

The Stamp Collector

Louis had a friend who collected stamps. Years ago, I won a small pot in the Massachusetts lottery and took Louis to Europe, and in every country we visited he bought sheets of postage to mail home to his friend. In Paris, I watched him from a hotel reception desk, choosing a table at an outdoor café, raising two fingers at a waiter, sliding his friend's stamps into an envelope and addressing the envelope in his big loopy scrawl. By the time I'd paid our bill two coffees had arrived, and when I sat down beside Louis he was humming a club tune. This was Europe to me: sunshine and all the national coffees and Louis humming as he did his mail.

Louis addressed the envelope to his friend, then he wrote postcards. He asked me to pick out a card for his mother, and even sixteen years later, I remember the Seine river scene I chose; it was the one I thought he'd have chosen himself. "Picturesque," he remarked, then he suddenly kissed me — on that broad French street! I closed my eyes and took his hand under the table, and he sang me a love song to the tune of the French national anthem: "Je t'aime je t'aime, je t'aime, je t'*ai*-aime, Joe..." In those days I hadn't yet learned to fear Louis's mom, and I didn't know the friends he wrote to at home. I barely knew Louis.

We'd only been seeing each other five weeks when I won my money. Nothing like that had ever happened to me, and I'd never had a steady boyfriend, either, and between Louis and the sudden wealth, I believed life had changed. Louis had a fancy dining guide, and in Europe I spent a fortune on expensive dinners, after which we checked out the clubs, most of them just like places in Boston, but exciting nonetheless for being overseas. Then we came home, and I gave Louis fifty-five thousand dollars towards a salon on Newbury Street. It was the best thing I ever did, because it made me a partner, and through all the bad years, I've depended on that stream of checks, each with PREVALA printed fancily at the top. And giving him money tied me to Louis, too. Otherwise, how long would he have lasted after I drank up his good will? But Louis was loyal. He got me in a program and tried to watch out for me, and sometimes we still had dinner, once, twice, even three times a year. He knew how I felt.

I remember saying the money wasn't going to affect me, and perhaps it

didn't. Perhaps it simply heightened existing defects. For a while, I kept my job with City Cyclists, humping along as I always had, repairing flats and talking jargon with weekend athletes, but it was hard to convince myself that I *needed* to work, and even harder to resist squandering the sudden deluge. Besides the cash for the hair salon, I wrote checks to every gay charity in Boston and hired a musclebound design queen to fluff up my small apartment. I stood rounds of drinks all over town and bought Louis bouquet upon bouquet of flowers.

I've never been good at planning for the future. Eleven months after I won my pot, I screamed at my boss and lost the bike shop job, and the thing with Louis barely made it to two years. And sometime between those two points, the money finally ran out. As I'd told myself again and again without believing it, even \$237,000 can't last forever.



When the phone rang, I was wondering what small tidy gesture might make the place clean. I'd been struggling to stay dry, but I'd had my slips, and it was weeks since I'd closed up the fold-out couch. On the night-table, perched like a tea bag on the handle of a coffee mug, lay the wrapper from a condom I barely remembered using, and when things reach this point I start to get worried. I watched Mr. Navy jump to the ficus plant and squat, and when I hollered at him he hopped down and rubbed my leg. I'd been out walking most of the night, approaching, then avoiding the usual taverns, and I still had on yesterday's button-down shirt and briefs.

The man on the phone said, "Mr. Meegan, Officer Lee McCabe of the Rhode Island State Police. Regarding a Louis Prevala, of Boston, Mass?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

There's a notion that such moments bring you to your senses, but the effect on me was to turn up the static. Louis had once called me a sports car with a headlight misaligned, and as the trooper explained the nature of his call, that crooked, unpredictable beam was hard to resist. I went to the kitchen and poked around for Excedrin, and as I knocked back the tablets I noticed my hand was shaking. I opened a Dr. Pepper and wondered if I'd fed Mr. Navy, and through it all, the cop described the collision. He said Louis's mother had turned into the wrong lane, and I pictured East Duffield as it was when I visited: the shingled storefronts, the chunky green window boxes. How inconspicuous I'd felt there! The officer said Mrs. Prevala had not survived—but she never thought I was right for her boy. Then he said Louis

had not yet regained consciousness, and all I could say was, “Who gave you this number?”

The officer paused. “Mr. Meegan, you do know a Louis Prevala . . .” Of course: handing him that fine piece of change was my crowning achievement. “Because his wallet listed you as emergency contact.”

“We’re in business together.”

“Well, at your business, it seemed you were closed for the holiday.” He paused again, then said, “Columbus Day,” and I nodded. Louis often spent long weekends with his mom.

I bent down to pick up Mr. Navy, who gave a cry and leapt from my arms, and perhaps Officer McCabe thought I’d cried out myself, because he said, “Sir, are you all right?” I said I was. “You might want to get down here ASAP,” the trooper said, and it was a good thing he told me; I might have stood there all day.

I took down the names of the hospital and Louis’s emergency room doctor and the garage in East Duffield that had towed Mrs. Prevala’s car. “How long before he comes to?” I asked. The cop said the doctor would answer my questions and told me to drive safely.

I fed Mr. Navy and lay down on the crumpled sheets. I could hear him dropping kibble on the floor, then there was a thump as he joined me on the bed. Years ago, Louis had had a calico that woke him each morning by licking his scalp. “Doing hair’s just an interim thing for her,” he used to joke. “Until her big break in entertainment.” But I’ve never liked being groomed by a cat, and as I pulled away from Mr. Navy I rolled onto a black boot folded into the bedclothes and jumped up in a panic.



Louis was in a small county hospital, in a jarringly quiet ICU. To his right lay an old man with some kind of plastic device on his mouth; to his left was an empty bed. Louis had a plastic thing in his mouth, too, and an oxygen tube running under his nostrils. His face was swollen and padded with bandages, and his body hung limply, like the tail of a kite. He looked awful.

I whispered, “Hi, Louis,” and a minute later added, “Joe here.” After that I was at a loss. When Louis broke up with me he said he had nothing left to give, and I yelled that it was funny because that was how *I’d* felt since the money ran out. Now, standing beside the hospital bed, I reached for his hand, then noticed a tube running into a vein and thought I’d better not touch anything. Behind us, a nurse in a blue sweater was moving about a small, glassed-

in office. I tapped the door and asked if the doctor would be around soon.

“We’re real short-handed here on holidays,” the nurse said. I took a seat on the empty bed and didn’t trouble her for anything else.

Louis had two black eyes, and his cheeks were so swollen that the skin dimpled over his nose. It was a while before I realized the nose might be broken. Poor old Louis! In our twenties he’d had all the vivacity, but I was the one who got cruised when we were out together, and it made my passion for him seem like our secret. And then, how everything changed. I lost my hair and whatever small confidence made me attractive, and when I stopped racing bikes I got heavy. But Louis only got younger. A beauty salon is, after all, a fountain of youth. Even at forty, his hair was lustrously dark and his skin taut and nicely tanned. And though he never conquered the pudginess that made him a bit like a large hairy infant, I know he hit the gym regularly and had some baby fat removed from his tummy. But pudgy or not, he still made my mouth water, so it was heartbreaking to see that after all that cosmetic work he now looked so much more beat down than me. Me, with my gut and my desperation shirt.

A tiny man stepped to the bedside and touched a stethoscope to Louis’s neck. “You friend of Mr. Pervawa? We just waiting for him to wake up.”

“How long?”

The guy glanced at the machines behind the bed, then reached out and hit a button. “His numbers very good,” he said, smoothing the blanket over Louis’s feet. “Brain activity, normal range. Maybe *little*, little depressed if you consider anti-seizure meds...”

“His face looks crappy.”

“No! Not crappy. Not so crappy at all, really.” He patted my hand. “Not bad. Doctor tell you the same.”

I nodded back. I’d thought *this* guy was the doctor. “Where’s his stuff?” I asked. “His clothes and all, whatever he was wearing.” They had Louis in a gown that tied at the neck.

“Oh. ER orderlies generally... Yep. Right here.” The man reached for a bin attached to the bed’s undercarriage. “Of course, valuables usually set aside for safekeeping, although — oops!” He passed me Louis’s fancy watch. “Very short-handed today.”

Louis had been wearing a white shirt of some silky knit. His blood had soaked into it in ragged brown stains, and as I drew the fabric from the bin I felt sick. Beneath the shirt lay his folded socks, his expensive loafers and black designer jeans; also gray cotton boxers. Sometime, while my back was turned, he’d stopped wearing briefs. I let the foreign guy drift away, then dug

around in the jeans until I found Louis's billfold. And there was my name, after his mother's and the name of the shop. As the officer had said: 'In Case of Emergency.'

I put a hand on Louis's shin, and the next I knew it was evening, and nothing had changed. What on earth was I thinking as the sun slowly set? I was wondering if Louis's recovery would be a long one, and if he'd let me take care of him while he got well. In the silence of the ward it was easy to imagine what a fine nurse I'd make; to dwell on my chance for regaining what I'd lost.

The tiny man appeared again and touched me on the shoulder. "You can speak to him, you know," he said. "Go 'head. Speak, sing. Important to let him know that you're here." He picked up the hand with the tube running into it and slapped at the fingers. "Mr. Pervawa! You friend is here. Time to wake up! You friend —" He said, "What your name?" and I told him, and he called out, "You friend Joemeegan!" and offered me Louis's palm.

"Hi, Louis," I said. "It's Joe. I'm still here. You had an accident, but you're gonna be fine." And then, to the foreign guy: "That's right, right? He'll be okay?"

The guy nodded. "You wait. Mr. Pervawa's doctor tell you everything. But ... Maybe tomorrow. You go home now, get some food, shave, some rest. Conserve you stren'th." He patted my hand again, and I stood to go. The old guy in the next bed hadn't budged, and the thought of him lying like a stone made me queasy; but of course, Louis was just the same. "Go on!" said the foreign guy and moved me toward the bed. "Go on, you can kiss him. Mr. Pervawa!" he called out, slapping Louis's fingers. "You friend Joemeegan giving you good night kiss!"



Except for Mr. Navy, no one was waiting for me in Boston. I had a temp job I was expected at in the morning, but I could call and say I'd had an emergency, or I could let them figure it out for themselves. It wasn't the first time I'd let someone down. The roads had changed since I'd visited Rhode Island, and I wandered blindly for a while, then took a chance and turned toward the coast. Rounding a curve, I saw a frame house where a lantern shone on yellow clapboards and a gravel road led up a hillside, and I knew I'd seen the place before. Sure enough, a mile further, East Duffield's streetlights began. A motel called the Franklin Arms looked shabby enough to be cheap, and as I passed over my card I realized that if I blew off the temp place I'd be short of cash, and I wondered if I should have borrowed something from Louis's

wallet. I found a fish place on the main street, but when my meal came I couldn't eat. I can always drink, though.

I haven't been around much. Other than one miserable season house-painting for an AA acquaintance in Key West, I've lived my whole life in Boston. And though Louis continued to travel as he made money, that trip to Europe was my only time abroad. It might have been years since I'd set foot in an unfamiliar establishment, and when I caught myself watching the bar-keep handling the tap I lit out lickety-split. I stopped at Cumberland Farms for a six-pack of Dr. Pepper to take back to my room, and as I pulled up to the motel it began to rain.

By morning, I felt I'd conquered something. Unlocking the car, I drew deep breaths of sea air, and if I hadn't wanted to see Louis I'd have gone to the beach. I drove out of town the same way I'd come, and as I passed the yellow house I realized why it was familiar.

Two men were in the front yard, running an American flag up a pole. The older man was thin and gray-haired, and as he unfurled the flag, the stamp collector tugged at the rope. The stamp collector was in his thirties, but as I came into view he waved vigorously, letting go of the line, and the flag dropped into his father's arms. I waved back.



Louis's mother had been advised to walk, for her heart, and she insisted on company. When we visited, we walked to the bottom of her hill before breakfast, and where her gravel road met the main one we'd find a neighbor and his developmentally disabled son puttering about their yellow house: putting up the flag or weeding or once, in the wintertime, shoveling a path to the street. Louis would shake the kid's hand, which he seemed to love, then he'd chat about chores or stamps or some small pet that was always getting out of its cage or even what the kid had eaten the night before. Louis was good at this. Small talk is, after all, a hairdresser's trade. But Mrs. Prevala had limited patience for the son, and if Louis kept talking she could get rather edgy.

Once, as we made our way back up the gravel road, she said tartly, "I'm really not interested in Stevie's *meals*." Her hair, newly colored by her son, shone in the summer light, and she wore green dangling earrings that matched her shift, but her face was puffy and the color of oatmeal. I knew she kept a bottle of Scotch in a drawer in her bedroom, and I knew what it meant to be thirsty in the morning. But Louis's mom had a black belt in façade; it

was one of the differences between her and me. Each day she got done up and behaved like a duchess.

Louis did not take his mother's bait, and after a moment she said she felt for the boy's parents. "I don't know what I'd *do* if I had a child like that."

"I'm sure Stevie feels the same," Louis muttered, eyes fixed on the road. Mrs. Prevala stopped short.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she said. It was a good question, and I'm not certain Louis had any answer. He trudged grumpily forward, leaving me wondering whether my role was to soldier on with him or remain like a chevalier at his mother's side. Then the roadside bushes rustled in a breeze, and Mrs. Prevala inhaled dramatically. "Mmm. Smell the bayberry!" she said, and when Louis still didn't turn she said, "*Excuse* me, Joe," and bumped me aside as she ambled after him — though as far as I knew I'd been sniffing the breeze and hadn't crowded her at all. But Mrs. Prevala had a black belt in condescension, too.

It must have been one of my dry weekends late in our time together, when Louis convinced me to join him in East Duffield and avoid the temptations of the Boston bars. The pressure of me and his mother together could make Louis snappish, but we did pretty well when we slipped off alone, so we spent an hour at an animal shelter looking at puppies, then took our sweet time with his mother's many errands. At dinner I visualized a big tub of Maker's Mark instead of Louis's famous chicken, but I kept to my seat and ate what was before me.

Mrs. Prevala, though, barely touched her dinner. Louis had banned wine on account of my struggle, and his mother made numerous trips to that drawer in the bedroom, growing slightly more querulous each time she returned. Taking her plate to the kitchen, she'd heat it in the microwave, then set it on the placemat and disappear into her room. Louis and I remained at the table, and for an hour he urged her to come and sit down, but at last he snapped. "For the love of God," he cried, balling up his napkin. "What does it cost a person to act civilized?"

Mrs. Prevala stared widely at him. "Aren't you lucky, Louis. You have such freedom." She let her gaze pass coolly over me, and I felt so unmanned that I tore a banana from the fruit bowl, just to put something, anything, in my mouth. "Beholden to no one and so free to judge," she said. "Well, maybe you think life is easy for everyone."

"Mom," said Louis, "I'm gonna help you to bed. Joe and I are —"

"*Civilized!*" Mrs. Prevala said bitterly. "Like it's an *attitude*. Or some chic hairstyle!" She took a step toward the bedroom, and I thought she might

fetch that bottle and wave it about, as I'd certainly have done, for once I'm drinking I can't pretend that I'm not. But even three sheets to the wind, Mrs. Prevala acted as if she was only high-strung, and Louis never acknowledged his mother's alcoholism the way he did mine.

Mrs. Prevala pointed a manicured finger. "*Get* yourself a little dog, Louis! So you can monitor its behavior. Buy stamps for the retarded neighbor boy, whose actions can't possibly disappoint. Or find some—" She glared nakedly at me. "Get some hapless hanger-on to follow you around!"

Mrs. Prevala went into her room, closing the door with surprising softness. Louis stormed to the kitchen and noisily attacked the dinner dishes, and I could perhaps have followed, whether to show my skill with a dish towel or fuck him hard on the floor by the range. But by then I was mentally halfway to Boston, more than halfway to a package store. And it was only years later, on my way to that hospital after the accident, that I realized the stamp collector wasn't even a boy when I first met him, but a man not much younger than Louis and I.



The little hospital had lost its Columbus Day sleepiness, and the lobby was bustling. I ducked into the men's room to put on a shirt I'd picked up at an outlet place, and as I did the buttons I imagined Louis up and counseling nurses about their hair. But he was just as I'd left him, under the beige blanket, and the sight of him lying there made my head ache. Even worse, April, the Prevala Salon manager, was by the bed, and I almost snuck off before she spotted me. There are those in his circle who view me as a nuisance.

But April flung her arms around my neck. "Oh, Joe! Thank you for being here yesterday! Why didn't you call me?"

I shrugged. "They say when he's gonna wake up?"

"Not much change, I guess. The doctor will be around soon."

"Could be the swelling's down."

She nodded, slipping an arm in mine. When Louis first hired April, she had a look that was down the line New York City: black outfits, spiked hair, tough-tough mouth. But over time she'd made an asset of her pixie qualities, and now she cuddled against me. "Joe's here," she called out wistfully to Louis. "He just arrived. It's Joe and April, honey, who love you very very very much." With her free hand she stroked Louis's fingers.

There was a step behind us, and we turned. "The family of Carole Prevala?" A man in a tight suit stood at the foot of the bed. He had a Rhode Island-

er's ruddy complexion and sun-lightened hair, and he looked like a dressed-up lobsterman. "I'm sorry for your loss," he said.

"Thank you for meeting us here," said April. "Joe, we have decisions to make."

The man stuck out a hand. "Al Flaydon, funeral services. Very sorry, sir, for your loss."

"We've had no loss," I said. "He's *this* close to coming to."

"For Carole, Joe." April squeezed my elbow.

I turned away. Louis had a coterie who moved in his orbit, who called his mother *Carole* and weren't ashamed of their behavior, but I was not in that club. Still, no one knows drunkenness as well as a drunk, and Mrs. Prevala was driving drunk—of that I was certain. And here was Louis, a plastic breather on his face! I let out a sob, and April's pixie voice trilled my name. The pixie fingers scampered over my arm, but I'm not a salon patron, and I will not be managed.

"This was her fault," I said at last. Who else would say it?

"*Joe!*"

I felt April's grip tighten, but something was caught in the beam of my wayward headlight, and I drove right at it. "It's her *fault!*" I cried — as if they all didn't know! "And you thought *I* was trouble." Turning to the lobsterman, I said, "You want a decision? Take her down to the beach. Leave her for low tide, for the fishes, what do I care?" Recalling those dangly earrings, I could have wept in despair! The façade, the hauteur: I could have torn off my ears! "I came here for Louis, April. Certainly not for fucking *Carole* —" From their glassed-in office, the nurses stared.

April shot the undertaker a look, and he stepped away. "Joseph," she said. "We do not know what caused this tragedy."

"I mean it!" I wailed. For the moment, everything I'd done since I'd won my big money seemed like only a failure to watch over Louis. Louis and me. "You think it's coincidence they called me yesterday? After sixteen *years?*" I grappled for his pants with those emergency contacts. "Take a look in his wallet! He respected my *judgment!*"

April jerked me by the collar. "You fucking sociopath, don't make me laugh. And get your fat ass off the floor." I stood up, wiping my nose, and she said, "If you want to be part of this, cut the crap. Sit down and think of what *Louis* would want. For his mother's burial. Which is no picnic for anyone." She slid a chair across the linoleum. "*Sit!*"

I sat down and stared at Louis. His skin still looked like it was brushed with yellow, but his nose was reemerging in his swollen face. I sniffed, laying

my hand on the bedside rail, then set my chin on my fingers. Before me, Louis breathed in and out. I reached down and touched the crook of his elbow, which was warm and a bit moist, then I moved my fingers to the sleeve of his hospital gown, where I could feel his biceps, more pumped than when he'd belonged to me. "Mmm," I said and remembered that I could talk to him. I ran my knuckles down the hairs of his arm, and as the skin pebbled to goosebumps I said, "Mmm," again; he'd always loved it when I moaned. I reached over and rubbed his stomach, and my dick jumped.

The doctor arrived, accompanied by the foreign guy from the night before. "Morning, Joemeegan," bubbled the foreign guy. "Mr. Pervawa seem much better." He and April had met already; she called him Ricky and said he was a love. Flaydon was gone.

The doctor was pudgy and pink and could have been Louis's overachiever brother. He said he was optimistic, then said it again in various other phrases, but my only question was when would Louis wake up, and I'd already figured that was one thing they wouldn't discuss. The doc said, "Remember, it's only the second day. These things take time," and Ricky nodded. "I gather there was another party in the car," the doctor said. "So sorry for your loss."

We watched him examine Louis's chart and do everything Ricky had done the night before. At last he picked up Louis's hand and pinched the palm, and the four of us watched the fingers contract. "That's good," said the doctor. "Response to pain stimulus is normal, in fact."

"So he's miles ahead of me," I said. The doctor grinned.



I drove up to Boston to get some clothes and see Mr. Navy, and I decided to bring him back with me. All down the interstate he sat on my lap, but at the exit he stood and began to meow, then he disappeared under the seat and continued his complaining from there. "Psst," I said. "Pss-pss-psst." It was midnight, and no one else was on the road. I'd stayed longer than I intended at my apartment, always planning to stand up and get moving, but really just lingering on the fold-up couch. It wasn't April who'd made me feel helpless, but Louis, lying stonelike until visiting hours ended.

I turned toward the coast, and the yellow house looked cozy, lit by its single lantern. I slowed for the curve, then suddenly braked, and instead of continuing to the Franklin Arms I turned up the gravel road.

Louis's Miata was parked in a turnaround; the top was down. I caught my breath, thinking for just a moment that — but of course, it was Mrs. Preva-

la's car that had been in the crash. I got a flashlight from my glovebox and peered at the leather seats, which held puddles from last night's rain, and as I poked around for something to soak up the water there was a whish of fur, and Mr. Navy darted into the blackness. I called, but heard only crickets, and as I waited for him to come back I took off my sweatshirt, then my shirt, and sopped up the water in Louis's car.

The house was unlocked. I went around turning on lights, and as I passed the pantry I saw two fifths of Mrs. Prevala's cheap scotch peeping from behind a half-open louvered door. In Louis's room, one twin was unmade, under the same poster of Diana Ross that had always hung there, and on the bedside table sat the same clock-radio beside the same book of movie-star portraits. Louis's dirty laundry was on the floor, and on the second bed a weekender contained his clean clothes: Calvin Klein underwear; nylon running shorts; a cashmere sweater. The sweater was too small for me, but I draped it over my shoulders and hugged the sleeves to my bare chest, and suddenly I was thinking about that scotch.

The first pull was like heaven, and I let the bottle touch the back of my throat like a glass dick, until it made me gag. A little stream ran down my chin and onto my stomach, and I dabbed at it with the sleeve of Louis's sweater. Another slug, and when I screwed the cap on I was gasping for breath. I leaned my forehead on the cool kitchen counter and knocked a dirty cereal bowl into the sink. It landed with a terrible clatter.

I picked up the bottle again and called for Mr. Navy and felt very sorry for myself. Outside, the crickets were still making their deafening pulse, but I stood on the deck and said, "Pss-pss-psst" as loud as I could, and when nothing happened I said, "Well, fuck you, then." On the patio was an ashtray with a couple of Mrs. Prevala's butts in it, and I said, "Fuck you" to the ashtray and then "Fuck you" to the porch furniture and the half-open kitchen door and the gabled roof of the bathroom and Mrs. Prevala's Polident and ugly toothbrush and Metamucil inside on the sink and the little area of cleared lawn and all the overgrown bayberry and honeysuckle bushes that crowded the hillside: "Fuck you. Fuck you, fuck you fuckyoufuckyoufuckyou." I spun around a couple times and flung the bottle into the night, thinking as I waited for the sound of the crash that if it would make Louis wake up this would be my last taste of alcohol forever, despite that second, unopened fifth still waiting in the pantry. But the bottle just bounced on the hard ground without breaking, and I walked over and picked it up. "Fuck," I said. The air was cold, and I forced my head through the neck of Louis's sweater, letting it sag around my shoulders like the neck-ruff in some old-fashioned painting.

I went around to where the Miata was parked and reached down to feel the upholstery. It was damp and flabby, but I didn't use Louis's sweater to mop it up. Instead, I had another drink, and then another, and then I decided to see how quickly I could finish the bottle, and I did the best I could. After this I could no longer stand, and I got down on my knees and pressed my face to the fender, which was wet with condensation and felt delicious. I crawled the length of the car with my cheek to the metal, imagining the band as my face slid along the side panel, and when I reached the rear bumper I lay down in the dirt. The ground was damp and a bit soft, and I inched myself under the trunk, putting my arms at my sides and getting in tight behind the rear wheels, until I was pinned there and could no longer move. I pressed my face to the ground and rubbed my nose back and forth until it seemed I'd abraded the skin, then I picked my head up and slammed it against the undercarriage, and though I wasn't quite sobbing yet, I started to heave. I knocked my head around until stars fluttered before me and all I could manage were a few whimpery squeaks, then I opened my mouth and bit the soil, scooping up all I could with my tongue. I've done this before, this wallowing in abasement, and it always feels good. There's a theory that a drunk won't clean up until he hits rock bottom, so each new incident might perhaps be the one.



Sometime in the night I moved my face out of the dirt, and I woke to feel something soft strike my cheek. I opened my eyes and saw a limp mouse in front of me and the grey-yellow morning shimmering beyond the car. In a patch of sunlight sat Mr. Navy. "Hello, there," I said, and he stepped toward me with a new kind of proud chirp and reached out to bat the mouse, and when the corpse hit me in the face again it was time to rise and shine.

It wasn't easy climbing out from under the Miata; I'd wedged myself in with the kind of ambition I only muster when I'm wasted. Louis's sweater caught on a bolt and nearly choked me, and I slid out of it and left it hanging from the undercarriage; and as I emerged I saw the scotch bottle a few feet away, with two fingers of amber liquid capped in like a message. I didn't drink it. Instead, I took it into the house and replaced it on the pantry shelf, and I was in Mrs. Prevala's bedroom rummaging for Excedrin when I heard knocking on the screen door.

It was the neighbor from down the hill. He nodded at me, and when I stepped outside I saw the son trying to sneak up on Mr. Navy. "I'm a friend of Louish," I said. "Been at the hoshpital, got in late." The man leaned back,

and I realized my breath must be something. My face was undoubtedly pretty bad, too, and I hoped it would make him take his kid and go. "It's fine. I won't break anything." My mouth was so dry.

Mr. Navy scampered under a bush, and the stamp collector ambled toward us. He had short, very black hair and a large mouth, but he wasn't ugly or crazy-looking. He eyed me deliberately, then said, "You got in a fight."

His father said, "*Stevie*."

I looked myself over. My pants were streaked with dirt, and there were patches of mud in the hairs on my stomach. Rubbing my hand over my face, I felt the sting of torn skin, plus some crustiness on my stubble, and I wondered if I'd spat up during the night. I nodded at Stevie and tried to think of what to say, and at last I stuck out my hand. "I'm Joe."

Stevie shook my hand enthusiastically. "Your kitty caught hisself a mouse." "Probably his first. Mr. Navy's an apartment cat."

"What's that mean?" he said.

The old man sighed, shaking his head. "I hear Carole's viewing is today, over to Flaydon's. Terrible thing." He pushed up the sleeve of his jacket and picked a scab from his forearm. "She was some lady, for all her frailties."

"I'll stay with Louis," I said. "I won't go to the viewing." I started to tell him I'd never bought into Mrs. Prevala's gentility, but my mouth was too cottony to say very much. And of course, the man was just being polite. How people do that I really don't know.

"Louis is *my* friend," put in Stevie. "I like him better than her." The dad laid a hand on his shoulder. "He brings me stamps and cuts my hair."

"Looks good," I said, wetting my desiccated lips. "Quite a handsome cut." The bayberry trembled, and I rubbed my arms: goosebumps. "You know, you could visit him. It's supposed to be family in ICU, but nobody checks. And Louis has got no family now." Then I was overcome by the dryness.

The old man said, "You ought to have some clothes on," and reached for the screen door, and I pushed past him and rushed to the kitchen and put my mouth under the tap, and the water that came out wasn't nearly wet enough. It poured into my mouth and burbled down my face, and I swallowed as much as I could, then turned and let it wash over my head and ears, finding sensitive zones all over my scalp. At last I just let go, and my face hit the bed of the sink. The cold water poured over my neck, and when I opened my eyes I could see the dish I'd knocked in the night before. Then the tap was turned off, and someone was patting my head with a cloth.

"Good idea," the man said. He moved the cloth to my back and went on patting, gently patting, and said nothing about my heaving and sniveling or

the way I rocked back and forth and dug my chest with my nails. “A quick visit to Flaydon’s, pay our respects. Then off to the hospital to tell Louis hello. How’s that sound, Steverino?”

“Good.”

“Get yourself cleaned up.” He tapped my shoulder blade. “We’ll wait.”

I stood up, running a hand through my wet hair. I hadn’t changed my opinion of Louis’s mom. She’d had nothing for me, not even friendship, but I’d addressed all that yesterday, or meant to, and now, with my face raw and my belly muddy, I hoped I would never think of it again. And of course, Louis’s mother was never the point.

I watched Stevie stick a finger in a dried flower arrangement and thought how Mrs. Prevala would hate having him here, then he opened the door, and Mr. Navy strolled in. “I just don’t know,” I told whoever was listening. “I can’t make up my mind.”

“What you want...” the father said thoughtfully. “You want to be able to tell Louis about it. How respectful it was, all the little details.” He’d had thirty-plus years, I guess, of guiding the stamp collector, and he did it very well, speaking very slowly and holding my gaze. “Cause you bet your life savings he’s gonna ask.” He scratched his arm again and asked if I had a razor, and I realized that if this was the day Louis woke up, I’d better be at my best. And I *had* a razor, so the first step was easy.

I went to my bag and dug out a can of cat food. “Do something for me?” I wondered if there was anything that might do me some good, and I thought of the years I’d spent looking after myself. I didn’t do a good job, but I endangered only me. How long did it take to become one of those guys who’d hit rock bottom and bounced back?

I handed Stevie the can and gestured at the bathroom. “I’ll be quick.”

“Come on, fella.” The man took his son’s arm. “Why don’t I help you with that, then you’ll give it to the nice kitty. And I’ll make a pot of coffee.”

“Be my guest,” I said.



The day Louis and I were scheduled to leave Venice, our flight was cancelled. We’d had our last cappuccino in the sunshine, and Louis had mailed Stevie his Italian stamps, and we’d already checked our luggage when the airline cancelled the flight.

In the little tourist kiosk where two young Venetians were making hotel reservations, Louis pretended we’d only just arrived. “No, no, just the one

night. Our first!" he said. "I'm excited already." And on the ferry into the city he continued to pretend it was all once again new, and I played along. "Look, babe, the canals! Do you think we can ride around in one of those boats?"

I put my arm around him. "We'll do whatever you like."

Our new hotel was on an island across from the main square. In the years since, I've forgotten the name. Our room was on the top floor and had a single high window, and Louis and I went to bed and made love in the light of the window, and when we were finished he stood on a bench to look out. I climbed up behind him and held his waist. Across the water, the city was lit by sunset, and the cathedral looked like a cluster of bright balls dropped down among blocks. In the main piazza we could see tourists photographing each other with the pigeons, just as he and I had done the day before. "Let's come back every year," I said. "Every year an annual first visit."

Louis said, "I might have my salon by next year. I'm really ready to set up on my own."

"But you'll take vacations." He said he would.

Louis said, "I have a place in mind. You know on Newbury, with the big white planters?" I didn't, so I kissed his neck. "It's got kind of new fixtures, but the guy wants to sell. Of course, it's an old queen's shop now, and I want soft lighting. Maybe an accent color, greenery, orchids... Very friendly and genteel, no attitude."

While Louis was talking, I stepped down from the window and sat on the bench with his feet between my thighs. He always had great legs, and when I touched his shins he shifted his feet so my dick fell between his heels. I wondered if he expected me to speak of my own ambitions, and I almost told him it was my dream to take over City Cyclists, though it certainly was not. The fact is, I'm no good at imagining the future, and all I wanted was for everything to go on forever: the vacation, the money, the amazingly relaxed camaraderie that was just beginning to become love. Even the very moment itself! Yes, if everything had stopped then: if I'd been compelled to spend eternity sitting on that bench with my forehead against the backs of Louis's thighs while he gazed at the Venice skyline and contemplated his plans — if that had happened, I'd have been perfectly happy, because that was truly all I expected at that moment of my life.