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DIPTYCH

The way that she halts in the middle of the room, with the torque of her hips arrested mid-stride, Glover knows that something is wrong. The thirteen-year-old has just woken up and is sitting at the end of the bed in his underwear.

"What?" His eyes bat as if to clear the remnant of a cruelly pleasant dream.

She takes a step nearer, hugging his laundered clothes to her chest. She bends forward. Her long brown hair slides over her shoulders. "Your eye, Glover."

There is a wateriness in his right eye, a hovering discomfort – but only now that Winnie has pointed it out. She plops the stack of clothes on the bed and sweeps back her curtain of hair. "Don't touch *anything*, Glover!"

Fluttering her hands, Winnie snaps from the room, slamming the door behind her. Glover sits perfectly still for a moment, his sandy hair in paralyzed contortions. He wonders if she did the same thing to Lucas, just barging in any old time.

Glover's last foster parents had pretty much let him alone. For

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almost two years, the binge-drinking Liptaks of Ozone Park had remained an agreeable mystery. Not so Winnie Ramos. In six weeks, he has come to know her precisely – the cold optimism and warm self-regard. She routinely compares him to her son, Lucas, her strapping, athletic and “respeckful” teenager who grew up to manage a car dealership somewhere north of Poughkeepsie.

Glover pulls on his jeans and consults the oval mirror on the bureau. The eye rises like a red planet. He leans close to examine it. A bullet of pus in the inside corner changes shape with each swipe of the lid. He feels a tug at the back of his stomach, like a loose suture pulling tight. He bends closer. The veins of the eye look swollen; their fingers clutch at the rose-tinted surface. He blinks, the bullet flattens. A thread of it, thin as spider’s silk, is drawn up by his lashes.

“Don’t touch it!” Winnie shrieks, thrusting in once more. Her gait slows as he turns from the mirror. Again he senses a change in her, a shift away. The red of the eye sears the distance between them. Raising the burnished buckler of her smile, Winnie resumes her advance. In her hand: a white, wet, steaming washcloth.

“Pinkeye is very contagious, Glover. Very catching. Sit.”

Winnie sits, too – measuredly close – her denim skirt stiff against the bedspread. Dressed to meet her Watchtower friends for their daily Pioneering, she wears a khaki blazer and a powder blue cotton blouse.

“Do you know where you got it?” she asks him, a vapor of Listerine in the words.

“No.”

Her index finger, wrapped in a corner of the washcloth, affixes itself to Glover’s right cheek and pulls at the lower lid.

“Those video games at the corner, I expect. Don’t pull away!”

Glover, submitting, avails the eye to a thorough inspection. Winnie releases him. Her eyes sweep to the top of the bureau, where a photo of Lucas with his swim team had stood. As if remembering she had moved it to the dining room recently, her gaze retreats to the window. It stalls there, searching, it seems, for a reason to be there.

“Come,” she says, rising. “And don’t touch anything.”

Glover squints against the blaring light and surfaces of the bathroom.

“I’m meeting Yolanda downstairs,” says Winnie. She turns the spigot as hot as it will go. “Now remember, Glover. Wash your hands first, then your face, then your hands again. Then shower.”

He watches her in the mirror of the medicine cabinet. She has to stand on her toes to reach the can of Lysol on top of the storage unit.

The eye turns to its own reflection. The rim of the upper lid tingles in the light; he can feel the pulse of blood under it. The veins on the eyeball form an intricate system of deltas around the iris. He lowers his hands to the running water, unable to look away.

“Glover? Call Dr. Rivera and make an appointment. Try for this morning. Tell him it’s urgent. I’ll leave his number on the table. *And,*” she adds, her breasts jogging as she shakes the spray can, “I want you to scrub every inch of your room. Promise me.”

Armed with the Lysol, she marches down the hall. She prowls the apartment, spritzing doorknobs and light switches. She goes in his room and fogs it down good. He pictures her stalking around the bed, searching out evil deposits on the pillow case – the faded trails of unwanted dreams.

Winnie had removed the photo for a reason. She had popped in one morning – again unannounced – with all the radiance of Jehovah’s Anointed. He had whipped the sheet over what he’d been doing, his eyes caught to hers. Never had he seen a face change so thoroughly, the enamel expression, by segments, dissolving. Winnie strode to the bed and snatched the picture frame from his hand. She glared at it fiercely, trying to locate what carnal attraction he had found in the photograph – a group of high school boys in their swim caps and trunks.

The swim team now sits on the dining room sideboard between Lucas’s senior yearbook picture and a second-place swimming trophy. It won’t stay there long, most likely. She’ll move it to the nightstand in her bedroom until, for want of contented sleep, she commits it to her closet, to a padlocked chest, some airless place that Glover’s thoughts can’t reach.

She reappears in the bathroom door, a stack of *Awake!* magazines in her arm.

“I’ve asked Doris and Yolanda for lunch, Glover. I suspect you’ll be at the doctor’s. In fact, don’t bother with calling him. Just go there and give them my name. Alright? He’ll take you. Just like before.”

Glover feels the eye as it turns in its socket. There’s a scraping sensation, as if it moves on sandy ball bearings. Winnie had clipped an orange bow to her hair and tarred some mascara to the ends of her lashes, which flap pointedly at the sink.

“Soap,” she says.

The elevator shakes with the beat of the blaster. Heads bobbing, feet rocking, the boys, grooving in their Pepes and Phat Farms, seem not to notice Glover. On the ninth floor, they are joined by old Mr. Chu, with his plastic pail and fishing pole, on his route to East River Park. He

winces at the music and shoots furtive scowls at their feet. The right side of Glover's head helplessly soaks up the bass. He finds it strangely invigorating. Like a transmission of amplified beehive activity. The boys disembark at the notorious fifth floor and a slender girl with armadillo curls and gold lipstick steps in. She looks dead flat at Glover's right eye. He withstands her gaze, watching the disgust compile in her face.

"Faggot," she says. "Pipsqueak cracker-ass motherfuckin' fag."

Mr. Chu in the corner coughs once, weakly. The girl veers for a moment his direction, then triple-snaps her chewing gum and swings her hips around.

The day is hot already. A gray haze stretches over the buildings of Campos Plaza Community Apartments and the soaring cliffs of Stuyvesant Town. Glover takes the courtyard to 14th Street, expecting to see Winnie and her old lady friends at the gate. But only Rufus White is there, his hands in his pockets, a green pick sticking out of his hair. Rufus – called Fufu by those half his age – wears clip-on neckties put on by his grandmother and likes to stand around with the Witnesses.

"Where they at, Dove?" says Rufus, unable to pronounce or remember "Glover."

Behind him, in the branches of a crab apple tree, Glover sees that the dirty gray webs of the tent caterpillars still haven't been cleared away.

"Check at the subway," says Glover. "If they're not there, they prob'ly went down to the Hall."

"Hall?" says Rufus, his brow bunching up.

"Kingdom Hall. By the Seaport. You been there a hundred times."

Rufus raises his head as if to nod, but freezes, peering down his nose at Glover.

"Where you goin', Dove?"

"Errands. See you later."

Glover hears Rufus's shuffle-step behind him.

"Dove! It hurts?" Rufus grabs him by the shoulder. "Your eye hurts?"

"Nah," says Glover, extricating himself. "It itches."

Rufus steps up, looks deep, draws back – just like Winnie had.

"It's red!" he says. "Red huuurts!"

"No it doesn't. Come on."

They stop at a T-shirt shop with a rack of sunglasses sitting outside. Glover claps on a pair with mirrored lenses in curvilinear, copper-colored frames.

"What you think?"

Rufus giggles, his head bobbling. "Phat, fine, flyyyy!"

Glover checks the sunglasses in the tiny mirror imbedded in the rack. Their breadth and curve hide the eye completely. He buys them with his lunch money, already feeling a certain relief.

Rufus turns when they reach First Avenue and makes for the subway entrance on the opposite side of the street. Winnie stands there with Yolanda and Doris, each holding Watchtower literature. When they see Rufus coming, they confer together briefly, then open to receive him.

Doris and Yolanda Banks are sisters. They're both in their sixties, share the same ostrich-like proportions, and dress like Munchkins. Doris wears a salmon-colored, ruffle-necked blouse and a knit skirt in green and black checks. Yolanda's ensemble is equally ecstatic, but with the added flourish of a pink corsage pinned to her jacket lapel.

Just when Glover thinks they've missed him, Doris waves his direction and shouts. Winnie whips around. The distance of the intervening crosswalk does not observe the connection between them – the IM's flash transmission. She gives him a cursory wave and smile, then turns her back to him. Rufus looks happy planted among them. He has already snatched up one of the magazines and is waving it over his head.

The traffic light changes. In the crosswalk, Glover passes an old man with a clear plastic shield fixed over one eye. The man walks unsteadily, glancing back and forth, as if the street is riddled with mobile sinkholes that could swallow him into the sewers. At a bus stop shelter near Second Avenue, Glover sees a lady with a similar shield. She looks at him pointedly, her lips parting as if to speak. Beneath her uncovered eye hangs a small yellow sack of skin. He quickens his pace, glad for the shield of his sunglasses.

The wail of sirens obliterates the lingering resonance induced from this encounter. Two squad cars and an EMS van zoom down 14th Street. Behind him, a fire truck rolls out of its station and makes the turn up First Avenue.

Now Glover remembers the Eye and Ear Infirmary, its banners hanging right over his head. Such an alien term, infirmary. Medieval. Like heated forceps and floppy-hatted nuns.

Glover walks by without looking in. Passing the optical store at the corner, he turns down Second Avenue.

Infirmary, nunnery, orphanage – modern medicine and social workers should have wiped such words from existence.

"Winifred Ramos," confirms the receptionist. She's a middle-aged Goth-chick dressed in black, with tattooed arcs for eyebrows. "And what is your name?"

"Glover Thomas."

"I'll see what we can do."

Glover takes a seat in the waiting room across from two others: a college-aged girl with her arm in a sling, and an elderly woman not a day short of ninety, her hair like a bubble of finely spun vinyl. Their pointed stares, deflected by his mirrored glasses, fall back to their habituated voids. The old woman looks at the metal cane standing beside her on its rubber-tipped toes. The girl looks at the coffee table. Its rectangular glass top is positioned so low that Glover can see her knees – and the underside edge of her pink skirt (and the dark void beyond it) – reflected in the glass. The girl is wearing black underwear or nothing. She adjusts the sling with her good hand, her knees edging carefully together.

There are more shifts of posture, barely noticeable, as if his fellow patients are both acclimatizing to the new dynamic that he has introduced. He pushes the sunglasses snug to his brow and stretches his legs as far as the table permits.

On his first visit to the clinic, Winnie had come with him. They had spent two hours in the waiting room – time that Winnie had managed to fill with an account of her religious beliefs. The only part that Glover remembers is that three types of people inhabit the universe: the *Anointed*, very few in number, who will help Jehovah rule His kingdom; then all the rest of the Watchtower faithful, called *Jonadabs* or the *Great Crowd*, who will be the citizens of that kingdom; and those that Jehovah will “rejeck” and destroy, including liars, adulterers, murderers, homosexuals, and those belonging to the synagogue of Satan.

Finally, the nurse had called his name.

“Tell Doctor Rivera what you saw.” Like show and tell, Winnie took the framed photo from the plastic bag she had brought it in. “What did you see here to do that to?”

“Mrs. Ramos,” Rivera protested. He was a tall, good-looking man in his forties. “Maybe it’s best to leave us alone?”

“It’s good for him,” she snapped. “What is it, Glover? My son’s legs? Is that it – his swimmer’s legs?”

She seemed to have forgotten that Lucas was not the only boy pictured. But among the five other bare, wet chests, Lucas’s was definitely finest. One arm was raised in a silly wave or salute, the line of the triceps crisply defined. His lips were puckered in good-natured confidence as he mouthed something to the camera. The photo cut off just below his thighs, the hairs on them combed by rivulets of water.

Just thinking about it, Glover feels a shift in his pants. As if to combat this rival sensation, a pointed itch takes hold of his eye. Closing it firmly, he turns it back and forth against the lid.

“Myrna Goldberg?”

A nurse stands in the doorway smiling. The elderly woman pries herself up, assisted from above by her Zeppelin hair. Glover lifts the sunglasses to get a better look. As the wispy dome floats down the corridor, an overhead light flashes harshly off the cane.

Glover drops the glasses back to his nose and braces himself for the added irritant. He keeps the eye still, holds his breath, tries to forget the prodding at his waist band.

“Tell the doctor what you were looking at.” Winnie thrust the photograph in his face. “Answer me! What did you like about him?”

“When you fantasize, Glover,” said Dr. Rivera, attempting a measure of professional autonomy, “do you only think about males?”

Glover slouched in his chair and stared sullenly at the floor. With a dike-bursting sigh, Winnie forged ahead.

“Answer me!”

The doctor retreated to the examination table, waiting for her to finish.

“His arms,” Glover mumbled, just to say something.

“Okay,” said Winnie, her left foot tapping at the floor. “His arms. What else?”

Glover glanced at the doctor. Rivera nodded encouragingly.

“His stomach,” he said with a little more conviction.

“What about it?” said Winnie.

Glover looked at her then. It was like stepping across a treacherous bridge, the placement of each foot unsure.

“The way it ripples.” His voice trembled as it rose. “The little hairs on it. And his chest.”

“Dios mio.” Winnie straightened. “What about his chest?”

For the first time, she appeared to be listening.

“The way it looks hard and soft at the same time.” Glover could feel the air on his teeth. He could feel Rivera watching him. The bridge fell away.

“I like his hips and his legs and the way his crotch sits in his trunks, his dick pressed up with his balls.”

Winnie’s face went lax. She shoved the picture back in the bag and sat down. Glover felt the blood red-hot in his cheeks.

Rivera continued the consultation, his tone rigidly tender.

“Of course, I wouldn’t encourage pursuit of such fantasies. It’s easy to get into habits of thinking.” He glanced at the polished steel of his stethoscope. “But, really, we know more about these things than we used to. Maybe some counseling would be good. For both of you, eh?”

He ventured a well-meaning look at Winnie, who rose from her chair like a very dense, extremely toxic cloud of smoke.

A mosquito shrills faintly in the waiting room. Glover hears it first near the window, then toward the elevator, the sour sharpness flavoring the air. He tries to ignore it, this plaint or directive from an alien world, from the hairy swamps of the Mesozoic.

"Would you pass me that magazine?" The girl nods at the coffee table.

"Which one?" he says, still trying not to move.

"The only one there. *Premiere!* Hello!"

He complies, though he has to sit forward to do it.

"Thanks," she snorts. As she thumbs noisily through the magazine, her knees, across the reflective table, slowly spread outwards.

Glover looks at her cradled arm. Even through his sunglasses, he can see the swollen fingers hanging off the end of the sling. They have a brownish-gray color and bruise-black nails. As if cognizant of his probing eye, she carefully shifts her wrist in the sling. The fingers pull at each other, a film of sweat, dirt and pain sticking them together. Glover's eye twitches. Their respective ailments, each on alert, send out countless microscopic tentacles to assess the other's defense capabilities. Her blackened nails are the only curb to the festering poisons readied for dispersal, just as the sunglasses, Glover decides, keep the safety on the pinkeye trigger.

As if to thwart any diplomatic efforts, the whine of the mosquito encroaches.

He feels a tingling in his left eye now. A leak must have sprung in the dam. He detects a seepage, an entire terrain being inundated. He thrusts up, scraping a shin on the coffee table, and hurries to the bathroom. He locks the door, removes his glasses, bends close to the mirror.

The left eye still shows clear. No redness yet, at least compared with its brother – the ascendant twin – whose territorial ambitions are garishly apparent. Glover turns on the spigot, his gaze locked to the arabesque of blood vessels etched around the iris.

On the way home from the first doctor's visit, he had told himself to prepare for a change. Winnie Ramos would lose no time in contacting the case worker. He had expected imminent expulsion. Days passed, then weeks. A reprieve had been granted, the length and conditions of which were never clarified. She cooked his meals and bought him clothes at the Old Navy sale. But she watched him, waiting for just the right moment – his most vulnerable – to drop the other shoe.

"Fuck you." His eyelids narrow as he speaks the magic words. The lower right lid is beginning to unravel; he can feel the single thread

that composes it disengaging row by row. The lid has a purplish cast to it, like the girl's fingers in the sling.

This much he knows: the status initially granted him, though never explicit, had been irreversibly revoked. He had been "weighed in the balances," to quote Winnie's favorite Bible phrase, "and found wanting." He should have known it when she snapped her back to him at the subway – a careless giveaway on her part, a rejection reflex. How many other gestures had he missed, how many involuntary cringes and double-takes and furtive Lysol spritzes?

"Fuck you, Winifred."

He turns off the spigot. The hum of the mosquito pricks his ear. He can see it in the mirror, right over his head. It lowers steadily, drawn to the fruiting bog – the malaria, the typhus. He swipes at it, whirls around and swipes again. The insect retreats to a corner near the ceiling. He flings his sunglasses at it. They hit the wall and clatter into the sink, harmless and unharmed. Cheap shit. He stuffs them into his shirt pocket.

"Glover Thomas?"

The nurse is calling his name. His stomach tightens. He turns to the mirror. With his little finger, he cautiously dabs at the pus-filled corner of the right red eye. Then – a trepid smile, a cringe of valor – he brings it to the surface of the left eye. Just one little, lingering dab. Enough to ensure transmission. At once, he feels the germs taking root, the files, from folder to folder, transferred.

The girl looks up as he emerges from the bathroom. She catches her breath, unprepared for such an unveiled exposure. Her lips curl back. Her arm turns to salt.

"Glover Thomas?"

He tramps past the elevator to the stairwell door. The letters of the EXIT sign emit their lava light, a warning.

"Young man, the doctor is waiting."

He pushes out, taking the stairs by threes to the street.

The fervor of a righteous heart guides the storm of his passing. Each footfall shakes the veils of soot and carbon monoxide hanging in the air. The cracked sidewalk, the spindly ginkgo, two squatter types chaining bikes to a lamppost – each registers the passing threat, for he refuses to shield the infection with his sunglasses. An emaciated woman with two bags of groceries steps to the side, eyes averted.

Against the harsh Millennial light, his own gaze rages defiantly ahead. It confronts a fruit stand, frisking a ziggurat of Haitian mangos. It brushes the fur of a tethered pit bull and moves on, assaulting

two oncoming pedestrians ignorant of the desecration done them. It lurches toward the back of an orange knit cap on the head of a black boy waiting at the crosswalk. As if sensing the danger, this boy, in his mid or late teens, turns his head slightly, then moves into the crosswalk. He wears a white tank top and saggy jeans of the type forbidden to Glover.

The color of the cap seems to vibrate around it, forming a series of electric halos. They incite the germs in the left eye to multiply. Winnie's sterilizing efforts that morning had been justified. The slightest touch was enough to establish a whole colony of invaders.

The black boy glances over his shoulder, his blue-mirrored sunglasses (genuine Oakleys, with gunmetal frames) flashing in the light. He turns back and keeps walking, but deliberately slows his gait. The sinuous lines of his triceps harden as he slips his hands in the pockets of his jeans. Glover, wishing only to pass him, quickens pace.

"S'up, baby?" The voice emits a saccharine mist, sticky to the ear, cloying sweet.

Glover concentrates on his mission, launching red darts at promising surfaces – cell phones, shirt buttons, parking meter dials. He is placing the rungs of a living ladder, a bridge of sprouting petri dishes, that will carry his gospel to the whole Eastern seaboard. By nightfall it will board the last water taxi at the Christopher Street pier.

"So serious, baby. Why'n'cha come play?"

For a stubborn moment, the orange stocking cap and Oakley sunglasses hold parallel. Then they are swept into the roiling backwash, there to slosh and churn with the stagnant sea of plastic bags, clumps of hair, empty spray cans and the porridge of rotted newspapers.

Glover hears the boy's laughter behind him, like a lashing tail, with a hiss of both dismissal and challenge. It distracts him from his purpose, throws doubt on his previous work. Glover elects to glance behind him: he hears, yes, and he chooses to ignore. The black boy saunters playfully, his hands moving inside his jeans pockets; he grins, touching his upper lip with his tongue.

Glover whips around. He collides with a man just turning the corner. Packages flop on the sidewalk, boxes and cardboard envelopes tumbling, the colors of Federal Express.

"Jesus Christ! Watch where you're going!"

Glover, stooping, tries to help. The man pushes him off.

"Get the fuck away, little fuck!"

Glover takes a few steps, continuing on.

"You! Hey!"

Glover stops when he should just keep going. Mr. FedEx stands glaring at him, legs spread, packages every which way in his arms.

His posture changes – a shift of weight, a tilt of the head. He has seen it. Something about the eye sets him off. He drops the packages and springs forward, both feet leaving the ground at once. Glover bolts up the avenue.

"I'll fuck you up, you queer-ass little bitch faggot!"

After two blocks, Glover thinks he can still hear the man in pursuit. He is afraid to look back. Reaching 14th Street, he turns the corner, heading right toward the banners of the Eye and Ear Infirmary. He ducks in through the doors, his lungs ready to rip from his chest.

The waiting room has the feel of a bus depot, a veneer of seediness to it. No windows, high ceiling, a hollow square of vinyl-upholstered seating units in the center. On the wall to the right stands a long, high counter with two reception stations marked by yellowed computer terminals.

"May I help you, son?"

A fat white security guard with a shaved head and a wax-sculpted mustache approaches.

"My mother," says Glover, his eyes at half-mast; he should have put on his sunglasses before barging in. "I'm supposed to meet her." He tries to calm his panting. "She's having an operation."

"What's her name?"

"Winnie Ramos. Winifred."

"Take a seat. I'll see when she was scheduled."

Glover picks a spot with his back to the doors in a section where no one is sitting. Just a minute he needs, two minutes, enough time to clear the street of danger and to calm the knot in his stomach. He dons the sunglasses and looks around cautiously. Most everyone is old or retarded-looking, scattered in groups of twos and threes. The air of restless boredom around him overlays a more insidious and deeply rooted malaise. The word "infirmary" is entirely appropriate.

The run has spurred a frenzy in his eye. Like an anthill under Code Orange.

"What's the name?" He hears the guard at the door, and another voice answering: "Dupres. Cataracts."

His first day at Winnie's, she had walked with him to the East River Park, taking the foot bridge over the FDR. Everything was so derelict there, half the boardwalk fenced off. Unlike the other side of Manhattan (he had been to the Hudson River Park with the Liptaks), where the grounds were landscaped, everybody wore stylish clothes, and boys just a year or two older than he was hung out on the pier and rubbed sunscreen on each other and even kissed sometimes. But there he sat on a broken-slatted bench, watching anthills built in the

rifted concrete while Winnie talked to Mr. Chu, who always fished from the same spot and never said a word to her. Glover had noticed that the level of activity among the anthills was consistent; when one got busy, they all did at once. Was it something in the ground, or the time of day, or a signal sent by microscopic transmitters? Maybe the anthills were connected through a network of tunnels in the pavement.

The three-block run to escape the FedEx man had decidedly stirred up his eye. Both eyes. The microbial traffic moves freely now through a passage significantly widened.

Glover gets up and makes his way through the lobby, his gaze fixed to the sign that says "lavatories." Tucking his glasses into his pocket, he enters. A man with a bandaged ear washes his hands at the sink. Glover posits himself at a urinal, waiting to have the mirror to himself. The man continues to wash his hands, sighing disgust every time the motion-triggered spigot cuts off. The hand dryer, too. When he finally leaves, someone else comes in and stands at the urinal beside him.

"S'up, baby?"

Glover drills his gaze to the wall, imposing a kind of vertigo on himself, as if he stands at the edge of a cliff far removed. Yet, the red nets draw everything into their orbit – from the orange Kangol cap to the Nike Prestos. They sense the eyes behind the Oakleys turning. They register the movement of the muscled arm. Glover keeps his eyes to the shiny white tiles six inches in front of his nose. The mordant glare of antiseptics sets its blades against him. He can smell its challenge: submit or resist.

On the Internet at the Tompkins Park library, he had read that the human body harbored more than five hundred species of bacterial cells, more than eighty trillion in all. How many were seething in his eyes at that moment? How many surge through his veins and arteries? How many coat the tongue in his mouth or the tongue of the boy beside him? And if his bloodstream carries all these alien cells, how much of it can he call his own?

The older boy edges back from the urinal, exposing his own blade of challenge. He gives a squeeze to the end of it and tucks it under his sweatshirt.

"Come play, baby!"

In the reflection of the tiles, Glover watches the orange cap recede and the door to the stall behind him open.

Each throb of his heart trips a response in the red web. With every contraction, his complaint roots further into the ocular membranes,

taps into his matrix of blood pipes, inspiring a pointed resonance elsewhere, like a contained hemorrhage, which holds there, as in a knotted balloon, the stubborn, irresistible itch.

Glover glances toward the sink and the door. Someone could burst in any moment – the security guard with the weirdo mustache, the fuming FedEx man. There might be cameras here. He looks back at the tiles, at the dim reflection of the Kangol cap in the frame of shadow behind him. He takes a breath. The sides of the urinal touch his forearms – cold porcelain, germs. He puts on his sunglasses, takes another breath, then turns and slips quickly into the stall.

Yolanda Banks stands at her living room mirror. With her mouth whorled in concentration, she pins a corsage of satin rosebuds onto her jacket lapel. In such a pose, she looks every minute of her sixty-two years, but as she straightens her shoulders and lifts her chin, her age recedes to the odd swath of white that bursts through what is otherwise normally-graying, coarse, brown hair. She wears it in the style that she has for twenty years, bobbed sharply at the nape and with bangs to her eyebrows.

She checks her watch and grabs her bag. She must take a bus down to Kingdom Hall to renew her supply of pamphlets and magazines before meeting her sister and Winnie Ramos for their Tuesday Pioneering. She can hear them teasing her about the corsage: "So was your favorite Elder at the Hall this morning? We'd hate to see you get dolled up for nothing." To which she would answer in all good humor: "That's for me to know and you to pray about."

With a final frisk to the pink corsage, Yolanda steps into the corridor. Before she can turn to lock the door, she is met with the stare of her neighbor, Mrs. Brown, a stick of a woman with a bony head capped by a tight, curly, copper-colored wig.

"Get your trashy ass back to five!" she snaps, glaring straight at Yolanda. The wig is so tight that it puts the old woman's glasses off-kilter. "And don't come up to this floor no more, like your granddaddy still be livin'!"

Down the hall, a girl with gold lipstick and a frilly tank top sulks at the elevator. Even twenty feet off, Yolanda can sense the tension in this girl, in the volatile bounce of her hip.

"What has she done?"

Mrs. Brown renews her siege of Yolanda.

"I ain't her grannie, Miss Banks," she glowers. "Ain't nobody lef' here love that tin can hussy!"

The elevator bings and the doors edge back. Getting in, the girl launches a missile of obscenity down the corridor. In the light fixture overhead, a fluorescent tube flutters off and on.

With the girl's departure, Mrs. Brown has nothing more to impart. She stands there, uncertain, in her nightgown and slippers.

"I was sorry to hear about your husband," says Yolanda, careful not to break eye contact as she locks her apartment door. "I'm sure you must pass many lonesome hours."

The old woman nods, her glasses settling back on her nose. Mr. Brown had become disabled from a stroke and, after months of physical therapy, had ended up taking his own life (with a boning knife, according to Doris) while his wife was shopping at C-Town.

"You might find comfort at our Kingdom Hall. If you'd care to go with me sometime –"

Mrs. Brown stiffens, the engines of her eyes firing.

"No, Miss Banks, I believe in the Trinity, and you can tell old Satan that I told you so!"

It is a hot, humid morning, with only the barest tinge of blue to the sky. Thankful for even a mild breeze, Yolanda walks by the crab apple trees in the courtyard of Campos Plaza. She stops at one of them to examine the tent worm nests in one of the lower branches. The web-like nests appeared in June, at first white and dewy, then darkening with soot as the creatures they sheltered grew fat. It is the first day she has seen them outside of their nests. Four of them cluster on a branch near the trunk. They are soft and black, about an inch long, and are edged with fine gray hairs. One sits on the underside of a twig, its tender body clutched to the wood as its mouth assails a leaf. They must be preparing for their time of transformation. Any day now, they will forsake the communal nest completely to spin individual cocoons.

Malacasoma Americanum. She had written it down to remember it – the genus and specie of moth they will become. The larvae are known as tent caterpillars due to the structure of their pre-pupal homes spun out on the ends of branches. These facts – and so many others on so many subjects – Yolanda has gleaned from the Internet with the help of Glover Thomas. Given her persistently curious nature, she recognizes that such a pastime could seriously distract from prayer and Pioneering, but the interaction with Glover at the library was a kind of ministry in itself. Glover is a very alone type of kid. Not that she presumes a bond between them. Like most kids that age, he seeks the communion of his peers.

As *she* does with Elder Odibo.

Which is beyond (as she had explained to Doris) a prurient, physical or even intellectual, interest. Dennis Odibo, Yolanda knows in her heart, is one of the Anointed class. The power of Jehovah communes through his eyes. Each time he looks at her, it is like Moses parting the waters, allowing the Truth of the study lesson to approach her weak understanding. His odd and meticulous pronunciation lends a weight to his words that Elder Johnson can't match, or Elder Suarez.

When she told him about her neighbor's suicide, he replied in his Ghanaian accent: "So sad, what Jehovah's Truth could have made him, especially in the throes of his affliction."

It was Elder Odibo who taught her the goodness of Works and the privilege of being a slave to God, of being a Jonadab. He counted himself among the Jonadabs, too, and joyfully so: "Without the existence of the worker bee, the hive cannot continue."

But in the world to come, Yolanda knows, this man from Ghana will number among the One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand specified in the book of Revelation. One night she had even dreamed that he was standing before Jehovah's Throne, his white robes enhancing the darkness of his skin, his uneven mound of silver hair bur-nished in the Judgment light. Then the radiance from the Throne had burned off his robe and he had danced naked on the Sea of Glass, his body swaying to the music of trumpets and pipe organs, much the same as King David must have danced before the Lord.

That the bus is overly air conditioned is something she should have prepared for. An old blind couple, both in sweaters, occupy the seats behind the driver. Yolanda has seen them in the neighborhood before, maneuvering the streets with their long white sticks. She sits across from them, next to a smartly suited young man on his cell phone.

Passing the library, she remembers the first time that she saw Glover there. He was fixed at a computer, so engrossed on the Internet that she had almost thought it selfish to intrude. But after the initial embarrassment (he quickly closed the web page he was studying), the boy seemed quite willing to engage her. He, too, had noticed the webs in the crab apples. Next thing she knew, he was showing her how to search for sites and images. Once they had matched the name and face of *Malacasoma*, they had Googled pictures of all kinds of caterpillars, some fleshy and hairless with bizarre markings, some like miniature porcupines.

The old blind couple sit holding hands, their faces utterly lax. They must have no inkling that their seeing counterparts make an effort to present an air of self-possession in public. Yolanda wonders

how they met and how they preserved their own history together. Obviously not in photo albums. No snapshots to remind them, or confirm recollection, of significant points in their lives. What did a snapshot do anyway, but reduce an event to a single reference point, so that the snapshot itself became referred to in memory as representing and containing that event?

The old man cocks his head to the right, his oyster eyes turning her direction.

Usually the Hall is cleaned on Mondays, but, on entering, Yolanda hears the vacuum cleaner running in the sanctuary. Standing in the vestibule, she sees a large Bible with a navy blue cover laying on the bench by the coat rack. It is Elder Odibo's. She can tell by the ribbons sticking out of it, the brightly colored strips of silk he uses for bookmarks. If Sissy Crocket had another spell of asthma, Dennis might have been asked to vacuum today. As if he didn't have enough responsibilities, what with service leadership, nursing home visitations, and study lessons.

Yolanda finds herself drawn to his Bible, an object he treated with such a light-hearted kind of reverence, as someone else might treat a scrap book or diary. Bending down, she runs a finger over the cover. So many places he has marked, passages of special relevance for him. She has no right to intrude on these. She does, however, very gently, lift the cover. A bookplate marks the volume as his own: W. D. Odibo, Ph.D. He had never mentioned that he had a doctorate, but then secular honors were not particularly valued by the Watchtower. She might have been calling him Doctor all this time. His address is listed on the bookplate as 71 Bethune Street, along with a 646 phone number. An odd satisfaction percolates in her stomach, as if, until now, she has not quite believed that he existed in the flesh, in New York, in her life. He must have mentioned that he lived in Manhattan.

Leaving her bag in the vestibule, Yolanda enters the sanctuary. The burgundy carpet has already been vacuumed. He must be cleaning one of the study rooms. This pleasant coincidence is just what she hoped for, and the bus ride had precipitated a question that she wanted specifically to ask him.

"Questions, questions," he will chortle, his long dark fingers patting her hand. Yolanda imagines the glint in his eyes, the mixture of amusement and forbearance her quandaries always bring.

But how silly – the subject has flown right out of her mind. She stands outside the teen study room, hoping that the Hoover will continue its roar until she can remember it.

Oh, yes – the couple on the bus. For people who were blind from birth, she had wondered, what kind of dreams did they have? What kind of memories, with only the reference of sound and smell, touch and taste? Or did they necessarily invent images for things they had never seen? So in the book of John, when Jesus healed the blind man by rubbing mud on his eyes, both the man's waking time and his time asleep were changed forever. Had Jesus deemed it a richer life, or did the miracle have more to do with glorifying Jehovah?

Carefully, Yolanda leans in through the doorway. She would like not to startle him. But the surprise is hers, for it is Elder Johnson, not Dennis Odibo, who is doing the vacuuming. Bent over, the corpulent, white-haired senior Elder pulls a clot of something from the cleaner head. He glances up, red-faced and sweating. Yolanda nods to him and withdraws, hoping that her disappointment was not too flagrantly apparent.

In the vestibule, she takes twenty copies of the magazine – ten in English, ten in Spanish – from the rack of literature. She cannot help glancing at Dennis's Bible. He must be in the building somewhere or have stepped out for coffee or something in the neighborhood. The Hoover shuts off. She can hear Elder Johnson padding through the sanctuary. With Yolanda, he has retained a formal, falsely avuncular interface. He does not unfold easily, at least not to her.

"Hallo, Miss Banks." His recent visit to the London chapter of the Watchtower Society put a lingering stamp on his accent.

"Good morning."

"Terrible day to be running around. You'd be well advised to wear a hat, I should think."

"Elder Odibo is here?"

"He was indeed."

"He left his Bible."

Elder Johnson nods, a pointedly vague significance in the gesture. His gaze drops to Yolanda's corsage.

"Very flashy," he says, twitching his shoulders, as if to release accumulated sweat trapped in the folds of his body. By the way he says "flashy," it may or may not be a compliment.

Yolanda would never think of approaching him with her question. She knows that her restless intellect is her own particular weakness, ever having to humble itself before Jehovah's Truth. Elder Johnson's smugness would not accommodate her. The intellect, as he often proclaimed, is the "launch pad for pride and heresy."

"Is Elder Odibo coming back this morning?"

"I'm afraid not, Miss Banks."

He turns to the coat rack and begins to arrange the wooden hangers at consistent intervals. For such a large man, his hands are small and delicate.

"What's happened?"

He glances over his shoulder and meets her gaze with a squint.

"The Society, I regret to inform you, has dismembershipped Dennis Odibo."

Yolanda can only stare at him. Johnson responds with a bitter grin, as if to say that he has always suspected it would come to this.

"He has embraced the lies of the Pentecostals, the very infidels he was trying to convert. One must beware, Miss Banks, of the company one keeps."

Yolanda is so cocooned in her thoughts that she almost misses her bus stop. Only the chance sight of Doris and Winnie at the subway entrance plugs her back into the day.

"Good timing, Landa," says Doris. Her round face is dewed with sweat and her cheeks are a mottled rose color. "Down to our last magazine. What's wrong?"

Yolanda shakes her head and throws on a smile. She can't blurt it out right here.

"Your corsage," says Winnie. "It's crooked. Let me."

"It doesn't matter," Yolanda balks. "It's fine. Really."

Assuming her own Pioneering stance, Yolanda greets each passerby with a pleasant but not frivolous nod. Elder Johnson would not have lied to her. He would not have accused his associate falsely. The charge of apostasy, so extreme, would not be applied without a thorough confidence in the guilt of the accused. Had Dennis really abandoned his faith so utterly as to embrace Pentecostalism? He had always so pointedly criticized this particular sect of infidels: "To be *slain in the spirit* cannot mean also to surrender one's mind. We are told, are we not, to be sober and vigilant?"

Rufus White has suddenly joined them. Doris kisses him on the cheek, and Winnie, with more affection than usual, hugs him and pats his back. The young man fairly slobbers with pleasure. He snatches an *Awake!* from Yolanda's bag and thrusts it out with both hands: "Ge'cha Post! One cwaaaa-daaaa!"

"No, Rufus!" says Doris, tapping his shoulder. "Our message is free, like God's love."

Without altering pitch or volume, Rufus calls out, "God has a name! God has a name! Je-hooooooo-vah!" He learned this from Elder Suarez's street corner witnessing. Yolanda, however, had read on the Internet that the spelling of "Jehovah" in English was not an ac-

curate phonetic rendering. She had read, in fact, that God's name consisted only of vowels, most correctly represented in English phonetically as Y-A-H-W-E-H. Something she meant to ask Dennis Odibo.

"Glover won't be joining us for lunch," says Winnie. "He woke up this morning with a little problem and I sent him to Dr. Rivera."

"So that's where he was going in such a hurry," says Doris, fanning herself with a pamphlet.

Yolanda had been so distracted that she had not seen Glover at all. She asks Winnie if he is alright.

"Red huuuuurts!" Rufus wails. His eye has caught on Yolanda's corsage, where it lingers uncertainly before tearing away.

"It's nothing," says Winnie. "A little infection."

"Dr. Rivera is very competent," says Doris, adjusting her green and black checkered skirt, which has crept several inches to the right. "And such a nice, good-looking young man."

A fire truck careens onto First Avenue, sirens wailing. Two squad cars and an ambulance follow. To Yolanda, the noise is more piercing than usual, and recedes with greater reluctance.

"Dr. Rivera," says Winnie caustically, "does not think Glover's *tendencies* are sinful."

All expression drains from Doris's face, as if she's mentally shifting the pieces of a puzzle that she had previously misassembled. In about a minute, Yolanda thinks, her sister will restate her position.

"Now that you mention it" – less than a minute – "I do remember something strange in his manner when I had those plantar warts cut out. Something a bit too . . ."

"Winnie didn't say he was homosexual," says Yolanda. She will shoot that rumor dead in its tracks. This is how reputations get sullied. The same must have happened to her friend and councilor – a single remark misinterpreted, confirmed by coincidence, and reinforced beyond alibi's recall.

A man in a clown suit, a green wig and white face paint, stops in front of them. Yolanda greets him with a smile. He mimes his delight at having made her acquaintance, then pretends to set up a tripod and camera – one of those large box contraptions from the old days, for which the photographer had to cover his head and hold up the flash apparatus. Like in a Charlie Chaplin movie. They stand there stiffly as a group of pedestrians gathers, either to enjoy their humiliation or, even more perversely, to keep from passing between "camera" and "subject."

The mime, however, keeps delaying the "shot," attempting to compose them in just the right way. He first indicates that they should move closer together (which they do, inexplicably), then further apart. Rufus, oblivious to the ridicule, enjoys these antics thoroughly,

even makes the faces dictated by the mime. Yolanda, caught between chagrin and amusement, can hardly keep from laughing.

At last, the "picture" is taken, the "flash bulb" is exploded, and the ecstatic performer, in fright wig and white-face takes the stairs down to the subway.

They return in silence to Campos Plaza. As for Doris and Winnie, by all appearances, the mime has managed to persecute them beyond any explanation. As if his make-believe camera had captured something shameful in themselves, which appeal to Jehovah's Truth did not entirely expunge. There was a ghost record, caught in his "flash," of perhaps a moment of defensiveness, of caring how the world perceived them. Even Rufus seems to suffer a pained introspection.

Yolanda is possessed of her own ordeal. Every subsequent minute brings greater anguish. As they enter the courtyard of the housing project, she feigns – God forgive her – an attack of intestinal flu. Which isn't exactly a boldfaced lie. A nervous wooziness bides in her stomach, growing in proportion to the certainty that she must speak to Elder Odibo.

"Flu?" Doris's glistening face mugs concern. "It was those deep-fry shrimps at the diner last night. I warned you, Landa."

"And the heat," says Winnie, avoiding embrace. "Feeds the germs. *Mi-ra*. Take a nice cool shower and get in bed. Can we bring you something?"

Yolanda declines, sweeping a hand through her white streak of hair. "I'll just step around to the Rite-Aid quick and get some Pepto."

So as not to stand guilty of another falsehood, she goes to the drugstore and makes the purchase. She asks the cashier if she happens to know the whereabouts of Bethune Street. The girl shrugs and, ignoring Yolanda's outstretched palm, plunks the change down on the counter.

Back in the heat, Yolanda hails a man in hardhat and goggles approaching her on the sidewalk.

"Excuse me, sir. Can you tell me if Bethune Street is in Manhattan?"

He meets her gaze through his plastic lenses and shakes his head as he passes her.

Yolanda asks a thirty-ish looking woman waiting at the bus stop.

"West Village," the woman answers, glancing at Yolanda's corsage. She looks familiar, with her dyed orange hair and lip piercings. "You can take any 14 bus." She nods down the block. "With this one, you'll have to get off at Eighth Avenue and walk down."

"Do I know you from Campos?" asks Yolanda.

"More or less." The woman thumbs a MetroCard from her wallet.

"I watch Rufus White sometimes when his grandmother goes for transfusions. She won't be doing that anymore, though. No use. Of course, you people don't believe in transfusions do you?"

On the half-empty bus, though the woman sits across from Yolanda, she immediately pulls out a book and starts reading. Her arm is tattooed with a hodgepodge of images: praying hands clutching a rosary; the words "*une rose est une rose*" in script underneath it; and, nearest the elbow and most proficiently rendered, the pyramid-eye from the dollar bill with its burst of light rays.

The Watchtower's stance on blood transfusions has always stumped Yolanda. It was the single point – as far as she knew – in which Dennis Odibo disagreed with his brethren. "The proscription in Leviticus is against eating blood, that is all, fresh blood." Quickly adding, "But if it indeed is fallacious doctrine, it is an error of human application, not of Scripture." By the tone of his voice, he expressed such views to nobody else.

Had she been wrong to trust so much in his judgment? How she had hoarded the advice he gave her, and the compliments. The first time she wore the rosebud corsage, he had said with admiration that the Queen of Sheba must have worn the very same.

She had become altogether too fixated on him, pulling up Internet sites on the post-colonial history of Ghana and the presence of Jehovah's Witnesses there. She had even Googled "Dennis Odibo" – something she'd felt a little guilty about – but found nothing but Odibo Hardware on Dennis Street in South Bend, Indiana. Of course, if she had known his initials at the time, she might have found something more.

Yolanda regrets that she didn't grab his Bible before she left the Hall. That Dennis Odibo had abandoned it was the most disturbing fact of the day. As if he had repudiated the faith entirely. Or maybe Elder Johnson insisted on it as a penalty of dismembership, or was unwilling that it should be used in the service of heresy. The ribbon bookmarks Dennis used reminded her of Joseph's coat of many colors in the book of Genesis. When she told him that, he nodded: "It was a gift from his father, a sign of his love. So is the precious Word to me, a gift from my Heavenly Father."

"This is Eighth," said the woman across from her. "Walk south, about six blocks down. Bethune is just past Abington Square." She shoots Yolanda an oddly sympathetic, almost pitying, look. "Don't forget your bag."

A sudden breeze through the bog of heat registers at once on her fellow pedestrians. If it would only last: the easier breathing, the coolness

on the brow, the clarity of thought and intention. A hopeful swath of unadulterated blue pushes into the sky from the west.

Yolanda hasn't been on this side of town since her mother's last days in St. Vincent's. The West Village, with its cobblestone streets, boutiques and posh eateries, is more generally a place for the young and well-heeled, like this Asian man with a feminine gait walking a dachshund and chatting on his cell phone. As Yolanda approaches, he looks right through her, until his gaze closes on her satin accessory. She hears him, too, as she passes him: "Oh, faggot, you should see what I'm seeing – Prom Night for Baby Jane," followed by a braying snicker.

The remark does not hit its target as intended. The corsage, for Yolanda, had quickly begun to lose the prestige with which she so vainly accorded it. And she is too preoccupied with thoughts of the coming confrontation to absorb such petty venom.

Confrontation is too strong a word. Clarification, explanation, "the scoop," as Doris would say. That's all. And if the worst were true, a resolution, a goodbye, a handshake, a hug.

Crossing Jane Street, Yolanda is surprised to see a dense little garden nestled between a lingerie shop and a liquor store. It is a glut of flora: phlox, daisies, hibiscus, hollyhocks, something that looks like a lilac but isn't, and a cherry tree, to judge by the bark. Here, such unchecked spontaneity seems like a breach of public order. And the branches of the cherry are blotched with webs – two drab, debris-speckled tents of that miscreant *Malacasoma*. She finds it strangely comforting to see this phenomenon on the West Side, too. The caterpillars are at the same stage exactly, dispersed here and there on the branches. A small hairy caravan troops up the side of a limb.

When Yolanda first saw them in Campos Plaza, they had incited mild revulsion. Revulsion and a wary interest. Then interest alone, a fascination even. Were these the first creatures to have infested Eden when Sin first entered there?

Eighth Avenue converges with Ninth at a triangular, landscaped traffic island. The orange-haired young woman was right. Just past this park, on the right side of the avenue, Bethune Street runs straight to the Hudson River, shining like brushed pewter in the distance. The breeze is holding. Yolanda feels the air at her temples, and the hair drying at the nape of her neck.

Here, already, is number 71. Yolanda halts and steps back several paces, as if her whole being is too far-sighted to take it in properly. The building must date from the eighteen hundreds. Its white-painted brick and worn embellishments – cast iron griffins flanking the steps –

could not be more charming or less ostentatious. The window boxes of the first floor apartments hold nothing fancier than red geraniums.

Yolanda climbs the four steps of the stoop and pushes open the door. The address on the bookplate might be out of date: only now does she think of this. Heart racing, she scans the panel of intercom buttons. Some are labeled with old plastic punch-letter strips, like the one she is looking for: Odibo, W. D. She presses the button, her stomach pitching as if down a well.

Dennis's Bible, if she had thought to bring it, would have provided an excuse for the visit, a lead-in. She wouldn't have to be standing in the foyer like a dog awaiting rebuke or embrace. It would have also given Dennis something to which he could easily attach his story. He would offer it willingly, nonetheless; she was sure of this. He was probably devastated, in dire need of a receptive ear, a kind word.

The hallway past the foyer door is lit with modern-looking sconces. The dark mouth of a stairwell waits at the end. Should she ring again? Now she hopes that he isn't home or won't answer. Silly. Again she presses the button.

There is a movement behind her. A middle-aged woman in a baggy T-shirt, jeans, and white hair cut similar to Yolanda's pushes in with four grocery bags. She sets the bags in a group on the floor and pulls a set of keys from her waist-pack.

Yolanda makes herself as small as possible. "Excuse me. Do you know a man here named Dennis Odibo?"

The woman fumbles through at least a dozen keys. "Nope." She has a flat face with the tiniest upturned radish of a nose.

"He's number 2C on the buzzers," says Yolanda. "Can I help with the bags?"

"The second floor buzzers don't work," says the woman, giving Yolanda a discriminating once-over. "Come in. He's expecting you?"

The woman doesn't wait for a nod or an answer, but unlocks the door, props it open with her heel, then, turning around and snatching up the bags, enters the hall, buttocks first.

"Sure I can't help you?"

"Nope. Thanks."

Ahead of Yolanda, and with four full bags, the woman mounts the carpeted, crooked stairs two by two. An odor permeates the second floor hall, a mélange of disinfectant, fat fryer grease and tangy cologne or aftershave, which Yolanda recognizes at once. As she knocks at the door of 2C, she remembers the comment of the man on the street in reference to her corsage. Does it make her look foolish? She had meant to take it off on the bus. She feels about for the pin securing it. A sharp prick to her thumb tells her where the point is

located, but she can't seem to find the head. She drops her shoulder bag on the floor and fumbles about with both hands.

Footsteps approach the other side of the door. After the requisite peep-hole pause, a deadbolt snaps open. The door cracks to the length of the chain guard and a woman peers out through the interstice. "Yes?"

The surprise of finding a woman on premises, combined with the rip she has just put in her jacket, puts Yolanda in a state of paralysis.

Removing the chain guard, the woman opens the door far enough to reveal a young, heart-shaped, Hispanic face.

"What is it you want?" she asks, not unpleasantly. A gentle frown rumples the smoothness of her brow. "If you're canvassing for that City Council guy . . ."

"Oh, nothing like that!" Yolanda bursts out, a nervous giggle erupting. She grips the corsage with both hands.

"Then you must be Jehovah's Witness?" Again, with a gentle, sympathetic tone. She looks at the object in Yolanda's hands. "It's okay."

Yolanda has met this woman before. It was at Kingdom Hall more than six months ago. Her name is Carmina or something like it. She is Dominican and belonged to a Pentecostal church before attending a handful of study group meetings.

Carmina smiles. "It's okay if you are, ma'am. Jesus loves you just the same."

She had come to four or five meetings, two weeks at most. When she had stopped attending, people said she had reverted to her Pentecostal beliefs.

"Is that why you're here? To talk about the Watchtower?" She opens the door as if to demonstrate that she is neither annoyed nor defended. "Jesus can set you free of this slavery."

Yolanda tries to keep back the tears. She shakes her head. She cannot stay here. She thrusts out the satin corsage of rosebuds. "It's for him," she blurts. "He'll know it."

"What's the matter, ma'am? You're crying."

"Please!"

Carmina reluctantly takes the corsage. "Would you like to come in?"

Yolanda turns before the tears come hot. She reaches down to pick up her bag and makes for the dark of the stairwell. Carmina calls after her, but Yolanda, holding tight to the rail, takes the creaky steps down without pausing.

In the foyer, she stops, feeling faint and unsteady. She takes a tissue from her bag.

She had seen them together one night – Dennis Odibo and this

Dominican girl – at a restaurant on Avenue C. Until this moment, stepping into the sunlight, Yolanda has completely forgotten it. It was winter time. It was dark. They were sitting at Esperanto's, by the window, having dinner. Had it been the fact that they were sitting together or just how they were sitting that had caused her to pass two times by the window? They had certainly been conversing intently, Dennis leaning forward, his sharp African elbows on the table, Carmina with her head angled coquettishly away from him.

So many months later, Yolanda can evoke the smile on his face and the way he had patted the girl's wrist as he talked to her. Yolanda had passed by the window twice to mark the expression on each of their faces – even as fanged and feral jealousy hurled itself against the bars of her heart.

She had not intended to walk so far west, but here she is, standing at the West Side highway. The cluster of skyscrapers across the Hudson seems to have sprouted overnight. Since the terror attacks on the World Trade Center, Jersey City has grown by leaps and bounds. This skyline is completely new to Yolanda, as is the landscaped park across the highway and the white-framed towers in glass and steel rocketing up on her left.

Crossing the highway, she enters the park through a portal of shrubs and ornamental grasses. Flowers flock the curbs: lavender and black-eyed Susans and plants she cannot name. Small pines that she has never seen cast patches of shade on sculpted hillocks. Young locust trees line the boardwalk, where the benches and railings look freshly installed.

Beyond the rail, pilings sticking just out of the water trace the shapes of two vanished piers. These are the only remnants of the past. And herself. Yolanda Banks. The tears come again. Still, she does not feel old. Her sadness is not an anchor of despair or bitterness like her neighbor's, like Mrs. Brown's. It is a live thing, thrashing inside her like a spiny fish. It is the hurt of the young that Yolanda feels, a hurt that still has hope. There is pride – sinful pride – yet, in the flesh. She would not be without it on such a gorgeous afternoon, where the world has opened like a flower to the sun, and all things in it are new and lustrous, almost painfully so.

Crowds must flood this park on weekends. Even on a weekday there are joggers and skaters, tourists, the unemployed, seniors out for their daily stretch or drawn from their chairs by the promise of perfection – if they could only get closer to it. For the millionaires living in those stark condominiums facing the great wide West, what activity would not seem trivial in the face of such a vista?

A little further down the boardwalk a completely renovated pier boasts further plantings, a meander of grass, curvilinear benches. Small groups of young people sprawl about there. Mostly boys, it seems. But here are two girls – Japanese or Korean – in flowered little skirts and flip-flops coming toward her, tittering, and dipping their heads. One holds out a camera. “Photo?” she asks, indicating herself and her friend.

“Of course, dear.”

Yolanda sets her bag at her feet and takes the expensive-looking instrument. She has never used a digital camera, and she points to what must be the shutter. Both girls nod eagerly, step back and pose, tilting their heads together and smiling. Yolanda motions them to the right, backgrounding them with a flower-ringed sculpture.

“Zoom!” says one of the girls, excitedly. She breaks the pose to point out the feature, then scuttles back to her friend.

Yolanda plants her feet for balance and, getting used to the viewfinder, zooms in and out. She composes the shot with the girls’ faces in the lower left foreground, the sculpture in the center, and the edge of one of the pristine highrises toward the upper right. (She would take perfect pictures, Doris always said, if she didn’t shake pressing the shutter.) Yolanda waits for a jogger to pass, then for two shirtless men holding hands. With her finger poised to shoot, she notices someone seated on a bench just to the right of the statue. He is not conspicuous enough to bother with except for the fact – and she zooms in to confirm – that it looks for all the world like Glover Thomas sitting there in a pair of new sunglasses.

After taking the shot, the girls step forward and thank her, nodding profusely as the Japanese do. She makes her way toward the boy on the bench.

“Glover? Is that you?”

His head snaps her direction. It is certainly Glover, and he is shocked to see her. He wipes a cheek with the side of his hand and looks back at the river.

She almost asks what he is doing here, but she veers off just in time. “A lovely day, isn’t it?”

He grunts and shrugs his shoulders. He sits, slouched, with his arms folded and his knees spread wide. Like a street thug. He’s been crying, she thinks.

“May I sit, Glover? Or do you want to be alone?”

Again the shrug, but she sits anyway, but not overbearingly close. He will share with her if he wants to. The sunglasses make him look cold and aloof, with their mirrored lenses and copper-colored frames. Still, she can picture the eyes behind them, light brown and

gentle, acutely perceptive, chock full of secrets. Winnie is very strict with him. He is probably the only kid his age without a cell phone, certainly over here. Things like that are hard to bear for young people.

They sit together, watching a yellow water taxi approach the left side of the pier. Yolanda has never seen one before. The boat docks, allowing passengers off and on. Beyond it, a gigantic cruise ship, the Norwegian Dawn, glides southward, obstructing all but the tallest skyscrapers of the city across the Hudson.