



dallas noir

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HARRY HUNSICKER ♦ MATT BONDURANT ♦ AND OTHERS

pluck my eyebrows, brush my teeth, do my makeup, fix my hair, file and buff my nails. They see your hands more than anything. I put on my pants and undershirt and grab all my tools. I put the second Plan B pill in my pocket and hope I will remember to take it when everything is madness at eight o'clock. I stop at the cleaner's to swap soiled for pressed, I have a good man on the corner of Greenville and Belmont who does my shirts the way I want them and doesn't charge much. He starches everything to spec, so my long bistro apron can stand on its own and the creases in my sleeves will be so pointy that even at ten thirty tonight when I walk up to my last table for the first time they will see those creases and they'll trust me just a little. My name is Marie, and I'll take care of you tonight.

NIGHT WORK

BY CLAY REYNOLDS
Old East Dallas

Samuel Grand Avenue, 6:30 p.m.

They came just at sundown, direct from the park, from the tennis courts, out the south entrance nobody ever used, wearing white. Mercedes convertible. Blue as sapphire. Not one of the nicest ones, but a nice one. Tan leather seats. Custom wheels. Not usual in this neighborhood, not even uncommon, more rare than that. It made everything around it look shabby, made the pavement look filthy. She got out. Not him. Everybody noticed that, particularly the homeys on the corner hanging out by the low-rider, a boom box on the car's roof, smoking doobies, a little crack, cigarettes. They noticed her right off. She was tall, maybe five nine. Legs to the sky. Short skirt, cashmere sweater cut in a V that didn't quite go down low enough over a mound of freckled cleavage. Her hair was blonde, ponytailed, pink terry cloth headband. And her eyes were blue. Cobalt blue. Blue enough to fall into forever. She didn't walk; she bounded. That was the right word. On the balls of her feet. The blasting salsa across the lot suggested a rhythm, a sway. She picked it up. Her hips moved underneath the pleats of her skirt when she bounded up onto the sidewalk, graceful, like an antelope, past the stuffed trash cans, nasty wads of paper sacks, broken shards of beer bottles, crushed-out butts and candy wrappers, into the store. Every move was velvet, smooth as a breeze. Delicate forearms, lightly laced with golden gossamer. Her calves curved like twin tan bows down to the pink tops of her socks.

Her thighs were slender, tight, ridged with muscle, rich as flan. Those legs caught the mind of every dark eye in the place. Even the bitches hanging by the video rack, drinking Slurpees, snacking gum, eating day-old donuts, reeking of Dial and cheap perfume, caught those legs, envied them too much to scowl, to do more than stare, to feel the ache of envy, afraid to catch one another's eye for fear of sharing the loathing. She went into the women's, in the back, past the stacked boxes, the beer poster with a half-naked cowgirl, past the racks of snacks and sweets, over the dingy linoleum, by the cracked wall, and through the dented door, out of sight. Everybody exhaled like something awful had passed and left them scared, safe, but revealed something true, something they didn't want to know. Outside, the homeboys checked him out. Young, groomed, confident, dark hair, good shoulders. An athlete, maybe. A tailback, maybe. Shortstop, maybe. Fast, probably. But not big, not mean, not really strong, and not fast enough. Money. Sure. White mohair sweater's arms knotted over the collar of a whiter polo, bracelet on his wrists, gold flashing in the dying light, more gold on a matte of dark, wiry chest hair. Money. Sure. Country club players slumming on the public courts, wrong part of town. Still in the car. Not noticing being noticed, he fucked with the radio or the CD. Looking for a tune, maybe, or a ball game, maybe. NPR, maybe. Fucked with something on the dash. AC, maybe. Trying to put the top up, maybe. Maybe he should have thought about that before he pulled up to this store in this hood. Convertibles are easy. The sun dropped behind the buildings. Tall evergreens on the edge of the park speared dark shadows across the street, the concrete lot, blackness crawling over the ground like blood on a bathroom floor. Streetlights came on too bright, store neon too loud in the urban gloaming. Cars passed without slowing. One cop. Didn't even look. A cell burbled. He answered, talked. Never looked around. The homeboys nodded, like they were all on a string

and somebody dipped their heads. Like puppets. Muscles flexed, tattoos rippled, earrings sparkled in the electric glare. One got behind his wheel, fired the engine, gunned it once, let it slide to a low rumble, bounced it again. V-8 power under primer paint and dark glass. Quality rubber. Cranked up the CD. Mexican rap. Heavy bass. It permeated, even inside, through the heavy glass, the cinder blocks. If he heard it, felt it, he didn't show, didn't look. The others snapped down the boom box, stored it, got in, shapes in the car, the yellow glow of lighters pricked the smoked glass. He was talking on the cell, not watching, not listening. His hand moved in the air, struck the wheel, annoyed, not angry. Not the type to get pissed off, to lose it. Money. Sure. She came out of the women's, stopped, looked around. The bitches stared for a beat, then found new interest in old magazines. She'd had her piss, now she wanted to make it right. Buy something. Two dollars in her hand. She grabbed a pack of mints, put the bills on the counter, slid them forward with one long, pink, polished nail. The clerk, as young as she but five shades darker, fifty times more acute, stared at her. A question, maybe. A warning, maybe. Only blue eyes in ten blocks. Only true blonde in twenty. Beyond her world, beneath her notice, he said nothing, dropped his dusky face, made change. She offered a smile. He looked up as if he heard it. Teeth so white they hurt. Eyes so blue he wanted to lick them. She said something no one heard. Thank you, maybe. Then was gone. Through the door, iron-barred, steel-framed, opaque glass milky from dirt, handprints, scratches, crusty yellowed tape, and then outside. Bounding again. Off the curb, into the Mercedes. He dropped the cell, said something sharp and quick when she slammed the door, grabbed her shoulder belt. She laughed, stretched. Arms up, smile flashing, tits rolling. The homeys watched and waited while they pulled out. If he went right, toward the freeway, he was cool. If he went left, toward the barrio, he was fucked. Convertibles were easy. He went left.

His brake lights weren't even off before the homeys squealed out. The clerk watched, then picked up the phone, stood there, as if frozen, knowing it wouldn't matter, thinking about her goddamn eyes. He looked at the bitches, saw them watching too. "Is what it is," one of them said. They stared out into the gathering darkness and nodded when another agreed, "Night work."

Deep Ellum, 10:00 p.m.

There were four of them at the counter. Not one had ever been ugly. Not one ever would be. Six-inch heels, no stockings, perfect legs, skirts so tight you could see the rounds of their asses when they moved, not enough fabric in all four to cover a pillow. No blouses, just swatches of shiny, cheap cloth, stretched over strand-up tits. No bras required. Yards of skin. Coffee, vanilla, chocolate, tattooed in telling places. Ankles, thighs, birch stamps between sacral dimples, just above the ass crack. And hair, acres of hair, flowing and clean and fresh, scented with flowers, fruit, almonds. Nearly as much hair as makeup, artfully done. They were eighteen, maybe nineteen. An assortment, a mixture, a blend. Perfect. They wanted snacks, smokes, the cheap ones, not premium. They flirted mercilessly with the buzz-cut behind the counter. He was swimming in it, and in sweat. It bubbled across his upper lip, his forehead, in heavy beads. He couldn't peel his eyes from those bobbing tits, flat, beaded bellies, pelvic grooves diving down into the tiny faux-leather kilts. Suggestive, not concealing. Movement constant, whirling and spiraling in front of him like phantasms. Tempting, luscious, out of reach, unreal. They were studded out: eyebrows, lips, tongues, navels, likely nipples and clits too. Paste diamonds, rubies, emeralds, plastic gold, strainless silver. Cool. Trendy. Out there. Manicures so sharp they'd cut glass, fingers twisting silky tresses, twirling in the air as they talked, cooed, and spun in front of him. A gust of sweetness he could almost taste, perfume radiating like shimmering tendrils.

Willing. Eager. Laughter like breaking crystal, high heels bouncing on cold, dirty linoleum, lacquered nails tapping scratched Formica. Three hard hats on a break from overtime, stale with sweat, weary to the bone, lingered at the coffee machine, watching, gaping. They were dark, greasy, bristled, boasting more dirt than pride. Heavy boots, stained jeans, second-hand shirts, filthy bandannas. One opened his third packet of sugar. Another stood with a forgotten cup steaming in his hand. The third just stared, a hot dog crushed in his stubby fingers, oozing mustard, mouth slightly open, salivating. Like cats watching a rookery, their eyes captured the undulating movements and held them. When the buzz-cut finally found his voice, they pulled IDs from tiny purses, giggling, spiraling on their spikes, stretching their legs, straining their stomachs, flexing their hips. "How do they move in skirts that tight?" the hard hat with the hot dog asked. There was no answer. They moved. The buzz-cut studied the IDs, fanned them out in his fingers like cards in a rummy game. Eyes nearly crossed in concentration as he tried to memorize a name, an address, any detail while he pretended to verify, match a photo with a face, but he couldn't focus, not with them so close, their scents wafting, their eyes playing, their voices chirping and tittering, glossed lips smirking when he returned IDs, and they danced with each other, raked cards through the machine, punched buttons, waited without standing still even for a second while he bagged their goods. At last, he pushed the plastic sacks forward, his hand lingering, hoping for a touch, but they were too quick, too experienced to let that happen, to let anything happen that wasn't deliberate. They swept out as a wave into the night, then jammed, legs folding, heels flying, laughter echoing, into a small rusty Honda. Somebody's idea of a car. Dented fender, one headlight against the jet. When the engine buzzed alive, smoke billowed from exhaled tobacco, music burst from the open windows, smothered their mirth, fueled their excitement. The hard hats

moved slow to the counter, paid up, stared while they pulled away, then went out and stood on the sidewalk for a space, sipping coffee, eating hot dogs, watching the Honda as it pulled away into the garish lights of the boulevard and turned toward the flashing neon and dark alleys, toward the clubs and bars. The buzz-cut also came out, sweat drying beneath his shirt, lit a smoke. He shook his head and, catching the eye of the hard hats, blew blue out of his nose and said, "Night work."

Harry Hines, Midnight

The pickup was old, older than the owners, rusty, had a caved-in right side, cracked windshield, mismatched tires, missing tailgate, ruined spare in the bed. The driver was large, bearded, hunched over the wheel, his eyes shadowed by a filthy, sweaty, shapeless cap. His arm on the window, thick, antiquesly tattooed beneath coiling black hair. In the middle, a car seat with a sleeping baby. Another kid, maybe two, maybe three, crammed in next to it, only a tow crown visible in the indirect slant of the store window's yellow light. She sat enflade, pressed against the passenger side. When she got out, slammed the door, he yelled something, low and mean. She shot him a scowl, came to the door. Short, light, she leaned heavy, levered with her hips and knees to push open the heavy glass. Inside, she stopped, recovered breath, found the heavy strength, then strode toward the coolers. Deliberate. On a mission. She wore a uniform, yellow knee-length skirt, once-white sneakers run down at the heel. Waitress, maybe. All-night café, maybe. Swing-shift, for sure. Underarms stained, collar soiled, one missing button in front, tight in the bust and waist, but modest. It didn't hide a flat stomach, taut ass, firm legs. Built right. Not sexy. Sturdy. Solid. Cute. Best word for it. Precious might work, but that seemed wrong. Wholesome, maybe. Compact. Nearly perfect, for sure. And strong, though she'd put in a full shift, dealt fried grease and tepid coffee to overweight

slobs, losers, and drifters who glanced from the TV only long enough to watch her walk away, then tried to see her naked. But just naked. Nothing more. An assessment, not lust. Nothing dirty. Nothing nasty. She conjured different dreams, past visions. A girlfriend, maybe, girl next door, down the block, up the hall, across the classroom, on the sidelines in a short skirt and bobby socks, church choir, maybe, picture in a yearbook, maybe, somebody's sister, somebody's cousin, somebody's best friend, maybe. Out of reach. They saw her in memory, the girl they met the last day of summer vacation, spotted getting off a bus, sitting at a stoplight, humming with the radio, waiting for the light to change, standing in the other line, looking the other way, looking like a girl somebody, anybody, might want to talk to. Nothing dirty. Nothing nasty. Just a dream. A girl to get to know, to send flowers to, to walk with in the rain, to marry. Maybe. A girl. Not a woman. A girl in the best sense of that word. Strawberry-blonde, feathery cut shag to her shoulders, green eyes that glistened, button nose, and a smile that would light the dark side of the moon. Her makeup was stale, but she didn't need it. Fresh. That's a word. She'd not lost that. Not yet. Two kids, hooked to a brute, lousy job, cheap rental, no money, no future, not much past, but she still had it. Knew how to flirt, but she knew the limit, the line between courtesy and come-on. Smart. She moved like she was gliding, sking, lithe, easy on her feet, but now, here, tonight, also weary, weighted, resigned. She lugged a twelve-pack of Keystone and a liter of Sprite to the counter, heaved it aboard, glanced sideways at the pickup still idling off the curb, thought for a moment, then snagged some Skittles from the display and put them on top. She dug in the skirt pocket for a fold of bills, counted them out, added some change. Fingers, short but nicely shaped, delicate, ready to handle fragile things, smooth down a napkin on a metal counter, expertly pour a refill, clear a stack of plates, snatch up a sorry-ass quarter tip, wipe a kid's snotty nose. Nails

blunt, painted with licorice, chipped at the tips, light-brown hair on her forearms, small beauty mark on one wrist, deep scratch on the other, just above the band of a cheap plastic watch. She asked for a tin of dip, then a pack of smokes, and, when she got it, zipped it open like a pro, put one on her lip before she remembered, then snatched it away and grimaced, grim, abashed, but not really apologizing, not looking up. The clerk, shorter, darker, forever internal and forbidding, counted the money, said she was light twelve cents, and she looked down, counted again, moving the bills and change around as if they would multiply with her touch. She glanced outside again, looked up, a plea in her sea-green eyes. Brows up, an antique scar between them. She knew the answer before the clerk, impersonal, insensitive, uncaring, shook his head. Her face went hard for a second or two, lines creviced around her eyes, her mouth, revealed her age, showed every month, every year since she pronounced herself grown. More bad than good. They webbed the veneer. Nothing soft remained beneath the alluvial surface. Iron under fascia. No rust. Not yet. But it was coming. Leather under satin, worn smooth with use, still strong, still serviceable, still salvageable. For a while. She smiled now, not just a grin, and displayed a chipped front tooth, slightly yellowed from smoke, from coffee, from life. Made her seem older, witness to too much for her age, for her time. As if she knew that, she sagged a little, defeated, not beaten, looked again out the window toward the pickup. Quick. Dreadful. Set her jaw. She put down the smokes, the loose one carefully on top, next to the twelve-pack, the soda, the candy, the snuff. "Be back," she said, shoulders squaring, her voice sweet, a chirp, but deliberate, like a mockingbird's. Then she stepped to the door—one movement, tugging it open and sliding out like a gust to the driver's side. The hulk in the cab's shadow sat still for a moment, listening, staring straight ahead, one arm draped over the wheel, fingers drumming. She shifted

her weight, lifted one foot to give it a rest, dropped it toe down, knee bent, calf rocking, while she waited, like a catnap from an ancient time taking an order, flirting with a punk. One hand behind her back made a fist. She tossed her head like a colt. He said something, she barked back, her give as good as her take. He leaned, found a crushed wallet, then his hand extended, a bill in fat, dirty fingers, and she took it, spun neatly on one leg, and returned. Jaunting, almost saucy. At the counter, her face resumed its mask. Resignation, resentment, retribution. A jade glare at a stone clerk, who came to life, all at once. Broke his face with a plastic smile when she gathered her change, the beer and bag. She didn't look, didn't speak. She fished the lighter from her pocket, lit the smoke, inhaled deep, and blew a warm blue cloud over the clerk's false grin. "Fuck you," she said. Her tone now a knell, tolling deeper, resonant, acidic, edged by unformed tears. She hauled to the door, yanked it open, welled strength, stored and summoned, bounced it against her back, held the bundle of beer and bag against her chest, squinted against the smoke trailing from the butt in her lip. Spoke around it, "I mean it. Fuck you." She released the door, then twirled, burden balanced, trudged to the pickup door, got inside, slammed it. He pulled out with a squeal. The clerk watched them go, rubbed his eyes, pinched his nose, put his hands flat on the counter. "Night work," he said.

Oak Lawn, 1:45 a.m.

Behind him, Outside Security felt the pulse, the laughter, the low ebb of privilege, money, power filtering through the thick wooden barrier. A mass of masculinity. Handsome, in a way. Intimidating, in a way. Large, dense, well-defined. Polite, firm, impassive, circumspect, obsequious, blind, deaf, dutiful, obedient. Automatic. Ex-soldier, maybe. Ex-cop, maybe. Ex-pro player, maybe. Ex-boxer, maybe. Ex-con, maybe. Ex—all of it, maybe. Nameless. Beefy.

Forty-something. Strong. That was the word. Unmovable object. A block. Still athletic. No other ability, no potential. What he had was enough. Bald head, close shave, broken nose, mashed ears, solid chin, muscled neck. A body defined, chiseled, sculpted by iron and steel, sweat, streak, salad. No carbs. No booze. No tobacco. No drugs. Fit. Another good word. Off-the-track suit, thick-soled shoes, white shirt, tasteful tie, Windsor knot. Coiled, even at rest. Ready. Gray eyes wide. Alert. Sentry. Guard. Picket. Invisible, but present. No one in. Not unless he said so. List memorized. Kept in his head. Authority, under his arm, in his pocket. Locked and loaded. Fully permitted. Nothing chanced. He scanned the restaurant. Dark, empty, quiet. That kitchen closed at ten. Tables cleared, white cloths replaced, folded linen and silver setups arranged. Regular staff gone. Waiting for tonight. Overpriced food served with style. Panache. Class. Good tips. The outer bar closed at midnight. Now deserted, scrubbed and polished oak and brass stretched down the wall, backlit. High glass shelves with top tequilas, vodkas, gins, whiskeys that ran a Franklin a shot. Brandies, cordials, liqueurs with names he couldn't say. Wines, vintage. Beer, imported, microbrewed. Varied clear pastels and earth tones of alcohol, awaiting orders. All quiet out front. Behind him, the door, oak-paneled, steel-lined. Three inches thick, but the deep bass vibe passed like light through tissue. Back room. Separate kitchen. Separate bar. Different staff. VIP. Twenty-dollar cigars. Dancers, players, gamblers, politicians, a police chief. Bankers, judges, doctors. Gangsters. Visiting CEOs. Mistresses. Whores. Men on their way up, women on their way down. Crowded, loud, smoky, secret, illegal. Wealthy people. Private party. Nothing to him. A paycheck. Never ask. Never say. Keep the List. Never ask. The door opened too quick. He pivoted as if on a spindle, arms out, hands ready. The din, the reek of tobacco, stench of alcohol, expensive perfume, sweet cologne blended into the waft. The flotsam of excess buffered his

face. Jaw set, fingers flexed. Mental check of weapon, a quick impassive mask. She came out. Hair dark as thunder, wild and straggled, foused over alabaster shoulders. Exposed, naked. Black dress, too short, too tight, too young. Satin wanting to be silk ripped open down one side. Bloodred fingernails held the ragged edges partly together; one breast, bold but helpless, escaped, a pink nipple resting the ambience. Eyes blind with panic, she slammed against him, bounced back. A wall. Pure sinew. A rock. Unyielding, impervious. Unforgiving. She tottered on heels too high, the dress rode up her rounded ass. Thighs like clouds. Over her tangled nest of hair, he looked past the door, assessed lights flashing wild, heavy music, hard, driving, blasting. Roar of shouted conversation. A nude dancer pranced, crotch shaved, revealed, unashamed. Well-dressed men and women watched, laughed. Drank. Ate. Jewelry flashed. In the alcove beyond, golden light over oak-trimmed tables, green velvet, vested dealers, chips stracked, cards sliding, dice flying. Waitresses in bustiers, black-mesh stockings, high heels, long hair, large breasts, tall legs threaded through controlled chaos, balanced silver trays in constant noise. He caught the eye of Inside Security. A nod. A caution. Not serious. Not yet. He shut the door, stepped back. She listed, swayed, looked up. Panic. Wild eyes welled. Violet pupils, high, perfect brows. Mascara ran black muddy rivers down soft pale cheeks, one blistered with bright prints. Whole fingers. Pain. Perfect teeth, whiter than a wedding, gritted. A long neck, chafed, red marks traced against the cream. Lips messy with smeared gloss, cut, bleeding. A fresh scarlet trail on a clipped chin. Her arms reached, long fingers loosing torn fabric, forgetting, letting it fall. Grasped his muscles, dug sharp red nails into cheap black fabric. Pleading. Desperate. Naked to the waist. More new bruises. "Please!" Breath laced with booze, dope, sex. Her eyes cut to the door, looked through it, beyond it. "Please!" A lisp, lip bleeding. "Hurry!" Her head fell forward, pounded a

crown into his chest. A shield. Then up, into his face. "Please!" once more. He held her away, out from himself, off her feet, hands under her bare arms, her breasts, large, soft, swayed flaccid against her body. He felt the pulse of terror, smelled fear all over her. Soiled, exposed, helpless. Dangerous. New noise now. Shouts over the vibe. Anger. He looked once more into the tortured face. Considered. He felt the velvet of her skin beneath his fingers, the fragility of her bones. He decided, returned her to the floor like a delicate crystal curio, then slanted his gray eyes to the bar. She looked at him once. Quick. Verifying. Then scrambled, the shards of fake silk bunched, held closed, and passed through the publican's gate, dropped to the rubber-padded floor behind the long, heavy counter. He could hear her breathing when the door opened again. A man emerged. Not so fit. Not so tall. Not so strong. A player, maybe, run to fat and ruined by prosperity. Middlities, maybe, but wrathful. Face dark with fury, marked by three long scratches, ear to chin, deep, crimson dolllops on a white custom collar. Fists clenched. Platinum wedding band. Diamond horseshoe. Movado watch. Italian shoes. He jutted, nearly tripping, into the dim of the vacant restaurant, looked around. "Where?" No eye contact. Indirect confrontation. An insult. An order. A challenge. An accusation. Arrogance. Privilege. Condescension. Then, a collecting pause, an assessment. Calm. Control. Careful. Softer, now. "Where, goddamn it?" Outside Security's eyes slanted toward the side door. Exit only. An escape. No access, not even for cops, except those on the List. "Shit! Fucking shit." He rushed across, then out, holding it open with one hand, looked. Right, left, right again. He peered into the night, breath vaporizing slightly in the humid air. Another scout, a survey, a reconnoiter, final check. Thorough. Met by disappointment, frustration, then a shout into the shadows, voice cracking soprano. "Bitch! Fucking bitch!" A sag, a shrug, a return. Handkerchief out, pressed against his face, soaking it red.

Still no contact. "Got a smoke?" in enhanced baritone. A cigarette appeared in thick, hammer-hard fingers. A lighter followed, and the first gray breath flooded out, struck unblinking eyes. "Need an ambulance?" Now he looked. Up. Judging tone. Judging size. "She say anything?" A short moment, then a shake of the head. Dark eyes studied gray, then narrowed. "You see anything?" A longer moment, a deeper beat, a bubble down deep started to form, to rise, to burst on a solid surface. A desire to assert. Indignation. Pride. Self-esteem. But then, priorities. A shake of the head. One more look. Verification. Then a nod, and the man stepped forward. Outside Security held the door as he went through, holding his face, laughing now. Falsely vindicated. He faded into the chaos, naked youth dancing on tables, wrinkled age lounging on leather, watching without looking, talking in shouts, laughing in yells. Lasers flashed on expensive gems, solid gold, Spanish silver. Music boomed, swirled through the smoke. He shut the door, muting hell. A moment. Then two. She emerged like a fawn from a grove. Crept forward, hand grasping the rag across her body, face swollen, blood dried, hair a twisted mat, eyes masked by ruined pencil and paint. Thirty, he thought. Not younger. She sagged, knees buckled. He stepped to her. Four paces. Caught her, steadied her, held her with one hand. "My bag." A gasp, a sob. "My bag. Keys. Money." Her eyes looked at the door in horror. He shook his head, definite, probed his pocket, found a bill, pressed it into her palm. "Wait on the corner. Behind the bus stop. Green cab. Ten minutes." She looked at him again, hard and deep, to be sure. Her smashed mouth mouthed silent thanks, then choked, "I'll pay—" He shook her arm, pressed his face down into hers. "Don't come back." She looked, nodded. Stumbled away, out the side door. He followed, made sure, returned. His post. Pulled a cell from his breast pocket. Punched a number, listened, then said, "Yeah. Again. Night work."

Northwest Highway, 3:00 a.m.

He pulled up in a nondescript ten-year-old Chevy Impala—gray, no frills, no distinctions, no front plates—killed the lights, got out, stood for a moment in the amber glow of the arc lights, inspected the parking lot as if it was real estate he might buy. His gaze lingered on the dark edges, shadows bunched like lurking gangs of ghoulis. One more sweep. Careful. He came in. Empty shop, golden light, a lone clerk. Tall, lanky, Ethiopian. Slim mustache and a small beard on the edge of a pointed chin, dozing on his feet, behind black laminate. A textbook open on the rear counter. The bell's jingle animated him. Reminded him. Instructions, policies. The man, older, bowed shoulders, thin face, sharp, hollow, lined, marked by clear eyes, light brown, never still. Not tall, not short. Nondescript. Average. That was the word. A dark blue suit with worn lapels, shiny creases, threadbare, clean. White oxford button-down, black tie, worn loose. Rummled. Driving awhile. All day, maybe. More, maybe. Heavy shoes—wing tips with composite soles. Shined, high gloss. Nothing else looked kempt, neat, new. He was balding. Thin strands, well oiled, raced away from a forehead furrowed, and bushy eyebrows. Short, sharp sideburns, pointed ears flat against a peaked crown. A narrow mouth, sharp amber teeth. Thin lips. Grim. Like a knife scar, like a scratch on a new car. He waited, adjusted from the darkness outside, took in the clerk, nodded a greeting. Silent, unsmiling, ignored. The clerk waited, shifted. Unaccountably uncomfortable. Adjusted items in his reach. A pad, a pen, a small display of packaged fruit, dry cookies. Looked busy, not nervous, but he was nervous. The man inspected the shop. Constricted aisles, small, bright orange plastic booths, shelves of coffee appliances, clever crockery, upscale implements. A ravaged bakery display. Stale pastries, gummy sandwiches left from the day trade. He rolled his shoulders, his neck. Stretched without extending, flexed his

fingers, one of which twisted in an awkward tangent, and again met the clerk's eyes. "Regular coffee?" Starting as if pinched, the clerk nodded to the coffee island in back. Thermos pots and bold carafes. Hot and ready. Checked every half hour. Instructions, regulations, policy. "Self-serve after midnight." The man stared, ugly mouth grim, eyes unblinking, then nodded, walked there directly, not fast, but steady. Like a cat, one foot in front of the other, confident, cautious. Eyes roaming. At the island, he studied the vessels, selected a paper cup and poured, added cream, sugar, stirred, then turned, faced the door, blew on the surface, eyes worked the shop over the rim. Sipped, tested the heat. The clerk watched, looked indirectly, furtively glanced, shifted, wanted to move, for some odd reason, to whistle. His head felt light, neck prickled, brow burned. Fear sprouted in his abdomen. His hands roamed, straightened candy, energy bars, gum, napkins, impulse items near the register. Something to do. He coughed a little, although he didn't have to, swallowed dryly, glanced again at the man, put his hand on the cell phone next to the register, pretended to adjust it, check it. Surreptitiously, he hoped, he punched in three numbers. Didn't call. Ready. The man noticed but didn't show it. He leaned against the island, crossed one foot over the other, drank deeper, looked around, eyes always moving. Watchful. Lights and appliances buzzed white noise, a barely audible hum, like the sound of pulse in the ear. The clerk turned oblique, watched the convex mirror overhead, fidgeted, wanted to walk away, maybe to run. He touched the textbook, then pushed a button on a wall-mounted console. A hiss, then music, low and jazzy. He offered a half-smile. Not returned. He resumed his blank stare, tried to see without watching, tried to hear without listening, willed himself not to shake. The man finished, refilled, added more cream, capped it, brought it forward. Same careful stride, slow and measured. Hands large but thin, thickly veined, hairy knuckles. Right at his side, loose, ready. Left

held the cup lightly. He stepped close, set it down. "What's the book?" The clerk, alarmed, confused, recovered, relieved. "Uh, economics . . . finance. Studying . . . college." He barked with an invisible blush. The man nodded, dismissive. He touched the cup with the twisted finger, put his left hand in a pocket. The clerk named an amount. The man's eyes narrowed. The clerk tried to swallow, couldn't. The man looked at the cup, rediscovered it. "That's a lot." The clerk nodded, tried again to swallow, cleared his throat. A rasp. "Cup and a refill." Then, "Refills are half price." The man's eyes rose, quick and menacing. "You're serious?" The clerk nodded, pointed to a small hand-lettered sign, one of six posted around the shop, verifying instructions, regulations, policy. The man read the words slowly, his lips moving, as if they were in a language he didn't know. "Economics." The thin mouth's corners turned up. "Finance." He shook his head, but his eyes remained fixed on the clerk's. "Fucking bean-counters." In reply, a blank nod. Underarms awash, brow dripping, sweat rolling down his back, his sides. Primal fear. Inexplicable. Instinctive. The man extracted coins from a pocket, studied them, replaced them, opened his coat. The wooden butt of a heavy revolver appeared beneath his left arm, tucked deep. The clerk's head snapped back, heart plummeted to his belly, crushed balls tingled, tried to withdraw into his body, legs dissolved. He wanted to slump. He sought balance, stepped away, hips blocked by the counter behind him. Throat closed, mouth arid as the desert that spawned him. A desperate need to piss. The man removed a battered brown wallet, pulled five crisp singles, cascaded them on the shiny laminate, adjusted them with the twisted finger. The clerk couldn't see them, only the pistol. The man looked right and left, up at the mirror, replaced the wallet, buttoned the coat, checked his watch, although there was a clock on the wall, just over the clerk's head. A reach into the side pocket produced a small, wrinkled piece of paper. He smoothed it out.

The clerk looked down. "You know where that's at?" A beat. A look. "Exactly?" A long stare, half a minute, maybe, and then the clerk made sense of the penciled symbols. At last, he wet his mouth, swallowed hard. "Two blocks down. To the right. Third building." His voice sounded small and far away. One hard nod. Affirmation. He replaced the paper, picked up the cup. "Keep the change." The clerk forced a smile, a nod. "Night work," the man said. "It blows." The clerk grinned wider. "Yes. Sir." Then the happy jangle of the bell, and the clerk breathed. The first of his life. He watched the man stop, survey the lot, get into the Chevy, start it up, pull out. Nevada plate. Brake lights flashed. A right turn. Even a signal. The clerk stared down at the money, the phone, scooped up the bills, punched them into the register, wiped the counter, mopped his face. Same towel. He looked at the empty shop, swallowed, breathed deeply again, heard the jazz, swayed slightly in the golden light, felt the cooling of hot sweat. "Night work," he muttered.

Inwood, 6:30 a.m.

If the cop, lazing against the photo counter, nursing sore feet, a bad back, feeling the weight of twenty-some-odd pounds of equipment and arms, worn all night, could have seen the horizon past the buildings and trees across from the front of the drugstore, he would have watched a growing silver glow warming the night of imminent mortality. Instead, he watched the fat man and the girl. The fat man trudged through the automatic doors. A high-pressure system. Invasive, huge, dominant, calm, confident as daybreak. He placed himself solid amid the wash of anonymous music misting from invisible speakers that seemed to mute in his presence. His head, an oblong ball mounted on a thick pedestal of neck based on a dense beam of muscle. Massive torso, draped by an ugly, strained, faded, flowered shirt worn half-buttoned. A hairless chest swallowed by a bulging gut. Shirt-

tail out to cover a tortured waistband of cargo shorts worn low. Pockets bulged. He stood broadly. Boxy feet planted, like trotters flatly spread, crusty, yellow, jagged nails projecting over toes of flattened rubber shower-shoes. Dense hands, square fingers chewed ragged, raw, fresh-scarred knuckles akimbo at his sides, arms ink-sleeved with incomprehensible blue, green, and red designs—faces, whorls, symbols, and illegible words, chaotic collage. Hair, dyed ghastly yellow, stretched into a greasy miniature ponytail. Thin line of sideburns and curved, thick Fu Manchu affected a gangster style. Twenty years younger, a hundred pounds lighter, a dimension cooler. Tiny pale-blue eyes framed a vulture's beak, held court for a jowled face heavy with thick lips, perpetually pouting. He rested on spurred heels, recumbent inside his mass, poised in personal power, and took inventory of early shoppers browsing bright aisles, full shelves arrayed with the familiar at cut rates. And behind him, the girl waited, as if in queue for something she didn't want. Crouched in the shadow of his bulk, seeking invisibility in plain sight. Mindless patience, still as wounded prey, breathing lightly, hiding in full view. Small, black, timid, displaced. Wispy strands spraying out from poorly braided cornrows. She wore a man's white tee over cutoffs, floppy casings for rope-skinny thighs, balls of knees, shapeless calves falling like spikes onto bony ankles eling into too long, too narrow feet with peeling polished toes in worn leather sandals. Unshielded nipples dented white cotton, tiny juts betraying her age—too young, too old, already dying. Her eyes, black as ebony, uncused, flickered dimly, looked dully at nothing. One orb slanted into an ugly bruise, the other dark pupil was matted by a bright, broken vessel, tinting the edge scarlet. Her right hand cradled her left in long, thin fingers chipped by red paint, the forearm crooked into her body under the tented points, held gingerly, like a baby. Her mouth, slightly parted, too wide, too crooked, lips swollen, nose misshapen in some exquisite way. Ugly. No

other word for it. Except pitiful, maybe. She frowned when he shifted, reclaimed his shade, her acne-pocked cheeks wrinkling in a wince. He waited another moment. Checked the clerk in her company-blue vest, ignorantly busy, ringing up a sale, and then the cop, still leaning on the photo counter, watching him. Casual, calm, curious. With a nod, he snatched a plastic handbasket and marched, heavy paced, lumbering to a rear aisle, the flattened rubber flipping and flopping against the callouses of his soles. She followed two steps behind, as if on a lead, her stalky legs stutter-stepped, nearly limped, as if hobbled. The cop unlimbered, rolled his head and cracked his neck, hefted his utilities, adjusted the black pistol at his waist, strolled forward, stopped briefly in the pretense of adjusting some novelties on display, but kept in view the man and girl, who, now returning, stopped at the cooler, opened a door, then came forward, him slapping, her shambling, nearly stumbling. At the counter, the girl, a pint of chocolate milk, package of cheap sugared pastries in her good hand, waited as he dumped the basket. A jumble. Gauze, peroxide, latex gloves, medicinal tape, iodine, painkillers, antiseptic, bandages, a sling. His head bobbed, she surrendered her loot, reluctant, timid, scowling when her bad arm moved. The clerk, bored, tired, glanced at the clock on the wall, scanned, bagged. "Morning," the cop said, stood off a yard or so, moved his hands to his belt, hooked his thumbs, rocked back on neoprene heels in the classic posture of surety policemen long ago adopted, perfected. A twirling nightstick was wanted. The fat man nodded, stared at the clerk, mouth closed. "Trouble?" The question hung between them like smoke suddenly exhaled in a small airless space, swirling without direction. The fat man's neck reddened. "Accident." Fat hands cupped, bunched the final items for the clerk, who finished, named a price. He dug a wad from a side pocket of the shorts, ignored the cop's startle, and counted out bills. Soiled, wrinkled. Head down, eyes focused, lips slightly

moving with uttered numbers. The ponytail bobbed against the sticky orange orchids on his shirt collar. He turned, money in hand, faced the cop. Eyes pale. Direct. Cold as skim ice. "No big deal." The cop's chocolate eyes flared for a heartbeat. Gaze steady. "Report it?" The fat man's mouth parted. "Just a fender-bender." He took a wheezing breath. "No fault, no problem. Nobody hurt that bad." A confirming nod to the girl, his eyes still matched with the cop's. "Right?" She looked up, found the cop's face, drew away his stare. An instant cry, maybe. A flash, a signal. Maybe. One quick nod, her face found the floor. Her good hand reached for the sack with the milk, the pastry. "Nobody hurt that bad," he repeated. "Nothing can't be handled." For a moment, two, maybe, they stood en tableau, without breathing. Tension taut, atmosphere electric. Overhead, the music shifted to a waltz. The clerk, change made, now suddenly aware, now frozen, eyes on the cop. The girl pulled her arm tighter to her body. Bag dangling. One foot covered the other, one knob of knee folded over the other. Protective. The cop gave first. "She with you?" The fat man appraised her like a stranger. "Right." He swung his gaze to the cop. "Got ID?" The fat man gathered his bags. Casual. He stepped forward, closed the distance. The cop held ground. "No need. Stepdughter." The cop glared. "Right?" The fat man asked the air. She raised her face. A plea, useless without words. Her head moved, barely. The cop studied, unwound, nodded, turned to the kiosk behind him, pretended to adjust a row of perfumes, soaps, bath salts. "Have a nice day." The fat man nodded, the ponytail bobbed. He tacked out the door, a ship unmoored, bags for ballast. The girl trailed like a dinghy on a line. Helpless but to follow. The cop watched them go, saw the yellowing sky, looked at the clerk. Her face a hundred questions. He hiked up his utilities, leaned on the counter, looked her in the eye. "Night work," he said.

FULL MOON

BY LAUREN DAVIS

Pleasant Grove

A cool rain was falling when Danny Contreras awoke to the nightmare and shouted, "Cuidado!" The face of his mother floating, a specter behind his throbbing eyeballs. Way too much crystal meth and tequila last night. Christ knows what else, but he craved hair of the dog. A shot and a rail. The sting in his septum. The burn of the añejo coating his guts. The thought eased the pain and he sat up and gazed around the room as if taking inventory—admiring the open floor plan, the midcentury modern furniture. Raising his arm, he squinted and tried to focus, but his wrist was bare. Oh yeah—the Rolex. He'd let the dope dealer hold it.

He reached for the phone on the night table. Five till nine. He called work and had the secretary he shared with the other midlevel investment brokers cancel his appointments. "Yeah, I know it's the third time this week."

No way was he fighting Central Expressway from Uptown to North Dallas this hungover in the rain. Fuck it—it was Friday. He had the weekend to get the devil out of his system. He could try normal again on Monday.

Normal. He thought about his mother, crying in the nightmare. "Cuidado, mi'jo!" she'd warned, but what was he supposed to be careful of? When she'd died two months ago, that's when he'd started to fuck up, feeling like his life was coming off the rails. He was in Thailand—running down profit margins on a sapphire mine. It was fucking paradise over there. He'd decided to stay