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Fields of Gold  
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by Rachel Swirsky

When Dennis died, he found himself in another place. Dead people came at him with party hats and presents. Noise makers bleated. Confetti fell. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

His family was there. Celebrities were there. People Dennis had never seen before in his life were there. Dennis danced under a disco ball with Cleopatra and great-grandma Flora and some dark-haired chick and cousin Joe and Alexander the Great. When he went to the buffet table for a tiny cocktail wiener in pink sauce, Dennis saw Napoleon trying to grope his Aunt Phyllis. She smacked him in the tri-corner hat with her clutch bag.

Napoleon and Shakespeare and Cleopatra looked just like Dennis had expected them to. Henry VIII and Socrates and Jesus, too. Cleopatra wore a long linen dress with a jeweled collar, a live asp coiled around her wrist like a bracelet. Socrates sipped from a glass of hemlock. Jesus bobbed his head up and down like a windshield ornament as he ladled out the punch.

Dennis squinted into the distance, but he couldn't make out the boundaries of the place. The room, if it was a room, was large and rectangular and brightly lit from above, like some kind of cosmic gym decorated for prom, complete with drifts of multi-colored balloons and hand-lettered poster board signs. On second glance, the buffet tables turned out to be narrow and collapsible like the ones from Dennis's high school cafeteria. Thankfully, unlike high school, the booze flowed freely and the music was actually good.

As Dennis meandered back toward the dance floor, an imposing figure that he dimly recognized as P. T. Barnum clapped him on the back. "Welcome! Welcome!" the balding man boomed.

An elderly lady stood in Barnum's lee. Her face was familiar from old family portraits. "Glad to see you, dear."

"Thanks," said Dennis as the unlikely couple whirled into the crowd.

#

Things Dennis did not accomplish from his under thirty-five goals list (circa age twelve):

- 1) Own a jet.
- 2) Host a TV show where he played guitar with famous singers.
- 3) Win a wrestling match with a lion.
- 4) Pay Billy Whitman \$200 to eat dirt in front of a TV crew.
- 5) Go sky-diving.
- 6) Divorce a movie star.

#

As Dennis listened to the retreating echo of P. T. Barnum's laughter, a pair of cold hands slipped around his waist from behind. He jumped like a rabbit.

"Hey there, Menace," said a melted honey voice.

Dennis turned back into the familiar embrace of his favorite cousin, Melanie. She was the one who'd been born a year and three days before he was, and who'd lived half a mile away when they were kids. She was also the one he'd started dry-humping in the abandoned lot behind Ping's groceries when he was eleven and she was twelve.

"Mel," blurted Dennis.

"Asswipe," Melanie replied.

She stood on her tiptoes to slip a hug around Dennis's neck. She wore cropped jean shorts and a thin white tee that showed her bra strap. She smelled like cheap lotion and cherry perfume. A blonde ponytail swung over her shoulder, deceptively girlish in contrast with her hard eyes and filthy mouth. She was young and ripe and vodka-and-cigarettes skinny in a twenty-one-year-old way, just like she had been the day he was called to view her at the morgue—except that the tracks where her jilted boyfriend had run her over with his jeep were gone, as if they'd never been there at all.

"God," said Dennis. "It's good to see you."

"You're not a punch in the face either."

Dennis reached out to touch the side of her head where the morticians had arranged a makeshift hairpiece made of lilies to cover the dent they hadn't been able to repair in time for the open casket. At first Melanie flinched, but then she eased into his touch, pushing against his hand like a contented cat. Her hair felt like corn silk, the skull beneath it smooth and strong.

She pulled away and led Dennis on a meandering path through the crowd to the drinks table. "How'd you kick it?" she asked conversationally.

"Diabetic coma," said Dennis. "Karen pulled the plug."

"That's not what I heard," said Melanie. "I heard it was murder."

#

Dennis Halter had married Karen Halter (née Worth) on the twenty-second of November, six months to the day after their college graduation.

Karen was the one who proposed. She bought Dennis a \$2,000 guitar instead of an engagement ring. She took him out for heavy carbohydrate Italian (insulin at the ready) and popped the question casually over light beer. "I can still return the guitar if you don't want to," she added.

Karen was an art history major who was being groomed for museum curation. Dennis was an anthropology major (it had the fewest required classes) who was beginning to worry about the fact that he hadn't been discovered yet. Karen was Type A. Dennis's personality begged for the invention of a Type Z.

Melanie was similar to Dennis, personality-wise, except for the mean streak that had gotten her expelled for fist fighting during her senior year of high school. She and Karen had only met once, six months before Karen proposed, at a Halter family Thanksgiving. They didn't need to exchange a word. It was hate at first sight.

"Hillbilly whore," Karen called Melanie, though not to her face.

Lacking such compunction, Melanie had called Karen a "control-freak cunt" over pecan pie. She drunk-dialed Dennis three weeks later to make sure he hadn't forgotten her opinion. "When that bitch realizes you're never going to change, she's going to have your balls on a platter. If you marry her, I swear I'll hand her the knife myself."

Melanie died instead.

#

"Murder?" said Dennis. "No, I wanted her to pull the plug. It was in my living will. I never wanted to live my life as a vegetable."

"Unless it was a couch potato, huh?"

Melanie spoke with the too-precise diction of an over-compensating drunk. Her tone was joking, but held a vicious undercurrent.

She flailed one hand at Dennis's spare tire. The gin she was pouring with her other definitely wasn't her first. Probably not her fourth either.

"Worked out for you, didn't it, Menace the Dennis?" she continued. "Spent your life skipping church only to luck out in

the end. Turns out we all go to the same place. Saint, sinner, and suicide."

Dennis's jaw clenched. "I didn't commit suicide."

"Didn't say you did. Sinner."

"And you weren't?"

Melanie poured three fingers of rum into a second Solo cup and went to add Coke. Dennis grabbed the two liter bottle out of her hand.

"Can't drink that with alcohol," he said, irritated, remembering that bender when he was fifteen and she'd promised him it wouldn't matter whether his mixers were diet or regular. He'd ended up in ketoacidosis.

Melanie rolled her eyes. "Think your body works the way it used to? You're dead, moron."

"Fine," said Dennis, annoyance clashing with embarrassment. "Give it to me then."

He rescued the Solo cup and poured a long stream of Coke. Melanie watched reproachfully, gulping her gin.

"You were okay before you started dating that stuck-up bitch," she said. "Had time for a beer and a laugh. Maybe you deserved what that cunt did to you."

"I told you. It was in my will."

"That's not what I'm talking about, jerkwad."

"What are you talking about?"

For a moment, Melanie looked simultaneously sly and uncomfortable, as though she were going to spill the beans on something important. Then she shook her head, ponytail whipping, and returned to her rant. "If you'd kept doing me, maybe I wouldn't have ended up with Al. Maybe he wouldn't have gone off the deep-end when I broke it off. I could still be alive. I could be the one in that fancy condo."

"Melanie," said Dennis. "Shut up."

Melanie made to throw an honest-to-God punch. Gin splashed over her shirt and onto the floor. "Look at this!" She gestured broadly, spilling even more. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Before Dennis could answer, she stormed off in a huff, rapidly disappearing into the mass of people.

#

When he was alive, Dennis had told people he'd married Karen because she was his type of girl. He hadn't told them that one skinny blonde with a D-cup was basically as good as another.

When he was alive, Dennis had told people he'd married Karen because she was driven and smart and successful. He hadn't told them she made him feel inferior by comparison, sometimes because she told him he was.

When he was alive, Dennis had told people he married Karen because he was a simple man with simple needs. He hadn't told them he kept those simple needs satisfied by fucking around at least twice a year.

When he was alive, Dennis had told people he'd married Karen because she was the kind of girl who knew what she wanted and went after it. Time was like water in Dennis's hands, always flowing through his fingers, leaving him damp but never sated. Karen drank from the stream of time. She made things happen.

One of the things she made happen was getting married. Well, what else was Dennis going to do? It wasn't as if he had plans. Okay, he did have plans, but diamond albums didn't just fall into your lap.

Karen proposed and it made sense, Dennis had told people when he was alive. That's why they got married.

That part was true.

#

Things Dennis did not accomplish from his under thirty-five goals list (circa age nineteen):

- 1) Sign with a label.
- 2) Hit the charts.
- 3) Get into Rolling Stone.
- 4) Earn \$1,000,000.

- 5) Have at least one girl/girl threesome.
- 6) Screw Libby Lowell, his roommate's girlfriend.
- 7) Play in concert with Ted Nugent, Joe Satriani, and Eddie Van Halen.
- 8) Get recognized on the street by someone he'd never met.

#

Dennis stared after Melanie in minor shock. Somehow he'd figured this kind of social terrorism would be one of the things that ended in the stillness of the grave.

But if anyone was going to keep making incoherent, drunken rants fourteen years after going into the ground, it was Melanie. She'd always been a pain in the ass when she was drunk. She'd introduced Dennis to alcohol back when she first learned to pick the lock on her father's liquor cabinet with a bobby pin. They'd experimented together to figure out just how much sugar Dennis could ingest with his booze without over-taxing his liver.

From day one, Melanie had drunk until she couldn't see straight and then used it as an excuse to say exactly what she thought. Not that she wasn't a fun drunk. Some of the best nights of his life were the ones they'd spent together as drunk teenagers. She'd start out hurling insults until he left in disgust, only to show up on his porch at three a.m., laughing

and apologizing and determined to convince him to join her in making prank calls and harassing the neighbors' cows.

She was Melanie. She was the kind of girl who goaded a guy into running over her with his Jeep. But it was hard to stay mad. Especially now that both of them were dead.

The smell of old tobacco arrived, along with a cold hand patting Dennis's shoulder. Dennis was startled to find that both belonged to his late Uncle Ed, Melanie's father.

"Always thought we should have spent more time raising her right," Ed said.

The old man looked just as hangdog as he had in the moment twenty years ago when he'd fallen off his roof while cleaning the gutters. There he'd been, his feet starting to slide, but he hadn't looked scared so much as wrung out and regretful, as if someone had just told him the Christmas pie he'd been looking forward to was gone and he'd have to make do with fruit cake instead.

He was wearing his best brown suit with a skinny, maroon tie. Slicked back hair exaggerated his widow's peak. The weak chin and expressive eyebrows were family traits, although Ed had a lean, wiry build unlike most Halter men, on account of a parasitic infection he'd contracted during his military days that left him permanently off his feed.

Uncle Ed. Christ. Back home, everyone Dennis's age cussed blue when they were on their own, but even Mel had kept a civil tongue in front of the 'rents. "How much did you hear?" he asked.

"'Bout all of it."

"I'm sorry."

Ed gave a rueful shrug. "You have no idea what she gets up to. The other day she stripped naked in front of everyone and started sucking off President Garfield."

"Shit," said Dennis without thinking. "Uh, I mean—"

"Sounds right to me. She sure can be a little shit."

Suddenly, a grin split Ed's melancholy face. It was the same grin he'd flashed when fourteen-year-old Dennis let slip that he'd gone through all the senior cheerleaders one by one until Veronica Steader agreed to be his homecoming date.

"Of course, I was into Mary Todd Lincoln at the time," Ed's leer widened to show even more teeth. "Good woman." He slapped Dennis on the back. "You get yourself one of those. You've had enough of the other kind."

#

Dennis had never watched his diet very carefully. Not as carefully as he needed to anyway. Other kids got to eat Doritos

and Oreos at lunch and they didn't even have to worry about it. When Dennis was eight, that righteously pissed him off.

It didn't piss him off enough that he tried to eat exactly the way they did. He wasn't stupid. But it pissed him off enough that he acted a little reckless, a little foolish. Always just a little, though, so that whatever happened, he could plausibly claim—to everyone including himself—that there was nothing deliberate about it.

Eventually, even he believed he was too irresponsible to take care of himself.

#

The party had moved on to the stage where everyone was too tired to be gregarious but also too drunk to stop partying. Everyone had gathered into small, intense clusters, leaning urgently toward each other to share dramatic whispers, hands cutting the air with emphasis. From time to time, an over-loud exclamation punctured the susurrations.

Dennis surveyed the crowd, identifying faces. There was Blackbeard with Grandpa Avery and a buck-toothed redhead. And over there was that Chinese guy who used to live down the street, chatting with Moses and Aunt Phyllis. Most of the groups consisted entirely of strangers.

These were some of the things Dennis picked up as he wandered through the crowd:

- 1) Death had its own time frame in which connected events bent around mortal time to touch each other. In dead time, the assassination of Archduke Ferdinand had coincided with the deaths of millions of World War Two soldiers. For reasons widely subject to speculation, so had the sinking of the RMS Titanic and the deaths of several big game huntsmen touring French colonies in Africa.
- 2) The dead also had their own vocabulary. Recently dead people were called rotters or wormies. People who'd been dead a long time were called dusties. Dusties tended to stay in their own enclaves, secluded from the modern ideas and inventions that scared them. Famous dead people were called celebs and they:
  - 3) were considered by popular opinion to be fakes. This allegation caused Blackbeard to roar with anger and threaten to march the speaker off a plank. It was pointed out to him that this was the sort of behavior that had created the theory that celebs were fakes in the first place. Celebrities conformed too closely to their legends. Cleopatra was always seductive and never bored or put-upon. Lincoln declaimed non-stop poetic speeches. And hadn't

someone spotted Lady MacBeth earlier that evening when she wasn't even real?

- 4) Reality, it seemed, was a contentious issue. Mortality shaped the living world by imposing limits. In the limitless afterlife, the shape of things deformed. That was one reason dead people came to parties. Rotters still carried an impression of the living world. It was like going home again for a little while. Besides, there was good food, and who didn't like watching General Sherman march up and down the linoleum, threatening to burn Atlanta?

While Dennis pondered these new pieces of information, he also picked up a number of more personal things. He had an intuitive sense of where these latter were leading, though, and it wasn't somewhere he wanted to go. Consequently, he performed the time-tested mental contortions he'd developed as a third grader who ate too much sugar while pretending he hadn't done anything wrong. Dennis was a master of self-denial; he didn't even let himself realize there was something he wouldn't let himself realize.

For instance:

- 1) Whenever Dennis passed a group of strangers, they interrupted their conversations to peer as he passed,

and then returned to their huddles to whisper even more urgently.

- 2) Their renewed whispers were punctuated with phrases like "Do you think he deserved it?" and "Poor son of a bitch."
- 3) At a certain point, they also started saying, "At least the wife got what's coming to her."
- 4) These last remarks started occurring at approximately the same time as people began disappearing to attend another party.

#

As the crowd thinned, Dennis finally located someone standing alone, a very drunk flight attendant staring blankly at a tangle of streamers. On being pressed, she identified herself as Wilda. She was unbelievably hot, like a stewardess from a fifties movie, in her mid-to-late twenties with long, straight blonde hair, and a figure that filled out all the tailored curves of her uniform.

The hint of an exotic perfume was all but drowned out by the stench of alcohol. She wasn't currently crying, but tears had streaked her mascara.

Dennis decided to pick her up.

"Melancholy stage?" he asked.

She spoke as if her lips were numb. "What's the point? On this side?"

"Of being melancholy? I didn't know there was ever a point."

"Mortality," she said gravely.

Her expression altered ever so slightly. Dennis tried to echo back an appropriate seriousness.

"I knew a man once," she went on. "Died in the same crash as me. An actor. Very famous. I was so nervous when I poured his in-flight drink I thought I'd spill. He asked for orange juice."

Dennis gestured back toward the buffet tables. "Do you want a drink?"

She ignored him. "After we died, he never spoke a word. Not a word. He... his mouth would open and this sound would come out... eeeeeeeeeee... like a dying refrigerator..."

She looked at Dennis urgently. Her eyes focused briefly. They were weird, electric blue, like a sky lit up by lightning.

"He was grieving for himself, I think. Or maybe he just used up all his words in the world? And when he died, he was just so happy to be quiet that he never wanted to talk again?" She blinked, slowly, her wet mascara smudging more black beneath her eyes. "It's like the celebs. You know?"

"Would you like to kiss me?" Dennis asked.

"I bet the real dead celebrities are nothing special. They probably blend in. Like my friend. But the fake ones, I think they're made from a kind of collective pressure. None of us lived our lives the way we wanted to. It gets mixed up, all our needs, our unsatisfied desires, the things we wanted to be back when we were alive. Beautiful. Famous. The best of our potential. We make the celebs to be like that for us. Since we can't."

Wilda gestured vaguely toward the crowd. Dennis turned to see Benjamin Franklin demonstrating his kite, which rapidly became tangled with the multi-colored balloons. Marilyn Monroe struggled with her skirt while standing over an air-conditioning vent tucked next to some bleachers. Gandhi sat in the middle of a group positioned near the buffet tables, pointedly not eating.

"You should stay away from them," said Wilda softly.

"They're bright and crazy. They suck you down."

Dennis turned back to look at her beautiful, tear-stained face. "I'd rather be with you anyway."

She blinked at him, too lost in her own drunkenness to hear. Or maybe she just didn't believe him? Dennis glanced over his shoulder at Marilyn, ripe and coy, dark-outlined eyes sparkling. Something dark and furious clenched in his stomach.

He was only thirty-five! Marilyn made him so choked up with jealousy he couldn't breathe.

He turned back toward Wilda and leaned in to dab some of the liner from beneath her eyes. She started toward his embrace but got tangled up with her own feet and started to fall. Dennis caught her before she could hit the floor.

She looked up at him, smiling vaguely. "I wanted to be a gymnast. You know? I was good," she said, and then, "Do you think it's cheating?"

"What?" murmured Dennis.

"My husband's still alive."

"So's my wife."

"What if she weren't? Would it be cheating then?"

"I don't know. I wasn't that faithful when we were both alive."

"Neither was I."

Wilda's voice cracked like ice. Tears filled her eyes, colorless like vodka. Dennis looked down at her left hand where she wore a tan line but no ring.

"I don't like being dead," said Wilda.

"I'm sorry," said Dennis.

He held her, silently, until she recovered enough to stand on her own. "I'm sorry, too," she said at last. "I should go to the other party."

Dennis tried to fake a smile. "Don't drink too much while you're there."

Wilda reached out to touch his shoulder. Her fingertips were frozen.

"When you figure it out," she said, "try not to be too sad."

She faded away.

#

A few of the times Dennis cheated on Karen:

1) The coed who got stuck in the Dallas airport after her flight was canceled who he wooed with four margaritas, his best dozen dirty jokes, and a rendition of Sting's "Desert Rose."

2) The bartender in Phoenix who'd just been dumped by her fiancé and said she needed to know what it was like with a guy who could commit.

3) The drunk divorcée from the Internet ad who got on the hotel bed and dropped her pants without even a word to acknowledge he was there.

A few of the things Dennis pretended not to notice about his marriage:

1) The way Karen's sense of humor about other women had changed. When they were younger, if she saw a pretty blonde who was about her shape walking past them in the mall, she'd say, "I bet she's your type." If she was in a teasing mood, she'd whisper about all the things she and the other girl would do to Dennis if they had him at their mercy. In recent days, her eyes had started getting hard when they even saw blonde girls on TV. She'd angle her face away from him, trying to hide her disgust.

2) How Karen no longer laughed indulgently when he forgot things. She still took care of him: she did his laundry, she found his keys, she rescheduled his doctor's appointments. But she moved through the actions mechanically, her blank expression never flickering.

3) And then there was the worst thing, the one Dennis had taken the most pains to hide from himself—the flicker he'd seen when Karen came home exhausted from a late night's work and found him still awake at two a.m., sitting on the couch and eating beans out of a can. She picked up the dishes he'd left on the coffee table and carried them to the sink, grumbling to herself so faintly he could hardly hear it, "It's like I'm his mother." He looked up and caught the brief flash on her face. It was the same emotion he'd heard in her voice: contempt.

#

The morning of November nineteenth was three days before their thirteenth anniversary and two months and five days before Dennis's thirty-fifth birthday. Karen Halter (née Worth) proposed they stay in that Friday night to celebrate both occasions. She proposed an evening of drinking and making love. Dennis liked having sex when he was drunk, and although it wasn't Karen's preference, she tried to indulge him from time to time. She knew it reminded him of being young.

Fifteen years ago, when they'd started dating, Karen had carefully reviewed the guidelines for mixing type one diabetes and alcohol. The liver was involved in both processing alcohol and regulating blood sugar, and consequently, a type one diabetic who got carelessly drunk could preoccupy his liver with the one so that it couldn't manage the other. Glucose levels required a tricky balance. If they went too high, they could damage a variety of systems. If they went too low, one could become hypoglycemic or even fall into a coma.

It was trivial to give Dennis more insulin than he needed. She let him inject himself, just in case someone checked later. Not that they would. Everyone knew Dennis was too irresponsible to take care of himself.

She worried when he started puking, but he didn't suspect anything. He just thought he was drunk.

The sleeping pills were his idea. He was feeling too sick to get to sleep on his own. He asked if he could borrow one of her Ambien and before she could say yes or no, he'd pulled the bottle out of the medicine cabinet. She watched him drunkenly struggle to unscrew the lid.

She hadn't meant to go this far. She'd wanted to shock him. She'd wanted him to see how bad things could get and grow the fuck up. Yes, she wanted him to suffer a little, too, just so he'd know what it felt like.

If she let him take the pill, it'd be more than that. He wouldn't be awake to monitor his condition. He wouldn't be able to call an ambulance when things started going really wrong. He'd get sicker than she'd intended. He could even die.

Karen had matched Dennis drink for drink. No one would suspect her of wrongdoing. At worst, they'd think she'd also been too drunk to notice his symptoms.

With a shock, it occurred to Karen that maybe she'd been planning this all along. Maybe she'd been slowly taking the steps that could lead to Dennis's death without admitting to herself that was what she was doing. She knew how self-denial worked by now; she'd been married to Dennis for thirteen years, after all.

She eased the bottle from his hand. "Let me do that," she said, unscrewing the cap. She poured out two pills: one for him and one for her.

Now neither of them could call for help.

In the morning, memory clear and heart pounding, Karen called 911 in a genuine panic. She rode with Dennis in the ambulance, weeping real tears. She cried because she'd become a murderess and she didn't want to see herself that way. She also cried because she wasn't sorry she'd done it and that scared her even more.

The doctors proclaimed the coma unusually severe. Brain damage had occurred. Over the next several weeks, using sterile, equivocal comments, they made it clear that there was no hope. They would need a decision.

Karen had set herself on this path. There was no escaping it. Dennis's living will was clear. She told them to pull the plug.

During the weeks when Dennis lay comatose, Karen began having nightmares. She researched bad dreams on the Internet and confirmed that anxiety produced an increase in negative dream imagery. Nothing to be concerned about. Except she kept dreaming about the strangest thing—that trashy cousin Dennis had admitted to fucking when he was a kid. They'd gone to her funeral a few

months before Karen proposed. Dennis had bent over the casket and wept for nearly a quarter of an hour. Karen could understand why he was upset; the girl was family. But deep in her gut, whether it was fair or not, she couldn't help being appalled. He was mourning his partner in incest.

Afterward, at the visitation, various family members asked her to stand next to the big, glossy photograph of the deceased they'd hung on the wall. "You look just like her," everyone said, which made Karen even more uncomfortable. She tried to laugh off her reaction as indignance that she'd ever dress like that, but she had a niggling feeling there was something more profound. She did look eerily like the girl, the same close-set eyes, the same blunt chin, the same shade of blonde hair. It was as if Dennis was trying to recreate the relationship he'd had when he was eleven, as if it didn't matter to him that Karen had her own thoughts and feelings and personality, as long as she looked like his first, forbidden love.

In Karen's dreams, the blonde cousin had a knife. She chased Karen down winding asphalt streets, upraised metal shining in the shadows. "I don't care what I said," she growled. "I'm not going to let you cut his balls off. I'll cut you first."

The day Karen told them to pull the plug, she woke with her heart pounding so hard that she thought she was going to have to check into the hospital herself. The feeling faded when she went down to give the decision in person, but intensified again as she got in her car to drive home. She'd told them she couldn't handle staying to watch Dennis die, which was true, but not for the reasons they supposed.

Outside, thick, dingy clouds of smog dimmed the sunlight to a sickly brown. Headlights and taillights glared in Karen's windshield, a fraction too bright.

Horns screamed in the wake of near misses. Karen watched carefully, mapping out the traffic in her mind's eye, making sure she didn't veer out of her narrow lanes or crash into the broken-down SUVs on the side of the road. She was the kind of woman who had memorized the safety manual that came with her vehicle, and could recite all the local laws regarding child safety seats even though she'd never had any children in her car.

Despite her meticulousness, as Karen pulled into the intersection after waiting for the green, she failed to see the blonde woman in a white t-shirt jogging into the crosswalk. She pounded the breaks and yanked on the steering wheel, but it was already too late. Rubber screeched. Metal crunched against

metal. The car next to hers careened sideways with the impact. Karen fell toward the windshield, her airbag failing to deploy, the steering wheel breaking against her head.

It took Karen almost three weeks to die, but in the land of the dead, time twisted around itself to join connected events. So it was only a few hours into Dennis's party that Karen's began, and his gossiping guests faded away to attend the newest scandal.

#

Things Dennis did not accomplish from his under thirty-five goals list (circa age thirty-four):

- 1) Start another band.
- 2) Play some gigs in the area.
- 3) Get his sugar under control.
- 4) Be nicer to Karen.
- 5) Stop cheating.
- 6) Go to the gym.

#

Dennis's self-denial had finally reached its breaking point. He ran between the fading guests. "How do I get there? You have to show me! I have to see her!"

They winked out like stars from a graying dawn sky, not one of them letting slip what he needed to know.

The empty gym, if it was a gym, seemed to be disappearing on the edges. Perhaps it was. The dead people had talked about imposing their own shapes on the limitless afterlife. Maybe shapelessness was taking over.

One spot near the buffet tables remained bright, a fraction of the dance floor underneath the disco ball. Uncle Ed stood alone in the middle, fiddling with the coin slot in the juke box.

He turned as Dennis approached. "I wanted 'Young Love,'" he said, "but they've only got 'After You've Gone.' Not worth a quarter." He sighed. "Oh, well. That's the afterlife, I guess."

The juke box lit up as the coin slid into its machinery. It whirred, selecting a record. Dennis recognized the bright, slightly distorted strains as a hit from the forties.

Ed selected a pastel blue balloon and began to whirl it around like a dance partner. Dennis stood tensely, arms crossed.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

Ed dipped the balloon. "About what?"

"About Karen."

"Figured you'd find out sooner or later. No sense ruining a perfectly good party until you did."

"I'd have wanted to know."

"Sorry then."

"How do I get over there? I've got to talk to her."

"You can't."

"I've got to!"

"She doesn't want you. You can't go bothering someone who doesn't want you. That's one of the rules we agree on. Otherwise someone could stalk you forever." Ed gave a mild shrug. "I was used badly by a woman once, you know."

Dennis glared silently.

"My first wife, Lilac," Ed went on. "Not Melanie's mother. Lilac died before you all were born. Your mom never liked her."

"Mom never liked Karen either."

"A perceptive woman, your mother. Well, things were good with me and Lilac for a while. We spent my whole party making out. Afterward, we found some old Scottish castle out with the dusties and rolled around in the grass for longer than you spent alive. It didn't last long, though. Relatively. See, while I was still alive, she'd already met another dead guy. They'd been together for centuries before I kicked it. She was just curious about what it would be like to be with me again. Near broke my heart."

"Ed," Dennis said. "Karen murdered me. I have to know why."

Ed released the balloon. It flew upward and disappeared into grey.

"Have to?" Ed asked. "When you were alive, you had to have food and water. What's 'have to' mean to you anymore?"

"Ed, please!"

"All right, then, I'll take a gander. I've been dead a long time, but I bet I know a few things. Now, you didn't deserve what Karen did to you. No one deserves that. But you had your hand in making it happen. I'm not saying you didn't have good qualities. You could play a tune and tell a joke, and you were usually in a good humor when you weren't sulking. Those are important things. But you never thought about anyone else. Not only wouldn't you stir yourself to make a starving man a sandwich, but you'd have waited for him to bring you one before you stirred yourself to eat. One thing I've learned is people will give you a free lunch from time to time, but only so long as they think you're trying. And if you don't try, if they get to thinking you're treating them with disdain, well then. Sometimes they get mean."

"I didn't treat Karen with disdain," Dennis said.

Ed blinked evenly.

"It's not that I don't think about other people," Dennis said. "I just wanted someone to take care of me. The whole world, everything was so hard. Even eating the wrong thing could

kill you. I wanted someone to watch out for me, I guess. I guess I wanted to stay a kid."

"You married a problem solver," said Ed. "Then you became a problem."

When Dennis thought about Ed, he always thought about that moment when he'd watched him fall off the roof. Failing that, he thought of the mostly silent man who sat in the back of family gatherings and was always first to help out with a chore. But now, with his words still stinging, Dennis remembered a different Uncle Ed, the one who'd always been called to finish off the barn cats who got sick, the one everyone relied on to settle family disputes because they knew he wouldn't play favorites no matter who was involved.

Ed didn't look so much like the man who'd fallen off the roof anymore. His wrinkles had tightened, his yellowing complexion brightening to a rosy pink. His hair was still slicked back from his forehead with Brilliantine, but now there were generous, black locks of it.

He straightened his suit jacket and it became a white tee-shirt, snug over faded jeans. He grinned as he stuck his hands in his pockets. His teeth were large and straight and shiny white.

"I always figured we'd have kids," Dennis said. "I can't do that here, can I? And the band, I was always going to get started with that again, as soon as I got things going, as soon as I found the time..."

Dennis trailed off. The juke box spun to a stop, clicking as it returned the record to its place. Its lights guttered for a moment before flicking off.

"I'm dead," said Dennis, plaintively. "What do I do?"

Ed spread his hands toward the gym's grey edges. "Hop from party to party. Find a cave with the dusties. Get together with a girl and play house until the continents collide. Whatever you want. You'll find your way."

A newsboy cap appeared in Ed's hand. He tugged it on and tipped the brim.

"Now if you'll excuse me," he continued. "I need to pay my respects."

"To my murderer?"

"She's still family."

"Don't leave me alone," Dennis pleaded.

Ed was already beginning to fade.

Dennis sprinted forward to grab his collar.

#

When Dennis was four, he found his grandfather's ukulele in the attic, buried under a pile of newspapers. It was a four-string soprano pineapple made of plywood with a spruce soundboard. Tiny figures of brown women in grass skirts gyrated across the front, painted grins eerily broad.

The year Dennis turned six, his parents gave him a bike with training wheels for Christmas instead of the guitar he asked for. After a major tantrum, they wised up and bought him a three-quarter sized acoustic with two-tone lacquer finish in red and black. It was too big, but Dennis eventually got larger. The songbook that came with it included chords and lyrics for "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," "Leaving on a Jet Plane," and "Yellow Submarine."

The summer when Dennis was fifteen, he wheedled his grandparents into letting him do chores around their place for \$2.50 an hour until he saved enough to buy a used stratocaster and an amp. He stayed up until midnight every night for the next six months playing that thing in the corner of the basement his mother had reluctantly cleared out next to the water heater. He failed science and math, and only barely squeaked by with a D in English, but it was worth it.

The guitar Karen bought him when they got engaged was the guitar of his dreams. A custom Gibson Les Paul hollow-body with

a maple top, mahogany body, ebony fret board, cherryburst finish, and curves like Jessica Rabbit. He hadn't been able to believe what he was seeing. Just looking at it set off strumming in his head.

As she popped the question, Karen ran her index finger gently across the abalone headstock inlay. The tease of her fingertip sent a shiver down his spine. It was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

#

Everything blurred.

Dennis and Ed reappeared in the rooftop garden of the museum where Karen had worked. It looked the way it did in summer, leafy shrubs and potted trees rising above purple, red and white perennials. The conjured garden was much larger than the real one; it stretched out as far as Dennis could see in all directions, blurring into verdant haze at the horizon.

Seurat stood at his easel in front of a modernist statue, stabbing at the canvas with his paintbrush. Figures from Karen's family and/or the art world strolled between ironwork benches, sipping martinis. Marie Antoinette, in robe à la Polonaise and pouf, distributed petit fours from a tray while reciting her signature line.

Dennis glimpsed Wilda, seemingly recovered from her melancholia, performing a series of acrobatic dance moves on a dais.

And then he saw Karen.

She sat on a three-legged stool, sipping a Midori sour as she embarked on a passionate argument about South African modern art with an elderly critic Dennis recognized from one of her books. She looked more sophisticated than he remembered. Makeup made her face dramatic, her eyebrows shaped into thin arches, a hint of dark blush sharpening her cheekbones. A beige summer gown draped elegantly around her legs. There was a vulnerability in her eyes he hadn't seen in ages, a tenderness beneath the blue that had vanished years ago.

Dennis felt as if it would take him an eternity to take her in, but even dead time eventually catches up.

Ed, struggling to pry Dennis's fingers off his collar, gave an angry shout. Both Karen and the old man beside her turned to look straight at them.

Ed twisted Dennis's fingers until one of them made a snapping sound. Shocked, Dennis dropped his grip.

"Christ!" said Ed, glaring at Dennis as he rubbed his reddened throat. "What the hell is wrong with you?" He turned

away from Dennis as if washing his hands of him, tipped his hat to Karen, and then stalked off into the green.

"How are you here?" Karen sounded more distressed than angry. "They told me you couldn't be."

"I hitched a ride."

"But that shouldn't matter. They said—"

Karen quieted in the wake of the noise from the crowd that had begun to form around them. Ordinary people and celebs, strangers and friends and family and neighbors, all gossiping and shoving as they jockeyed for front row views.

The elderly art critic straightened and excused himself to the safety of the onlookers. Dennis stepped into his position.

"Maybe you let me in," Dennis said. "Maybe you really wanted me here."

Karen gave a strangled laugh. "I want you out and I want you in. I can't make up my mind. That sounds like the shape of it."

"You murdered me," said Dennis.

"I murdered you," said Karen.

Behind them, Dennis heard the noise of a scuffle, some New Jersey guido pitting himself against H. L. Mencken.

"I didn't mean to do it," Karen continued. "I don't think I did, at least."

Dennis swallowed.

"I'm sorry," Karen said. "Sorrier than I can tell you."

"You're only saying that because you're dead."

"No. What would be the point?"

Dennis heard the guido hit the ground as H. L. Mencken declared his victory in verse. A small round of applause ended the incident as the throng refocused on Dennis and Karen. Dennis had thought he'd want to hit her or scream at her. Some part of her must have wanted him to do that, must have known she deserved to be punished. He wondered if anyone would try to stop him if he attacked her. He got the impression no one would.

"I hate you," Dennis told her. It was mostly true.

"Me, too," said Karen.

"I didn't when we were alive. Not all the time, anyway."

"Me, too."

They both fell silent. Straining to overhear, the crowd did, too. In the background, there were bird calls, the scent of daisies, the whoosh of traffic three stories below.

"I don't think," said Dennis, "that I want to be near you anymore."

So, according to the rules of the land of the dead, he wasn't.

#

Things Dennis did accomplish from his under thirty-five goals lists (various ages):

- 1) Eat raw squid.
- 2) Own a gaming console.
- 3) Star in an action movie.\* (\*After a bad day when he was twenty-four, Dennis decided to broaden the definition of "star" to include his role as an extra in Round Two.)
- 4) Watch Eric Clapton live.
- 5) Seduce a girl by writing her a love song.
- 6) Screw Pamela Kortman, his roommate's ex-girlfriend.
- 7) Clean out the garage to make a practice space.
- 8) Play all night, until dawn, without noticing the time.

#

He was back in the gym. A single bank of fluorescent lights whined as they switched back on. Only one of the bulbs turned on, casting an eerie glow that limned Dennis's body against the dark.

A figure crept out of the shadows. "Hey."

Dennis turned toward the voice. He saw the outline of a girl. At first he thought it was the stewardess, Wilda. No, he thought, it's—is it Karen? But as the figure came closer, he realized it was Melanie.

"Hey Mel," said Dennis.

"Hey Asswipe," said Mel, but her voice didn't have any edge to it.

"I thought you were at Karen's party."

"That bitch? I wouldn't go to her party if she was the last rotter. I've been waiting here so I could catch you alone."

She crept even closer, until he could smell the sourness of her breath.

"I heard what my dad said. I wanted to say I'm sorry. He was pretty hard on you. You didn't deserve it. I was going to come out and give him a piece of my mind, but I didn't know how you'd feel after all that stuff I said."

She shifted her weight nervously from foot to foot.

"You didn't deserve that either," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Dennis said.

"No, really."

"No, really."

Melanie smiled. Her expression looked so young and genuine that Dennis finally felt the fist around his heart begin to relax.

He remembered the late nights when he and Melanie had been kids, when she'd turned up on his porch and begged him to go with her to steal cigarettes or throw aftershave at Billy

Whitman's window. The same mischief inflected her pose now: her quirked smile, sparkling eyes, and restless fingers.

"Do you think a man could live his whole life trying to get back to when he was eleven?" Dennis asked.

Melanie shrugged. She was twelve now, young and scrappy, pretty in pink but still the first kid on the block to throw a punch.

"Do you want to go play in the lot behind Ping's?" she asked.

Dennis looked down at himself. He saw the red and purple striped shirt he'd worn every day when he was eleven years old except when his mom took it away for the laundry.

Tall, dry grass whipped the backs of his knees. It rustled in the breeze, a rippling golden wave.

"Yeah," he said.

He reached for her hand. Her fingers curled into his palm.

"We don't ever have to come back if we don't want to," she said. "We can go as far as we want. We can keep going forever."

The sun hung bright overhead, wisps of white drifting past in the shapes of lions and racecars and old men's faces. The air smelled of fresh, growing things, and a bare hint of manure. A cow lowed somewhere and a truck rumbled across the asphalt. Both sounds were equidistant, a world away.

"Come on," said Dennis.

They ran. She led the way, long sandaled feet falling pigeon-toed in the soil. Dennis felt the breath flow sweet and easy through his lungs.

Someday they'd stop. Someday they'd fall exhausted to the ground and sleep curled up together in the dirt. Someday they'd pass into town where Dennis's father was arguing over the price of wood while Uncle Ed stood in front of the hardware store, sipping lemonade. Someday they might even run straight through the universe, all the way back to the weird land of death where they'd chat with Descartes about the best way to keep mosquitoes off in summer.

For now, their feet beat like drums on the soil. Wind reddened Dennis's ears. Melanie's hair flew back into his face. He tugged her east to chase a crow circling above the horizon. Behind them, the wind swept through fields the size of eternity.