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Air Space

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Air Space

As soon as Mooney saw her he knew something was wrong. She stood at the top of her porch steps in a sleeveless white nightgown, pale calves and bare feet showing below the hem, slim arms waving, orange hair vivid in the morning light. He paused at the bottom of the wooden steps, and Charles and Amelia instantly hairpinned their lean flexible bodies and pointed their snouts back at him, two sets of moist dark eyes hungry for reassurance.

“You don’t know, do you?” she said.

“Know what?”

“I can’t watch this alone. Can you come inside?”

Before Mooney could answer, his neighbor turned around and walked into her house, the nightgown billowing around her legs as his startled mind groped for her name—a name he ought to remember. He had never entered this house before, but for the dogs’ sake he acted like it was natural, talking them up the porch stairs and over the threshold.

She stood across the living room, intent on the television he could hear but not yet see. Directly behind her, strong morning sunlight poured in through the window on the east wall of the room. The fabric of the white nightgown was sheer, summer weight. Before he crossed the room to join her, Mooney accepted the vision that the sun offered him, a clear outline of the woman’s profile as if drawn in preparation by an artist who would sculpt her. The form was streamlined, proportional, the small breast above counterbalanced by the slim haunch and modest buttock below. The hair that topped this slender body was spectacular, a persimmon-colored tangle that massed densely upward from the nape of the neck and then roiled above the cranium in an exaltation of sunlit coils. The sun showed Mooney another bank of orange coils flaring forward beneath the gentle rise of her stomach.

On the television screen the Twin Towers were burning. Mooney and his neighbor—he knew her name; he *had* known it—stood side by side watching the spectacle, listening to the newscasters’ voices, the dogs whining quietly as they leaned against Mooney’s legs.

An explosion curdled the air outside. The dogs squealed and she took hold of Mooney's arm. "What was that?"

They walked together out onto her porch. The street was quiet; the whole neighborhood was quiet. The September sky was blue, the air crisp and warm and still.

"Maman," she said, and they headed back inside.

The phone to her ear, she spoke in rapid French as he stood next to her in front of the television. She stopped talking when the network cut away from the burning towers to report that the Pentagon had been struck.

"That boom," she said to Mooney, and he nodded.

She spoke for a few more minutes and then set down the phone. Newscasters speculated about how many planes had been hijacked, who was flying them, where they would strike next. The dogs lay on the floor, beginning to settle in, but they both jumped to their feet the moment the sirens began to moan. Charles yapped while Amelia tossed her pointed snout skyward and howled. Mooney bent down and stroked Amelia's narrow back.

"What's that?" she said, walking over to the open window.

"What?" Mooney said.

"I smell something."

They went out onto the porch and Mooney smelled it too, something burning, not wood. Something acrid, toxic. Something malignant. She pointed above the roof of the house opposite, and through a gap between the trees he could see the pall of black smoke.

"The Pentagon," he said.

They closed the door and the windows and went back to the television. Sirens wailed from every side of the neighborhood and the dogs answered them. The air in the house grew warm.

"My god," she said, and he realized he'd gotten distracted, was looking away from the television at the pictures on the woman's walls as he rifled through his cluttered mind searching for her name. *Kate? Kathy?*

He looked back at the television in time to see one of the smoking towers crumble and fall in on itself like a pillar of ash. Her hand slid along his lower back and laid hold of his hip. He reached over and pulled her close. They watched as the great clouds of ash and dust billowed among Manhattan's giants. They kept watching as the second tower fell.

"You're crying," she said.

He reached up and touched his wet face. "I can't watch any more of this."

"You're right." She went to switch off the television and then

gestured toward the couch. He sat down and she sat next to him, offering a tissue. The next thing he knew they were kissing, not the correct kisses of a first date but the fierce, hungry kisses of people so scared and excited they might try to eat each other. His hands moved over her body frankly, familiarly, as if they were only taking possession of what that first backlit vision of her had promised. Grappling, stumbling, but still kissing, they migrated from the living room into a little hallway and through the door to the sunny bedroom at the back of the house. She flung the nightgown up like a sheet and he shucked his pants as they tumbled onto the bed. He was already inside her when she reached forward to tug his T-shirt over his head. He lay back as she kneaded the flesh over his ribs and ground her hips against his. The orange hair was an aurora on the horizon of his vision. His eyes stayed fixed on the delicate collarbones that flared from her neck like wings.

"Karen!" he shouted, and came.

Eyes closed, he let his untethered mind brew up a storm of translucent tissue paper, tiny squares of it fluttering down from on high, a many-colored blizzard, white, pale yellow, yellow, yellow-orange, orange, red, maroon, purple, navy blue, royal blue, pale blue, silver, black . . .

The body on his shifted, brought him back to the moment. He looked over and saw the dogs curled around one another on the runner just beyond the bedroom door. Amelia was the color of cornbread except for the white diamond at her throat. Charles was piebald, white with patches of black. The sirens had stopped.

She had been resting her head on his chest, but she planted her hands on either side of him now and rose, the tip of her nose hovering no more than an inch from his, her blue eyes difficult to read.

"Who is Karen?" she said.

He shut his eyes. "I was searching for your name the whole time, and then I had it. I thought I did."

"It's Camille."

"Right," he said, opening his eyes again. "Camille Trevor."

She nodded. "Forgive me. I'm just terrible with . . ."

"Ward Mooney."

"Sorry, Ward. I just think of you as the plane man."

It made sense she would think of him that way. They had first met about a year before, when she had come to his door on a Sunday afternoon and asked him to sign a petition. They spoke on Mooney's porch while he cradled a nearly finished scale model of the

F4U Corsair in his right hand and Charles and Amelia sniffed and whined on the other side of the screen door. He didn't intend to sign her petition. In fact, he had already thrown his support behind the home remodeling project she sought to block.

The home in question stood across the street from Mooney's place and two houses down. It belonged to Vince Lyle, who shared Mooney's passion for building and flying model aircraft. The Lyles lived in a one-story, two-bedroom bungalow much like Mooney's, but Lyle and his wife had two children, with a third on the way. They needed more space. An engineer, Lyle had bought design software for his home computer and worked up a plan to enclose his house's front porch and add a second story. But the porch of Lyle's 1920s house sat closer to the street than the city's 1950s building codes allowed. To touch that porch, he needed a variance. To get a variance, he had to make an application and notify all the affected neighbors of his intentions. One affected neighbor was Camille Trevor, whose lot backed up to the Lyles'.

"What's her deal?" Vince had asked Mooney when he learned from a neighbor that Ms. Trevor was organizing resistance to his plan. Vince's black hair grew in a ring below the bald crown of his head. His scalp was smooth and brown. He had crossed the street with his older child, a boy of six or seven, when he caught sight of Mooney outside waxing his Town Car. "I mean, she can't even *see* my front porch. Why does she care what I do to it?"

Mooney saw Vince's point. A few days later, he signed the counterpetition Vince had drafted. Still, he treated Camille Trevor courteously when she came knocking that Sunday afternoon. He wore a listening expression even if he didn't listen to her all that carefully at first. Nothing she could say would cause him to betray Vince. Besides, he was very much struck by the color of her hair. When her knock sounded, he had been standing at the workbench in his house's second bedroom applying a color almost exactly the same as that of her hair to the tissue-paper skin on his model of the F4U Corsair. Around the front of the plane's navy blue fuselage Mooney was painting flames. He held the Corsair in his hand as he spoke with Ms. Trevor, the fumes from the wet orange paint rising to his nostrils.

Before she left, he worked up the nerve to ask her why she was so concerned with the fate of the Lyle porch when she couldn't even see the front of the Lyle house from her own.

"Good question," she said. "I'll answer it with one of my own: where are we standing right now?"

"On my porch," Mooney said.

"Right. We're on your property, under your roof, but not inside your home. An apt spot for an exchange between neighbors, don't you think?"

The question didn't seem to require an answer.

"May I ask why you bought this house?" she said.

"It was cheap. Convenient to the District, where most of my business is." The sedan he drove for a living, clean and black, sat in the driveway next to the house. He tipped his head in that direction.

"Cheap? You've been here a while."

"Ten years," he nodded. "Rougher place when I came in."

"I bought here a year ago," she said. "It wasn't exactly cheap."

"No, not anymore."

"I bought because of the porches," she said, answering the question he hadn't asked as she launched into the lecture on porches that she had been delivering all around the block and would deliver again during the comment period at the Planning and Zoning Commission hearing a few nights hence. Porches, she told him, are not just a homeowner's resource, a place to park the stroller, to leave one's boots on snowy days, to curl up with a book or serve drinks to friends when the weather is fine. Porches are a community resource, a buffer between sidewalk and living room, a place of transition between the public life of the street and the private life of the home. Good porches, she concluded, make good neighbors.

She didn't collect Mooney's signature, but she got his attention. Though he continued to support Vince's plan, to nod sympathetically whenever Vince began to vilify the woman he had begun to call Red, what she had said to Mooney would come back to him that fall whenever he was strolling along a sidewalk with Charles and Amelia and some acquaintance would call out to him from the porch, waving.

At the November hearing, the Planning and Zoning Commission sided with Ms. Trevor and the eleven neighbors who had signed her petition. They told Mr. Lyle to return with a revised design that left the porch unmolested. He did so, and won approval at the Commission's December meeting for the modest second-story addition that he intended to build himself using stockpiled vacation time and weekends.

But the result didn't satisfy Vince. He was a fiery man, a competitor, and anything less than total victory rankled him. This became clear a couple months later to all the men present at the

February gathering of the Cleave Springs Free Flyers, when the model airplane business had been covered and the group members began the social part of their evening. Vince had kept the guys abreast of his renovation project every step of the way. He assumed, rightly, that they would want to see his latest set of blueprints, the third and final version, fresh from the printer. He stood up and uncorked a cardboard tube, rolling out his plans on the rectangular table in the deep room of the Lily Pad Café, where the club had been gathering the third Wednesday evening of every month for the past six years.

Seven men were present and every one of them stood, jockeying for a clear line of sight as Vince flipped through the rectangular pages, each of which presented a different elevation. The north elevation, the view from the backyard, was the showstopper. Seconds after Vince peeled open that page the whistles and murmurs began to sound.

"You'll show her, won't you Vince?" It was the smoke-charred voice of Pete Bloess, the group's senior member. Pete was seventy-five, a retired civics teacher who wore reading glasses on a leash around his muscular neck. He was saying what everyone thought.

"Show who?" Vince said. The narrow space between his black eyebrows vanished when he squinted.

"How dare she tread on your God-given right to turn your porch into a living room?"

"Not my God-given right, Pete, my American right to do what I want with my property."

Pete cleared his throat. Breathing loudly, he leaned his thick trunk forward and peered down at the blueprint through his glasses. He smiled. "Like turn that little house of yours into a castle?"

"Castle," Vince scoffed. He dragged a palm back across his brown pate and began to explain how the octagonal shape of the three-story addition he would build off the back of the house was actually the most practical solution to the problem of maximizing interior space while preserving adequate room outdoors for his kids to play. The ground floor of the octagon would feature a kitchen that was more than half the size of the Lyle family's current dwelling. On the floor above, Vince and his wife Michelle would have the ample master suite that she had dreamed of for years. And on the third floor, beneath the metal-roofed turret that sharpened to a point 70 feet above ground level, Vince would store his tools and tinker with his planes.

"What does the city say?" Pete asked.

"This whole plan is in compliance," Vince said. "They don't much care what I do as long as I leave the porch alone and respect their setbacks."

"Have you shown the neighbor?" one of the younger guys asked. "That chick who lives behind you?"

"Red?" Vince spat, charging the word with the same nasty power it had carried during Mooney's Cold War childhood. "I'm not asking for a variance, so I don't have to show her anything. She'll see this when it's built." He swung his head right, then left, smiling. "She'll see it every day."

Vince had yet to break ground, a month later, when the Cleave Springs Free Flyers gathered with dozens of other model airplane enthusiasts from the greater metropolitan area for the Capital Challenge, Mooney's favorite event of the year.

Mooney had glued together his first kit model, a dime scale P-47 Thunderbolt, at age eight. Since then, during four decades of focused, passionate work, he had developed a comprehensive knowledge of the aircraft deployed by every nation that had engaged in air combat during the two World Wars. His familiarity with body designs, materials, color schemes, and insignia was absolute. He accepted model airplane kits as a necessary evil, the low-hanging fruit that kept the hobby robustly populated by dabblers and dilettantes. But his planes were scratch-built all the way. He flew indoors only, unwilling to see months of painstaking labor erased by the kind of sudden gust that can rise up on a calm day, grab hold of a twelve-gram airplane, and slam it to smithereens against the trunk of a tree.

There were easier places to fly indoors, but nothing compared with the Great Hall of the National Building Museum for grandeur. This colossal structure occupied most of a city block. Its four floors of office space wrapped around the sides of the Great Hall, a deep rectangular tank that made a reservoir for the light that streamed in through banks of arched windows up near the roof. Two rows of massive Corinthian columns divided the Great Hall into three large square spaces. A circular fountain bubbled in the center square, while the squares on either end of the hall were reserved on this day for flying. Around the perimeters of these squares, guys knelt over their many-shelved toolboxes, while out on the carpet others stood gazing up at their slowly circling airplanes or cradled the delicate machines against their chests, making minor adjustments and winding the strips of rubber that served as engines. No hot motors allowed.

The vast, still space calmed Mooney and inspired him. He en-

joyed the fellowship too, the great ingathering of kindred spirits with their unkempt hair, ill-fitting pants, and many-pocketed vests, the great wads of keys clipped to their belt loops. Mooney's job required that he keep his graying chestnut hair and beard carefully clipped, and he had stopped dressing like a dork long ago. Still, this was his tribe, and he had standing among them. As soon as he arrived guys he'd flown with in the past started coming over to him, asking what he would be flying today. Guys from rival clubs spoke about him in low tones, trying to point discreetly.

Mooney easily won the Peanut class with his 11.5-gram Japanese Zero, a trusty little machine that flew in graceful left-hand circles and stayed in the air sixteen seconds longer than the second-best plane. He sat out the next round and then entered his Fairey Spearfish in the Open Rubber class, which he also won. After that he watched for a while and began to make some last adjustments to his newest creation, the navy blue Corsair with the orange flames just aft of the prop.

Vince Lyle had set up his toolbox next to Mooney's. He whistled when he saw the Corsair. "What have we here?"

Mooney laid the plane in Vince's open palm. "I'm going to send her up this morning during the trimming session. First time."

Vince studied the plane carefully and then handed it back, envy bleeding into his dark eyes. Vince was the only member of the Cleave Springs Free Flyers with talents that rivaled Mooney's. But Vince spread himself too thin to really excel in any one sector of the hobby. He had a weakness for loud, flashy planes that tore through the sky making gaudy moves he could dictate with a battery-powered remote control. Then too, Vince had the big remodeling project to worry about and a family that took up his time. "Maiden flight?" he said, squinting. "Break a leg."

When the competitive rounds were finished, Mooney strode out onto the carpet as he gave the Corsair's prop a few last turns. He launched the navy blue bird and watched it begin to climb, light shining down through the translucent tissue, revealing the elegant skeleton as it rose in a widening spiral of left-hand loops. Too wide. The plane crested the arches of the ground-floor arcade in good shape but nearly clipped the side of a column as it rose above the arcade that gave onto the second-story offices. On the third story there was no arcade, just an open walkway that wrapped around the Great Hall. Mooney lost sight of the Corsair as it sailed over the walkway's parapet.

Oh well. Not bad for a first flight. He was actually glad for the chance to climb up to the third level so he could gaze out over the

Great Hall from a high perch. He liked to hike up the building's gently sloping stairs, the dark old bricks grooved and polished by a dozen decades of shuffling feet.

He emerged from the stairwell and peered down the walkway in the direction the plane had disappeared. The walkway was deserted except for a woman who stood twenty or thirty yards away. Mooney walked toward her, growing concerned as he drew near enough to see that she was holding the Corsair. She did him no favors by picking up the plane. The slightest squeeze in the wrong place could tear the skin or snap a strut, undoing hours of patient toil.

But as he got closer, he saw how gingerly she held the Corsair, how she balanced the plane on the tips of her ten fingers, out away from her body, as she studied it in the rich light that poured through the windows just above. Then he remembered where he'd seen that lively tangle of orange hair before.

She sensed him nearing and shifted her blue eyes away from the plane. "Ah, have you come to fetch this lovely thing?"

"Ward Mooney," he said. "We've met, I believe."

She smiled. "My petition drive. You were holding a plane like this when we talked. Camille Trevor."

Mooney thought of Vince Lyle, who was sorting out the trim of a Grumman Hellcat down below with no idea in the world that his friend might be up here exchanging pleasantries with Red. And then he thought of Vince's addition, the tower that would soon dominate the view from the back windows of this unwitting woman's house.

She handed him the plane. "Did you make it?"

"I did."

"How?"

"Very, very carefully," he said.

She tilted her head, eyeing the plane. "The covering—what kind of paper is that?"

"Japanese tissue. Lightweight, but very strong. The long fibers shrink when you spray them with water, which makes the skin hold tight to the frame."

"It's wood, the frame?"

"Balsa. The best strength-to-weight ratio available." He could have said more about the wonders of balsa, he could have gone on and on and on, but he caught himself. "Are you here for the Capital Challenge?"

She shook her head. "I work here."

"On Saturdays?"

"Generally, no. We've got a new exhibition opening here next week. The Ethics of Space," she said, smiling. "Kind of a big topic for me, as you may have guessed. Now is crunch time."

"Well, I hope we're not in your way."

"Oh, no. You own this building, Ward. We do. You and me and everyone else down there."

They turned and rested their forearms on the top of the waist-high parapet, light from the arched windows above bathing their faces as they gazed out into the colorful, quiet confusion of circling craft.

Armored vehicles with heavy guns had taken up positions along the road around the Pentagon. National Airport, minutes from Mooney's house, was closed indefinitely. Roadblocks, barricades, and checkpoints complicated his movements around the edgy District and lengthened drive times for his passengers. But business was brisk in the days after the attack, the nation's capital swarming with people who dashed about like ants from a kicked nest. They all needed rides, and Mooney was there to drive them.

In the early days, when he still drove for a service, he had gotten used to the night shift. He had worked hard and lived frugally to purchase his independence. In his own car now, master of his schedule, he stuck with what he knew, beginning his workday with the afternoon rush hour and calling it quits at midnight. He ferried lobbyists, Hill staffers, and diplomatic people to happy hours, dinner meetings, evening flights and performances, the watering holes where they went for nightcaps. But this week nobody seemed to be sleeping, and Mooney was rolling in regularly at three.

He would come in exhausted but keyed up, buzzing with the energy of the angry, traumatized capital. He would stroke the dogs for a while, talking them back down into the sleepy state his return had disrupted. He would drink a beer, pull on his pajamas, and lie in bed, wondering about Camille Trevor and listening for the new sound in the night sky, the reassuring rumble of the fighter jets that periodically streaked past. The planes up there were the descendants of the ones he replicated, great-grandchildren of the flying machines that crowded the shelves in every room of his house and hung on fishing line from hooks in all the ceilings, their dark forms hovering above him now as he summoned up memories of his younger self, a brown-haired kid curled up in bed, his lamp carving a small circle of light from the general darkness as the dog-eared novel splayed on his pillow wove visions of American fighters danc-

ing to the death with Japanese Zeros and Nazi Messerschmitts, battling evil in far-off places to ensure his safety at home.

Mooney and the dogs passed Camille Trevor's house every morning and every afternoon. On Tuesday the 18th, as they turned onto her street, it occurred to him that today was an anniversary of sorts. One week. "Who wants to see Camille?" he said to the dogs in an upbeat voice. Charles wagged his tail cautiously while Amelia sniffed the sidewalk. "Okay, let's go see Camille."

He coached them up the porch stairs and kept speaking to them in comforting tones even after he'd knocked on the door. The patter calmed him also.

He half-expected her to be wearing the sheer white nightgown, but she was dressed for the day. She left the door open behind her, stepping out onto the porch in clogs and capris, both dark brown. Her T-shirt was pale blue with a single brown stripe.

"Ward," she said.

"Camille."

They shared a smile over the post-coital confusion with names. She lingered comfortably in the moment while he groped for something innocuous to say. At last he managed to ask if she still worked at the Building Museum.

She nodded. "I only go in three days a week. I work from home on Tuesdays and Thursdays. That's why I was here last Tuesday."

They shared a second smile.

"I'm glad you stopped by," she said. "I wasn't sure what to do. I mean, nothing like that's ever happened to me before."

"Me either."

"Listen," she said, losing the fingers of one hand in the depths of her hair. "I'm in the middle of a couple of things right now. Everything is crazy at the museum, all the new security issues. Could you maybe come back later? I could make you dinner."

"I work in the evenings."

"Lunch, then?"

He took the dogs on an extra-long walk. Back home, he wiped down the inside of the car, cleaned the windows and shined all the chrome outside. He went to his workbench and did his best to get involved in a drawing of the Tomahawk Mk 1 he thought he might build. It was hard to concentrate with the noon hour approaching.

Charles and Amelia were used to him leaving in the late afternoon in his black suit, but seeing him take off at midday in jeans and t-shirt offended them. They whined at him and pled with their moist eyes. "*Babies*," he hissed at them. "I'm coming *back*."

He did come back, but so late that the dogs' afternoon walk had

to be skipped. He barely had time to comb his hair and knot his necktie before dashing out to the car to begin the slow drive out to pick up a passenger at Dulles. The smell of Camille's body made him think of almonds. It lingered in his beard.

His second visit to the bedroom at the back of her house had been completely different from the first, things heating up only after they'd agreed that the unusual circumstances a week before had only postponed a necessary conversation about birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, and any personal entanglements that might prevent them from going forward. Camille was ten months clear of her divorce and not seeing anyone seriously. Mooney had never really *had* personal entanglements. A lifelong bachelor, he had yet to meet the woman who could pierce the armor of his routines.

The mood was more tentative, more tender this time, more bashful and exploratory, the pace measured. They maneuvered around one another, getting their bearings, kissing a lot, but much to Mooney's satisfaction they arrived at the moment of crisis in the same position he remembered from the first time, Camille poised above him, her hands planted on his chest, her elbows locked, her beautiful collarbones flaring winglike out toward her shoulders as her hair dazzled across the upper edge of his vision.

Afterward they lay in each other's arms and cried. The fear Mooney had felt the morning of the attack, the confusion about what was happening and who was doing it and how bad it might get, crested and broke over him as it had threatened to do all week. He was exhausted from all the late nights, rattled, vulnerable, and he wondered if that was how she felt too.

Camille told him about her mother, a French woman who had married Camille's American father and moved with him to the States fifty years before. She was a widow now, all alone down in Charlottesville, worried about her only child living and working in such a dangerous place.

"I spend the weekends at her house," Camille told him. "You should have seen Maman Sunday afternoon. So distraught. She begged me not to come back here."

From then on, Mooney and Camille ate lunch in her kitchen and made love in her bedroom every Tuesday and Thursday. Each time, after he'd dressed, before she began to playfully push him out of the house so she could carry on with her work, Mooney would stand at the bedroom window and survey the building that was taking shape on the other side of the fence, the white palace

with the imposing red-roofed turret that stood twenty feet taller than any other built thing in the vicinity. Camille called it Lyle's Prick.

It was rising very slowly. Over the summer, Vince had wrangled with various cement contractors for weeks before the foundation for the octagonal addition was poured. After framing half of the octagon's first floor, he tore it down and sued the lumber company for selling him bad wood.

The Cleave Springs Free Flyers stopped asking for updates on Vince's project after the attack in September. At the December meeting, once their business was finished, they plunged into a discussion of cruise missile delivery systems and transitioned from there to remote-controlled targeting devices and unmanned drones.

Old Pete Bloess interrupted a lively exchange on the wiring of bunker-busting bombs when he uttered a number in his deep, smoky growl: "Twenty-seven-fifty."

"Twenty-seven-fifty," another guy said. "What kind of ordinance is that?"

"It's not a weapon," Pete said. "It's the number of Afghan civilians killed since we started dropping bombs over there. Two thousand seven hundred fifty. An estimate, of course."

Vince scowled across the table at Pete. "Still not even."

Pete's eyes were level, unblinking. "Even?"

Vince shook his head. "I bet they wish they never agreed to let him hide there."

"These people didn't agree to anything," Pete said.

"You know what I say?" Vince's volume was rising. "I say bombs away. Bomb those fucking mountains and keep bombing until you grind them to sand. And if he's still not killed, cross the border and bomb the rest of them."

"Yeah," Pete rumbled, pounding the table with his fist. "I mean, we've got these bombs, we *paid* for the darn things, let's use 'em." He looked around the table hopefully for a moment, then shook his head. "That was supposed to be a joke."

Mooney and Vince walked home from the Lily Pad together, as usual, and they were quiet until they reached Vince's driveway, which had become a source of much grumbling in the neighborhood. The driveway was crowded with tarp-covered building supplies. A rusted tricycle, upside down, anchored one corner of the blue fabric. A half-used pile of gravel spilled off one side of the slab into the weedy flower bed. A thick layer of mud covered the

whole surface, leaching out across the sidewalk and clogging the gutter.

Mooney asked how the project was going, and Vince launched a rant about the neighbors, how they'd been calling behind his back to bring inspectors out, how someone had dumped yogurt on Michelle's car and someone else had cut one of his extension cords.

"The calls don't surprise me," Mooney said. "But vandalism?"

"You think I'm lying?"

"I didn't say that."

"They're just pissed," Vince said, reflective. "They beat me down on enclosing the porch, but they couldn't stop my addition. It's bitterness, plain and simple. But I'll tell you what, Ward, it's going to be so sweet when I finish. I've got it all framed up now, got the house wrap on the exterior walls and the roof up on the tower." He cuffed Mooney firmly on the shoulder. "But I don't need to tell *you* how things are going back there."

Mooney's throat went dry. He had been meeting Camille for three months now, three solid months, but they were not a public couple. They took no measures to conceal their relationship but they also did nothing that would attract attention. Their schedules allowed them to meet only on those Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, when most everybody in the neighborhood was off at work or school.

But that was it. Vince went inside, Mooney went home, and by the time he had put on his pajamas he had almost convinced himself that Vince didn't know about him and Camille, that his comment and the little blow to the shoulder were innocuous, that Mooney was making Vince's words seem to say more than they actually did.

Next morning, as Mooney descended the porch steps, trying to keep the dogs' leashes untangled, something out of sorts registered at the edge of his vision and caused him to look over at his Town Car. It was sitting too low. He and the dogs slowly circled the car, but the lap they took was largely ceremonial. He could see before they began that the tires had been slashed.

Mooney told Camille about the tires that afternoon. They had finished making love, and he had dressed, but instead of going over to the window, he sat on the side of the bed and watched her pulling her clothes back on. Mooney was rattled. Except for the lack of blood, the absence of physical pain, this act of aggression had

struck him like a physical assault, as if some thug had chopped off four of his toes.

The news didn't even seem to surprise Camille. "You're a traitor," she said. "Do you expect to go unpunished?"

"If I'm seeing you, how is that his business?"

"That's how neighborhoods work," she said, zipping up her jeans. "The lines around these lots are blurry."

"You're defending him?"

"I don't defend terrorists." She smiled—not at her choice of words, Mooney saw, but at his naïveté. "Poor Plane Man. You helped a neighbor in need during a national emergency. This is the thanks you get?"

"I don't need to be thanked."

"No, you just have to accept that nothing happens in a vacuum. Each of your actions resonates. One thing leads to another." She sat down next to him on the edge of the bed. "Speaking of which, you've been having lunch with me for—what—three months now? I hope you don't think you can avoid meeting Maman."

He was too busy brooding over the tires to ask what she had in mind. anyhow, she would let him know when the time came.

It came one day in early March, as they sat together in her kitchen over bowls of minestrone. She proposed a weekend together in Charlottesville. Mooney resisted the idea not just because he would miss a night of work but also on account of the dogs. He had adopted Charles and Amelia through a whippet rescue program. They were fragile creatures, he explained, survivors of abuse. They depended on him.

The next time they met, Camille told him about an intern at the Building Museum, very experienced with dogs, who had offered to spend the weekend with Charles and Amelia.

"A stranger?" Mooney said, his head shaking dubiously.

Now that he and Camille had a routine it was not uncommon for short conversations to sprout up and briefly interrupt their sex. The next time Camille brought up Charlottesville, Mooney was sitting cross-legged on the middle of her mattress and she was sitting in the triangular space between his thighs, her legs folded around his back.

"Plane Man," she said. "I have an idea about Charles and Amelia."

"An idea?"

"We'll bring them along."

"No," he said, stiffening.

"Maman likes dogs."

She rocked forward and reached down, slipping him inside.

"That car is my livelihood," Mooney said. "I can't haul dogs in it."

She closed her eyes, working her hips from side to side. Her brow furrowed. "Who said anything about *your* car?"

On a Saturday morning in late April they laid towels across the back seat of Camille's Subaru, and Mooney lured Charles and Amelia into the wagon with little balls of raw hamburger. The dogs were either calmed by the motion of the car or sunk in a fearful stupor. They slept for all but the first five minutes of the two-hour drive and awoke when Camille pulled to a stop in the parking lot at Monticello.

The day was mild and breezy, the sky busy with bright white clouds that occasionally blocked the sun. The big trees around Thomas Jefferson's hilltop manor were just leafing out. Mooney took Amelia and let Camille hold Charles's leash. They walked all over the grounds. At the edge of the west lawn, near a planting of larkspur, they paused so Amelia could pee. They gazed across the lawn at the house, its white dome hovering beyond the pillared portico. Mooney compared the living-color version to the one on the back of the nickel he'd fished from his pocket.

Camille sighed. "I look at this place, and it doesn't say *mansion* to me."

"What does it say?"

"A word Vince Lyle should learn—*scale*. I have no beef with big houses, Plane Man. They can be lovely, like this one, if they're in the right context and have enough space around them. Vince's problem is that he wants a palace on a postage stamp, and so what if he trashes the architectural integrity of the neighborhood. So what if he wrecks his neighbors' view."

"I think that's part of the point," Mooney said.

"Speaking of Vince," Camille said a little later, as they drove down the hill, "did you hear Michelle's leaving?"

Vince had stopped coming to Free Flyers meetings, and Mooney hadn't heard anything about him in months. Vince's wife was close with Camille's next-door neighbor; they talked on the phone every couple of days. As soon as the school year ended Michelle was going to her parents' place in upstate New York and taking the kids with her.

"You can't blame her," Camille said. "While Vince works on the palace, they're living in a space that's half the size of the original house, cooking on a hotplate, washing dishes in the bathtub. The

kids can't play outside because the job site's hazardous. Plus, Vince is a creep. Michelle has just had it."

"Will she come back at the end of the summer?"

"Vince better hope so. That's a lot of house for one ridiculous man."

The dogs were wide awake for this ride, whining and trembling in the back seat. Mooney reached back and stroked them as Camille drove into town.

The house she had grown up in was a gray Cape Cod that sat on a quiet street three blocks from the University of Virginia, where her father had taught. A pair of healthy ferns hung from the eave of the front porch.

"Your first porch?" Mooney said, as they climbed the steps.

"We wouldn't have survived my adolescence without it," Camille laughed. She pointed toward the swing that hung from chains at the far end. "Cordless didn't exist yet, so I'd pass the phone to myself through the window. That swing was my spot."

Maman opened the door in her apron, saying they were just in time for the meal. Her lead-gray hair was long and straight, gathered up at the back of her head in a loose bun. Her eyes were steady and dark.

It smelled wonderful inside. She sat them at the square dining room table and served carrot soup first, then roast duck with potatoes, then salad. Mooney rarely drank during the day, but the wine was so good he had a second glass. The conversation was easy, mostly about the weather, the traffic on their trip down. Mooney heard Maman's accent only because he was listening for it. From time to time she would peek beneath the table to say kind things to the dogs.

After the cheese, as they sipped coffee and ate pear tart, the old woman reached over and placed her warm hand on top of Mooney's. "Ward, may I ask you something?"

He waited.

"Does it worry you, living there?"

"In Cleave Springs?" he said. "Not at all."

"But the attack. It came so close."

"Our air space is safer now than it's ever been," he said. "Think about it. We live under the same umbrella as the president."

Maman grimaced slightly, removing her hand from his. "Camille says the District is different. Less . . ."

"Less free," Camille said in the decisive tone that Mooney usually admired.

"Maybe," he said, feeling his face grow warm. "But more safe."

Mooney thought he saw the two women exchange a look before Camille got up to clear. While mother and daughter did the dishes and conversed in French, he wandered around the house with Charles and Amelia in tow. Books took up most of the wall space, but there were also a few family pictures that told Mooney where Camille's coloring had come from. The father was pale, blue-eyed, with a froth of strawberry-blond hair. In one photo—Mooney guessed it was twenty years old—the professor and Camille stood side by side in academic robes, faces celebratory, hair swirling out from under the black tasseled hats on their heads. The only time Mooney had ever donned a mortar board was when he finished high school.

Maman needed a nap, so Mooney and Camille took the dogs for a walk around the campus Jefferson had plotted at the foot of the little mountain that gave his house its name. They began at the south end of the terraced lawn and walked up the gentle slope until they reached the white-roofed rotunda that stood in the background of the graduation photo he had seen back at the house. On the rotunda steps, they sat and stroked the dogs, looking out over the long reach of grass.

"The ethics of space," Camille said. "Jefferson wanted to design buildings that embodied civic virtues. Do you think that's possible?"

Mooney was slightly drunk, and still a bit bothered by the way the dessert conversation had ended. "Why not concentrate on people?" he said.

She smiled. "You sound just like my father. 'We need to design *people* who embody civic virtues. Who cares where they live and study?' That was his line. We used to go around and around about it. Maman agreed with me that there was a connection. I wish Dad was alive to see Vince's house. That might've convinced him."

The professor was ten years dead, but his study remained as he had left it, the pipe in the ashtray, the chair parked at the desk as if awaiting his return from a weekend away. Camille's old room had a double bed for guests. After dinner, Mooney took some time getting the dogs settled in the living room and then went to the guest room to put on his pajamas. He lay in bed listening to the rising and falling tones of Camille and Maman. Camille had gone to say good night thirty minutes ago.

When she finally came to bed she was in the summer-weight nightgown she had worn the morning they first made love. "Hasn't this been a strange day?" she said.

"Strange?"

"I was realizing up at Monticello that you and I have barely

been outside with each other. And now here we are, Tuesday-Thursday lovers for eight months, about to spend our first night together. It's exciting, Plane Man." She turned off the lamp and rolled over to him.

They kissed for a few minutes, but then she rolled away and turned the light back on. "You're not excited."

Mooney gazed at the ceiling. "You really think we're less free?"

"And not necessarily more safe, as they would have us believe."

"But they caught us off guard that one time," he said. "Now we're vigilant. The element of surprise is gone."

"Don't take this the wrong way," she said, "but I believe we can't live without the element of surprise. Think about it. Would you and I have connected if I hadn't been half-naked on my porch that morning, flagging you down?"

He didn't answer.

"Admit it, Ward, you were surprised. Your defenses were down."

"What *were* you doing out there?" he said.

"I was terrified. I couldn't stand to be alone. I rushed out to the porch, and here you came up the sidewalk. A familiar face. The plane man." She nuzzled up close to him, her breath warm on his neck.

"Your mother must wonder what you see in me," he said, still looking at the ceiling.

"She doesn't have to wonder. I've told her."

"Told her what?"

"About Charles and Amelia. And your planes." She lifted her head and reached over to stroke his beard with the backs of her fingers. "When we bumped into each other at the Building Museum that time, I asked how you'd made the plane I found. You said, 'Very, very carefully.'"

"I remember."

"Let's just say I haven't always chosen careful men."

Old Pete Bloess was sick. He missed the May meeting of the Cleave Springs Free Flyers, calling Mooney to tell him he was having some health troubles but would definitely be there in June. But before the June meeting, Pete's wife called Mooney to say Pete was going to have to stop coming.

Otherwise the summer went well—until August, when Camille left to spend a month in France with Maman. She had invited

Mooney to join them, but he had declined. Knowing he'd made the right decision—the only decision that would keep his bills paid and his dogs sane—didn't help him navigate the middle of every Tuesday and Thursday while she was away. The Tomahawk MK 1 was finished. He had planned to use the extra time to get started on the next plane, but when he went to his workbench he had a hard time getting excited about something new.

The third Tuesday of the month, he decided to go pay Pete Bloess a visit. The heat outside was awful. He walked the six blocks to Williams Street and arrived at Pete's house with a soaked shirt and beads of sweat rolling down his legs.

Ida Bloess answered the door and led Mooney into the cool house. In the living room, a news channel played on the television and Pete dozed in a big chair with a blanket over his legs. His color was bad. Skin hung like gathered curtains on either side of his wasted neck.

Ida muted the television. She touched Pete's arm and Mooney watched him struggle like a man rising from deep water.

"Ward." The voice was weak. "Lung cancer. It's bad."

"Ida told me." Mooney offered Pete the plane he had brought, a B-26 Invader like the one he had flown in Korea.

Pete took the plane and looked it over carefully before setting it on the table beside his chair. "Ward, your planes always made me feel like I had too many thumbs. Beautiful work. Thanks for stopping by."

"We miss you," Mooney said. "The club isn't the same."

"I miss you guys too," Pete said. "Did Vince ever come back?"

"No."

"Those two younger guys?"

"They followed Vince's lead, I guess."

"Well, that's my fault. I must've pushed back on Vince a little too hard. Just couldn't stomach all that war mongering."

"Actually," Mooney said, "it's not your fault." He told Pete about himself and Camille.

"Consorting with the enemy," Pete said, nodding.

Mooney considered gossiping about Vince's marital troubles but thought better of it. "About the club," he said. "With our numbers as low as they are, I'm wondering if we shouldn't maybe merge with another club. The Cloudbusters up in Rockville are really solid in every sector of the hobby. I know the guy who runs that outfit pretty well. I thought I'd bring it up at the meeting tomorrow night."

"Makes sense," Pete said. "But it's sure too bad. What we had there, that group of guys, all of us living right here in Cleave Springs—we were a community. That's what kept me coming back. You probably noticed I had lost interest in the planes."

"Your arthritis?"

"That was my excuse. But the fact is the hobby started to bother me. I flew in a warplane, Ward. I know what they're made for. I was no pacifist back in Korea, but I guess the seed got planted there. It's been growing ever since. How do you reconcile that with a hobby that glorifies killing machines?"

"I guess I don't think of them that way," Mooney said. "I'm so involved in making calculations, drawing plans, shaving balsa, cutting paper, thinning enamels. I can't get past how fragile they are."

"Even the real ones are fragile. Fragile and deadly."

Mooney sneezed. The convulsion came so suddenly he failed to cover his nose.

"Bless you," Pete said.

Mooney checked his watch. "I'd better get going."

Pete raised his hands and Mooney reached out to take them in his own. They were surprisingly light, as if he had balsa for bones. "Ward," he said, "I'm glad to hear you've got someone to love." His eyes went to the television across the room and Mooney's eyes followed, seeing the president stride across the White House lawn toward a waiting helicopter, his jaw firmly set and his jacket flapping in the wind. Something or someone caught the commander in chief's attention, and he broke his stride to glance backward, tangling his feet in the maneuver and nearly falling flat on his face before he flung out his arms for balance and wobbled through a series of lunging steps. Walking normally again, he reached down quickly to brush a small chunk of turf from the knee of his slacks, doing his best to reassemble his resolute expression, to act as if the stumble had never occurred.

"You'll need it," the old man softly growled.

Mooney attended Pete Bloess's funeral on September 7th, a Saturday. Four days later, on the 11th, Camille took the morning off and she and Mooney spent it together in bed. They pleased each other—they knew very well how to please each other by now—but on this day, this anniversary of their first fantastic coupling, the current running between them was a faint reminder of the energy that had crackled in this same house 365 days before.

Afterward they lay spent, side by side on the bed with the

bunched top sheet snaking through their limbs. "Thank you for this year," Camille said.

"Thank *you*."

"The right thing for me, at the right time."

"Me too."

She propped herself up on an elbow. "We can't be Tuesday-Thursday lovers forever, Plane Man. I can't." When he didn't say anything she took his chin in her hand and turned his face toward her. "Could you?"

"What kind of lovers do you want to be?" he asked.

"I don't know. The off-the-clock kind, I suppose."

"Off the clock," he said. "What would that look like?"

She rolled up onto him and held her face just above his, hovering. "Stay tuned."

In early November, Camille told Mooney that Maman was moving to France, to an old stone house in the Normandy town where she had been raised. Camille was going with her, and they wanted him to join them.

Before he could begin to explain how impossible that was she quoted the outrageous figure he could expect to sell his bungalow for, explained that Maman already owned the charming and spacious stone house they would share, described in detail the procedure for shipping dogs safely across the Atlantic, and assured him that the model airplane hobby was alive and well in France.

"This is about more than a T-shirt," Mooney said, referring to a shirt Maman had seen a man wearing at the supermarket a week or so before. It said:

FIRST IRAQ
THEN FRANCE

Camille smiled. "We've been talking seriously since August. Maman kept bringing it up last year, so we decided to go there for a month and see how it felt."

"She wants to finish her life there?"

"That's part of it. Also, she's just ready to get out of here."

"She's scared?"

"We both are. But not like we were when it first happened."

"What are you scared of?"

"This country's on the warpath," Camille said. "People are *buying* those T-shirts."

"You'd move across the ocean because of *them*?"

"Maman has to do this," she said. "I can't let her go alone. Besides . . ."

"Besides?"

Camille tilted her head. "You and me, there? Who knows . . ."

Mooney knew better than to try talking Camille out of something once her mind was set. With him or without him, she was going to France. He agreed to go along. Camille and Maman hadn't yet picked a departure date. In fact, there seemed to be no big hurry to leave, which suited Mooney just fine.

But then Camille was offered a job at an architectural library in Rouen—an easy commute from the stone house. They wanted her to start the first of the year. Camille accepted the job and Mooney smothered his misgivings in activity, helping her pack up the house and get it ready for the market. She showed it on a Sunday in mid-December and the bidding war raged all day Monday. Tuesday morning, she accepted an offer that was forty thousand dollars above an asking price that Mooney had thought laughably high.

Maman joined them in Cleave Springs for Christmas. Charlottesville now had a reputation as a good place to raise kids, and young couples were flocking there to breed. Her house had also sold for a big sum. She had donated the professor's books to the university library, sold off the furniture, and shipped the rest of her belongings to France. Her gift to Mooney was a set of French language CDs.

Maman and Camille prepared a sumptuous holiday meal in Mooney's spartan kitchen, and the three of them ate in his dining room.

"When did you come to the States?" Mooney asked Maman.

"Nineteen fifty," she said, glancing up toward the planes that hovered above the table. "Not long after the war."

"What was it like, changing countries?"

Maman set down her fork. "I've always found this country attractive, though at times it has discouraged and frightened me. I was here for Civil Rights, Vietnam, a great deal of upheaval. Frankly, I've never found it as repellent as I do now."

"I promise you," Mooney said, sounding to himself like a salesman whose customer is about to walk, "you're safe here."

She reached over and placed her warm hand on his, just as she had when he'd sat at her table. "None of us is ever completely safe, Ward. I accept that. For now, I prefer to be under threat elsewhere."

Mooney loaded his Town Car's trunk with luggage and drove Camille and Maman to Dulles the next morning. Camille's dark wool hat covered most of her hair, and the boots she wore made her taller than usual. After they checked in, Maman joined the security line alone, giving Camille and Mooney a moment of privacy.

Camille hugged him tightly, pressing her body against his in a way that made his groin tingle. "It's better this way," she said.

"Better than what?"

"This is just forcing you to decide."

"You've decided?"

"Only that I'm open to trying this. There's no guarantee it will work." She brushed his beard with the backs of her fingers, and he grabbed her hand roughly in his.

"Ouch!"

"You're torturing me," he said.

Tears sprang from her eyes. "I'm *what*?"

He released her hand and scanned the security line until he caught sight of Maman, who was having a heated exchange with a security person just beyond the metal detector. "Your mother needs you."

He had told Camille his launch would have to wait until after the Capital Challenge in March. He needed time to sort through everything he had accumulated in the house over the years and get the place ready to sell. Also, he wanted to fly in the Building Museum one last time. Joining the Cloudbusters, the model airplane group in Rockville, had renewed his zeal for the hobby. The drive to Rockville was bothersome, but a couple of the guys in the Cloudbusters were purists like Mooney. They had admired him from afar over the years and now wanted to learn as much as they could from him. Mooney was a mentor, a bit of a star.

Through the first two months of the year, when he wasn't driving, sleeping, or walking the dogs, he was working like a demon on a SPAD S.XIII that he planned to unveil at the Capital Challenge. The SPAD S.XIII was a French-made biplane of World War I vintage. Other countries had flown the SPAD S.XIII, but Mooney planned to apply the French tricolor insignia to the rudder and fuselage in honor of Camille. He would tell her all about the biplane whenever they spoke on the phone, and she would listen attentively before she began to ask how it was going with the house. He told her he had given most of his planes away to guys in the new club. His French? The language discs, he said, lived on the

front seat of the car, going into the player whenever he was between clients. He talked as though that last moment at the airport had never happened, and she also let it lie.

Until the Friday afternoon before the Capital Challenge. She called at three o'clock, wanting to catch him before he started his shift. "What was it that T-shirt said? First Iraq . . . ?" Three days before, U.S. bombs and cruise missiles had begun destroying targets in Baghdad.

"We're not going to attack France," he said.

"Anyway, I called to wish you good luck tomorrow. Will you fly the blue one with the flames?"

"The Corsair? I thought I would."

"I remember the day it landed at my feet."

"Two years ago."

"I'll never forget the look on your face when you saw me holding your plane."

"Most people would have damaged it."

"Do you know you broke my hand?" she said.

"Your hand?"

"Only one bone. A little fracture. It's almost healed now."

This information sucked the air right out of him. He wanted to apologize but the breath wouldn't come.

The Great Hall was as serene as Mooney remembered it, air smoothing the edges of every sound and light softening any surface it touched. He placed his toolbox near the rest of the Cloudbusters and set up the planes he had brought on the club's table. A steady stream of admirers passed the table to ogle the SPAD S.XIII as he stood on the carpet watching his little Zero circle higher and longer than any other plane in the Peanut class. With a nostalgic lump in his throat, he flew the navy blue Corsair with the orange flames in the Open Rubber class and won that handily also.

There was time to kill before the trimming session, when he'd have a chance to send the new SPAD up for its maiden flight, so he decided to hike up the stairs and have a look at everything from above. He retraced the steps that had taken him to Camille two years before, but when he emerged onto the third-story walkway no orange-haired beauty with exquisite collarbones awaited him. The only person up there was a balding guy with a fringe of dark hair who was leaning out over the parapet and watching the planes.

"Vince," Mooney said.

Vince turned and squinted, his two eyebrows becoming one. "Ward."

"I didn't see you on the floor."

"Too busy to work on my planes," Vince said. "Didn't want to miss the event so I came up here to watch."

Side by side, they leaned their forearms on the parapet and gazed out at the circling craft. "We still have the best ones in the world," Vince said. "That's why you and I can stand in this peaceful place today while our guys unleash ten kinds of hell over there."

Mooney remembered the explosion, the way the air curdled around Camille's house.

"I guess you know Michelle and I are finished," Vince said.

"I'm sorry." He recalled the pall of black smoke that rose into the blue September sky, the fearful smell of the burning wreckage.

"The remodel was hard on us, Ward. Here I thought I was making us a dream place to live, and I went and drove her away. I keep thinking if she'd just come and see it, she'd change her mind. It's almost finished now. I don't mean to brag, but it's sweet. The first million-dollar house on the street. That's what my realtor says."

The sirens. Charles's manic yapping and Amelia's howls. "Your realtor?"

Vince nodded. "I'm selling the place as soon as it's completely done. Divorce isn't cheap. Besides, there couldn't be a better time to put it on the market. This war on terror has been great for the economy around here. You see it, Ward. What people are paying for houses in Cleave Springs is unbelievable."

Beads of sweat poured across Mooney's ribs. His throat was parched. "Where will you go?"

"Got my eye on a piece of property in West Virginia. Twenty acres. I can build a house on it and still clear two hundred grand. Even better, there's plenty of space between me and the neighbors."

He couldn't silence the noises in his ears, couldn't expel that smell from his nostrils.

"Speaking of which," Vince said, "I heard through the grapevine that Red moved to France."

"Camille."

"Right. You going to follow her?"

"I may," Mooney lied, and then told Vince he had to go. He walked back to the stairs and hurried down the six flights to the floor, where he gathered up his toolbox and planes. He left without speaking to anyone.

The streets were wide open on this Saturday afternoon, no war

protesters in sight, Mooney cruising swiftly through the city that gave him his living, the capital of the free world, its broad avenues lined with marble facades, its narrow side streets pocked with holes. This peaceful place.

Six minutes to the river, six more to his driveway. He entered the house and the dogs whined happily at their protector's return, sniffing his legs as he walked around the rooms, the three of them surrounded by the killing machines that still lined all the shelves, still crowded the air space beneath all the ceilings.

Eventually he sat down on the couch, propping a foot on the coffee table where the package of CDs sat unopened. "Fools," he said, looking into Amelia's moist dark eyes, then Charles's eyes, then back at Amelia. "Lucky fucking fools."