



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) 91-120 OF A TOTAL OF 150.



PART 91

The Storage Space was appalled, simply appalled. It had heard, and had tried to avoid hearing, a lot of voices in its day:

Her, the most precious of all, the one the ghost of Edmund would forever mourn, the one Amelia was descended from.

And the lovely old adjoining tea room that was no more. Yet even still it somehow managed to linger, grieving for the sensual yin and yang in the kaleidoscopic, ever-changing mix of lemon and sugar spilled across its porous old floors.

Le Grand Rat...

That Frank.

And, of those still living, the lovely Karen who loved that Frank.

And, going back to the days of grand old theatre, that firefighter who'd staggered in that awful night The Brooklyn Theatre burned, already burnt so badly he couldn't survive, whose body beneath a grand old staircase was never discovered...and never removed.

But what was this new voice, so weak and small? Yet with the cadence of Shakespeare, pleading for another chance to fret and strut another hour upon the stage? Clinging, desperately clinging...to what?

A huge, bloody rope attached to its teeny belly, connecting to something liver-like attached to a living, pulsing wall that kept quivering with insane laughter and bleeding...partially separated now from that wall...the blood spilling out to puddle on the floor of the poor, long-suffering Storage Space.

The Storage Space heard. The Storage Space knew. This new voice, so weak and small? With her feeble kicking unheeded? It was none other. It was *her*.



PART 92

Imogene like felt the kicking and like felt all that gross blood like spilling out of her onto the floor. She even kind of heard something. Not out loud but in her mind. Something like a desperate plea. But she couldn't stop laughing.

Real Life was funny! That's what RL was! Funny!

"A summer's day..."

It like hadn't been said aloud. It was like part of that desperate plea. It was...funny!

There, there!"

It had been said aloud, in that beautiful voice the old woman holding her had. Amelia was her name. Then Amelia pressed Imogene's head into the crook of her neck, forcing Imogene to close her eyes. At first she smelled bandaging and Bacitracin but then something funny happened...not really happened, just in her mind like that desperate plea...and there was the scent of a different woman sparking odd...were they memories of a snugly long ago when someone else sang to her?

She was being rocked, still imagining things...like that Amelia, the source of the desperate plea, and that different woman were all three singing to her. But a harsh thought she couldn't quite grasp broke the spell, something about how someone might never again hold her tight.

She felt something like shadows shift about in her mind. Something like optical illusions first appeared one way, then another.

Imogene grabbed at one of the shadows in her mind, something from long ago. Part of it seemed to slip through her fingers such that she might never again grasp it, but she did come away from it feeling like a child and did remember that she always liked shiny things.

"Where's something more I can use to keep her warm? Like a blanket."

Amelia speaking. Everyone else was looking around, away from Imogene, who'd flickered back to the present at the sound of Amelia's voice but now slipped back to being the child who liked shiny things. An...elephant...that's what it was next to her. Broken. But a bunch of shiny things had fallen out of it. Imogene grabbed a few when no one was looking.

"Nothing? No blankets anywhere?"

Amelia's voice again. Imogene saw she was holding a handful of data sticks she absentmindedly crammed into her pocket before she slipped back to being a very small child who squirmed because her diaper needed to be changed.

"Blood! Look at the floor!"

Amelia...

"She's miscarrying!"

Shadows shifted about in Imogene's mind again. An optical illusion snapped the other way. Like who was like miscarrying? It couldn't like be her because she wasn't pregnant. Those pains were effin' menstrual cramps. Where was her phone? Where was ^URS? These others were like ridiculous. Real Life was ridiculous. They were talking about her mother. RL was so funny. Imogene laughed and laughed and laughed some more. Didn't they know she'd never like ever had a mother?



PART 93

Martin was still talking. And talking. And bloody talking. He was telling No Name all about all the money he stole from the charitable organization he and Jennifer both worked for, and how he'd stupidly told Jennifer about it. He was explaining how he needed the money to fund his addiction to gambling, and how he'd gotten more money from Frank, the really dangerous loan shark he'd killed. And how Frank had turned out to be the husband Martin's friend-with-benefits Karen was escaping when she showed up at Martin's apartment.

No Name's hands were shaking when she handed him her first, home-made-for-him, vanilla latte.

It was terrible, but Martin took one look at Jennifer, who was still leaning against the wall where the T-rexes had been and guzzled it gratefully.

Glaring at Jennifer, he told No Name about how Jennifer had blackmailed him into getting back together with her, but that he'd found "stuff" on her phone that meant he was actually in the better position to blackmail her.

But for all that talking he knew there was something important he'd forgotten to say about killing Frank, something important about how he'd been justified, and something else important, something about No Name's name.

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

But what did something that she'd said come from some overly violent American Clint Eastwood film have to do with "my darling"? Something about her name... Something about her trying to trick him...

"Let me help you!"

Yeah, sure. Tears in her eyes and everything.

"No one else needs to ever know. We can go away!"

Where? And then it came in on him: Who was this No Name anyway? Women... Karen, married to Frank the ruthless loan shark. Jennifer... And now No Name? What did *she* want? Was he always so taken in whenever some woman was gobsmacked with him that he never saw women were nothing but trouble?

He swatted the vanilla latte, spilling the rest on the floor. And he talked even more, talk he felt sure would un-gobsmack her. He told her about his past over-indulgence in hallucinogenic drugs, what his parents said, and all the hallucinations he'd been seeing recently. Then he yelled at her for letting Jennifer into her bloody flat.

No Name wrinkled her brow, and looked around...obviously pretending she couldn't see Jennifer. This made Martin furious. He tried to think quickly of some place, some possible place in his life, where no women would ever be allowed. "There's only one place I'll be bloody safe!" he yelled at her, amazed to find he was both yelling and crying at the same time. "Prison!"



PART 94

Karen hurried over to help Amelia with the laughing teenager, horrified by the circle of blood beneath her. The cop in Marie's sweater joined them. Slyly, slowly the father joined them too.

No one else seemed to be in the building. Except every now and then between the teenager's laughs Karen thought she might be hearing a man and a woman talking in reception...but it was so faint she wasn't sure.

"I know I'm not your mother..." Amelia started.

"Never had one," the teenager barked, before resuming her laughter.

"...but please lie down," Amelia continued. "And please stop that constant laughing."

Amelia tried to lean the teenager backwards until she was lying down, but the teenager fought...and the rate at which the circle of blood was growing increased.

"Lie down, Imogene...Sweetheart." The father's voice cracked, almost as if this soft voice was one he'd never used before and he didn't quite know how to use it. It worked though, but in a way that surprised Karen.

In recoiling abruptly from her father, Imogene ended up flat on the floor. She also stopped laughing.

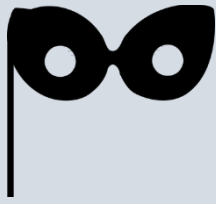
The growth of the circle of blood stopped.

"Could just be pooling inside her," Amelia said to no one in particular.

Karen gulped, envisioning the discovery of Irwin's body and other unpleasant consequences from more outside intervention, but still forced the words out: "Need an ambulance! Someone call 911!"

"Anyone know who and where the father is?" asked the cop.

Karen watched Imogene's father stiffen at that, probably ready to kill the father of his daughter's illegitimate child.



PART 95

Irwin had played his cards right when he got out of that fucked-up storage space building.

Finally, in the gym two blocks away, one of the naked girls in the Women's Communal Shower spotted him in his big green-snake shape. She screamed before slipping on the sudsy floor, failing to regain her balance, falling face down on the hard tiles, and starting to bleed while all the other naked girls screamed at the top of their lungs.

That was when Irwin really knew he'd played his cards right, because this could only be heaven.

But just then a naked man rushed in from the Men's Communal Shower. "What's wrong?" He spotted the bleeding girl. "Sonia!" He dashed over to scoop her off the floor, touching her huge titties as he did so and showing off what a big dick he had. "Sonia, darling, talk to me, please!"

Irwin desperately tried to distract him by turning into a green monster with an even bigger dick, but Sonia was unconscious and nobody else could see the dead.

The rest of the girls weren't screaming anymore. Instead they'd turned off all the showers and were wrapping towels around themselves and getting dressed.

Maybe this wasn't heaven.

He slithered out through the ventilation system with the last of the steam and found himself in a children's playground next door. Two twin boys spotted him, and he had fun chasing them around till one of them collapsed, turning blue as he struggled to breathe. But his mother started screaming something about asthma, fixed it with an inhaler, and took them both away.

Next Irwin went off in search of drivers on the fastest roads who could see him, till he'd managed to cause what he was pretty sure was a fatal accident.

But somehow it wasn't enough...



PART 96

The Storage Space thought it felt slithering again and would have been most horrified over what it gathered was the return of Le Grand Rat, but just then an extraordinarily noisy emergency vehicle made a deplorable mess of parking out front. Next a veritable horde of extremely inelegant individuals added to the racket by clattering up the stairs.

The teenager's father was the first to address them: "You must save my darling daughter!"

Never, in all the years the Storage Space had been a grand old theatre, had it heard a line delivered with such utter and complete ineptitude.

The emergency workers each tried to question the teenager about her baby's father, but she kept denying she was pregnant. They started murmuring among themselves about something called DNA testing.

The teenager's father stiffened. "And, when the baby's born, you can prove with DNA testing, or whatever it's called, that my daughter was impregnated by...my wife's boyfriend?"

Did one have to be firmly grounded in the theatre to pick up the telltale tremble of fear with which that last speech was positively riddled?

"Don't you worry now..."

Remarkable that one of those inelegant intruders had a voice like silk.

"...we'll find out who impregnated your daughter. But the thing to concentrate on now is... Hey!"

"I tripped!"

"If my colleague hadn't moved like lightning, you would have hit your daughter...quite hard, I might add...in the lower abdomen!"

"Edward! Oh Edward!"

That last speech... Not the emergency worker with the sometimes silky voice that spoke last. Certainly not the inept pregnant teenager's father. *Her*. Not speaking aloud yet. Way too small. Way too weak.

But just as the Storage Space wanted more than anything to concentrate on *her*, it found all it could concentrate on was Karen. Something about witnesses again. Oh it was all too tiresome. The Storage Space simply wouldn't pay it any attention, simply chose not to think about it.

Karen raised the scalpel she somehow still had and plunged it into an emergency worker's back.



PART 97

Imogene couldn't like understand why she was the one on a gurney, being like carried down the storage space building stairs. After effin' all, one of the emergency peeps was the one bleeding all over the place, and that blonde cray cray bitch who'd thought Imogene was pregnant was the one crying as they dragged her down the stairs too.

Imogene started to laugh again, but then she spotted the look her father gave her when no one else was looking.

Imogene like didn't have anything to laugh about. Except that, with a father like that, she was like very glad she'd never had a mother.

Real Life.

Her father looked away.

Imogene fumbled in her pocket, came up with a handful of data sticks that she thought had something to do with that elephant she'd broken, and found her phone.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

Nothing from ^URS.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Really long sec!

Nothing from ^URS.

Imogene like didn't have any effin' idea of what to do. One of the effin' emergency peeps tripped on the last stair. One of the data sticks she hadn't shoved all the way back into her pocket did a little dance across her gurney and clattered to the floor as they turned toward the front door.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Where R U?

Nothing from ^URS.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: I like really need U!

Nothing from ^URS.



PART 98

Martin looked down at his handcuffs. He couldn't believe he'd told an officer of the law that the only place he could ever feel safe was prison.

Officer Ann Worth darted a look at him from across the police station. The burly detective she was talking to turned to retrieve some forms he's just printed. Officer Ann Worth, nee "No Name," took the opportunity to mouth something at Martin. She didn't say it aloud, but he knew it was "Ma cushla." He still had no idea what it meant, but he knew it was from some overly macho Clint Eastwood movie. That made it the final insult. Rubbing it in whilst he was helpless in handcuffs. May as well have called him the scrawny effeminate Brit she undoubtedly thought he was. And with that fake heartbroken face to boot.

Martin didn't have much. Looking around, about the only thing he could think of that he had was that he wasn't hallucinating...not one teeny bit...and he didn't see Jennifer. But that was probably only because she was in a separate room in the police station, babbling her brains out...without even the vaguest nod to any extenuating circumstances...about how he'd killed Frank. Well, he'd beaten her to the punch on that one; he'd already told that burly detective all about it.

He had included the extenuating circumstances, but the burly detective only raised an eyebrow and made the sarcastic remark that that explained why he'd notified the police immediately rather than fleeing 3,000 miles under an assumed name.

No, Martin didn't have much. And, yes, he was a scrawny effeminate Brit who'd taken too many hallucinogenic drugs when he was younger. But he bloody well wasn't going to let some cheap tart with that annoyingly broad American accent get the better of him.

Dear Ann was still staring at him with that fake heartbroken face, rubbing in that sarcasm by repeating "ma cushla" over and over again whilst the burly detective sorted all those bloody forms.

Martin drew himself up, raised an eyebrow and raked Ann Worth repeatedly with a look that would wither whole fields of crops on the vine. If there was one thing a Brit had that no American could match, it was hauteur.



PART 99

Karen's eyelids fluttered, trying to open. Something was hurting her wrist. She caught a brief glimpse of it handcuffed to the side of a hospital bed before her eyes closed again.

"Your name?"

Karen heard the voice, but couldn't open her eyes at all now. She felt like a dentist had turned the laughing gas up way too high. Obviously sedated. Still, she thought she was speaking aloud when she gave her name.

"Occupation?"

She gave it. Whether aloud or not, she couldn't tell. Then her mind wandered under the sedation. Occupation... What had her occupation really been in life? Not her job, certainly. Beauty. She'd so wanted to find beauty. She'd found it with Frank. But there was still so much ugliness elsewhere. At first outside of, and then inside, that storage space building she'd at last escaped. Where she'd actually imagined she heard the building itself, telling her of all its secrets, of all the treasures still hidden behind its corrugated metal walls. Where Frank must have killed Martin and she herself had killed Irwin after he'd... When her eyes fluttered open... Had she seen fresh bandages on her old wounds and an intravenous, or was that wishful thinking? How had she ended up handcuffed to a hospital bed? Briefly she remembered...OMG it was Irwin!...telling her to stab that emergency worker in the back.

"So you didn't kill Irwin after all?"

OMG what had she been babbling about? Her head started to spin, but how could that be when she was already passed out.

"Social security number?"

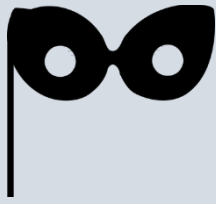
Karen gave it. Maybe she'd just imagined the previous question.

"Date of birth?"

She gave it.

"Sexual preferences?"

Huh???



PART 100

Pat was thinking about his sexual preferences...or rather "their" sexual preferences, if "they" was going to stay in character as the sick perv "they" was pretending to be. What else had that real "transgender" from the night before said? Didn't matter. Especially when the she he was with now...no, the she "they" was with now...moaned and moved a bit, exposing even more of her thigh.

For a moment Pat wished more than anything that it was possible to reach farther and shove aside what little was still covering the booty on the opposite bed. But there were other things to worry about. Like how to convince the cops that "they" was...or was it "were"?...the victim in the violence the night before, not the perpetrator.

Still, handcuffed to a hospital bed and all, a smile was in order. She of the luscious thighs...Karen was the name she'd given...had told enough about where priceless treasures were hidden behind the walls of a storage space facility that money shouldn't be so hard to get in the future.

Which brought back the memory of the horror that was the night before.

It had started innocently enough. Pat...a self-respecting, God-fearing heterosexual...had just trailed his mark a bit longer than usual, not sure whether it was a man or woman he was about to mug. Which made it hard to plan accordingly. Then he'd spotted the ideal alternative down a cross street...a young, rich-looking boy, his clothing alone worth a fortune...and switched to tailing him. But when Pat made his move, he made two horrible discoveries: 1) the rich boy was some kind of martial-arts expert, and (2) the first mark he'd abandoned had then trailed Pat and was determined to protect the rich boy.

Pat's body ached just thinking about it. The rich boy was bad. The abandoned first mark...who turned out to be a "transgender," inspired by social consciousness to protect all other people...was even worse because "they" were all fired up by righteous indignation. Finally the rich boy abandoned the battlefield, leaving poor Pat to listen to the transgender's endless lecture on everything from the moral bankruptcy of mugging people to far more details than any self-respecting male would ever want to hear about transgender-ality. What a relief when Pat recovered enough from the transgender's kind ministrations to beat "them" into unconsciousness and snatch some of "their," he gathered from the lecture, typically transgender articles of clothing.

A nurse heading toward him..."them" now...snapped Pat back into the present. The bitch pulled the sheet all the way over Karen's thigh on the way. But at least there was still cause to smile over the

results of Pat's interrogation of Karen. Mugging was now out; ripping storage space walls apart to find treasure was now in.

The nurse, tending Pat's wounds, turned out to be a brute. *First they handcuff the victim of a rich boy's hate crime to "their" hospital bed, then this?* "they" thought, working on "their" indignation.



PART 101

The Storage Space felt...hollow, then chided itself. Of course it felt hollow. That was patently obvious. It was, after all, a building.

Karen...

Gone...

The Storage Space would have felt utterly heartbroken, if only a building could...

"So there!"

Who was *that* woman? Not Karen, surely. The voice seemed a little deep, maybe not even a woman.

"More than god-awful. Fifi, you're a... You're a..."

Definitely a man speaking this time. Though so slight of frame. And with shoes that looked like rainbows.

"Really!"

The maybe-a-woman again, this Fifi who had *pink* hair...though rather of an anemic, not very well-done pink. And enough make-up on to ascend the stage. But the Storage Space didn't care about whatever these two were doing in Unit 3, leaving all the garments they'd removed from each other to spill into the hall. What the Storage Space cared about was...

"If all my boyfriend could do was fuss about his pregnant daughter going to the hospital, I really couldn't be expected to wait any longer. So I took action. With you, Sebastian. Really!"

Fifi of the pink hair yet again. How dreadfully tiresome. The Storage Space tuned Fifi and Sebastian out. All it cared about was...

Karen...

Should it have let her know that she'd been wrong when she'd assumed that the love-of-her-life Frank had succeeded in killing Martin after she passed out? That it had really been Martin that had killed Frank?

"Clumsy, Hank, clumsy."

Yet another bottle clattered down the stairs to the reception area Sebastian and Fifi had deserted. The eternally drunk Hank tripped and tumbled down the stairs after it, still mumbling to himself.

"What's this?" Hank asked himself, picking something else up off the floor before standing and wobbling back upstairs with his bottle. "A data stick?"



Part 102

Imogene thought she could like never, ever hate anyone more than that cray cray blonde bitch who'd come with her from that storage space building to the hospital. Cray cray bitch had the def-not-woke hospital peeps thinking Imogene was pregnant too! So now she had to lie on her back like to keep from miscarrying when...duh!...that blood must be her period, proving she couldn't be pregnant. Even worse, OMG, they effin' wouldn't let her use her phone!

Hahaha.

Imogene was staring at the peeling paint on the dirty white ceiling, but she was thinking about ^URS, who always made her laugh.

Hahaha.

How would ^URS Snapchat-filter this ceiling?

Ha...

She couldn't do it. She couldn't imagine how to Snapchat-filter that OMG ugly ceiling. She couldn't make herself laugh. She couldn't do anything to escape OMG ugly Real Life! She couldn't do anything without ^URS.

The door slammed open. Some nurse was Draking about how there was no room in Oncology. Some super-sexy-cute guy shoved a gurney through the door, heading for the empty bed by the window with a bunch of other peeps in white. Thirsty, Imogene craned her neck to watch him, but they like yanked the curtain separating the room's two beds and all she could do was listen to her new roommate Draking about how much getting transferred to the bed hurt.

OMG Real Life was ugly.

Finally the super-sexy-cute guy came out from behind the curtain.

Imogene did her best to look super-sexy-cute herself, though it was hard when all she had to work with was that her chest had gotten bigger lately, for no apparent reason. "Uh, like, could you please help me?"

"Sure. What's up?"

"There's, like, not even a TV in this room. They told me I'm supposed to lie on my back, but that's only because they, like, think I'm pregnant, and I'm not, and..."

"Sorry, no TV in this room. Sorry, gotta go."

What? Not even a TV?

The last nurse to leave pulled the curtain back. Maybe Imogene could at least, like, talk to her new roommate, who, like herself, was def not pregnant...way too thin. But they must have like given her new roommate something to shut her up. She was all out cold with her tongue hanging out. Besides she was all gray and, worst of all, she was really, really, really old.

Real Life was cray cray ugly.



PART 103

Martin couldn't believe they were booking him, about to haul him off to prison to wait till either someone bailed him out...he couldn't imagine who, not his Calvinistic mum or dad certainly...or he went to trial. A real cock-up. All that running. Three thousand miles. And all he ended up being in the end...all he'd ever been all his life...was an utterly pathetic damp squib who couldn't do shit. Unable to bear it, he looked away from the ink the cop had managed to get on Martin's vintage Frank Sinatra shirt while fingerprinting him.

Two dese/dem/dose-type Brooklynites were also being fingerprinted while they smacked what was probably vintage Hubba Bubba gum. They must have weighed over 20 stone...each. When they caught Martin looking them over, they looked him over, then leered and winked.

A thin-shouldered, "effeminate" Brit in prison? And to think he'd once imagined it would be preferable to a lifetime of picking up Jennifer's dry cleaning. Or even paying off her debts. Or even...

Speaking of Jennifer, where was she?

Jennifer. Her phone she'd left in his apartment! He'd been so distracted by that porn with her on it that he only now realized the men involved were politicians he recognized. And...the rest. That stupid little bitch had actually been instrumental in throwing a major election! If he wasn't such an incurable damp squib he would have, instead of confessing, silenced Jennifer back in that bitch detective's apartment with just one mention of what he'd seen on Jennifer's phone.

Bollocks! Bloody fucking hell! Was the only thing in his life he could possibly be thankful for that he'd finally stopped hallucinating? He looked up again. Right into the eyes of one of the gum-smacking monsters they'd just finished fingerprinting. The monster took a step closer. No one stopped him. He smiled. Martin cringed. Maybe there were things even worse than hallucinating...

And then it happened.

Martin was almost relieved to see Jennifer ride in on top of a T-rex.



PART 104

Karen clung to her dream, not wanting to wake up.

Frank, she was in bed with Frank. She loved him so damn much she didn't care that he'd murdered Martin; she couldn't care, no matter how wrong that was.

Something caressed her thigh lightly. Then she heard Frank whisper in her ear, "But do you care if I'm no longer alive?"

She shuddered. Was it Frank's words in her dream, or had someone really moved her sheet a bit, exposing even more of her thigh to a sudden chill.

A scream snapped her eyes open. The ceiling and walls were all so very far away. It wasn't her storage space. Where was she? She couldn't remember.

It was night; the room was dark. The wind whistled outside, whipping the shadows of tree branches that flowed across the ceiling into a frenzy of rustling leaves. The curtains over the window had been pushed back. A street light outside spotlighted her exposed thigh and butt.

Karen reached for the sheet to cover herself, but was brought up short as metal clanged and cut into her wrist.

Handcuffs.

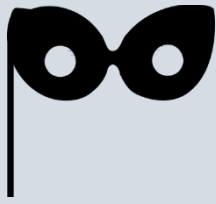
The hospital bed.

She thought she caught movement in her peripheral vision. Turning, she saw a broom with a handle long enough to reach between the two beds drop to the floor, its closest end pointing toward her exposed butt and thigh.

Another scream. More metal clanging, but these weren't her handcuffs. It was all coming from the other bed.

And then she saw it, rubbing her eyes over and over again because she couldn't believe it could be true. On the other bed was...why had the hospital allowed this?...a man. He too was handcuffed to his bed. She gathered he'd been jerking off but was flaccid now as he stared up at...

Frank. In all his muscular glory. Furious. No doubt because this guy had pushed aside Karen's sheet with that broom handle. Frank, every bit of him just as she remembered except... He was floating over the handcuffed man's bed. The same streetlight that spotlighted Karen's partial nudity was shining brightly through Frank, who was nothing more than a green and endlessly undulating...cloud.



PART 105

Sebastian couldn't stop thinking "god-awful" when he contemplated his discovery about Fifi in Unit 3. Bad enough getting head from a middle-aged woman with two-tons of makeup and pink hair...he'd only agreed to it as a goof because with her tacky clothes she managed to match every color in his rainbow platform sneakers...but to discover that she wasn't even a woman! What an idiot!

Still, he couldn't stop thinking about her, him, them, whatever.

And he needed to concentrate on what he was doing.

It hadn't been easy to weasel his idiot girlfriend Carmen into letting him "borrow" all her big, wheeled suitcases...which of course he had no intention of returning. Idiot didn't even admit to being his girlfriend, or to liking the sex he kept having to force on her. Or the little, fun, slapping around he had to give her to get the suitcases. But here he was, on his way back to that storage space building he'd stolen all those keys from with enough suitcases to do a whole shitload of shopping.

Lights, cameras, action...he was about to swing through the door where he'd have to pass reception with a ton of giant suitcases, a fistful of stolen storage unit keys crammed into a pocket in his skinny, reveal-all jeans and what...a big, shit-eating smile?

He froze for moment outside the door, thinking yet again about all the shit he had to go through to make a living in such a god-awful world and the idiots who kept jacking up the prices for the substance abuse necessary to make it tolerable. Then he remembered "he who hesitates is lost" and "carpe diem" and crashed through the door.



PART 106

The Storage Space would have screamed with pain when its front door was slammed open against the wall, if only a building could...

Why was it deigning to think in human terms again? Why could it not free itself forever from even the last vestige of association with those wretched, vulgar creatures? Why couldn't it concentrate solely on objects with dignity, id est inanimate?

The Storage Space thought of art, that upstart Claude Monet's multiple paintings during different seasons of that bridge in Giverny. It thought of architecture, that oddly sensuous new movement also coming out of France: Art Nouveau.

It thought about how it could be argued that all these inanimate objects might in some vague way be associated with humans. Such an insidious consideration was firmly swept aside.

"May I help you?"

That beautiful voice. Human! Well, yes, but some humans were...at least tolerable.

"Hey, sup?"

Unlike others.

"I beg your pardon?"

Amelia of the beautiful voice. But did the Storage Space detect a hint in her voice of the revulsion it shared?

"I beg pardon," the intolerable other mimicked. "How are you this fine day?"

"Fine, thank you, young man. That's an awful lot of suitcases, even for a storage space. You...believe in quick getaways?"

"Really!"

Another voice, forced high and dreadful, along with all the speaker's pink hair.

"Fifi...you know this guy?"

The pregnant teenager's father, with his arm around this...Fifi creature.

"I'm so innocent. Really!" Fifi protested, squirming within his embrace. "Rainbow Shoes, here, with all the suitcases? I was just talking to him on the street when I was waiting in your car while you took care of... What's your daughter's name? Really! I just can't remember these things."

"Imogene. I can't help it if it took a while. My wife beat her up again."

"But isn't Emily, Imelda, Whoever in the hospital now? Really! I remember that! So what are we doing back here?"

"Nothing you need to worry your pretty pink head about, so you wait here."



PART 107

Imogene had like two effin' choices, stare at the still-wet, water-leak stain on the acoustical tile right over her head or stare at her ugly sleeping roommate with, like, gray skin and no effin' hair.

Finally the door slammed open again.

Imogene prayed it was the super-sexy-cute guy again. Or even that nurse that was always Draking...if she brought a TV.

It wasn't either of them.

It was a cop. Almost as old as her roommate. He pulled a chair over next to Imogene, took out a tablet, and like blabbed a bunch of dumb preliminaries before getting down to it. "I understand, little lady, that you came in with another patient?"

"Cray cray bitch from the storage space building?" Imogene was wondering if she could get to Snapchat on that tablet...

"Excuse me?"

"That blonde bitch. Cray cray. Def not woke."

"Actually the young lady in question is no longer asleep."

"Like I didn't mean like literally asleep..."

"And quite upset. Won't stop screaming." He rolled his eyes and looked disgusted. "Thinks she saw a ghost."

"Like I say, totally, like completely, cray cray."

""Cray cray'?"

"Crazy! Don't you know anything?" Imogene snapped, then caught herself. "Like, sorry, officer, but I like get carried away because like that cray cray...sorry...really truly totally crazy bitch is always at that storage space building, like works there, and is so def not woke...that means so definitely completely out

of it...that she thinks all kinds of cray...crazy things and was probably so out of it that she thought she was helping when she like stabbed that guy with that scalpel!"

The officer didn't respond, too busy struggling to take notes on a tablet he was obviously def not woke about using.

So there, thought Imogene, *that should get that cray cray bitch locked up for, like, forever*. She turned away to look back up at the still-wet, water-stain on the acoustical tile right over her head.

"That poor, beautiful blonde..."

Compassion? Understanding? Those were like not at all the effin' responses Imogene was expecting. Or wanted. She was about to look back towards the cop, and maybe think of something else she could say to make the cop hate that cray cray bitch as much as she did, when a drop of water splashed right into her eye.

"And in the worst hospital in the city," said the cop sympathetically.

Imogene looked back at the cop. He looked up from the tablet and clapped a hand to his mouth, like he hadn't realized he'd been talking aloud. She was pretty sure his sympathy over the effin' hospital hadn't been about leaky ceilings but about that effin' cray cray bitch Karen.

Imogene could have screamed. She opened her mouth to speak but couldn't think of anything to say, so she turned back to the ceiling.

A water drop splashed into her other eye.



PART 108

Martin was six.

Was he dreaming?

His mum's garden. Kent. All was as prim and proper as the primroses. Even Martin. It was years before he fell in with what his Daa called "that bad lot." Years before he was so desperate to fit in and impress the girls that he'd do anything "that bad lot" told him to. Including all those hallucinogenic drugs...

His mum's garden. His Daa started watering with the garden hose. For some reason the water coming out of that hose terrified Martin. But his mum picked him up and swung him around in the sunlight, laughing. Then she stopped, hugged him tight, and nuzzled his neck. Martin could smell the scent of her soap, which she would also use when she scrubbed him clean. It reminded him of fluffy clean towels, bed linens, and cozy bedtime stories. Then they were on the ground, with his folks stealing a kiss over his head before they all three got busy weeding and patting the ground down around the flowers "just so." The earth was warm and wonderfully alive with the scents of the plants growing in it. Martin was happy, surrounded by his parents, watching their six hands working in that warm, rich dirt together. Making everything in their world all neat and tidy.

This was so much better than all those hallucinogenic drugs...

But with that he knew he wasn't really in his mum's garden, hadn't been there for...decades.

Where was he?

He *was* on the ground, and there *was* dirt on his hands. But this dirt didn't smell good. There *were* two bigger people surrounding him, but they were both men. For a moment he caught a flash of his dirt and blood-covered hands buried in a foul littering of dirt and garbage scattered over a hard, concrete floor. But then he spotted a pink and pudgy-cute T-rex winking furiously at him. There. That was much better!



PART 109

Karen couldn't stop screaming, even though they must have taken that man who'd been jerking off out of her room when she'd passed out, yet again, at the sight of...

Frank, her Frank! All this time she'd thought she had to forgive him for a murder he hadn't committed, because, somehow, that skinny, effeminate, little Brit Martin must have turned the tables on Frank and it was Frank who was...

Karen screamed and screamed until a nurse finally came in.

Frank! Dead! Endless memories of their making love in his apartment in Sausalito cut through her like a swarm of knives. For all the pain of thinking he was mad at her, for all the pain of thinking she would never see him again, none of this was anything at all compared to the finality of his being...really, actually...dead.

She screamed one long, loud, endless scream. Vaguely she noticed that the nurse was preparing an injection.

Dead! It was only in the face of Frank's death that Karen realized that no matter how convinced she was that she would never see him again there had always been at least a teeny chance for something she now realized could not possibly happen ever, not even in her dreams.

The nurse was fiddling impatiently with her IV and dropped something that shattered on the floor. "Will you please stop screaming?"

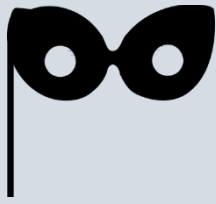
Vaguely Karen remembered something she'd read off her phone once about this being the worst hospital in the city.

"That 'transsexual' sick perv, who is an affront against the Lord Jesus Christ, is gone," continued the middle-aged nurse. "So you have nothing to scream about."

Something must have gotten into her IV, a lot of something, because Karen could feel herself losing consciousness what struck her as way too fast. She thought she heard herself mumbling something about how that wasn't a real transgender person, only a "sick perv" of a heterosexual man.

"Okay, this time I'm going to get an injection in your IV, and this time it's enough to knock out an elephant. Not spending the rest of my shift listening to this nonsense!"

Karen felt like she was on an elevator that's cables had just snapped and was now plummeting down a hundred stories. Her last thought was for Frank. Whether or not he'd ever forgiven her or she'd ever seen him again, how unbearable that he had lost his life.



PART 110

Hank choked back a few sobs, a sure sign that he needed another drink, and fumbled for his bottle with shaking hands. That data stick he'd found after they took that pregnant teenager out fell out of his pocket first. It clattered all over the floor just as a cop showed up.

"Who'd you steal that from?" the cop spat in disgust, scooping up the data stick and sticking it into...what were them things called?...a tablet.

Hank didn't care. He'd only vaguely thought he might be able to sell it to someone in exchange for a few bucks toward his next bottle. What Hank cared about was that this cop, who'd been sniffing around the storage space building all day, probably wouldn't take kindly to Hank's taking a swig of liquor.

"Elections R Us," the cop read off his screen. "Serving the greater good since 2001. A Florida-based corporation." He yanked the data stick out of his tablet and threw it at Hank, hitting him square in the face.

It stung, just missing his eye, but again Hank didn't care. It didn't sting anywhere near as bad as the memories of a lifetime of defeat that were his only reward for sobriety.

"Not possible in this fair land," the cop snorted, still looking at the data stick. "Bad joke." Now he was looking at Hank again. "But you look like you've sobered up nicely since I first saw you this morning. So I have a few questions."

Hank now had his hand on the promised land, his bottle. "I...I need a drink!"

"Not till after you've answered my questions. Because of recent developments in San Francisco we're re-opening an investigation into a disappearance and possible homicide here. We're in the process of ruling out homicide due to our failure to find any evidence of a body, but we need to locate a blonde woman named Karen for interrogation."



PART 111

The Storage Space considered the occupants of its lobby. Most assuredly a lesser-evil choice of where to squander its attention but at least a shred better than watching some cop interrogate a drunk. Or worrying about those now-only-occasional slithers. Or...

Hadn't anyone the least grounding in the theatre these days? Did it take an inanimate object, a building no less, to spot the jealousy all over the rainbow shoes and remarkable collection of suitcases? Or that the object of that ridiculously overacted jealousy was the pregnant teenager's father, who had his arm wrapped around that equally ridiculous Fifi of the Pink Hair?

Who the fuck cares?

The Storage Space was no longer aghast at such language. But it was determined not to squander its attention on such. Or...

None of them dumb shits ever played their cards right!

The Storage Space ignored the slithering. Or the temptation to deign to squander its attention on a sharp response. Or...

It reattached its attention firmly to the occupants...the *still-alive* occupants...of the lobby.

That Fifi creature was chattering away madly to the teenager's father about, as far as the Storage Space could tell, absolutely nothing. The smile plastered to the father's face looked like pancake make-up dissolving under bright lights. Finally he snapped out something about letting him go, that he had something important to do. Then he jerked back from Fifi, telegraphing to such an obvious degree that he was about to hit her...or him, or whatever Fifi was...that any director would have told him to find a new job in vaudeville.

Didn't any one see it? Other than...just maybe...Rainbow Shoes?

But then the teenager's father caught himself, plastered his smile back on with an apology to Fifi, and left her in the lobby as he clattered up the stairs to Unit 38.

I repeat, who the fuck cares?

The Storage Space was caught off-guard this time, its attention broken. *It's better*, it found itself answering, *than thinking of you. Or... Or...*

And then it all came crashing down, like that beloved tea room long since gone, and the Storage Space knew what that "or" it had been avoiding was. It was better than thinking of Karen.



PART 112

Imogene couldn't stop giggling.

^URSUnPC&proud: But wait...there's more!

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUnPC&proud: "It" now so cray cray u can hear it screaming.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Hahaha.

^URSUnPC&proud: Blonde bitch gets hers cuz it called u pregnant.

A long, like really horrible moan interrupted. Imogene knew she was dreaming, but she didn't want to wake up.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: U there?

Another moan. Close. Like in her room.

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

WTFwasImogeneCoca: ?

^URSUnPC&proud: I'll always love you.

Mumbling. Like in her room. Imogene tried to ignore it, but could feel herself waking up despite herself.

WTFwasImogeneCoca: Who R U?

^URSUnPC&proud: Your mother.

Imogene's eyes snapped open, just as a drop of water from the leak in the ceiling hit the bridge of her nose, rolling both ways to cloud both her eyes.

"Were you dreaming about your mother?"

Like, it was an old person's voice from the other bed in her room, all stiff and formal and all that cray cray shit. Imogene smirked. "That's like not possible, because I never had a mother." She turned to look at the woman who'd like messed with her dreams, somehow getting all her cray cray shit in them, and realized she hated this gray, hairless monster even more than that blonde bitch down the hall.



PART 113

Martin was playing with a fluffy pink stuffed animal while listening to the soundtrack of a movie his parents must have been watching in another room.

The Music Man. The part where Marion the Librarian tried to keep the second sleazy salesman from going after the first sleazy salesman, who she'd fallen in love with, by flirting with the second sleazy salesman. The second sleazy salesman kept calling her a strictly G-rated "girly girl."

But there was absolutely nothing bloody G-rated about what his parents were calling Marion the Librarian, or their suggestions about what the second sleazy salesman should do to her. And were those even his parents watching *The Music Man* in the other room? There were a whole lot of male voices and no female ones in the audience.

Where was he?

For a moment he saw the bars and the trail of blood leading toward him and realized he was on the floor again, and that he wasn't alone. An unbearable despair, far deeper and more painful than the most acute pain, forced an endless moan so unfathomable that it seemed to erupt from his bone marrow. A consummately cruel and oily voice breathed directly into his ear, "Beginning to like it now, aren't you..."

Then he was playing with his fluffy pink stuffed animal again, a pudgy-cute T-rex that was winking furiously at him.

"Little boy..."

That consummately cruel and oily voice! Where did it come from? Didn't matter. Couldn't matter. Martin concentrated on the undulating patterns in his little-boy wallpaper, clutching the winking T-rex. Desperately he tried to calculate how long until the end of *The Music Man*, knowing all the overly loud movie soundtracks drowned out and concealed...other sounds.



PART 114

Karen had never been so mesmerized by such a bright light. She remembered something about a summer's day as she rolled toward that bright light, gathering momentum as if rolling down a grassy hillside.

A summer's day...

Sunlight.

Flowers starting to bloom as she remembered a Shakespearean actor's elegant voice speaking of "the darling buds of May."

Faster.

Closer.

Tumbling toward the light now, head over heels. The light became so bright, and Karen longed for it so. She strained to reach it, to reach the sun, her feet seeming to leave the earth behind her. So much more comfortable. All pain, all anguish gone. For a moment a chill spread over her. There was something strange about that light: it wasn't warm. But it was peaceful. She would never, ever have to feel any pain about anything again.

A jolt like electricity intruded, jittering through her body. Not just warm but hot.

"Phew. Thank you, Lord Jesus Christ, for adrenaline."

Who was speaking? Karen felt shooting pains from everywhere. The light she'd been tumbling toward was gone.

"That was close."

Again, who was speaking? Karen's eyes fluttered open as her head pounded so badly she feared it would fall off. Her hands fluttered up toward her head, but only one made it. The other was stopped by something around her wrist that sent more pain shooting through her. Metal clanged, pounding through her head with an agony so unbearable Karen started to scream.

"You'll have a teeny little headache. Nothing to scream about. Lord Jesus Christ, don't make me have to inject you again!"

Each word throbbed through Karen's head like a locomotive. Next, like thunderclaps, were the footsteps. Karen's eyes snapped open to see the middle-aged nurse walking across the room to the door. Something seemingly gargantuan thundered down the hall and through the door, turning out to be only a gurney with a new roommate on it who was unconscious, but seemed to be missing a leg.

Karen screamed from the pain.

The nurse raised an eyebrow at her and started preparing an injection.

Karen remembered:

Frank!

Dead!

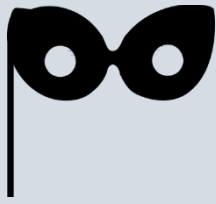
Karen screeched in the face of an agony she simply couldn't endure.

The nurse headed toward her with the injection.

But just then the seemingly impossible happened:

Her new roommate screamed even louder.

The nurse, still holding the injection, changed direction.



PART 115

Lydia was having what could only be a nightmare. But then, she'd had so many recently.

"Better check her vitals first."

Who was that? Never mind.

First there was the nightmare where her drunken boyfriend, who never drove...always saying, "I don't drive; I drink," actually got behind the wheel. Just because she, Lydia, had had a few. Then there was the nightmare accident, obviously a nightmare because it was such a tired cliché with them flying off the side of the BQE into thin air, then falling, then her leg being crushed. And now...

She couldn't help screaming. But that bloody stump where her right leg had been couldn't be real, especially because she could still feel the agony of her crushed leg.

"The hell with her vitals."

A different nurse, middle-aged.

"Stop her! Stop that screaming!"

The patient in the other bed, holding her head with just one hand, because the other was handcuffed to the bed.

"Know somethin', Blondie? You're changing! I'm beginning to like you."

The middle-aged nurse again, heading toward Lydia with an injection.

"I'm out of here."

The other nurse, staring at the injection while shaking her head and rushing out of the room.

The remaining nurse prepped Lydia's IV for the injection.

Recoiling, Lydia saw her right-leg stump move, felt a hideous throb of pain course through it that no nightmare could mimic, watched its bandaging turn bright red with fresh blood, and reached for it...only to discover that one of her hands was handcuffed to the bed too.

"Nooooooooooooooooo!"

Racing through her scream was the realization that it had all been true, even the part where her boyfriend died. Even the part where checking her license plate against her ID had resulted in them arresting her for that hit and run with that kid splattered all over her windshield from the week before.



PART 116

The Storage Space swayed with pleasure.

Amelia was singing.

"Mommy, Mommy, the building's moving!"

"Hush up, Suzy Q, buildings don't move."

"But it is so moving! It is so! Look at your Frappucino! It's gonna spill, Mommy! It's gonna spill!"

"Must be the subway."

The Storage Space swayed a long, leisurely sway that did indeed spill a little of the "Frappucino." Amelia finished up the last heartbreaking verse of a Puccini aria. The Storage Space couldn't help but shudder with the thrill of it.

"Mommy!"

"F train!"

Amelia started in on Puccini's lesser-known *La Rondine*, with its exquisite aria about a young girl's dream. The Storage Space had always preferred Ileana Contrubas' version over the usual Maria Callas but hadn't heard it in so terribly long that it managed to convince itself that the best version of all was Amelia's. It shivered with delight.

"Mommy!"

"High winds!"

The Storage Space was seeing its own staircases, not as they were now...oh no!...but as they were then. Gleaming wood balusters so intricately carved they seemed to sway and shiver to the music like fine lace. Veritable hordes of the haute couture, prancing up and down its stairs like sensitively bred horses with the highest pedigree.

"God fucking damn it!"

The Storage Space was wrenched back through subsequent centuries to Unit 38. It was the pregnant teenager's father.

"Mommy, that man said bad words!"

That far-too-talkative, odious child in Unit 37 again.

"Suzy Q! Hush up and mind your own business, or we'll never get out of here!"

Said child's mother.

"God fucking damn it to hell!"

The pregnant teenager's father again. He followed up by pounding the metal walls of Unit 38 with both his fists, seemingly forever, sending a cacophony of ricocheted racket throughout the whole building.

"Suzy Q, come back!"

"Mister, that's not nice. You're saying bad words. And all that pounding hurts my ears."

An even louder racket, with that odious child screaming.

"Stop! Stop! Mommy that bad man's hitting me!"

Having abandoned both her singing and the unit she was scrubbing clean, Amelia raced toward Unit 38.

Mr. Fists slugged Suzy Q's mother.

Suzy Q raced into the hall but stopped when she ran into a rather peculiarly dressed man carrying a crowbar who the Storage Space had never seen before. "What's your name?"

"Pat," said the peculiarly dressed man with the crowbar, obviously caught off guard.

Then Suzy Q spotted her mother and Amelia and commenced a wailing, at the top of her lungs, that would have put any Wagnerian opera singer to shame.

Mr. Fists threw an already broken carved elephant against the wall, shattering it into a million pieces, before collapsing to the floor. "Of all the data sticks, those two had to be missing?"



PART 117

Imogene fiddled with the data sticks still in her pocket. Like, what-the-fuck else did she have to do?

The gray, hairless monster in the other bed like had the effin' nerve to speak: "You...seem restless. Shall I...attempt to amuse you...with a story?"

Def not woke. Could hardly speak. Imogene was about to tell her to shut the fuck up, when another drop of water fell into Imogene's eye from the ceiling and she screamed instead, at the top of her lungs.

That nurse that was always Draking like burst into the room to scream at The Gray Monster. "Lord Jesus Christ, will you please stop screaming?" Then *she* looked def not woke. "No, can't be you, The Moaner. I just gave you enough pain meds to sink the Titanic." The nurse turned to yell at Imogene. "Lord Jesus Christ, will *you* please stop screaming?" Next she kicked the wall. "And I can't even shut you up with an injection because you're pregnant!" The nurse stormed out of the room, easy to hear Draking away to some other nurse in the hall.

Imogene yelled after her, "I am not pregnant!" Another drop of water fell into her other eye. She turned her head to the side and saw The Gray Monster was nodding off, like real high on her pain meds. Imogene like couldn't believe what she was about to say, but what choice did she have? Anything. Like effin' anything was better than just lying there. "Like don't go to sleep! Tell me an effin' story!"

"Huh?"

"A story! Tell me a story!"



PART 118

All Martin ever wanted was to be...forever...happy.

He was playing with a stuffed animal, his pudgy-pink T-rex. His parents must have been watching a movie in another room. But something was wrong...

The film. The actor's voice was soft, but it was...Clint Eastwood!

Martin hated Clint Eastwood. His whole body shook with rage. Why did he hate Clint Eastwood so?

No Name! Now revealed as Detective Ann Worth. She kept calling him that funny name, "ma cushla" or whatever, from a Clint Eastwood movie. Which Clint Eastwood was it? *Million Dollar Baby*?

No Name!

The pink T-rex was winking at him furiously. But something else was wrong: his wrists hurt. He saw the bars of his cell and the dried blood leading toward him and something he'd missed before and even the guards had missed, the homemade rope left behind the toilet...and remembered why his wrists hurt. And remembered that oily male voice behind him, always breathing the cruelest possible taunts into Martin's ear while he...

The pudgy-cute T-rex was winking at Martin even more furiously until it somehow turned ugly, its voice joining that oily voice and Clint Eastwood's: "Beginning to like it now, aren't you?"

The stuffed animal's winking sped up until it blurred just before its eye split open. The broken eye fell out of its socket, dripping blood. The shiny pink fur withered, curled up, and blackened.

Martin knew what was coming, what almost always came while the movies were on to conceal his screams.

He got to the rope first. Then the chair.

Clint Eastwood's voice alone sang out from the film's soundtrack: "Mo chuisse!"

"Ma cushla?" Martin muttered. So this was the bloody American macho movie, designed to humiliate an effeminate, weakling Brit? What irony! Because he wouldn't be doing this, he could have and would have borne it all if only...

And it finally came to him, the supreme surprise, as he watched his distancing contempt for "No Name" drop away like a house of cards.

...if only Detective Ann Worth had loved him too.

He was having trouble with the knot around the pipe overhead but finally got it, got up on the chair, placed the noose around his neck, and kicked away the chair.

"Mo chuisle," said Clint Eastwood in an unimaginably soft and loving voice, "means 'my darling, my blood.'"

Ma cushla means my darling? Martin's hands flew to the rope around his neck, clawing at it futilely while he looked down beyond his "still alive and kicking" feet to see they couldn't possibly reach the chair he'd kicked over. Then his vision seemed to curl up and blacken.

The last thing he heard was footsteps outside his cell. The man with the oily voice, whose attentions he'd now welcome if it wasn't too late? If those footsteps weren't too far away?

Martin was six. In his mum's garden in Kent. All was as prim and proper as the primroses. Even Martin. He would never fall in with what his Daa called "that bad lot." Martin was happy.



PART 119

Karen was not happy. Something that drunk at the storage space kept muttering, about sobriety being way overrated, kept repeating on her like a hideous but catchy tune. Karen felt like she had never in her life been as sober.

Something that middle-aged nurse had given her. What had she said... Adrenaline? She was so wide-awake. A doctor came in and smiled at her chart before leaving. She was also a whole lot healthier than she'd been in a very long time. And a whole lot more alert and aware...

Sobriety is way overrated.

Her whole life as a hopeless romantic... Caressing ancient wood carvings and imagining she experienced telepathic communication with a storage space that was once a grand old theatre. Falling hopelessly in love with a violent man, a criminal, whose two favorite words were "fuck" and "fugettaboudit." Who cheated on her with her very best, friends forever, Marie. Whose face had already been hideously scarred by a prior attempt on his life and who finally prompted that effeminate Brit Martin to kill him. Marie... How could she? Yet Karen was still so fixated on her that she imagined she was that cop with a completely different face who showed up with the sweater Karen had made her.

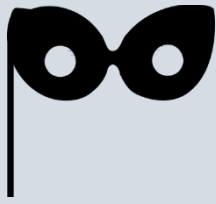
Irwin...

Karen's new roommate, the one whose leg had been amputated, stirred...though she'd been heavily drugged. "I can't believe they did this to me!"

Karen fought to remember her name, which some nurse had said. "I'm so sorry, Lydia!"

Lydia's eyes opened. She looked straight at her. "Just because I splattered some dumb kid all over my windshield."

Something snapped in Karen, something that felt...permanent. "Fugettaboudit... Fuck you, Lydia!"



PART 120

Beth wasn't sure if she was thinking or speaking. She wished she was typing; she had so many stories to tell:

"So that's how I ended my marriage to the only man who really did love me. Who loved the pilgrim soul in me. For the first ten years after my divorce I was sure I'd ended it because he was distant. For the next ten years I was sure I'd ended it because I was distant. Finally I realized I'd ended it because, in our strange and mystical way, we were closer to each other than either of us ever was to anyone else...either before or after our marriage. I'd ended it because it was the only way I could free myself of my constant, nagging fear that I was going to lose that closeness."

Beth's mind twisted and turned through even more complexities in her life, all of which were finally clear to her:

"Denial. Denial of what's real, no matter how ugly, is your biggest enemy. If only I'd had the courage to stand firm and let those hard waves of truth wash over me, I could have found so many more coral reefs teeming with life's treasures beneath those waves."

Suddenly the memory of Beth's mother surfaced from deep below the roiling waves of her subconscious: A woman she hadn't thought about for years. A complex woman Beth had also separated herself from, supposedly because her mother was the consummate embarrassment and just too crude to be endured. But now a hard wave of truth hit and she realized it was because her mother had threatened Beth's starry-eyed idealism with actual facts.

Equally suddenly, her long-estranged, and even longer-dead mother was standing in the center of the brightest light Beth had ever seen, beckoning toward her, saying something about it being time. Her words wafted toward Beth, warming her with long-lost memories of bedtime stories, yet swirling around and reverberating within her now in a refreshingly cool breeze.

"Def not woke! Dumbest effin' stories I've ever heard!"

The pregnant teenager sharing her room. For a moment Beth's eyes flickered open, and her heart reached out one last time to the world she suddenly felt so removed from. With every feeling Beth had ever felt, every memory, and every story she had ever had to tell, she wished this teenager well.

Then her eyes closed again and she could feel other things in her closing as well, a bit like dominoes falling. She grasped her mother's outstretched hand, took a giant step into the cool light that now surrounded them both, and just...let go.

All the pain was, at last, gone.

NEXT 30 PARTS IN A SEPARATE DOCUMENT