

The Abbreviated Life of Whitney Bascombe

Whitney Bascombe was one of the last of her kind—at least in the more developed American hemisphere—to be subjected to that brutal school of parenting in which actualities were starkly acknowledged. Her antecedents, who settled the Plains in houses of sod or battled natives on their inevitable progress west, were pragmatists by necessity; survival required a singularity of purpose that left no room for fancy or compassion. To believe otherwise was to invite—rather than merely delay—the mortal exigencies of taming a continent.

The pragmatism of Whitney’s mother could arguably be attributed to similar circumstances. She was abandoned by Whitney’s father, the corporate productivity assessor Harold Bascombe, in the second trimester—to paraphrase that rather tired commercial bromide, what happened at the industry’s annual spring convention did not stay in Vegas. Sheila Bascombe carried to term through double shifts at her local House of Tapas. What would have been the laying-in for her forbears she spent on her feet during a week promoting the franchise’s new brunch menu; she disguised her condition using loose garments that had the added advantage of curtailing harassment by her unscrupulous supervisor. She had just put in an order for an Iberian Omelet with a side of Maple Bacon Churros when she could no longer dissemble the pain of incipient contractions. Her water broke as she clutched the serape fringe of the life-size Pancho Tortilla mascot that ushered “Caballeros” and “Damas” towards the restrooms. If she ever allowed herself a fear proportional to her circumstances, it was perhaps now, as she lost consciousness beneath Pancho’s sleepy grin and polka dot stubble. Had her mother’s labor begun several years later, Whitney Bascombe would have been greeted by the possibly more propitious—and certainly more culturally sensitive—avian mascot Gary Gallina.

Sheila’s supervisor was unprepared for a live birth on the floor of his restaurant, but he was generous with the new mother, granting her permanent maternity leave and the entire contents of that night’s tip jar. Fortunately, her search for gainful reemployment would not be long delayed. While she and her infant daughter were rushed to the nearest emergency room for examination, lack of adequate insurance saved both from a long hospital stay.

Whitney’s own education began not much later, at the age of two and a half. Her mother by this point had settled into an indifferent marriage with an associate editor in the textbook division of Dumont and Dunn. Whitney’s stepfather was an aspiring novelist, which is to say

that his cultivation of others' words left him too exhausted to care when he managed to steal an hour or two for his own. Nevertheless, he had managed to take the manuscript of *Muses and Miscreants*—a fictionalized memoir of his years as an expatriate artist in Central and South America—through three and a half drafts. As extramarital activities go, those of Sheila's second husband were infinitely preferable to those of the first. She tolerated his blandness as a life partner and, at times, even sympathized with his frustration as an artist, but she never forgot the true purpose of long-term commitment: as credit against contingencies swarming just beyond the sphere of the predictable.

The toddler Whitney Bascombe's first encounter with this metaphysics occurred on returning with her mother to the family sedan after their weekly grocery run. She glanced over her shoulder from her berth in the foldout seat of a shopping cart. Her mother struggled with the capricious lock on the sedan trunk, ignoring the pile of black and gray feathers that rippled feebly between the lines of their parking space. The girl recognized the shape of wings and a beak, but the neck seemed strangely elongated against the muddy pavement.

"Bird sleep?" asked Whitney.

Her mother looked down at the pigeon clumped at her feet. At last the trunk yielded. "Not asleep," she answered. "Dead." She began unloading the cart.

Whitney looked curiously at her mother. "When bird wake up?" she asked.

"Never," replied her mother. She kicked the corpse aside as she handled a particularly heavy paper bag. Whitney watched the sodden feathers roll away and stop against the concrete edge of an island. The wind picked up, severing the remains of a wing from the collapsed body. The cart, nearly empty, shook loose underneath.

"Why?" wailed Whitney as she watched her mother slowly retreat in the forceful gust.

Her mother shut the trunk and arrested the cart with two fingers thrust through the wide metal mesh. "Who knows?" she replied, brusquely lifting her daughter from her seat.

Whitney's cries began to draw the attention of nearby patrons exiting the store. "Take bird home!" she screamed.

Sheila Bascombe set her daughter gently down and wiped the tears streaking her cheeks. "Dead things don't go home," she said.

"Take bird home!" Whitney insisted.

Sheila now grasped her daughter firmly by the waist. She looked intently into her pale blue eyes, the only trace that remained of her father. "Dead stay," she said, pointing at the broken bird. "Alive home. Are you dead or alive?"

Whitney studied the pigeon; she felt no less sad or disgusted by the corruption that had burst suddenly from its feathers. But she remembered now it was Friday, tomato soup, Tater Bite, and fish stick day. She swallowed in anticipation and her saliva absorbed the cold metallic taste of rain. “Alive,” she answered, allowing herself to be lifted into the car.

The origins of Whitney Bascombe’s uncompromising instinct for survival are not hard to trace; its rhetorical and aesthetic manifestations, by contrast, are less clearly foreshadowed. She was by all accounts a typical child, with a not unexpected record of demerits for talking in class and passing notes. Her physiognomy betrayed none of the severity that would mark her career as an editor. Ironically, if the Dickensian storyteller were to look for the future bane of the digressive or imprecise, he or she would inevitably look to Whitney’s younger half-sister Iris. Born two years into Sheila’s remarriage, Iris possessed none of the softness or ostentation of her namesake. Whitney was always the prettier sister, with a roundness to her face and body that in the child was adorable, and in the young girl mildly disquieting. The sisters lived together peaceably, Iris in hopeless emulation of Whitney, Whitney in the authority imparted by her unworthy adversary.

Whitney’s editorial talents arose fully formed in her sophomore year of high school. Having procrastinated until the night before to begin a short story due the following morning in English, she spent several blank-faced hours before her computer screen before retreating downstairs, less for sustenance from the family’s well-stocked refrigerator than for relief from her complete lack of ideas. She passed by her stepfather’s study. The open door revealed that the desk light was still on. The study was not forbidden territory for the children; Whitney’s original purpose, in fact, was quite innocent and responsible—her mother, having never relinquished her parsimonious caution, had instilled in her eldest a constant vigilance against waste of all kinds. She was about to extinguish the squandered light when she saw the latest version of her stepfather’s manuscript; its rubber band fastening had been barely removed before Iris called down to be tucked in. Whitney began reading. Even at her age, she recognized the wooden dialogue and clumsy lyricism of the amateur. But beneath the excesses, she sensed a solid foundation of plot that could yet be salvaged with judicious pruning. She turned off the light, took the stack of penciled pages, and proceeded upstairs, pausing briefly to assure herself of the even breaths continuing from behind her parents’ door.

By 5:48 the next morning—leaving her a mere twelve minutes to sneak down and replace the borrowed manuscript before the blare of her mother’s alarm—Whitney had extracted her first published work from the rubble and scaffolding of her stepfather’s novel. To call it plagiarism

would be to overlook the delicacy and craft of her excisions. One could just as well accuse the sculptor of stealing from the stone. And the young editor did make several changes to cover her tracks, transferring the action to Africa and changing the age, gender, and vocation of the first-person narrator from that of a twentysomething male apprentice artist to that of an orphaned teenaged female trying to find herself. Ironically, these very changes, hastily inserted to imbue her work with a semblance of originality, undermined the intended effect. This was particularly noticeable in the central motif of the now rechristened “Song of the Hummingbird”—it is unclear whether the Latin American species described at length in the original would have existed “on the arid plains of Nairobi.” Such questionable verisimilitude was lost, however, on Whitney’s English teacher, who also served as faculty advisor for *The Beacon*; she recognized in her pupil’s narrative distillation—nonetheless, at 15 double-spaced pages, a veritable epic by the standards of student composition—just the kind of precocious insight lacking in the pages of the student newspaper. The story took up three and a half pages in the tabloid’s final spring semester issue, and was awarded first prize for fiction in the school’s annual creative writing competition. The award assembly included readings by the winners of each category. Whether Whitney suffered any crisis of conscience as she approached the podium is unclear from the available record. Her mother, seated next to her husband in the auditorium’s third row, center, dissembled her disappointment that the fiction prize was paid not in cash but credit for more books. As the most substantial winning writer, Whitney could only read a portion of her piece, but it only took the first page for her stepfather to recognize the source of her inspiration. He vacillated wordlessly as he listened between disbelief, denial, and a rage he allowed himself only in dreams or the most removed of solitudes. The parallels with grief and mourning are not incidental; for, as he listened to his experiences emerge sparsely fledged but muscular in their denuded essence, he apprehended the frailty of his stylistic excesses and the vanity that prompted his sustaining of them. For the rest of his life, he would wield his blue pencil—and, for a time, a digital pen—with competence and occasional flair. But he never again resumed more creative endeavors. Nor did he ever tarnish the occasion of his stepdaughter’s earliest triumph.

Even if one could circumvent the legal barriers involved, her undergraduate records would be forever lost to the diligent researcher, victims of a freakish electrical storm and her institution’s spendthrift investment in data preservation.¹ She had to have pursued graduate study at some point in order to compete successfully for editorial work, if not at the entry-level then certainly

1. Kelly Dyer, “Storm Erases University Records,” *The Courier-Dispatch*, (2003): B+.

when she interviewed for the ambitious entrepreneurs who founded the New Media Consortium in 1999. In the Fall 1997 edition of the *Horn and Laurel* alumni magazine, the master's candidate seen scowling in profile at one of the Romulus Pitkin Library's new high-speed search terminals strongly resembles Whitney Bascombe; that said, the more one looks at the image, the more the resemblance seems to slip into any number of possibilities. The caption writer, perhaps more concerned with detailing the specifications of the larger, high-resolution screen and simplified graphic menu, omitted the identity of the student pictured. If Whitney was a graduate student, she was not interested in building a recognized reputation within her discipline. She is completely absent from departmental and university newsletters where aspiring scholars plant the first shallow roots of their *curricula vitae*.

This does not mean, however, she was not doing her part for the profession. Word-of-mouth in the student dormitories alluded more and more frequently to "The Harrow,"² an otherwise unidentified writing tutor at the Orson Revelle Center for Student Competencies. At the time of Whitney Bascombe's likely graduate matriculation, the Center would have paid tutors \$10 per hour of student consultation, a not inconsiderable addition to the University's notoriously stingy teaching and research stipends.³ Bascombe would have enjoyed the extra income, but she would have also welcomed a challenge she deemed worthy of her distinct talent. If she failed to distinguish herself in the literary seminars required for an advanced degree, it was not for lack of preparation or comprehension. If anything, she would have found the language of her presumed discipline maddening for its often needless inflation of ideas that, expressed concisely, would have revealed the pedestrian insights at their core. The abstract of a typical journal article would have been vulnerable to her ruthless quest for concision.⁴ Boredom and need would have led her inevitably to the underground economy supporting student dereliction. The anxious athlete or tearful sorority pledge might have paid several times the going rate for a ghostwriter on

2. Bascombe's putative nickname no doubt brings to mind one of the central mechanisms of Kafka's torture device from "In the Penal Colony." This, however, would be wishful thinking; "The Harrow" is also one of the virtual punishments befalling players defeated in one of the basement chambers in *Castle Bloodlust 4.0*.
3. Ursula Rook, "How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Ramen: An Open Letter to Dean Horace Templeton," *The Bison*, 18 March 1999: 6.
4. Indeed, several volumes in the Pitkin Library's *Masterplots* collection—comprehensive summaries of novels, plays, etc., used to aid literary study—have been anonymously redacted with pencil and green pen.

assignments neglected until the last possible minute. Soon enough, a Whitney Bascombe could be doing brisk business.

Her earliest customers, however, were put off by her trademark aesthetic. She ignored page counts, condensing scribbled notes and typed outlines into explications, arguments, analyses, and critiques several pages shy of the assigned minimum. “Where’s the rest of it?” students demanded, some still affected by the extra night of revelry afforded by “The Harrow.” “I used everything you gave me,” “The Harrow” would respond to the bleariness veiled beneath drawn hoods and visors. Payments were demanded back, but Bascombe had already spent them—payment was due before services rendered, cash only. She always seemed to run out of receipt forms to those savvy enough to ask for them; most were too desperate or impatient to do so. If students threatened to report her to the Dean or Honor Council, Bascombe would present them with a manila folder, containing copies of their work orders, which she had them complete and sign on the spot, by hand, ostensibly to make sure she knew exactly what the customer wanted. Because there was never a receipt, she welcomed the chance to present the files to university officials in order to draw attention to the plagiarism problem on campus and the lengths to which students would go to cover it up. No one, according to the extant record, ever called her bluff, and complaints, while vocal, were few; most under the circumstances were just relieved to have something to turn in.

But even the most fastidious teaching assistant could do little to penalize the growing student penchant for brevity. They were too impressed by the actual substance assembled by “The Harrow” to mark off for mere matters of style. Marginal complaints—“Dev[elop]?”; “Crucial point—but lacking rel[evant] evidence”; “Context?”—were common, but by the time students reached the scribbled summation on the last page, it was clear that their overworked graduate graders had decided to pick their battles.

It would be absurd, of course, to attribute such widespread effects to the editorial talents of a single disaffected graduate student. At the same time, business was doubtless good; she was frequently spotted—alone or with a presumed paramour—at dining or entertainment establishments well beyond the means of her colleagues: The Billings Brothers Steakhouse; Imperial Thai; Heure Flaneur (continental cuisine); Uqbar (\$7 cover weeknights; \$10 cover weekends; two drink minimum).

She lived as she worked. She had no patience for the rituals of courtship which for her were the romantic equivalent of the compound sentence, sluggish with conjunctions and overlong clauses. Her affairs were infrequent, brief, but they condensed months, even years, of limping routine to the most piercing syllables uttered from beds, bunks, desktops, shower stalls. A

fellow doctorate—strangely enough, a Marxist and gender critic in the Department of American Studies—managed to possess her for most of a three-day weekend at the beginning of the winter quarter. Giddy from satiety and lack of sleep, he proposed marriage, using the only ring at hand to seal his intent—his undergraduate class ring, bearing the cumbersome crest of his East Coast alma mater. She consented to its placement on her hand; it rolled loosely at the thickest knuckle of her finger. Gently, he propped the crest right side up and promised to save for a proper engagement ring. She laid her other hand over his and smiled gravely. She needed time, she said. He nodded. She kissed him and said she was hungry. He offered to take her out to brunch after a quick shower. He left her, one of his ragged t-shirts skirting her thighs as she cooed into the pillows about blueberry pancakes. When he emerged from the bathroom, she was gone. The bed was made, the shirt neatly folded in its customary drawer. The only sign that he had not dreamed the entire weekend was the ring, which she had left as her only reply on the blank bedding. He knew her name, but nothing else. By the time he began his inquiries around the Department of Rhetoric, Languages and Literatures, she had all but dropped out, her name no better than an alias to the Department's impassive administrative staff. He would marry four years later—an economist at a nearby private campus. He was a good husband and father. He never strayed from his obligations; doing so would have made him unfaithful to what could never be, which was never more vivid or more satisfying than when he was mired in what ineluctably was.

It was around this time that Bascombe arrived at her cubicle in the Revelle Center and found someone already waiting for her. She tried to hide her annoyance; she had no appointments for her first scheduled hour of tutoring and was looking forward to finishing a volume of Kawabata she had been enjoying between clients. Her current client was unusually polite, standing to introduce himself. She could smell his lemon aftershave as they shook hands. His cufflinks and pinstripe blue suit marked him as a business student, doubtless one who could pay quarterly tuition from the proceeds of a single job—or even personal savings. She became instantly solicitous and asked how she could be of service.

This client, however, was not a client at all—Theodore Hopper had already completed both a JD and an MBA at another institution, one she had never heard of. Her highly praised editorial skills had come to the attention of his business partners. Hopper was essentially here to advertise himself. In response to her undisguised skepticism, he withdrew a small silver case from his coat pocket and extracted one of his business cards. He excused himself to scribble an address on the blank side of the card; the gold-plated barrel of his fountain pen was etched with an angular

insignia that was illegible viewed from where she sat.⁵ He and his partners were looking to expand their operations. If she was interested, she was to be at the address tomorrow evening for an informational orientation. He expressed his sincere hope that he would see her there before collecting his things and departing with a polite nod. At this point, she might have noticed a hint of flirtation in the entrepreneur's proposition. This prospect, however, was outweighed in Bascombe's mind by the chance to finally abandon her studies altogether, which had become nothing more than unprofitable intervals between paying clients.

The following evening, she arrived a few minutes before seven. It was a part of the city she had never been to before, located just east of the city's fashionable lower downtown. Behind townhouse facades spray painted to resemble New York City punk dens or festooned with the crumbling statuary of an imagined bohemian Paris, abandoned warehouses crouched ominously beneath intermittent streetlamps. She felt the lightness of her purse as she turned away from the buzz of weeknight drinking. She had forgotten to replenish her pepper spray; the heaviest object now in her possession was a collapsible umbrella, which she now took out. Opened, it was a feeble shield that swayed clumsily in front of her. Cursing, she folded the umbrella into its cloth case but kept the handle extended. Wielding her blunt lance, she continued into the darkness. Silhouettes seemed to peer at her from illuminated windows several stories up. Three blocks in, she saw light slanting onto the pavement. Wavering shapes cut back and forth across what she could now see was an open doorway. Not until she recognized her visitor from the day before, a small crowd gathering behind him in ranks of folding chairs, did she unclench her hands, now smeared with imprints of fabric and metal.

"Right on time," Hopper said. He pointed toward the complementary hors d'oeuvres with his clipboard.

She had barely taken a seat with her wine and canapés when the lights began to dim and a screen was lowered in front of the assembled guests. It would not occur to her until later how the screen appeared from a bare ceiling fixed with fluorescent tubes. The film began and ended without credits. Slowly, the screen came to life with the first in a series of questions, definitions, interjections, and historical dates: "HOW DO WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW?" The letters dissolved into the candlelit cell of a monk, patiently transcribing text in a dead language onto a

5. This description closely resembles the company logo of New Media Consortium—the letters N and M overlaid on the letter C. See also Roger Tigue, "Masonic Origins of Corporate Logos," *Alternate Histories*, 28.2 (2006): 15-19.

blank scroll. The reconstruction's accuracy was questionable, the monk's earnest expression at his desk amateurish and overdone, but the performance was enough to elicit hysterics from Bascombe and others scattered throughout the improvised auditorium. She cupped her hand quickly to her mouth in response to several irritated whispers and managed the rest of the screening in silence.

If one could say that the orientation film had a plot, it somehow involved the evolution of the brain; the supplanting of oral with written culture; the approaching millennium; the use of hypnosis to treat physical and psychosomatic disorders; the universal centrality of sacred texts in all major religions; inscrutable petroglyphs in the Andes and southeast Asia predating Egyptian civilization by several thousand years; cryptography during and after the Second World War; the pattern and relative strength of synaptic activity elicited by pronouncing or hearing certain common and less common letter combinations; the often neglected role that sound, taste, touch, and smell have in the learning process ("THE JOY OF SENSE"); the successful trial of specially designed pictographic cards in preparing a group of high school students for college-level diagnostic exams; the unsuccessful trial of a similar second group that studied longer, using full texts instead of pictographs for the same exam; space travel; national security; a global network of information rising from the ashes of Alexandria; and *Homo cerebrus*, an artist's projection of the "all brain" macrocephalic representing the pinnacle of human evolution.

Bascombe was impressed. Had she been asked for a narrative of what had been represented onscreen, she would have likely not been able to do so beyond the foregoing fragmentary list. But it was impossible for the uninitiated to appreciate the coherence of what had just unfolded. She would later liken it to a long and particularly intense conversation at a party in which intoxication, rather than impairing perception actually sharpened it. She could parse every logical twist and turn of phrase as it was spoken; she could sense an order underpinning even the conversation's most far-flung digression. But if you asked her the next morning what had transpired, she would be unable to recreate the profundity of her impressions. This would do nothing, however, to undercut her sense that this night had changed everything.

She found Hopper at a long table set up near the door. He seemed to avoid eye contact as he gave her one of the company's application portfolios. She wondered what accounted for his coolness. As she left, she was struck by his resemblance to the monk from the orientation film.

Two weeks after sending off her materials in the enclosed postage paid envelope, she was called by a New Media Consortium representative and offered a job in the recently opened Research Division not far from the site of her orientation. Bascombe had scored so highly on her

candidate questionnaire that the board had decided to hire without the usual personal interview. The available evidence is clear enough on Bascombe's response: There is no record of her ever having completed a course of graduate study.

She had no idea what to expect on first arriving at the monolith of smoked glass that was then NMC headquarters on the following Monday.⁶ But after the tour of the Research Division's fifth and sixth floors offices—her elevator card afforded her access to only those floors—and the invitation to after hours nachos at the conveniently located Cecil's Tavern, Bascombe realized that she had finally found her calling. Every morning, her desk would be piled with several volumes that needed processing by the end of business that day. The volumes themselves had little apparent relation apart from the frail rubber band binding them loosely together. There were outmoded primers on fashionable dances, manuals for sending and interpreting floral arrangements, guides to the flora and fauna to now non-existent countries, crumbling almanacs from centuries past. She was to take these volumes and encode them into one of 14 discipline-specific databases using NMC software⁷ that distilled pages of print into a single screen of digital data. A boon for libraries and archives with limited shelf space, the NMC's electronic collections resembled the outmoded card catalog, with one very important difference; searching the latter, one only accessed the card representing the desired text, while the former yielded the text itself, rendered to its pictographic essence using simple sentences and mnemonic icons. The full text—scanned on a separate floor—was available for a modest fee, which would go towards preservation of the print original in the NMC's state of the art, climate controlled archive on the outskirts of Temecula, California.⁸

She enjoyed her work, especially after a second cup of French pressed coffee from her floor's small but well stocked kitchenette. She began with the wrinkled, fading, and cracked; by the end of the day, she had tamed this unwieldy assemblage of knowledge into several screens of palatable

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6. As of 2007, the company has no central corporate headquarters, operating instead entirely online, with over 500 individual consultants worldwide, each with a fully operational office as close as the nearest data port.
 7. Patent pending.
 8. NMC spokesperson Kelly Hollins calls the recent wildfires that destroyed half an acre of the warehouse facility's shelved materials "heartbreaking." The fires, which raged with striking precision at the mid point of the facility's east wall, destroyed hundreds of volumes, many of which had DPV ratios of 0.2 or less. A volume's DPV ratio is calculated by dividing the number of full text downloads during a given quarter by the total number of log-ins to NMC databases during the same period. (Internal quarterly memorandum RDB-0407).

information. Her stack of materials was usually the first to be replaced on the trolley for transfer to the archive; the clerk who collected her trolley would linger to chat and admire her speed. Mindful of the cameras discreetly housed overhead, she would respond with few words, perhaps a quick, sexually neutral smile, before opening her purse for inspection on the way to the elevators. Bascombe was never assigned demerits in the quietly maintained record of employee conduct. She was soon promoted to Serials, Compendiums and Miscellanies.

Speculation has no place in the respectable biography, but there are times when the standard of discretion must give way to the higher standard of accuracy. Her performance to the contrary, Whitney Bascombe was not a machine. She had at last established the kind of life she had dreamed of during the lean times of scholarly apprenticeship. If one subscribes to the notion of hierarchies marking one's progress through life, her achievement of basic subsistence and domestic comfort prompted needs of a higher order. One cannot deny the human element that embroiders even the starkest of circumstances with intimacies, affections, and desires. It would not be long before Theodore Hopper, her original liaison to the company, stopped by her cubicle. He apologized for not being more available during her first months of employment and offered to take her to lunch. When a sudden conflict made lunch impossible, he asked about dinner.

"Unless that would make you uncomfortable," he said, his tone at once coy and anxious at being possibly misunderstood.

"Uncomfortable?" she replied. "Why would that make me uncomfortable, Mr. Hopper?"

"Well, dinner is considered the date meal, isn't it?" he said. "Call me Ted."

Dinner turned out to be Mediterranean takeout; their original reservation was lost after instinct overcame propriety at the threshold of Bascombe's apartment. She kicked aside clothes scattered in the wake of their urgency and maneuvered the bulging delivery bag to the kitchen. They said little to each other as they filled their plates with gyros, hummus, and tabouleh. Hopper asked about her life before NMC; she obliged his curiosity with an unusually honest if characteristically attenuated personal history between bites of stuffed grape leaves. This is not to say she felt for Hopper any differently than her previous partners. But she recognized in him a common pliancy of attraction; already, as he remarked on her excellent choice of merlot and mimicked a particularly irritating co-worker for her amusement, she sensed him preparing a charming but definitive exit. Their repartee now was no deeper than that of commuters filling a lull between trains.

"So what do you like most about being gainfully employed?" he asked, emptying the last of the wine into their glasses.

“The benefits, definitely,” she said. She paused at her choice of words. They laughed nervously, looking at each other. “I mean, you don’t get dental for reading Ben Jonson.”

Hopper nodded. “And maternity leave. We’re more generous than most.”

Bascombe fixed him now with a hint of annoyance. “Why would I be interested in that?”

He sipped more of his wine. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I was just—”

“What about you?” she continued. “When are you planning to take time off to raise a family?”

He smirked. “Someday.”

“Really? You don’t strike me as the type.”

Hopper shaped his features into a semblance of offense.

“I just thought we had a lot more in common,” she added, staring into the filmy dregs of her glass.

He set his drink down. He pulled lightly at the cincture of her bathrobe. “We have lots in common. Anyway, marriage and family is a sound investment for the future. Plus it’s cheaper than a nursing home.” He lowered his hands to her waist. “Don’t you care about the future?”

She tossed her loosened hair with childish vehemence. “The future is for suckers.”

He was looking at her now with an unexpected intensity. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

She hesitated before answering. “I don’t know. I guess . . . I guess I do.” She began to undo her robe but stopped. “You’re not one of *those* guys, are you?”

“What guys?”

“The ones who are unconventional in bed, but romantic destiny’s bitch in the morning.”

He parted the robe with one quick tug. She was naked underneath. He ran a finger along the inside of her thigh. “I believe in destiny,” he said, “but there’s nothing romantic about it.” He led her back to bed.

Her suspicions were groundless. On Monday, they shared the same elevator. Hopper asked with desultory interest how the rest of her weekend was, but his eyes roamed as she answered, settling on the toxic orange tresses of the newest hire in Periodicals. He was unctuously solicitous as he introduced her to Bascombe and asked the girl—their youngest hire to date, fresh from the University’s bachelor’s program in Digital Media—how she was doing. Later, Bascombe entered the kitchenette for more coffee and found him chatting over Danish with an executive she had never seen before. She was mindful that her work required maintaining the spirit, if not the substance, of professionalism. She decided to say hello. But as she turned with her refilled cup, she heard the whispering behind her stop; both men seemed to leer at her, slouching with invitation. On her way out, she hoisted her cup and bid them good morning with alacrity. The nearest camera

caught the toast and her exaggerated grin, but missed the unhinged middle finger obscured by the coffee. The men's expression remained unchanged.

She returned home to find a message from her mother. Her stepfather had suffered an episode of aphasia at work; his condition was stable but he was being hospitalized overnight for observation. She offered to fly out immediately to be with her parents. One should not marvel at the sincerity of the offer. The Bascombes were practical women, but this should not be mistaken for callousness. A conscientious economy of acquisition and debt underpinned their instinct for survival. Her stepfather had supported them both with more than they had ever needed. It was time now for his credit to be redeemed. At this early stage, the clot in his brain could have affected any number of mental faculties and bodily functions that would now be the responsibility of his caregivers. Neither woman flinched as they looked forward to years of incontinence, special diets, rehabilitation. They would do what was necessary for the remainder of his natural life, not out of love but obligation, stark as the calculus of a monthly utility. One could hope for better. One could suffer worse.

He awoke the next morning with a slur in his voice, some loss of short-term memory, and an impatience with sentences of two or more clauses in length. Despite this, his doctors considered him lucky; he was otherwise unaffected and sent home later that day. The rest and rehabilitation prescribed could be supervised by Whitney's mother and her half-sister, who lived with her husband less than an hour away.

Whitney checked in regularly on his progress. The speech therapist was tough, but good. His memory and language comprehension improved at a remarkable rate. The impediment in his speech lasted through Thanksgiving, but by the time she called about Christmas, it was barely noticeable over the phone. He noted down her flight information, reading it back slowly but accurately.

Christmas being a family holiday, there were numerous roles required of her in various seasonal traditions: as grudging babysitter for the children of her half-sister and several cousins as they finished their shopping; as object lesson of the indignities suffered by those forsaking the matrimonial sacrament ("Whitney, dear," Aunt Peg, her stepfather's sister, would cluck over her pearls and double chin, "are you *still* living in that awful studio apartment with the broken water heater?"); as grateful recipient of questionably stylish garments, never quite her size and inevitably lacking a gift receipt for easy return. She was also the table setter and announcer for Christmas dinner, a duty she had fulfilled since childhood, when she brought the entire living room to silence

with indignant cries of boredom and hunger. This year, she was no less efficient but much more discreet. Having finished the place settings, she approached each group in the living room and quietly ushered them toward the table. Her stepfather was in his recliner by the fireplace, his eyes intent on a large white card. She looked over his shoulder and saw his finger tracing the crisp type and multicolored icons of a New Media Consortium digest. She recognized several symbols in the right margin: *history, birth, union*. “Dad,” she asked, “where did you get that?”

He looked up, but on seeing her he appeared too startled to speak. His stare was so vacant that for a moment she suspected a sudden regression and was about to alert her mother. Iris’s daughter skipped back into the living room. “Grandpa,” she said. “Mom says dinner’s getting cold.” He immediately rose from his seat and followed the girl toward the food, taking the card with him.

In the kitchen, her mother was filling a second gravy boat. “Mom,” Whitney said. “Dad was acting funny in the living room.”

“How so?”

“He was reading this card. It looked like—”

“That’s nothing,” she answered, wiping away a dribble of brown on the side of the boat. “The therapist gave him those.”

“He has more?”

“She calls them memory cards. They help him not to get confused. Iris, can you—”

“Mom.”

Sheila Bascombe looked at her daughter and smiled. “Oh, it’s you. I guess I could use some of those cards myself. Would you please?” she asked, holding the gravy out with one hand while shutting the burner off with the other.

Whitney was too busy surviving the holiday to dwell on the incident at dinner. She spent the New Year fighting the flu and searching for her friends at the city’s elaborate outdoor fireworks display. Despite the widely publicized fact that this was the false millennium, the city had gone forward with plans to mark the start of the year 2000. At midnight, she watched rockets and fluorescent stars streak overhead, her friends nowhere in sight. The chill that had prickled her throughout the day settled into a dull throbbing. She took to her bed for the rest of the weekend.

On Monday, more or less recovered, she ran into Hopper near the elevators. She remembered her stepfather as the doors closed in front of them.

“I didn’t know you were into therapy.”

Hopper kept his eyes on the single lit button of his floor. “What?”

“That must be new, right? The Protocols say Consortium materials have to stay in this office.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Hey,” she said, grasping his elbow. “I’m thanking you. Whatever you guys are doing, it’s working great.”

He looked at her as the doors opened. She saw the exhaustion in his expression harden into determined dismissal. He stepped out, saying nothing.

Hopper’s particular coldness confused and irritated her, and she was slower with her daily quota of digests. She worked through lunch but still felt no hunger as she switched off her system terminal. This, she decided, was better than the feverish nights of the past weekend. The clerk who usually collected her parcel had not shown up; she was relieved to have one less thing between her and the exits as she placed the finished texts on the trolley.

Her apartment door was open when she arrived. Inside, two men were taking measurements with oddly shaped instruments while a third seemed to supervise and take notes. All three wore business suits.⁹ Bascombe, who had never seen them before, threatened to complain to her landlord; she had not been warned in advance of any work required on her apartment, certainly none that would interfere so late on a day when all she wanted was to spend a quiet evening at home. The supervisor nodded sympathetically, but continued to scribble numbers and what looked like schematics onto his clipboard. He shook his head and asked for the time. One of his colleagues withdrew what looked like a miniature level from his pocket. The level seemed to have two transparent chambers; a radiant blue liquid flowed from one chamber to the other,

9. The exact color of these suits has never been determined. Despite this, previous reconstructions of Whitney Bascombe’s story have characterized her as a victim of so-called “men in black,” mysterious human or alien agents deployed to cover up an extraterrestrial conspiracy. This is at best reductive, at worst pandering to popular bowdlerizations of the supernatural (“Letters to the Editor,” *Fortean Studies Annual* 56 [2004]: 17). No one interviewed in Bascombe’s former residence complex exactly recalls Bascombe or her unidentified visitors. Her landlord greeted the trio in his office, who appeared to wear charcoal suits that seemed to turn silver in the light from the window. Recorded snowfall during the week in question would account for this anomaly. The super at the time does not recall the color of their suits; he was more concerned with the visitors’ claim that they were subcontractors working on unspecified modifications to the building. There was no record of such an appointment. However, as he paged through his calendar, he had the strong impression that he had made the appointment but had forgotten to write it down.

drop by drop. The supervisor, who could apparently read the strange timepiece from where he stood, turned apologetically to Bascombe. “We are so very sorry,” he said. “There were numerous appointments today, several of which took longer than expected.”

Bascombe set down her purse and overcoat. “Did the landlord authorize this?” The three were again distracted, this time by the drapes next to the television. One of the men withdrew a narrow silver rod from a brown leather case and began running one tip over the folds of fabric. She could hear something like static being emitted from the slightly bulbous tip.

“What’s he doing?” she asked. She looked at the coffee table, where the brown tool case had been set without disturbing the magazines stacked there in neat piles. She could discern, on the unbuckled side clasp, an insignia of dense runic characters.

“This is a rather complicated operation,” replied the supervisor, eyes fixed to his clipboard. “We’ve run partial tests, of course, but have never before attempted the complete sequence.”

“Who do you work for?”

“We’re longtime independent consultants,” said the supervisor, looking up momentarily through spectacles that reflected her image back in wavering lines. “Because of the sensitivity of our projects, we are often brought in off the books.”

“The Consortium?”

The supervisor hesitated, then nodded. “And other groups. Mainly in the private sector, though we have a growing presence in the public.” He resumed his note-taking. “Of course, I’m not at liberty to disclose specific names. Technically, I’m in breach of contract by even confirming to you our work for the Consortium. But under the circumstances—” He waved his stylus vaguely as the others began to pick up larger cases obscured by the sofa and TV stand.

“Is this about earlier? In the elevator? I didn’t mean anything by it? I just thought—”

“This operation has been in the planning for months. That said, this does not preclude the possibility that an abbreviation will one day not require such advance notice. But we are at least a decade away from plausibility.”

“Abbreviation,” she repeated. It was not a question. The word diffused and settled in the fissures between a host of discrete impressions, half-heard banalities, unspoken suspicions, revealing a topography as foreign as it was now coherent. She watched the supervisor continue to scribble; he had reached the last in a thick stack of forms. The tip of his pen seemed to scratch deeply at the transparent clipboard, but when she glanced over his shoulder, she saw that the lines over which he so studiously labored were blank. A blast of cold came from behind. The sitting

room window was opened. She saw two pairs of dress shoes on the fire escape; the heels seemed to elongate in ripples of air resembling the haze emitted from hot pavement. The supervisor pocketed his pen and unclipped the finished packet, placing it carefully in his case. “Everyone desires progress,” he said as he buckled the case. “Few acknowledge the significant practicalities of achieving it. Your efforts will not be forgotten. So to speak,” he added, patting her lightly on the elbow. He stepped onto the windowsill. “Just remember—” His words were muffled by the sound of a plane strafing the distant skyline. When she looked outside, the fire escape was empty. Damp feathers clumped on the dripping rungs.

The disappearance narrative is a paranormal staple. The victim, by all accounts a paragon of habit and punctuality, is expected at a certain accustomed place at a certain accustomed hour by one or more witnesses. A half hour passes. An hour. This is explained away easily—traffic, construction work, bank lines before a holiday. By the third hour without word, the conversation used to pass the wait becomes suffused with quiet anxiety. Perhaps call the victim’s phone? But on of all days, the phone has been forgotten or misplaced. Or the phone is called but never answered; it will later be recovered from an odd location never before associated with the victim: a desolate rooftop, an alley behind a transit stop halfway between home and office, the shore of a beach unmarked by footprints. Foul play is suspected, but the evidence is less than circumstantial. The absence nonetheless begins to take shape from what remains, a conflation of coincidence and theory that, after a time, assumes the contours of truth.

What, then, did Bascombe experience after a sleepless night, spent mostly seated before the bare sill? It occurred to her that she should shut the window, but her arms remained folded in front of her. The empty fire escape stood out with growing opacity in the slate gray dawn. Snow flurries rose and settled on the hardwood floor, but she felt nothing as she finally rose.

The lightening street emerged with the lucidity of a dream recognized just before waking. She took her time, struck by the branching of her customary path onto side streets dense with color. The streets grew crowded but she was never rushed. She was early enough to see the muffin vendor still unpacking his things in front of her building. She inserted her key card; the slot trundled its usual sequence allowing entry, followed by a long silence during which her card was not returned. The glass doors to the vestibule remained locked. She began her wait, a dimness in the glass against the movements reflected there.

Hopper emerged a little before six in the evening. He nodded at the security guard posted outside; the guard returned his nod without expression. She blocked his approach to a waiting taxi.

“When did you decide?” she asked.

“Does it really matter?” he replied. The guard looked over quizzically. Hopper took out his phone and dialed several digits, stopping one short of a phone number. He raised the receiver to his ear. “Hello? Yes, it’s me,” he said.

The taxi driver slapped one hand against the steering wheel and took off. “In the Middle Ages, people thought life was a book.” He was looking at her. “It was decided to find out just how true that is.”

“Am I the first?”

Hopper shook his head. The guard had resumed his impassive vigil. “But you are the most comprehensive. Even so, you’re still considered a soft target. Few friends. No family. Of your own, that is.”

“Did you know that before we met?”

“Some of it. The rest we figured out after.” The dial pad on his phone began to flicker. He punched in another sequence of numbers.

She began to speak, but her words were absorbed in the growing wind.

He spoke into the receiver, but his eyes remained intently where she stood. “The last of it was done this morning,” he said.

“The last of what?” she asked. The wind picked up. She leaned into the gust and placed her hand over his. The knuckles were cold and sharp as he gripped the handle of his briefcase. The case shook slightly, then opened onto the fading pavement. The air was filled with shreds of paper. They twisted in motes over Hopper’s frantic hands. They skimmed the leaves of trees and settled thickly to the potted soil below. They traced vague shapes against the purple sky before assuming the translucence of flight.