wall was suddenly covered with wall paper that he knew hadn't been there before. Dinosaurs. And the T-rexes seemed to be all waking up together and opening their eyes.

The doorbell rang.

Martin knew who it must be.

No Name looked as startled, surprised, and scared as he was. But for a moment Martin forgot about the doorbell as he struggled to remember something important about No Name's real name. Something from just a minute ago.

But he forgot about it again when No Name answered the door.

There she was, standing in the hall just outside their door. Jennifer.

No Name was talking to her. "Look I don't usually open my door when there's a strange man on the other side, but..."

Martin tuned out the rest. He was staring at Jennifer, shaking all over now. Jennifer was staring at him.

No Name went on, something about thanking Jennifer for bringing a heavy package up to her door, and Martin thought he heard some guy say, "No prob," but the only one in the hall was Jennifer.

Finally No Name closed the door on Jennifer.

Martin was so relieved he almost laughed, turning back toward the wall with the T-Rexes, figuring what were a few T-Rexes compared to...

The T-Rexes were gone. Instead, standing against the wall, was Jennifer.

Martin screamed. Then he talked: "Bloody hell, I did it! I stabbed Frank through what must have been his jugular with a piece of broken glass and I killed him."

He heard a gasp and turned to see No Name still by the door. It was hard to see her face beneath all the purple caterpillars but he was pretty sure he'd never seen a human face twist itself through so many different, conflicting emotions until it settled into the greatest sorrow he'd ever seen.



## PART 89

Karen watched the teenager almost choke on her own, endless, insane laughter while Amelia rocked her. Karen could hardly hear the lullabies Amelia tried to sooth the girl with, or the extraordinary beauty of that old homeless woman's voice, over the teenager's sharp, jarring laughter.

*The mother... Who would have thought...*

Karen bowed her head, feeling her cheeks burn in shame as she realized they'd all run off to get the cops to protect the teenager from the wrong person. Why hadn't they stayed long enough to see who struck the first blow? Then she felt a strong but gentle hand on her shoulder.

"You all thought I was the one who beat my daughter, didn't you..."

Karen looked up into a face full of rage that suddenly changed to pathos, pain, and the hurt of indignation.

"Your wife..."

"Her boyfriend does that, not me. He even takes turns beating my daughter."

It wasn't just the odd tremble in the voice; it was something in that hand still on her shoulder that froze Karen's blood. Still, none of them had seen him lay a hand on his daughter. But they'd all topped the stairs in time to see his wife hit him in the head with the lever Karen knew had been enough to kill Irwin. How had she found it? What else had she found?

"I know," he said, biting his lip so hard she was afraid he'd draw blood, "it's that terrible temper of mine. I can sure shout up a storm, can't I?" A fierce pride was just barely smothered by a sheepish shrug, and a weak little pleading smile. "But you know what they say about the bark being so much bigger than the bite."

The teenager's laughter escalated sharply at that.

The teenager's father clutched Karen's shoulder and got closer to her. "I can't stand it. They both have the same laugh. They're both off in la-la land. You can't believe a word either of them say."

"You mean like her denying she's pregnant?"



"She's..."

The hand on Karen's shoulder tightened sharply.

It was then that Karen looked over to where the teenager sat on the floor and noticed that she was sitting in a widening puddle of blood.



## PART 90

Fifi really couldn't be expected to wait any longer. Really! She'd reapplied all her makeup over and over again until she couldn't even remember how many times she'd done it or whether or not she'd remembered to put that special stuff the Botox doctor had told her to put under her "Super Pink" sparkled lipstick on or not. She'd even got through that whole long, complicated article about what was new in Plastic Surgery in the *National Inquirer*. Really!

So Fifi took action. She got the really big mirror out of her purse and brushed her hair...and firmly decided that, the next time they didn't get her hair pink enough, she was going to let them know. Then she redid her makeup...and was sure she remembered to put the stuff the Botox doctor had told her to put under her lipstick this time. Then she pulled her sparkly boots up and her skirt down, just enough to cover her butt. Who said a 44-year-old couldn't look sharp! Really!

Then Fifi got out of the passenger seat of the car, nodding to herself sharply. *So there!* She'd even noted where her boyfriend went this time, so she just followed him into the building. Really!

Immediately she looked around for someone who could help her. Independence felt good! She was proud of herself when she spotted what must be an employee. Fifi cleared her throat, reminding herself to speak in a high voice. "Excuse me?"

The employee jumped, which seemed odd. It was then that Fifi noticed his rainbow platform sneakers and couldn't help explaining, "Nice!"...though she forgot to keep her voice high.

"God-awful!" he exclaimed, looking back at her, though Fifi couldn't imagine what he was talking about.

It was then that Fifi noticed...enviously...how skinny he was in his skinny jeans as he skittered behind the counter. He'd been trying to pry a strongbox open with a ragged piece of metal. Poor thing must have misplaced the key.

"I can only help you," he now said from the other side of the counter, "if you pay your bill first."

That sounded reasonable to Fifi...though she wasn't sure what bill he was referring to since she'd never been in there before. But she remembered to keep her voice high. "How much?"

"Fifty."

"But I only have fifteen."

"I'll take it."

Fifi gave him the fifteen. She was taking action. Really! "So I'm looking for my boyfriend who came in here a really long time ago, looking for his daughter Imogene..."

**NEXT 30 PARTS IN A SEPARATE DOCUMENT**