



**sharp and
dangerous
virtues**
A N O V E L

**martha
moody**

SWALLOW PRESS
Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio



2047

a family and a place

HOWARD, AGE TEN, was doing a report on America's two greatest natural wonders, the Heartland Grid and the Grand Canyon.

"The Heartland Grid's not natural, son," Chad said.

Howard gave his father an incredulous look. "It's *plants*," he said. "It's how America feeds the world."

North of Dayton, Ohio, where Chad and Sharis ("It rhymes with Paris," she said) Gribble and their sons, Howard and Leon, lived, there was a polymer fence close to twenty feet high, a fence that went *forever*, surrounding a dedicated agricultural area of over fifty thousand square miles. The Grid was roughly the shape of a nine-by-twelve casserole. Intentional villages dotted its landscape, roads crisscrossing it at ten-mile intervals.

"We never fed the world," Chad said. "We feed ourselves."

"I have pictures of the Grid," Howard said, undeterred. "Miss Bishop says her father went there. He was driving a truck and he picked up lettuces. Only one time, but he got to eat there. He said they had delicious coleslaw."

"I'm sure all their food's delicious. It couldn't be fresher."

"They won't let you spend the night. They say they have too much work."

Chad gave a noncommittal grunt. He didn't believe that too-much-work line, not for one minute. He said, "The Gridians have always been clannish."

Howard shot Chad a questioning look. "They stick together," Chad said. "They live in special towns the government built for them. They don't have visitors or talk with other people. They don't even mo-com with people who aren't them." He searched his mind for an example. "Kind of like the Johnsons"—their next-door neighbors, an older couple with a grown son.

"They're gone," Howard said.

"What do you mean they're gone?"

"The Johnsons moved out. Their house is empty. There's furniture in there, but no car, and no more Johnsons! The Gilberts are gone, too." Neighbors down the hill. "Atunde told me and Leon they were leaving. His mom said Atunde wasn't supposed to tell anyone, but he knew we'd come by wanting to play."

"When did this happen?"

"I don't know. A few days ago. The Johnsons went first."

Good Lord, Chad thought. He had heard of people leaving the city itself, but not suburban neighborhoods like theirs. He felt ill. He thought of the party at their neighbors George and Gentia's a few weeks before. George had said they were sniggering idiots to stay, and Sharis, Chad's own wife, had spoken up to say she wasn't going to teach her kids to flee. "Dayton is our home, and we're staying," she had said.

"Have they told you much about the war in school?" Chad asked Howard now.

Howard looked confused. "You mean the trouble up north? Miss Bishop says it's really far away."

Chad had had, between the ages of about six and nine, a terrible fear of earthworms, not of the worms themselves but what they did. He imagined them writhing and burrowing underground, riddling the soil with tiny tunnels. A footstep

in the wrong place might end up with Chad swallowed by the earth. His relatives would never know what happened.

"I mean the conflict. I mean . . ." Chad was filled with the prickling dread he used to feel when he was sent into his yard to fetch the paper. Parks and the schoolyard were okay—every square inch had been tested—but how could Chad trust his own lawn? "Want me to draw it for you?"

"Sure!"

"Good," Chad said, relieved. Calm them both down. "Where's Leon? Leon should hear this." Leon was seven and had a personality as spiky as his hair. "What do you mean put my head on my pillow? I put my feet on my pillow!" And that was indeed how Leon slept.

"Leon!" Howard screamed. "Daddy wants you!"

Chad went to the kitchen desk drawer for a piece of paper and an old-fashioned pencil. "What's up, Daddy-o?" said Leon. He lit up when he saw the paper and pencil in Chad's hand.

Chad sat down at the big blue kitchen table and pulled out chairs for Howard on one side and Leon on the other. He drew a rounded rectangle wider than it was tall and decorated with appendages—Florida, Maine, Texas. "Okay," he said. "So here we are"—he put an X denoting Dayton below the protuberance that was Michigan (the one entity he'd drawn accurately, he thought, because it looked like a mitten.) "And this whole country, all the U.S., used to be rich and happy and basically the center of the world." To the right of his map, Chad drew a stick figure with a big head and smiling face. Not enough. He put a crown on top.

Chad's father had been an upright, even boring, man, an auditor for American National Bank. But every morning before he went to work he waited with Chad and his brother at the school bus stop and a weird merriment exuded from him. It was only then that Chad's father used The Voice.

"Oh, oh, you boys you are zee terror."

Or: "Your boos driver, she look like a beeg potato."

What Chad remembered most fondly of his father was The Voice. Chad hoped his own boys remembered him by his drawings.

“So that was then,” Chad said, waving at the stick man with the crown. “But then the U.S. got into wars, and then the economy went bad, and then the weather got all crazy—for example, you didn’t have hurricanes come inland like we do now—and there were new pests that ate crops, and before you knew it, it was the Short Times.” He drew an arrow from the figure with the crown to another figure below it, this one slumped and mournful. He sprinkled some tears down the page and put an upside-down crown at the figure’s feet. Howard and Leon laughed in delight.

Chad felt a pang at making jokes about these things. “But it was really bad, the Short Times,” he said. “It went on for years. People didn’t have enough food, and they got tickets for gas and electricity, and the health system got overwhelmed, and . . . Up in what used to be your mom’s old town there was an outbreak of rabies. You know about rabies?” Leon shook his head. “It’s a disease,” Chad said.

“From raccoons?” Howard asked, sounding pleased.

“Exactly.” To brighten the mood Chad started drawing a raccoon. “People were looking in the dump for food, and the raccoons that lived there bit them.”

Leon said, “That looks like a cat.”

“I made the legs too long.”

“Give him big teeth for biting.”

Chad did. Leon giggled.

“But it wasn’t funny, really,” Chad said. “It was terrible. I mean, I was a kid and I wasn’t worried, it was normal life, and then my parents died.” He immediately regretted mentioning this, but Leon seemed unperturbed.

“From raccoons?” Howard asked, his voice anxious.

“No, not from *raccoons*,” Chad said. “From pneumonia. Infections in their lungs. Don’t worry, that wouldn’t happen now. We have better antibiotics.”

Chad's father, in fact, had died over thirteen years before, in February, two months before the announcement of the Grid. Chad's mother died a month later. They were both fifty-four. People died then, during the Short Times. Doctors saw diseases they'd only read about: tuberculosis, measles, cholera. For people with only National Health Care, like Chad's parents, there were shortages of antibiotics. Chad felt a certain gratitude for the timing of his parents' deaths. Most people who'd had friends and relatives die during the Short Times found comfort in their loved ones' unknowing. A death before the Grid was an innocent death.

"At any rate, it was bad," Chad said, putting a big X over the raccoon. "People were desperate. This was the early thirties, and there were all sorts of ideas about how to get more food—that's when people stopped eating meat, for one thing—and then the government destroyed a couple towns in Oregon"—he went back to his map of the U.S., drew a star near the left upper corner—"to set up this enormous farm and, well, that farm was terrifically productive, so the government looked for place to make a humongous farm."

"And we have the best land right here in Ohio!" Howard cried. Chad wondered if he'd heard this from Miss Bishop.

"Can I go?" Leon said. "This is not what I'd call interesting."

"No, Leon, you should hear this." Chad turned to Howard. "Yes, Ohio has great land, flat and fertile and all that, but also this part of the country . . . The towns were dying and a lot of the land was owned by foreign companies, and the U.S. wanted to kick them out." He drew a quick stick figure with one leg up, kicking. "See, Leon? See the man kicking? At any rate, parts of Ohio and Indiana and Illinois were what they picked for the big farm. And a little bit of Michigan." Chad shaded the area. "So they moved all the people out of the towns, and the air force came in with these new disappearance bombs, bombs that basically turned things into dust . . ."

"What kind of things?" Leon asked. "People?"

"No, not people."

“Raccoons?”

“No, Leon, nothing living, bombs that turned buildings into dust, okay? Just buildings. At any rate, then the government brought in soil people and irrigation people and road people and they built the Grid. A little over a year later we had food. It was amazing, really. You had to admire the technology.” He drew another stick figure, this one beaming. “That’s the woman who was president then. Brandee Cooper from Colorado, woman of action.” He added some hair.

“Char,” Howard said, using the latest complimentary term. Leon had lost interest. He had scooted his chair back and was bent over picking at a scab on his knee.

“Your mother was from a town up there,” Chad said. “Where the Grid is now. She grew up in one of the towns that was destroyed. They don’t say destroyed, they say reclaimed.”

“Is that why she doesn’t have parents?”

“Everyone has parents,” Chad said. “Even clones have parents. Well, at least one parent. But yes, that’s why your mom doesn’t have parents. They died during the Gridding. They weren’t killed, nothing like that.” He glanced quickly at Leon, the boy still engrossed in his injury: he had managed to free all but the very central portion of his scab. “It was their choice,” Chad said firmly, as if there were no reason to question it. He didn’t want Howard asking more questions. Sharis, years before, had said they should never tell the boys. “And, okay, so now we’re now and the Grid is great, it works, we eat, so everybody wants it.” Under the map, Chad drew a circle and divided it with several diagonals. “That’s a pie, see? The rest of the world wants a piece of that pie. Because they have their own Short Times now.”

Leon briefly examined the scab sitting on his finger, then popped it in his mouth. Chad decided to ignore this.

Howard said, “Atunde said the rest of the world is against us.”

“Not the whole world. Mexico’s on our side. And lots of countries are neutral. Europe, China, Australia. Look.” Chad

turned the paper over and drew a big circle. He made some shapes for North and South America on the left and Europe and Africa on the right, letting Asia and Australia disappear over the globe's right edge. "These places are against us." He made big scowling faces out of South America and Africa. "They call themselves the Alliance."

"Bye," Leon said, jumping from his chair and heading out the back door.

The previous week, Chad and Sharis had attended a party at their neighbors'. People had been drinking and there was lots of loud conversation.

—For graduation! Sending them to Alabama for graduation! Like it's just a trip.

—And normally she's very organized, but after her office closed she . . .

—And the Calmadol! Ten doses a day at least, and now that you can't get it on your health card, he . . ."

Sharis's voice, in Chad's mind, had been the only clear one. "I'm not going to teach my kids to flee. Dayton is our home and we're staying."

—You should hear our neighbor who's in air force intelligence. There's a lot of dissention in the Alliance we don't hear about. He says the Africans hate the Suds.

—You want to be ruled by fear? Wumba Bumba to that African music!

"They aren't *Africans*," Sharis had said. "They're regular Americans."

Walking home with Chad, Sharis had spoken again about the Melano custodian in the church in downtown Dayton where she'd stayed the night after the Gridding. "Are you the light man?" she'd asked, and she saw again the worried concern on his face.

The door slammed behind Leon. Chad tried not to wince. "And then," Chad said to Howard, "and this really, *really* upset people, Canada went against us. Canada, our neighbor to

the north. “Here’s us”—Chad made a rough rectangle—“and here’s Canada.” He filled this in with angry crosshatches. “So that’s how the Alliance can get into Cleveland and threaten to capture the Grid. There’s Lake Erie up here”—this part of the drawing was getting crowded, so Chad did no more than tap the area—“and Cleveland’s on the south side of the lake and Canada is right across the water. So it’s handy for the Alliance to have Canada helping them. You know if our enemies got the Grid it would really change things.” Chad hesitated. “People can’t believe it about Canada,” he said.

Now Howard was looking bored, so Chad sketched another animal to the right of the globe.

“Is that a cow?” Howard said.

“No, no, no,” Chad said. He added a stick figure in a big hat to the back of his animal. “That’s a Canadian Mountie. A policeman on a horse. When I was a kid, my favorite movie was about Mounties.”

“Okay.” Howard bent over and pulled on his shoes, his broad back and wide buttocks facing Chad. Howard’s weight was a comfort to Chad: it would take Howard a long time to starve.

“The Alliance won’t capture the Grid, though, don’t worry,” Chad said. “It’s really well defended. Bristling with missiles.” To the left of the globe, Chad drew some fat arrows pointing upward. He considered these a moment, then found himself doodling wiggly curls all over the paper. What in the world was he drawing? Worms.

Howard stood. “I’m going outside now? I’ve got to help Leon with his fort.” Leon was the brother with ideas. He was also way too skinny.

“Sure.” Chad crumpled the paper. “You’ll need to pick something else, though. As a natural wonder. There’s a reason they call the Grid communities *intentional* villages. Because the Grid’s not . . .”

“I’ll ask Miss Bishop,” Howard said, disappearing out the door.

tuuro and the boy

AT WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN, the church in downtown Dayton where Tuuro worked, the new (five years) pastor liked to call him Our Director, using a hearty, booming voice that made Tuuro squirm inside. Tuuro was in maintenance. Aunt Stella, not Tuuro's real relative but his godmother or whatever she was, liked to say people could have all the automation and lifestyle control they wanted, but somebody had to sweep the floors. Tuuro swept the floors. He liked his job, the piles of crumbs and lint and plastic children's rings and bits of straw (straw! where did that come from?) he accumulated at the end of a Sunday. The detritus of the world consoled him with its humble dailiness, and Tuuro enjoyed disposing of it handily, lifting a burden and tossing it away. Once he wrote a ditty about it:

*The dust is flying in the air
the lint is going too.
If you think clean is Godly I
sure have the church for you.*

Irreverent, really. Maybe slightly hostile. Not a poem he would have recited to the pastor. Tuuro knew what he could

say to people or not. He had a daughter, Lanita, who lived with her mother outside Chattanooga. Tuuro had lived with Lanita's mother, Naomi, for almost seven years, and the relationship had split up, not, Tuuro had come to realize, over his lack of ambition, as Naomi had told him at the time, but because of the way Naomi had come to picture Tuuro. He knew how he looked: tall, darker than mahogany, dignified, with a face something like a cat's, high cheekbones and alert eyes. On the street mothers jabbed their daughters to take a look. But the Tuuro Naomi saw looked nothing like this man: her Tuuro was smaller, and he was cringing. He looked to Naomi, Tuuro realized, the way he looked to himself.

Not that he wasn't a good man, as Naomi liked to say, but Naomi wanted something more. No, she wanted something *other*: lust, scenes in front of the neighbors, a man who would twist her against the wall and say, Shut up, woman. She found that man. She and the wild man fled Ohio, landing in Chattanooga when a wire burned out in their car. Then something happened, Tuuro was never clear what. The original wild man was now in prison, and a new, slightly less wild man lived with Naomi. Tuuro was under no obligation to do so—the court had sided with him—but he deposited money in Naomi's account monthly to help cover Lanita's expenses. He lived for the rare days he saw his daughter. She was six.

"Can't she stay with me when you're back in Ohio?"

Naomi's sigh seared through the phone. Naomi was coming to visit her sister in Columbus.

"I send you money every month, Naomi," Tuuro said. "What more do you want?"

"Oh, I know, Tuuro. You're so *good*."

Tuuro bit his lip. "Why can't Lanita stay here with me while you're at your sister's?"

"Is it safe?"

"Of course it's safe. It's fine here. It's normal." Safer than Columbus, he was thinking. The quickest way from Dayton

to Columbus was driving through the Grid, on one of the walled-off interstates.

“It is not normal.”

“Naomi. Cleveland is far away.”

Naomi gave another heavy sigh. “All right, she can stay with you. I’ll bring her by Thursday late and pick her up Sunday. But don’t you be feeding her a lot of sweets. I’ve got her off sweets.”

“Did the sweets hurt her? Is she fat?”

“Sweets always hurt,” Naomi said. “Always. Nothing hurts like sweets.”

“**WHAT DO YOU** want for breakfast? Cereal? Eggs?” Tuuro’s apartment was the entire second story of a small frame house. His kitchen and living room stretched across the back, and the two bedrooms took up the front. His landlady lived downstairs. The house was two houses away from the house in which Paul Laurence Dunbar, the great African American (although people didn’t use that term now; the preferred word now was Melano) poet, had been born. The Dunbar house was a historical site that had never gotten much traffic, and since the Short Times its windows had been boarded up and its grass rarely mowed.

Lanita, Tuuro’s daughter, sat in an old wooden chair at the kitchen table, her feet swinging. Tuuro had sweet rolls in the breadbox, but thinking of Naomi he didn’t dare offer them.

“I want an egg that’s scrambled.”

It took Tuuro a moment of rummaging in his refrigerator to realize he had no butter. “I can’t cook that, Muffin. I don’t have the butter to cook it in.”

Lanita regarded him solemnly, and he saw her mother’s contempt in the wrinkling of her forehead.

“I’m disappointing you,” he said. She didn’t deny it. “How about a three-minute egg?” Tuuro asked, inspired. “You don’t need butter for that.”

“A three-*minute* egg?” Her voice was skeptical.

“You boil it three minutes. It’s good. You’ll see.”

Maybe six minutes later the egg was on her plate, chopped up and runny, and Lanita was eating it with a large spoon, eyes down and face serious, concentrating on every drip, and Tuuro, watching her, felt not swept, not washed, but swamped with love for her, so sloshily heavy he could barely stand.

She pushed the empty plate away and looked up with her luminous eyes. “Another one.”

She ate three, one by one, which Tuuro told her was nine-minute eggs, and when he picked her plate up from beside the sink he almost asked her, “Did you wash this?” before he realized the plate had been truly licked clean.

“You liked it,” he said. “You liked what I made for you.” The gratitude in his voice almost embarrassed him. To cover himself he made one of his silly rhymes:

Three-minute eggs
Three-minute eggs
My baby begs
For three-minute eggs

“Nine-minute eggs!” Lanita complained, smiling. She came over to him and wrapped her arms around his waist, and then she stood beside him, hand hanging on the back of his belt, a silent companion as he washed the dishes.

AND THEN LANITA was gone, back to Chattanooga, and the pastor was standing behind the desk in his office saying, “Tuuro, how are you?” and stretching out his hand. Tuuro reached out warily to shake it. Once the pastor’s hand had held a tiny pillow that made a fart, once a device that snapped Tuuro’s fingers, once a live toad. The pastor didn’t play these tricks on his parishioners. “Don’t worry,” the pastor chuckled now. “Vera cut off my access to the Magic Source.”

“Good,” Tuuro said—a remark as close to rebellion as he dared go.

The pastor waved Tuuro to a chair, then sat behind his desk and abstractedly tugged at his ear. “Tell me, did you have any bread left over from the Palm Sunday potluck?”

It was almost July, and Palm Sunday had been in April. Did the pastor think Tuuro’s memory was that good? It had been a cold spring, with several late snows. The weather experiments of the early thirties had, as an unexpected side effect, resulted in “old”-style winters and hot summers: it often snowed by Thanksgiving. “If I did I fed it to the birds.”

“That’s Christian, I suppose. Our brethren birds. How about after the Easter reception? Tequila Huntington said there was a whole sponge cake and half a loaf of lemon bread in the cupboard by the fridge.”

Maybe it was his race, or his temperament, or some forgotten trauma of his childhood, but Tuuro was always steeling himself for news of what he had done wrong. It made him cringe to think of himself cringing, but there it was. And he did do things wrong, didn’t he? He wasn’t perfect, although there were moments, turning to inspect the Sunday school classrooms before he flicked off the light, he felt he was. “Are you the janitor did the bathrooms?” someone would ask, and Tuuro would freeze, wondering what he had missed. “That’s the cleanest bathroom I ever seen!” the person might say, and Tuuro would be flooded with gratitude and relief and, yes, surprise; his face would light up in what he knew was a rewarding way. He got hundreds of compliments. He was a kind and conscientious man and he did his work well. But he could never quite believe that people would praise him and not find the fault.

So when someone found a fault, Tuuro accepted it. Hearing his mistakes was almost a relief. “I didn’t see any extra food at Easter,” he said now. “Maybe I should have.”

“There are some things missing,” The pastor said. “A sterling silver plate, and Jip Cooper brought a cut-glass server.”

Tuuro shook his head. "I'd remember those, I think. I'm pretty sure I didn't . . ."

"Well, that's too bad. No one hanging around that night? No intrusive interlopers?"

The pastor used phrases like that in sermons: fair-weather Philistines; complacent Christians; reductive religionists. He would never dream that Tuuro, listening from his station in the supply room behind the pulpit, would think of them as vacant phrases. "No," Tuuro said.

"Too bad." The pastor waved his dismissal and Tuuro was already to the door when the next question came: "Have you checked the narthex lately?"

The narthex was the anteroom at the back of the sanctuary where people stood and gathered before and after the service. Tuuro remembered starting this job and not knowing what a narthex was. Now his chest tightened and his tongue felt too big for his mouth: what else had he done wrong? "I cleaned it Sunday after services."

"All of it? I was in there to pick up some hymnals for the Chorale Society, and I noticed some brownish streaks on the cupboard beside the front door. Low down. Isn't that strange, I thought, Tuuro doesn't usually miss things. See? You have us spoiled."

In the narthex the late afternoon sunlight patched the hot and humid air with pinks and greens. The narthex was separated by a wall of stained glass from the sanctuary. At one end of the narthex, where Tuuro entered, a hall led to the church classrooms, social hall, and offices. Once upon a time, the whole sanctuary/narthex complex was air-conditioned all week, but those days of excess were long gone. Now the only steady air-conditioning was in the pastor's office. Tuuro opened the big front doors to get some air, glancing at the lower cabinets as he passed them. Brown streaks. The pastor was right.

Tuuro flipped the overhead light on in the narthex and walked down the side aisle of the sanctuary to the maintenance closet, where he filled his wheeled bucket with water

and soap and rags. "Fastidious boy," his Aunt Stella used to call him.

Back in the narthex, Tuuro squatted. A whole wall of oak cupboards flanked the front door, their shelves filled with hymnals and prayer books, a ledge separating the cupboards into lower and upper sections. The hymnals kept in the bottom cupboards were the old ones, rarely used. And it was on the doors of these cupboards, inches from the floor and running horizontally, that Tuuro examined the series of brown streaks. He swiped at one with a wet rag. Naomi, his ex, had had terrible periods, dripping out of her and onto the bathroom floor. The reddish brown on Tuuro's rag looked familiar. Blood.

Not dripped, as if it had spilled from someone. Not beside a doorknob as if someone had scraped a hand. But low on a cupboard, a thing a person shouldn't brush against at that level. And going on for inches, no feet, maybe three feet, as if a bloody something had been dragged alongside the wood, although there were (Tuuro checked now) no spots of blood on the floor.

Tuuro stood and shut the big front doors.

Tuuro knew what he expected when he opened the cupboard. So much violence since the Gridding, so many refugees, people stripped from their surroundings and turned casteless and angry, unfettered by grandmothers and neighborhood policemen and people who knew their names. The troublemakers were largely young males. The other day a woman's body had been found wedged behind a door at the public library. Instinctively, Tuuro pinched his nostrils as he opened the cupboard door.

It was a boy. A small Melano boy, not more than five years old, curled up in the cupboard facing out as if he were simply hiding, his nappy head tucked down to his chest. Tuuro touched his shoulder, cold and stiff. He wrapped his arms around the small chest and unwedged the body from the cupboard, slipped it on its side onto the floor. The boy's face had

a pleading, confused look. Tuuro felt for a second as if he were looking at himself.

Tuuro's clearest memory of his mother was her shoes. A blue pair with suede appliquéd sea-stars, an olive-green pair with seams stitched in a yellow zigzag. His mother liked to scoop Tuuro up so his legs dangled. A lilac smell. After she was shot by the man Tuuro called Uncle, Tuuro was raised not by his father (no one was raised by a father) but by his great-aunt and his grandmother Tati, who lived together in a welfare apartment that was actually Tati's, where Tuuro had to scoop his toys and himself under the bed when the caseworker arrived, because children were not allowed. The great-aunt had an ex-sister-in-law Tuuro was told to call Aunt Stella, who lived in an apartment down the hall. "To whence are you headed, little man?" she might ask. "To whom are you carrying that candy?" A stickler for grammar. She had what Tuuro later learned was an erect carriage: she always stood high with her neck extended, like an African queen, like a Zulu, she said. Tuuro could be Zulu, she liked to point out, that height and those high, wide cheekbones and almond-shaped eyes. Really, a remarkable-looking people.

People who adopted Melano boys got subsidies from the state of Ohio, because people didn't want to adopt Melano boys. "That adopting you should require a bribery is a tragedy and a crime," Aunt Stella said. "I couldn't be sure which it is more." But she and Tuuro would live better if she adopted him. They could leave this ill-kempt building with its slovenly occupants and rent a house with a yard and honeysuckles edging the back fence. A back door as well as a front one, three steps up from the yard to the kitchen. They would be a family. Tuuro could call her Mom. Would he mind calling her Mom? Or would that be sad for him?

"I could call you Mom," Tuuro said.

In his dream of how it was, she indeed adopted him. They moved to their little house in Englewood. Tuuro went to a good school and wore a uniform; when he got off the bus each

tuuro and the boy

afternoon, Aunt Stella was waiting by the fire hydrant. They had a dog. They barbequed in summer. Tuuro spoke correctly. No one stomped on anybody's heart.

It had been, in its way, a terrible childhood, not because he was unwanted but because after his mother's death he was wanted too much, by three aging, angry women who each had their own purposes and plans. Tuuro remembered sitting on the brown plaid couch at Tati's, eyes darting from face to face as he tried to figure out what they wanted, to whom he should acquiesce, to whom he should say "to whom." Now Tuuro saw in the dead boy's face the same confused pain that he had felt, and all Tuuro wanted was to make it end.

He picked up the body and carried it to his supply closet behind the pulpit, which no person but Tuuro ever entered, cleared a space on the bench against the wall there, and set the boy down. He could not get the boy uncurled. There was a wound in the left chest, a complicated thing with congealed blood mixed with torn fabric, an area he would have to clean, Tuuro knew, but for now something he chose to ignore. There was a streak of dried blood coming out of the right ear. Tuuro turned the light off in the supply closet, stood outside it praying the Lord's Prayer for himself more than the boy, then closed and locked the door.

He took a ten-minute bus ride home. He left his apartment to return to the church with a duffel bag full of supplies, remembering even the hat to cover the wounded ear.

He took off the boy's clothes and, starting with his face, washed him with a washcloth scented with cologne, cleaning off every part of him, even the bits of blood next to his wounds—which must be knife wounds—in his chest. As he worked he dried the boy with his fluffiest towel. Under the boy's blue shorts there was a surprise, dried stains on his white underpants, urine and stool and blood, which wasn't right, which hurt Tuuro in his soul. He said the Lord's Prayer again, left the body on the bench, the towel carefully draped

over it, locked the door, and took a bus to K-Bob's East to buy clean underpants, carrying the soiled underwear in a paper bag that he dumped in a bin outside the store. He bought the best children's underwear they had, boxer shorts in red silk with a black waistband. He returned to the church, finished his washing, oiled the body especially over the knees and elbows, where the skin was ashy, dressed the boy in the boxer shorts, and wrapped him in a red-and-green-and-black scarf Naomi had once given him for Christmas. Tuuro then shut the door to the closet again and walked to the social hall to get wood for the coffin.

Tuuro went through the planks of wood stored at the back of the stage. No one would miss a few boards. It was evening now, but still light out, and Tuuro checked the parking lot through the window to be sure the pastor's car was gone. Making a coffin would involve banging. Tuuro knew his boss's habits: unless there was a committee meeting—unlikely in the summer—the pastor would not be back during the evening.

By the time the boy was nestled on his side in his coffin, his lips over his broad white teeth oiled, a drop of cologne placed in the indentation below his nostrils, the city was almost dark. These days there were fewer and fewer lights at night, and Tuuro wanted the burial finished before he had to use a light to see. "Good-bye, my son," he said, kissing the boy's forehead, and then he hammered the board onto the coffin's top. It was sad to no longer see or touch him: Tuuro thought of the boy's puzzled face, his long fingers and slender wrists.

He dug a hole in a bare patch behind a prickly shrub in the church garden, a place Tuuro had never liked much (the volunteer gardeners were lazy) but one that would have to do. The hole was maybe a bit sloppy, not quite deep enough, but every minute it was darker and Tuuro wanted to be done. Beads of sweat dripped from his nose. He laid the coffin in the hole and shoveled dirt over it. The hollow thuds echoed like cannon shots, the worst sound in the world.

Another prayer.

But where was the service? The boy deserved the service.

Why am I creeping? Tuuro thought. Why don't I put the lights on? But he was creeping, without the lights on, through the narthex and past the social hall and the classrooms and into the pastor's office, a place which, for the sake of cleaning, Tuuro had a key.

There, Tuuro closed the curtains and put the light on. He went through the pastor's computer index, then his bookshelves. *The Book of Presbyterian Liturgy. Seasons of Life. Today's Rituals for Today's Times.* He finally found the service he wanted ("ashes to ashes, dust to dust") in a book with a broken spine that made him sneeze as he leafed through it. He took the book outside and, with a flashlight, read the entire service over the grave. He replaced the book in the pastor's office. Then, because it was too late for the buses to be running, Tuuro walked the three miles home.

TUURO BOLTED awake in the middle of the night: *But he has a mother.*

A cold sweat washed over him. He got up and stood over the toilet, wanting to vomit.

So what if Tuuro didn't have a mother, so what if other women, not his mother, fought over him? Why in the world did he assume the same about the boy? The boy who was just a boy, maybe four, maybe five, who lay now in the dark, warm ground. Of course the boy's mother, his only mother, his true and real mother, was frantic now, looking for him.

Tuuro dressed and ran back to the church, his left little toe sore, a blister rubbed open, the air still hot and sticky even as the dawn made a pink stain in the sky. He would unearth the coffin, go into the church, call the police to tell them what he'd found. The police would say oh yes, thank you for calling, we have the mother right here. They would bring the mother over in their car, her eyes like draining holes in her broad face, but

when Tuuro prized the coffin open (he hadn't used that many nails), she would understand. As terrible as her son's fate had been, Tuuro had, in his small way, eased the pain of it. He pictured the boy's mother kissing her son's face, running her hand over the boy's thin shoulders, touching the scarf with which Tuuro had dressed him, turning her eyes to meet Tuuro's, acknowledging in that gaze their mutual love for the boy.

By now it was light out. If he was lucky, if he kept running, this could all be over before the pastor showed up to his office.

Two blocks from the church a big dog ran down the center of the street, a twist of red and black and green trailing from his mouth. Tuuro broke into a cry, understanding. He had forgotten about the dogs.

There were scores of dogs, newly feral, that had been abandoned to the streets when people left Dayton. During the Short Times abandoned dogs had been a problem, too, but now the situation was worse, because most members of the Containment Squad were volunteers from the southern—the wealthier—suburbs, and a disproportionate number of those people had found a way out of town. Tuuro had heard that the Containment people now simply shot dogs in the street. As Tuuro ran now he cursed himself for not making the coffin stronger, for not burying it deeper, and he begged God again and again to let the boy's body be intact. He was so worried about the dogs he never imagined police cars and a van outside the church. He didn't notice the horde of people, some in uniform, in the garden.

Who is this? Why are they here? Tuuro thought when an arm stopped him. Then, even worse, he spotted the pastor. "Tuuro!" the pastor cried, lifting his hands in the air. "Do you know anything *about* this?"

THE LAWYER'S NAME was Brandon English. He was the color of a peeled potato, stocky, probably fifty, wearing a rumpled

shirt and pants it looked like he'd slept in. For Tuuro, who kept himself neat, the attorney's disdain for his own appearance was puzzling. It might be alcohol, it might be a runaway wife, it might be so much power that looks didn't matter.

"Mr. Tuuro," the lawyer said. "Don't tell me if they roughed you up." He removed his perc from his pocket, set it on the table between them, then slumped over its tiny holographic screen. He did have power, Tuuro thought: those holo-screens were expensive. After some minutes he looked at Tuuro with an unvarnished weariness and said, "First off, you need to know something: this boy of yours is Nenonene's grandson."

Nay-no-nay-nay. The name was somehow familiar. Tuuro ran through his list of neighbors. No. Tuuro said, "Does the boy have a mother?"

"Of course he has a mother!" Mr. English closed his eyes; when he opened them he looked, if possible, even wearier. "Even in our crazy modern world, a child has a mother. But it's Nenonene's *son* that is the father. I don't know who the mother is. Some woman. The wife of Nenonene's son."

Tuuro stared. The boy did have a mother.

"Nenonene!" English repeated. "The general. The African. The one who runs the Alliance from that hotel basement up in Cleveland."

Tuuro tried to shift his mind from the mother to a famous grandfather, but it was an ungainly process, like an old machine slipping laboriously into gear. Of course Tuuro knew Nenonene! Everyone knew Nenonene. But as a name, a concept, not as a real person.

"My God," Tuuro said after a moment. "Nenonene is the enemy. What was this boy doing in Dayton?"

English shook his head impatiently. "His parents live here. Nenonene's son is an American citizen. He has a PhD from somewhere south. International finance or global economics, something like that. He teaches at Wright State. He didn't keep his father's name. The son's name is Norris. Ken Norris."

Tuuro nodded blankly, trying to take it in. Still, the boy had a mother. “And this little boy, what was his name?”

“Cubby Norris.” A very American name. Not a name you’d expect for Nenonene’s grandson. Maybe the mother had picked it.

“Does Cubby”—Tuuro paused on the name; you could say the boy had been hidden in a cubbyhole; how savage, to make a name into a place of death—“have brothers or sisters?”

“Not currently. The wife is pregnant. Very pregnant.” English hesitated. “I saw her as I came in. She’d just seen the body.”

“The boy was young.”

“Four and a half. He was tall.”

“How is the mother?”

“Devastated!” A look of incredulity; a quick glance around the room. “What do you think?”

“I wanted to talk to her. I wanted to tell her I cared.”

English’s voice turned cold. “How long had you cared?”

“Since I found him! I never knew him alive. I told the policeman everything, don’t you have . . . ?” And Tuuro waved at English’s holographic screen.

At this, English made the holo-screen disappear. He sat for a moment, considering Tuuro, the sides of his cheeks moving as if he were chewing at their insides. “Let me ask you this straight out: Are you a homosexual?”

“Oh no,” Tuuro smiled. “Never.”

“Why are you smiling?”

Tuuro straightened his face. “It’s ridiculous. It’s something I never considered.”

“You speak well. How far did you go in school?”

“I finished my first year at Sinclair.” The local community college.

“Why didn’t you go on?”

Tuuro shrugged helplessly. “Money.”

“Reasonable. Are you political?”

“Political?” Tuuro laughed awkwardly. “I’ve never voted. I know it’s a duty, but . . .”

“You didn’t know about the boy’s connection to Nenonene?”

“How could I know? I come across this, this”—Tuuro saw again the boy’s tucked head—“tragedy, this small boy dead in my church, and I picked him up and . . .” “My” church, he’d said: not something he would say in front of the pastor.

“I’m your lawyer,” English interrupted. “Don’t tell me things I shouldn’t know.” He leaned into the table. “Now,” he said, “it would be absurd to think you hurt this boy to send a message to Nenonene, am I correct?”

Tuuro stared.

“Or to his son. You might be sending a message to his son. But it would be absurd to think that. It was a simple crime of passion, right?”

“A crime? I never hurt this boy. I came upon him, I saw the . . .”

“You didn’t do it.”

“He was a boy! A little child.”

“No conspiracy. Absolutely no political motive.”

“I went home to get him a blanket, I took a hat for him.”

A light had appeared in English’s eye; he sat up a straighter. “This wasn’t a molest-y thing.”

“It was like he was me!”

“You didn’t do it,” English repeated, wonderment in his voice. “Well, the genetics will take care of that.”

“It’s terrible to find the body of a child,” Tuuro said. “I have a child.”

“Okay, okay, I believe you.” English sighed. His shoulders sank, the spark that had seized him suddenly extinguished. “But damn, you managed to do right by the wrong body.”

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