

Detective story set in Minneapolis.

Lost Clusters

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Prologue

This is how I imagine it:
Howard and Art drive to Lake Nokomis. You'd think an upstate lake would be safer, but I suppose they didn't want to drive that far with a body in the trunk. I know the feeling.

Howard parks the car. Art is in the passenger seat. It's not that late, maybe 10 or 11. They pull off the road under a canopy of branches, a few yards from the lake. Maybe one of them likes fishing, and is familiar with the lakes—otherwise it's hard to imagine how they found such a perfect spot, off the main roads, trees obscuring the houses a few hundred feet away. There's no beach, just a grassy incline that drops abruptly into the water. Art picks his way down the slope, holding onto roots. He leans over the water, looking left and right, making sure they've come to the right spot. Satisfied, he climbs back up.

Howard is sitting on the Oldsmobile hood. Somehow I'm sure it's the Oldsmobile—maybe because of the trunk space, or the knife in the glove compartment. Certainly it's not Art's two-seater.

Howard's keeping his cool, more so than Art, who lights a cigarette and reveals in the lighter flare a damp face unsuited to this chilly night.

"Are we doing this?" asks Howard.

"In a minute," says Art, smoking, and shortly adds, "Man, I do *not* believe we're doing this."

Howard is sympathetic. "You think that guy's going to keep shut?"

"Well, he's got to, right?"

"Who is he, anyway?"

"Doesn't matter."

"Just seems like not the kind of guy you'd normally know."

Art makes a sound that under other circumstances might've been a laugh. "No, he doesn't, does he?"

Howard's driving characteristic is aggression—even with Art he can't resist needling: "Family's a bitch, huh? Only thing I have to deal with is my ma needing her air conditioning put in."

Art is done with his cigarette. He's paranoid: he opens the passenger side door and stubs it out in the ashtray, instead of grinding it out on the ground.

He clicks the door closed. "Keep quiet for a minute," he says.

They both listen, but hear nothing but the wind.

"Okay. Let's do this," says Art.

They move to the back of the car. Howard pops the trunk. The body is wrapped in a bedsheet. The knees are drawn up to the chest. It looks small

in the Oldsmobile's capacious trunk, even surrounded as it is by Howard's laundry bags. Art wrinkles his nose.

They carry the body down the slope. Art crouches over it while Howard returns to the car. In a minute he's back, carrying a grocery bag half-filled with something heavy. He goes back to the car for a second bag while Art starts unloading bricks from the first, piling them next to the body. Howard sets the second bag down and unwraps the body. He rolls it onto its side to free a corner of the sheet.

The corpse is a young woman's, in her 20s. She is nude and, resting as she is on her side, Howard can see the lividity darkening her back and buttocks. The uplifted sides of her chest and legs seem flushed as well, either the result of her position in the trunk, or a trick of shadows.

Howard flops the woman onto her back. Art places two bricks on her chest, sticks several more under her arms and between her legs. Meanwhile Howard is pulling a rope from the second bag. After a few more bricks, Art is about to pull the sheet back over her, but Howard says, "Hang on a minute." He snaps open a jackknife, and, kneeling, stabs the corpse six or seven times in the belly.

The smell is horrible. Art stumbles backward, gagging. Howard turns his head and coughs, shaking his head like a horse aggravated by flies. In a few moments they're back at work. They hold their breath, wrapping the sheet back around the body. Howard wipes his knife on the sheet and cuts a small section of rope, which he uses to tie the feet together. The rest of the rope he wraps around the body, securing the bricks, and ties it together with bulky knots.

They pick her up and stumble the few feet to the drop-off. Swinging together, they fling her outward. She splashes and sinks, feet first. For a moment they're afraid the water isn't deep enough, but no, it goes under in a boil of bubbles, and Art and Howard scrabble uphill to the car and drive away.

Art lights another cigarette. Howard rolls down his window. Cold April air rushes in.

"Back to that hotel?" asks Howard.

"Yeah." Art's cigarette has gone out before he's taken a single drag, and he lights it again. "I can't believe we just did that. I need to talk to this guy again."

"Not *just* him."

"No, not just him. Shit, this time he owes me big." Now that the body is dumped, Art has traded in his nervousness for anger. Howard hums a tune under his breath.

One

One

Uncommon Grounds was once a funeral home, and it's still decorated in that quiet sort of bad taste intended to ease your loss. I sat in the same place I did every week, in the second table over from the window, my back to the wall. The chair across the table from me was empty. Outside it was still light, so Richard hadn't yet come around to light the candles. A half-finished cup of coffee sat in front of me, and a full glass of water. At the table to my right a pretty brunette and a handsome blonde man played Scrabble. A half dozen other couples were lounging on couches or in comfortable chairs, quietly talking. I came to realize that everyone at Uncommon Grounds was beautiful. You could blow their faces up to billboard size with no loss of quality. I could walk down Hennepin Avenue and look up at heads the size of freight cars.

The coffee shop occupied the ground floor of a two-story house. No one knew what was upstairs. Wide archways connected the three main rooms, and a narrow door led into the kitchen and behind the counter. There was a patio in front, visible through a window in the front room, and two porches, front and back. When it wasn't too cold, customers sat at tables placed outside. The carpeting and couches were frayed, but this could be overlooked in the dimness. The wallpaper showed thin unassuming stripes, which in the half-light worked well to define where the walls were. The music varied between soft jazz and show tunes.

I was staring out the window to my left, observing the couples drinking coffee in the sun, when Rob returned from the counter. He sat across from me and placed his hot chocolate and cookie on the table.

"The cookies get smaller all the time," he said. He said this every week.

"It's your imagination," I told him.

Rob shook his head in disagreement. He was an ill-proportioned six and a half feet tall, with a thin frame and curly black hair like used steel wool. His nose was thin and his eyes overlarge, his smile lopsided but frequent. The features of his face didn't work together well; they appeared to have been badly collaged. I settled back against the couch and worked hard at getting comfortable.

Rob asked, "Who starts?"

"My turn," I told him. "The events of my week demand attention. Their poetry is inexhaustible."

"Do tell."

I told him. But I'd hooked him on false pretenses. My previous week had not been anything unusual. I had done a little work for Neil. I'd read a few books. I'd hit several bars and clubs. Some movie I'd seen had impressed me. Rob listened patiently. He wanted to hear about problems in my life, in order that he could advise. This was his role, the same role I filled for him; roles cemented together by a year's-worth of weekly repetition. Every Tuesday over coffee, always at the same coffee shop, always at the same hour. It lent some necessary structure to my life. Rob listened. Listening he was good at: he always nodded sympathetically, interjected insightful comments and probing questions. I couldn't think of any problems to tell him; nonetheless, he listened patiently, sipped his hot chocolate and nibbled on his cookie. He interjected an insightful comment, a quotation from some film: "Ninety-nine percent of everything we do is strict routine. Only one percent requires creative intelligence."

On Wednesday I had slept late and written a grant proposal for Neil. On Thursday I'd talked on the phone to my mother.

"She wanted me to come up to the house for dinner," I related. "I told her I had work to do, and she said Tia really wanted to see me. That's as may be, but Tia isn't one to worry much about it, unlike my mother, who believes that if she doesn't see me for a few weeks, I cease to exist. I would've been happy to meet them for dinner at some restaurant, but I'm allergic to Seamus—whenever I'm up at that house my eyes puff up like tennis balls and my throat constricts. On some level I think my mother doesn't believe in allergies, or if she does, she views them as a sign of weakness. Having a reaction to a dog is taken as a mark of immaturity."

"There's something I've never understood," said Rob.

"Allergies?"

"No. Why your mother's dog is named Seamus."

"Tia named it."

"Why did she give the dog your name?"

"She was three and half years old, and back then she was quite the sensitive soul. She didn't see much of me, and I think she took some comfort in having somebody with my name around. Whether it was actually me or not. First she named one of her dolls Seamus, but it was a female doll, and my stepfather thought it inappropriate for a little girl to practice proxy transvestitism. He made Tia change its name to Shannon, I believe. Then after the divorce Tia got a parakeet to make her feel better. She named that Seamus as well, and though I think the bird was female too, at least it didn't dress like it, and my mother didn't seem to have a problem with it. Then they got a cat, and that got named Seamus too, and Tia never bothered to rename the bird, so she just calls it 'my bird,' or 'bird.' When they bought

the dog, the cat got renamed ‘Shaymee,’ which was its nickname anyway. It still responds to ‘Seamus,’ though, as does the dog, so there’s been a certain amount of confusion ever since. I think Tia’s just practicing on the animals until she’s old enough to have a baby, which she’ll also name Seamus. I hope it’s a boy.”

“Must make it confusing when you come to visit.” Rob’s eyes held a certain ironic sympathy.

“Both the cat and the dog hate me. It’s resentment, I think. You know, I was never allergic to dogs until this one showed up. My mother doesn’t believe me.”

“About the allergy.”

“About the allergy. She wanted me to come to dinner and she got very upset when I declined. She has this idea that I don’t want to see her.”

“Is that true?”

“No. I’m a good Irishman. I love my mother.”

Rob nodded, broke off a chunk of his cookie and gave it to me.

On Friday and Saturday I had gone out drinking. At Nye’s piano bar on Friday I had gotten drunk and sung “September Song,” badly. Sunday I had seen some movie at the Edina Theater and rented two more that evening. On Monday I had talked to various people on the phone.

“And I have a pager now.”

“Why do you need a pager?”

“I don’t. My boss got it for me because he says he can never get ahold of me. I’m not sure exactly what he’s talking about, but I’ve got the thing now.”

I scribbled my pager number on a napkin and gave it to Rob before continuing. Rob listened patiently throughout. When I finished it was dark outside, and Richard had been once around the shop lighting all the candles. I had finished my coffee and most of the water. Outside, the patio was packed, and inside most of the seats were crammed full with charismatic couples. In the silence after I finished speaking I could hear the couple to my right arguing about the word “fuchsia”:

“It has an ‘s,’” said the woman.

“The hell it does.”

“Hell, yes!”

Rob began to speak. “I talked to my friend Harry—”

“Wait,” I told him.

“Maybe I can find a ‘k’ and make ‘FUCK IT.’ I have a ‘t.’”

“Harry’s a real nice—”

“Wait,” I said. I turned to my right. “It has an ‘s.’”

They stopped bickering and stared at me. The brunette gave me a fake smile, and the man looked angry. “Keep out of this,” he told me.

“No. There’s an ‘s.’ I’m trying to hear my friend talk, and I can’t because ‘fuchsia’ has an ‘s.’”

“Who do you think you are?”

“I’m your copy editor. Now play your game and be quiet.”

He looked angry for a moment longer, then turned back to the brunette. She was already taking the letters off the board for him.

I returned my attention to Rob, who sipped his hot chocolate, unperturbed. The glass was almost lost in his large flat hands. “I saw my friend Harry the other day.”

“Which day was this?” I asked.

“Thursday.”

“What happened on Wednesday?”

“Nothing of worth. I worked. But on Thursday I saw my friend Harry—you know, I’ve talked about him before. I met up with him after we both got off work. We met at the Espresso Royale downtown.

“It was strange. Harry’s been a friend for a long time, and I know him pretty well. To be real, he’s not the smartest guy I’ve ever met, but he’s got heart. I remember once, a few years ago, when my cousin died, Harry came to the funeral, even though he didn’t know Paul. He took me out to get drunk afterward, and you know how sometimes you want to have people to talk to, and sometimes you just want someone around, and not be obliged to talk to them? Most of the time I don’t know which one I want, if I’m bummed out. If I’m upset about something.”

“Something tragic.”

“Something upsetting. But Harry knew without me telling him that I wanted to sit and not talk. We played darts a little. After the bar closed we rented a funny movie.

“What movie was it?”

“I don’t remember. But it was very funny.”

I wondered if my question had been overly irrelevant. As I wondered, Richard approached our table and laid his hands on it. He leaned over and moved his head from left to right, looking alternately from Rob to me as he spoke.

“Excuse me, boys, but you should know you don’t tip me well enough to be your secretary.”

Rob asked Richard what he meant.

“There’s a phone call for—” He paused dramatically before pointing at me. “You.” He paused for effect a second time. “It’s a *girl*.”

Rob raised his eyebrows at me. "A girl," he said. "Interrupting our bonding session."

"Someone knows your habits pretty well," said Richard.

I stood up. The Scrabble-playing brunette glanced at me, but her friend kept his back to me and didn't look around. "It's my secret and illicit lover," I told Richard. "Calling to arrange our midnight tryst." Richard didn't look like he believed me.

We walked to the counter; Richard went behind it and handed me the cordless phone.

I spoke into the receiver: "Shame's coffee shop of love."

On the other end I heard what sounded like heavy breathing.

"This is great," I said. "Usually I have to call a 900 number for this."

"Shame," said some woman.

"Not these days," I told her. "What with AIDS and all, commercial audio sex is a safe and responsible way to reduce sexual tension. We have to get over these Victorian ideas of guilt."

"Shame," the woman whispered. "I'm scared. I think he's going to hurt me." There was more of the heavy breathing.

"Emma?" I asked.

She began to cry, then said something I didn't understand. I was growing angry.

"You're drunk," I said. "Why are you calling me? And why here?"

She sniffled. I still wasn't sure it was Emma. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Who's going to hurt you?" Richard overheard this, as did the two customers he was serving. They pretended not to listen.

The voice didn't answer.

"There isn't anybody, is there? Emma? That was just to get my attention, wasn't it? Why are you calling?"

She said something that might have been, "No reason." Then: "I just want to see you again. We have to talk."

"That's not what you said last time."

"This time it's real important."

"And it wasn't last time? What was it—a lark in a wheatfield?" I experienced a moment of panic, thinking perhaps the woman on the other end of the line wasn't Emma. The moment passed. It was her, all right.

"You have to call me. Call me tomorrow."

"If it's that important, you can call me. But I'm not going to sit at home waiting on the call. Leave a message if I'm not home."

"God. Shame, I have to go. I'll call you tomorrow." Emma was barely audible. She hung up.

I handed the phone back to Richard. "You seem upset," he said.

"Just a little surprised," I said. "That was my section chief giving me my assassination instructions."

"No one I know, I hope." Richard sounded concerned.

"I gotta whack some Mata Hari from Geneva," I said. "Make her disappear without a trace."

Richard nodded. Back at the table, Rob was still nursing his hot chocolate.

"Who was that?" he asked.

"That was part of my story for next week," I said.

Rob was flustered with curiosity. "You're not even going to tell me who it was?"

"I'm finished this week. We have to follow a certain pattern with these things or the world dissolves into chaos. I'll tell you all about it next time."

"You seem kind of angry."

"I said I'll talk about it later. You were telling me about your old friend Harry. You said he took you out to play darts and to rent a funny movie. That it was one of the most considerate things anyone has ever done for you."

"I said that?"

"By implication. If you didn't feel that way I can't see why you mentioned it. Harry's the considerate sort, then?"

"Not so much." Rob switched himself into talking mode. He was no longer concerned about my phone call. His interest contracted to the words he spoke and how he formed them. Their content, here drawn specifically from memory, became secondary; their reception did also. Rob could have been talking to an empty chair about nothing at all, as long as the necessary care was taken with the recitation.

"Harry can be difficult sometimes. He's one of those guys who never seems to take much seriously. I mean, the thing with my cousin was an exception. He just sat there and seemed to know just what not to say and just how not to say it. But usually he can't clue into other people's moods. I tell him what I'm feeling like, and it's like I'm talking about some unimportant nothing."

"Meaning nothing but a certain matured frivolity and selfishness." I was showing off, dropping a line from *David Copperfield* that even at the

time I wasn't sure was appropriate, but which I'd lately discovered and liked the sound of.

"Like if my mind was an engine," continued Rob, unmoved by the reference, "and he knew what each part was called but not what made the car run. A lot of people are like this. They'll listen to what you have to say, but they don't understand it. Have you ever had a near-death experience?"

"Every day."

"Everybody's had them. I remember when I was seven years old and taking swimming lessons. I'm a terrible swimmer. Every time I learn, I forget within six months. Suppose I could keep myself afloat if it was that or die, but when I was seven and just learning, I couldn't even do that. The instructors wanted us—those of us who were learning slower than the others—to toughen up and apply our energies. They wanted us to learn the basics and I suppose they thought that fear was a good way to do this. So they'd toss us into the deep end, and then as we're floundering and thrashing away, they'd be shouting out instructions at us: 'Legs together,' and 'Pump from your hips.'

"Some kids learned this way. The rest of us froze in panic and sank toward the bottom. This is when the instructors would dive in to rescue us. I don't remember how many times this happened to me. I remember them dragging me up through the water and coughing out chlorine for minutes.

"This one occasion I'm thinking of, it was after one of these fuck-ups. I'd swallowed more water than usual and my legs were shaking. I was lightheaded. The lesson period was over and everyone was going back to the showers. I was the last one out of the pool area, and when I walked by the deep end, I decided to jump in, for no reason. Maybe I thought I could swim better when there was no one else around. Whatever, it was a bad mistake. I sank like an anchor, man, so I waved my arms and kicked my legs and sank some more. And I'm trying to angle up, right? Toward the ceiling lights, but I'm getting *nowhere*.

"Drowning's an interesting sensation. Maybe it's different in a lake or ocean or somewhere, but in a swimming pool there's all these colors. I could see the blue-green of the water, but then my head would flip over and I'd see the florescent lights, and they were white and yellow and orange. I remember being surprised I could smell the water. You wouldn't think you would, right? But anyway.

"Now it gets totally weird. Because I'm absolutely convinced that I'm drowning. And I know there's nobody else in the pool area, and I know I'm not gonna get up the surface by swimming. So I know I'm gonna die, right?"

“Right.”

“But this is the thing: you don’t actually believe that. At least I didn’t. There’s something that says, nah, it’s not going to happen, and so I wasn’t panicking. I knew I wasn’t going to get rescued, but I also knew I couldn’t actually be *dying*, so then I start to think things like, I’m just going to stay here forever, right in this damn pool, underwater. And that’s a pretty lame prospect too, cause it wasn’t very comfortable. But I guess I must have still been kicking my legs, because I break surface right in the dead center of the pool and I manage to get myself over to the side. Then of course I’m too tired to get out of the water, but eventually one of the instructors came looking for me to see if I was all right.”

“Were you?”

“I guess. You know, I tried to explain to people afterward that I’d almost died. Actually almost died. This isn’t some little-kid exaggeration. The instructor didn’t show up until I’d been hanging on the edge of the pool for like, five minutes. And all the people I told this to—adults and kids, didn’t make any difference—didn’t believe it. Or more like, they believed it, but they didn’t know what it meant. It took some effort for them to show any concern. It wasn’t natural, like it is when somebody you know breaks an arm, or loses a job. More abstract. They couldn’t relate. Their faces looked the way yours does now.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. My point here is that it was impossible for anyone else to understand. I’ve thought about this a lot over the years. It’s happened several more times: after my car accident, once when I was camping in the Boundary Waters and our canoe tipped over and my foot was still wedged in boat, and once when I was almost killed by a falling roof—”

“A falling roof?”

“Yeah, it was like a Buster Keaton movie. I’ll tell you about it sometime. But Harry. Harry’s like this with everything. Not just near-death experiences. What I told you about my cousin’s funeral, that’s a bad example of Harry. That’s the most considerate thing I’ve ever seen him do. Not that he’s inconsiderate. Just that he doesn’t quite register the seriousness of things. I suppose he tries. He wouldn’t understand our talks here.”

“Could he advise you when you’re having problems?”

“That’s not how he is. He’ll listen to me complain or whatever, and he’ll nod and frown, but he won’t say anything, and when I’m done he’ll tell me something pretty common, like to find a good woman. Or, ‘My advice to you is to start drinking heavily.’ You know the kind of thing. From anyone else this would make me want to scream, but there’s a charm to him that’s

hard to describe. He makes you feel better just by being around. He's the one to go to for forgetting your problems."

"But not for solving them."

"There's no one's good at that. No offense. Sometimes listening's enough."

"Sometimes. Go on about Harry. I can't get enough of Harry."

"He wasn't like that last week."

"Thursday."

"Yeah. He was distracted. He was different. He spent most of the time staring at the weird amateur artwork hanging on the walls, and he was smoking more than usual. I asked him if anything was wrong, and you know what he said to me?"

I was about to guess, but Rob kept talking. Evidently it was a rhetorical question. I often have difficulty spotting those.

"He told me that if there was something wrong in his life he'd tell me about it, and that because he hadn't I could assume there wasn't. So that was strange, and I started to tell him about what's up with me, just keeping him posted, right? And you know me, sometimes I talk too much, and I can go on and on about something. But I like to think I've gotten better at that, and anyway if someone tells me to hurry up or trim down what I'm saying, I'll do that. Harry didn't say anything like that. He just stared at the paintings and nodded during all the pauses. Eventually—it was creepy—I lost interest in talking at all. I wasn't even done with the story, but I just ended it, like that. Harry nodded and said something that was probably sympathetic. I don't remember. Then I asked him what was going on with him lately, because I wondered if the reason he wasn't listening to me was that there was a lot on his mind that he wanted to tell me."

"Was that the case?"

"Well, I don't know. He just said, 'Not much. Just working. Haven't seen many people.' Or something like that. Then we sat in awkward silence for a while until I asked about Melissa."

"Who's this Melissa?"

"His girlfriend. I've mentioned her before. So Harry tells me they broke up. And they've been going out for three years. I tell you, I was shocked. But at least now I knew what it was that was bothering him. No wonder he didn't care about my life. So I asked him about it, but he wasn't real forthcoming. He just said they both realized it was time for the two of them to move on. Obviously he didn't want to talk about it, and since he said it'd just happened that Monday, I could understand why. So I told him I was sorry, and that if he wanted to talk about it at any point I was ready to

listen. Because Harry and I see each other once every two weeks or so, though in the past we've been closer than we are now. Sometimes I worry about that, because we used to do a lot of things together. We've gone on road trips a couple of times. We drove down to Chicago two years ago, and we did that long trip to San Francisco and Seattle in '90. At that point his girlfriend Wendy had just moved out to Seattle, and they were still sort of going out. They were trying to do the long-distance relationship thing, which never works. We talked a lot about that."

"And now he's broken up with Melissa too."

"Right."

"When he broke up with the Seattle woman, did he act the same way he was acting last Thursday?"

"No, but that was different. I think he was a lot happier in general back then. He was still working for his brother the mechanic, and he always seemed to have a lot of projects going on in his life. Back then he thought he was going to be a mechanic; he always liked working on cars, but something happened between his brother and him. They're still pretty close, but I think they had some sort of argument back then. Anyway, I know he's not as happy in this new job."

"Yeah, I've heard you mention this before. What does Harry do now?"

"He's a copy editor for an audiotext firm."

"That's a coincidence."

"What do you mean?"

"Earlier I mentioned copy editing to this Scrabble boy here."

The blonde man to my left, who had been concentrating more on our conversation than on his game, and consequently losing badly to the brunette, looked up and scowled at me.

"What's an audiotext firm?" I asked.

"It has something to do with making voice mail systems for corporations."

"How does one edit voice mail systems?" The blonde man spelled 'italic,' correctly, and for 8 points.

"He proofreads copy for brochures and advertisements. I guess most memos and stuff are shunted through his department before they're sent out."

"So he's still a mechanic."

"Huh. I think when he was happier with other parts of his life, like his job with his brother, he was able to deal better with romance problems. Melissa and he probably lasted as long as they did because there wasn't enough else for him to fall back on. It's not like they haven't had problems."

They were always fighting. She didn't think they communicated well, and knowing him, she was probably right on. In the last year or so, she's been spending more time with her friends than with him. I guess he's been drinking a lot, and when he's had a few he'll spew some sideways resentment toward Melissa's friends. Never directly at her. I've never heard him say anything against her."

"So who does he blame in the break-up? Himself or her? Her friends? His upbringing? The Russians?"

"I don't know."

"You know, I don't care much about Harry. Or Melissa. But you do, obviously. This is the first time you've gone on for so long about him. Why does this concern you so much? Friends have hard times. Friends are often unhappy. Now Harry's been kicked in the heart and he's got a boring job to boot. It's a shame. If I knew him, I'd be more sympathetic. But I don't, and while I respect your feelings for him, I'm wondering what's going on with you these days, that you need to tell me all this about him."

Rob drank the rest of his hot chocolate and ate the last of his cookie. He went up to the counter, where he waited in a long line of late arrivals. Five minutes later he came back with a new hot chocolate, a second cookie, and a glass of water for me. In the meantime the Scrabble-playing couple had left, without a glance in my direction. A new couple had taken their place. They cuddled together on the couch.

"Sometimes I worry about my friendships," Rob began, sitting down. "It's not that Harry and I have ever had a falling-out. But as I said, we used to be pretty close. You know how it is—for a year or two or longer you spend a lot of your time with one person, or the same small group of people, and then it happens that you spend less and less time with them, until before you know it, you have to go out of your way to schedule them in. When you see them after that, it's strained and you have to work at keeping your interest up. You fall into a pattern—you start to do the same things, like going to the Espresso Royale. That's where I always go with Harry. Nowhere else. For two hours. Sometimes if we're talking well, two and a half hours. So someday I suppose that we'll stop seeing each other even that much. If he was the type of guy who went to a lot of parties, I'd run into him there. We'd chat and both be relieved when we could get back to our real friends."

He paused, staring down at his new hot chocolate like it was the most interesting hot chocolate in the world. Eventually he looked back up. "Sometimes you get a bit direct for my taste."

"Me?"

"Yes, you. I'm aware that you've never met Harry. I know you've got no personal stake in his emotional life. But sometimes people like to talk about their friends, you know? They like to talk about their history together. Tell little stories. And when a friend's bummed out, they like to express concern. You and I have been having coffee together every week for a year now, right?"

"One year three months."

"You're full of good advice. I like to think I am too. We listen to each other, we can tell each other things we can't tell anyone else. But there's some jealousy in it. You don't like to hear me talk about other friends. You get short with me. Your advice gets more brutal, you're more sardonic."

"Brutal?"

"We're both like this. I think that, sitting here, it's like we share something no one else does. It's like a love affair. When you were going out with Emma, I think the reason I never liked her is because we have these coffee talks. When you broke up I felt sorry for you, but some part of me was relieved. It meant that I was back on top, that I was the one closest to your personal life. You get this way too."

"I never liked Adrienne, even before you started to date her."

"But you knew I liked her."

"I was jealous."

"You admit it."

"I admit it. Why wouldn't I? You're right. What have we been doing this for, for a year, if I can't admit to you when I've been in the wrong?"

"I don't even like hearing about Michelle."

"Michelle's different."

"Not to me."

"Is this conversation progressing at all?"

"What we've got here is failure to communicate.' My point is that you don't like Harry. You'll never like him, whether you meet him or not. It's different with people you and I both know. Then there's a common history we both have with them. But of Harry you'll be jealous."

"Envious. I'll be envious of Harry, and jealous of you."

"Don't edit me."

"I'm sorry. I've got a blue pencil for a tongue. Harry's a copy editor—he'd understand. I didn't mean to upset you. I wanted to know about you, and how you're feeling. How Harry's behavior affects you."

"It bothers me."

"Naturally."

“But it’s not just his behavior. His behavior I understand. It’s a sign of something bigger. It’s just that I worry about my friendship with him. I have for a long time. I can’t help thinking his break-up with Melissa might bring us closer, Harry and me. That he’ll rely on me for support. That now he’ll need somebody.”

“Are you prepared to fill that role?”

“I don’t know yet. A person only has so much emotional energy, I think. It gets spent among the people you’re close to, and there isn’t a lot left over. I don’t know if I’d have enough for Harry if he came back more completely into my life. It scares me—I want to help him, and I’m his friend, so I have an obligation to, but the thought of it tires me out. I don’t know if I can manage it.”

““We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.””

“Is it that late?” Rob glanced at his watch.

It wasn’t anywhere near midnight, but I’d finished my second glass of water and wanted to move things along. I hurried Rob through Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday and early Tuesday. It was approaching 11 p.m. when we finished. We wished Richard good-night, blew kisses at the happy couples and got into Rob’s car. He drove to First Avenue.

This was our weekly tradition. Every Tuesday, from 7:30 p.m. until around 11, we’d have coffee at Uncommon Grounds, then go to First Avenue, the famous Minneapolis nightclub—you might remember it from *Purple Rain*. The Tuesday theme was Club 241: two drinks for the price of one. At 241 there were always a random assortment of acquaintances, and for Rob and I it was the only opportunity to see some of them.

That evening at the club the music was too loud, and my gin & tonics tasted like rubbing alcohol. All the way home the smell of gin remained on my hands, stronger even than the cigarette smoke. Rob idled in front of my apartment building for a few minutes before I got out.

“Adrienne was there,” Rob said.

I told him I’d seen her.

“She was with another guy.”

“She has that right.”

“It’s unpleasant.”

“It can wait until next week.”

“I suppose. I’ll call you if I’m going to be late.”

I got out of the car. On the steps of my apartment building someone had put out a dish of cat food for the neighborhood’s stray cat. Rob continued to idle until I had gotten the key in the door and let myself inside.

Then he drove off, taillights shrinking down the street toward the vanishing point.

Two

Emma didn't call on Wednesday, and it wasn't until Thursday evening that I broke down and called her. She wasn't home. Her voice on the answering machine was controlled and even; it was as different as possible from her voice on Tuesday night. I didn't leave a message. An hour later I called back and this time I did leave one. I wondered what she was doing at that moment, while I was writing press releases and ad copy for Neil. She was out of the apartment. Where was she? Who was she with? I hadn't thought about these things since we'd broken up. Her unexpected call on Tuesday night had drop-kicked my emotions back into the Stone Age. Why had she called? Why hadn't she called since? My feelings swayed uselessly between concern for her well-being and anger at her new intrusion into my life.

Most of that week I spent working on material for Neil. On Friday morning he paged me. I was woken by the pager buzzing, and crawling slowly across my nightstand. It dropped to the floor. The telephone, when I picked up the receiver, seemed to be working, so I called him.

"Yeah. It's Neil."

"I have a telephone."

"I thought you might have been on-line, or out of the house."

"No. I was asleep."

"How's that press release going?"

The press release was for the Minneapolis Farmer's Market. I thought about it for a moment before replying. "It's going lousy. I can't make vegetables exciting. Particularly squash. I can't make squash exciting."

"This is what I pay you for." Neil didn't sound too sympathetic. He never did. Neil approached his goals straightforwardly, and didn't quite understand things like disinterest. As long as I had worked for him, he had barreled through obstacles like Sherman with Georgia on his mind. Once Neil was set onto a particular route, you either rode with him to the end, or got out of his way. Delay was impossible.

"Yes," I said. "But I'm not Walt Whitman, or Norman Mailer. My personality isn't bombastic enough to infuse squash with a sense of breathtaking importance."

"Can you get it to me today?"

"Yes."

"I'm having business cards made for you."

I yawned at him and propped myself up in the bed. "For what conceivable reason?"

"You should have them. So you can distribute. Let people know who you are and how to get ahold of you. Drum up business."

"But I don't do the selling. I write your press releases. I edit things. My job is invisible to the public. As well it should be, since if you relied on me to do your marketing you'd never get another client."

"You'll need to learn how to sell to people if you want to get far in this business."

"I don't want to get far in this business. I want to sit at home and write press releases for \$20 an hour. Really, that's fine with me. I don't like selling to people. People don't like me selling to them."

"I'll drop off the cards when I get them back from the printer."

Neil hung up. I turned my pager off and rolled over. I was still tired, and there was a dull pain behind my right eye from drinking too much the night before. After ten minutes of failing to fall asleep, I removed myself to the shower and pounded my head against the tiles while getting clean. I dressed in a white t-shirt with Ignatz and Krazy Kat on the front ("I dreamed an angel kissed me"), and a pair of blue jeans. I found clean socks from somewhere, smoked a cigarette and ate a bagel, looking at the dark computer screen. I slipped on my sneakers and went to the corner store to buy orange juice and the newspaper. When I returned, I extracted the crossword from the paper and sat drinking the juice while I did the puzzle. By the time I was done, absolutely nothing had changed, so I turned on the computer.

It whined at me, and its diagnostic program displayed informational windows of apparent urgency. I ignored them and began to work on the squash piece.

In this way I spent most of Friday. By evening my headache had diminished so I called Rob to see if he wanted to go dancing at Ground Zero, but there was no answer. I left a message. I called a few other people, with the same results. I didn't call Emma. Ultimately I went to the club by myself, and arrived at about 11 o'clock. Dennis the doorman nodded me inside, and I made my way over to the bar.

Ground Zero is very close to a Hollywood idea of a Gen-X nightclub. The music is loud and most nights tends toward the Industrial. Black paint, metal catwalks, and artificial smoke predominate. The theme for Thursday nights is "Bondage-a-Go-Go," which attracts a horde of leather-clad dancers. For a fee patrons can have skinny half-naked women pour hot wax on their nipples, or thrash them lightly with whips. Saturday alternates between Lounge, Disco and Trailer Trash nights. But Friday is

'80s night, allowing bright-clothed nostalgia, a safe environment for twentysomethings to live out their youth again, now in the adult confines of a frantic pick-up scene. It was at an '80s night, six months before, that I had first met Emma. She had walked out of the crowd and run her fingers down the side of my face.

At the bar I ordered a beer and drank it, watching the dancers. As usual, they were all white, and most of them danced like they were tangled in their own strings. Over the last year Rob had entertained himself by assigning names to each of the regulars, and I'd picked up the habit. That night I noticed Mr. Disco, the Smile and the Barbarian Queen. Chatting at the far end of the bar were Vampira, Ratboy and Bizarro Tim. The latter was inevitably dressed in an all-white plastic ensemble, and bore an unearthly resemblance to a friend of mine—hence the name. These were in addition to the dozens of people I knew in passing. Every few minutes someone I vaguely recognized would walk by, nod, wave or smile at me. I would return the gesture, as appropriate. I was like a mechanical device someone had slipped a quarter into.

I didn't notice David until he appeared out of the crowd to my right; clinging to his arm was a short woman I thought I recognized from somewhere. David was tall and thick, with pronounced weightlifter muscles and a tan. Sandy spiky hair; a fashionable goatee and gorgeous white teeth like bright bathroom tiles. I had met him during my semester at the University of Minnesota, before I had transferred to an out-of-state college, and for a few years we had been close friends.

He approached me, whispered something to the woman, patted her on the butt, and she made herself scarce. David was a post-feminist man.

He stepped close. "I tried calling you the other day," he yelled.

"That's a lie," I screamed back, into his ear.

David moved to put his mouth a few inches from my ear. "You're right. I've given up on you. I only see you at clubs, where it's too loud to hold a real conversation."

I nodded. "I have a pager now."

"Why?"

"For fun." I gave him the number.

"Did you see the chick I was with?" he asked.

"Briefly."

"She's the granddaughter of my high school Spanish teacher. Her name's Becky but I call her Juanita."

"I think I know her from somewhere."

"If Mrs. Zane knew I was banging her grandkid she'd flip. I got straight D's in Spanish all through school."

"When did you meet her?"

"Last week, right here. She bought me a drink and we hit it off. She says her grandmother used to talk about me all the time. Figures. The old bat had a temper like a Greek goddess. You know she used to threaten to put my head through the wall?"

"What type of wall?"

"It was fucking cinderblock. I used to piss her off by asking, 'Donde está la casa de crack?'"

"Why do you call her Juanita?"

"Cause Becky doesn't sound Spanish." Duran Duran's "Hungry Like the Wolf" began to play.

"Rebecca Zane?"

"No. Rebecca McCavity. Zane's on her mother's side."

"Macavity, Macavity. There's no one like Macavity."

"She's cool." David looked around for his woman, but she wasn't in sight. He turned back to me and shrugged. "McCavity's not there."

I coughed a bit. "You seen Rob around?" I asked him.

"He ain't here. I was hoping to see the whites of his eyes myself. I want to talk about maybe moving in with him. He still looking for a roommate?"

"He's turned away three drunks and a junkie. He figures he'll have to make next month's rent alone."

"Shit, I'll move in right now. You know what that bastard landlord did now?"

Suddenly I lost my concentration. In fact, I was interested in learning what that bastard of a landlord had done now, but as I stared at the side of David's face, my peripheral vision began to darken. The club dilated into a long black tunnel, with David at the end of it. His voice was a rush of cloudy water. I swiveled my vision to the left and the movement made me dizzy. My beer bottle clinked against the edge of the bar as I leaned back. In a moment it was over, but I had missed the landlord story.

I moved closer to David so he could hear me. "That's terrible," I sympathized.

"You can see why I want to move." David's face looked eager for agreement.

"I'd move too," I said. "I'd crack like lightning and move like a thunderhead. Pay last month's rent with a rain check." I motioned for the bartender to bring me another beer. I lit a cigarette and David took one off my hands.

“Thanks, Shame.” He smoked a long drag like a bong hit and exhaled it toward heaven. “Did you and Rob go out last Tuesday?”

“We go out every Tuesday.”

“I know.” David wasn’t typically the curious sort, but he was fascinated by my weekly talks with Rob. I don’t think he understood how conversation could become so regularized, how personal talk could grow so formal. Or maybe how formal talk could grow so personal. It drove him nuts that I refused to tell him what we discussed. Somewhere in the back of his mind David believed that all Rob and I discussed every week was him.

“What did you guys talk about?” asked David.

“I told Rob a little about my relationship with my mother and about the complications that surround my name. Rob philosophized.”

“About what?”

“About ’67 GTOs.”

“You don’t say.”

“His father had a ’67 GTO while Rob was growing up. The way his father adored the car became the template for Rob’s emotional life. Pampering jealousy and the economy of caregiving. It was a bright red machine and glossy like nail polish. Rob didn’t say what happened to it, but I got the impression it’s still garaged somewhere, with a plastic sheet over it and a few crucial parts missing.”

David didn’t buy it for a second, but he smoked his cigarette and seemed satisfied. “I’m going to take a leak. If you see Juanita, tell her I’m looking for her. I’ll catch you later.”

“Hasta luego.” There was no one else I knew around the bar, so I moved toward the back of the club, passing Tokyo Rose, the Epicenter and the Zombie Master along the way. By the pool tables it was quieter. I spotted Adam sitting on a stool. He had a whiskey and a pale complexion. I told him he looked sickly. He asked me to play pool with him.

I sank a solid on the break and followed it with two more before I missed. As I chalked, Adam leaned down for his shot. “I’ve got a raging flu,” he said. One stripe went in, as well as the cue ball. “Shit.”

“Your game is off.” I took my shot, and ran the rest of the solids before missing on the 8-ball. He missed his shot, I took mine and won the game. We retired from the table and sat together against the wall.

I had met Adam in 1988 at a high school keg party. Back then he wore his hair long and unwashed, listened to Metallica and Anthrax and pretended to skateboard. By the end of my college years his aesthetic tastes had switched to Ministry, Front 242 and Industrial flavor-of-the-month. His hair had turned mysteriously black and he began to exhibit a sort of tawdry

depression. Now, a few years after this mutation, I had noticed with interest lipstick and white makeup beginning to sprout on his face. Tonight these were mercifully absent.

Adam was the bass player for a noisy talentless band named Ice 9. They had played at 7th Street Entry's New Band Night a few weeks before, and I had been in the audience at Adam's invitation. After their set he had introduced me to the rest of the band, two men and a woman drummer, all with forgettable names.

He asked me for a cigarette, and we lit up. For the next five minutes we sat and watched people dance. Adam coughed a lot.

"Shouldn't you be in bed?" I asked. His eyes were sunken and his hands trembled.

"I'm meeting someone here."

"The Reaper?"

"Our lead singer. Evan. I'm going to give him the boot. He's got a shitty voice and he never shows up for rehearsals. Last week he was so drunk at the show he could barely stand up."

"I didn't notice."

"I got sick all at once. We were rehearsing last night, and right in the middle of a song I started coughing and couldn't remember my chords. I couldn't even finish the song. Evan should have gotten the axe last night but I didn't feel up to it."

My beer was gone, suddenly, like it had run down an invisible drain. "I have a pager," I told him.

He nodded as if that were the most natural thing in the world.

"I'm not giving the number out to just anyone, buddy. It's for emergencies. I'm not on call. Don't page me to make a coffee date, or because you read something comical in the paper. If you call this thing, you'd better be bleeding from the eyes."

I scribbled the number down on a napkin and offered it to him. He took it reluctantly, as if it were wounded and squirming. His fingers brushed mine and the heat from them was enough to boil me.

"Beer calls me," I said, and stood up. Adam nodded as if to acknowledge my departure, then seemed to remember how to speak.

"Do you ever feel strange going by the nickname 'Shame'?" he asked.

"What brings this up?"

"Just wondering, you know—why you like the nickname. Do find yourself feeling more guilty than other people, because you have live up to your name? Or did you choose the name cause you're generally a guilty-feeling guy?"

“What kind of virus makes you ask questions like this?”

“I’m just asking. If your name was Joy or Grumpy I’d ask the same thing.”

“My nickname was thrust upon me by humanity’s immoderate desire for contraction. I’ve accepted it so far because I appreciate the elegance of one-syllable names. And my Catholic background aside, I seldom feel guilty, shameful or regretful because I never act in any way other than the right way, the first time.”

Adam nodded, inadvertently timing the movements of his head with the beat of “99 Luftballons,” which was beginning to play. His head looked like a cheap Halloween toy with a loose spring for a neck. He grinned unexpectedly and the effect was terrible.

David passed me as I approached the bar. I nodded at him and he returned the acknowledgment. Evidently he still hadn’t found Becky. At the bar I waited for my beer until the end of the world. By the time I was served, my throat was dry from too much artificial smoke. The music was growing quieter, or else my ears had simply given in. A dozen people jostled me and I noticed I was off-balance. My heart was beating too fast. Adam had given me his virus and it was crawling up my bloodstream like a serpent, ready to devour my brain. After one beer my heart had slowed down, my legs had stabilized and I felt much better. After two beers I felt superior to everyone else in the club, and halfway through the third I was perfectly happy to lean against the bar, people-watch and talk to no one.

Chang ’n Eng stalked through the crowd; they looked pissed off, but impeccably dressed. A young man I didn’t recognize was trailing morosely behind them. He wore tight blue jeans and a plain white t-shirt tucked into his waistband. On his feet were Birkenstocks, which made me look twice. For no reason at all I felt a wave of love flow out of me and wash over him. I wanted to take him home and tickle the top of his head. The moment passed.

When I turned back to my beer there was a woman in the way. Rebecca McCavity, also known as Juanita, was leaning on the bar, cheek resting on her fist. From this close I could see her clearly, despite the smoke. Her face was small and round, with pale blue eyes like cracked ice. They matched her lipstick and her eyeshadow. Her face was otherwise as pale as Adam’s, the fault of too much makeup. She was dressed in ’80s MTV: a white mesh top over an overstuffed brassiere—blue—a blue vinyl skirt, white pantyhose, blue high heels. She was staring at me with a contemptuous half-smile and running her index finger around the lip of my beer bottle.

Even when I took the bottle away from her and finished its contents she still refused to speak. I was forced to make the first conversational foray. “David’s looking for you. Plus the sheep’s in the meadow and the cow’s in the corn.”

“You haven’t changed much.”

“All change is bad.”

“You used to go out with Emma. You’ve got a strange name. What is it? Shameless?”

“That’s right.”

“You probably don’t remember me. I’m Rebecca.”

“I remember you now. The last time I saw you, you were walking with both starry eyes open into a relationship with an ex-Marine named Tom.”

“You’ve got quite the memory. I’d almost forgotten that little thing myself.”

“No you hadn’t. You have a photographic memory, more or less. The second time you and I spoke you recited our first conversation back to me with frightening accuracy.”

“I have no memory of that. And virtually no memory of this Tom person.”

“I remember him distinctly. He had ‘Semper Fi’ tattooed on his left bicep and I got drunk with him one night and discussed Nietzsche. He was something of an anti-Semite—Tom, not Nietzsche, no matter what you might hear—and by the end of the night he was calling me Shylock in a good-natured sort of way and insinuating that I was an Elder of Zion.”

“Stop. I don’t want to hear any more. I didn’t know you were Jewish,” she said with no interest in her voice whatsoever.

“I’m not, Rebecca.”

“Neither am I.” The bartender approached her, stared at her chest and took her order. Fast as lightning he was back with an amaretto sour and a beer. She paid him and gave me the beer.

“I could fall in love with a woman who’s free with her money.”

“I saw Emma the other day. They finally let her out of the bughouse, where she’d been strapped to a bed for six months screaming your name.”

“Shameless.” After a pause, I added, “Wonder why they didn’t gag her. She called me the other day.”

“You were so rotten to her. It appears you still are.”

“Did she tell you about our talk on Tuesday? I think we worked through a lot of remaining issues.” I lit a cigarette. It took me a few tries.

“When I met you at that party, where Emma’d dragged you along, I thought to myself, ‘Now here’s a guy of hers—finally—who I don’t immediately want to put an ice pick into. Here’s a guy who might just need some polishing before I actually approve.’ You were even dressed well, back then. And you were well-spoken without being pedantic, which seems to’ve changed too. But the more Emma polished, the more shit kept coming off you, like you were just corrosion to the core.”

“You have an ease with similes. Did I tell you David’s been looking for you?” I blew smoke in her face. She didn’t much care.

“You bring it out in people. I remember all this from before. You can’t talk straight. You always circle round and around anything important. Then once you figure out where a person’s weak spot is, you rip their heart out. This can’t be news to you. I’m sure everyone you’ve ever dated has brought it up.”

“By the time they do I’m usually not listening anymore. Why do you pretend not to have a photographic memory?” Frost was beginning to form on my spine and inner organs.

“Because if people knew, they would be more cautious around me and I couldn’t use their words as ammunition against them later.”

“Verbal blackmail. You’re the Napoleon of crime.”

“I think about you at the oddest times. I’ll wake up in the morning and I’ll be furious because you exist in my world. I’ll be driving to work and some sarcastic DJ on the radio’ll remind me of you and I’ll tighten my hands on the steering wheel till they turn white. After you broke up with Emma she cried every time I called her. She was broken-hearted.”

“After I broke up with her?”

“Now we both know she tries to milk these little dramas for all they’re worth, but I’ve known her a lot longer than you and I’d never seen her that upset, more than once or twice before.”

“After I broke up with her?”

“You should hear the way she talks about you now. She likes to tell embarrassing sexual stories about you.”

“They’re all embarrassing. After I broke up with her?”

“Did you think it happened different?”

“The way I remember, it was a mutual agreement. Good-hearted and fair to all. Irreconcilable differences and all that. We parted with cheery smiles, and the songs of robins in our breasts. I didn’t know I was the villain. This is the first I’ve heard of it. Has she said anything about our conversation the other day?”

"No. And of course this is the first you've heard of it. It's not like you ever call her to see how she's doing. Who can blame her for being bitter? When you treat her rotten, break it off with the 'let's be friends' thing and then never speak to her again? Who can blame her?"

"For a woman I hardly know, you've been thinking about me a lot. You want my number? I even have a pager."

She looked at me like she might look at a piece of maggoty roadkill. "Emma says you have an impotence problem."

"That's true. When I don't have that, I have a problem with premature ejaculation, but I make up for it with comprehensive foreplay."

"Listen to me. Nothing you can say to me will get under my skin. I'm not embarrassed by people knowing my dirty little secrets, because I don't have any. I wouldn't care if everyone in this club knew every maneuver I make in bed—my life is entirely open for inspection. Emma knew that right from the beginning. She knew better than to think I'd keep every last thing about our relationship confidential."

"That was the main issue, by the way. I don't know what she told you, but it was confidentiality. It got to the point that she couldn't talk to me about anything without predicating it with, 'Don't tell anyone this.' The longer we went out, the more areas of her life were closed off from discussion. When people asked me, 'How's Emma?', I didn't know what to say: 'I can't tell you'? She started shutting the relationship down, a piece at a time."

"This is what I mean by irreconcilable differences. It's the reason we split. I understand why she's bitter—in fact, I've been bitter myself. But you won't embarrass me and you won't make me feel guilty, so you needn't bother trying. And you can tell Emma that I'm willing to talk about whatever's bugging her, but she's going to have to call me. I've left one message for her and that's all I'm going to do."

Rebecca had been very attentive. A look of fascination had taken root on her face; she stirred her amaretto sour with her straw, but didn't seem too interested in it. When I was finished speaking, she asked, "Are you through?"

"Very."

"That was impressive speechifying. You say David's looking for me?"

"Speechifying. Quite a big word for such a little girl."

Under the makeup, her face flushed. Carefully she removed the straw from her drink and dropped it to the floor. Then she threw the drink in my face. An ice cube hit me in the eye and I jerked back. She slapped me once with her hand, hard, and stalked away.

Somewhere during the conversation I had finished my beer. I left the empty bottle on the bar and walked to the bathroom. It was empty except for someone who looked a lot like a young Allen Ginsberg; he was standing at a urinal with a cigarette in his hand. Leaning over the sink I splashed water on my face and through my hair. I lit a cigarette, rested my arms on the sides of the sink and stared at the mirror. The glass was spotted by drops of water. My reflection looked a little peaked. It took its cigarette out of its mouth and blew smoke against both sides of the glass. "Shame doesn't play well with others," it told me. "Would it hurt for Shame to be nicer to people?"

Allen glanced at me as he left the bathroom. He might have been looking at a comic strip, or a piece of amusing graffiti.

Detective story set in Minneapolis.

Lost Clusters

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