

2.

Andy woke up at 2:00 in the afternoon, sweaty, his head pounding. After downing a bottle of water, he ran for an hour on his treadmill, showered, and walked downtown. The August heat and humidity had hung on into September, and already sweat stuck to him again. He nodded to people he knew but kept to himself until he reached the hardware store.

Bells jingled as he entered. He made his way to the back, walked through the employees only door, and went into the office. His brother Max sat behind the same gargantuan desk their father had used until he retired. God knows how he'd gotten it in there. Max talked on a cell phone, and Andy noticed two lines on hold on the desk phone. Max liked to come across as a wheeler-dealer, and Andy envied his ease with other people, one Andy could only mimic with police-trained politeness and the authority of a uniform, and badge.

Max rolled his chair backwards, opened a mini-fridge, and took out two bottled beers. He handed one across the desk to Andy and laughed at something. Andy popped off the bottle cap on the Pepsi bottle opener mounted on the desk, and cold vapor misted out into the air. He sat down in an old armchair from their family's house, leaned his head against the wall, and shut his eyes, sipping the cold beer, ignoring Max's chatter as best as he could.

"This is what I'm saying," Max said.

Andy opened his eyes and looked at the rows of caddies that went to the ceiling on one of the side walls. Their father had built them to hold boxes of nails, screws, nuts, bolts, and washers in the store and later moved them into the office when they modernized. Later, they'd held paperwork, extra receipts, orders from businesses around town. Now they held computer CDs, security camera tapes, books on better business acumen. Since then, Max had remodeled the store by restoring its old-fashioned look, but he'd kept the original caddies in the office. One thing hadn't changed – the pleasure of sitting in the dim, musty office and sipping a cold beer at 4:00 in the afternoon.

"Seriously, dude," Max said. "These guys want to come to our town, they got to be invited."

As much as he enjoyed the moment, Andy thought about leaving. He didn't know that Max was involved in criminal activity, but he often suspected it. Max certainly liked to play tough, exaggerating his accent to sound more like the boys up north, slipping in obscenities, working out as much as he could. Still, Andy gave him the benefit of the doubt. He was his brother, and he was charismatic, and Andy couldn't find a good reason to doubt either of those qualities.

"Yeah, yeah," Max said. "My bro's here. Later."

Max clapped the cell phone shut, slipped it into one of the caddies, and grinned at Andy.

"I swear, officer," he said, raising his hands, "I never met the girl."

He laughed.

Andy chuckled at a joke he'd never found funny.

"Anything exciting happen last night?" Max said.

"Same old, same old," Andy said.

"Aha! Not same old, same old," Max said. "Come on."

Andy followed him upstairs to the storeroom. Max pointed at the wall that paralleled the alley.

"Notice anything different?" he said.

Andy studied the bricks. They seemed the same. Lead paint peeled from them, in spots mortar had cracked or fallen, but they looked pretty sturdy for nearing on 100 years old. He shrugged.

"Look up," Max said.

One of the thin windows at the top had been broken.

"Huh?" Max said.

"Old windows," Andy said. "So?"

"Somebody busted it."

"Get it fixed," Andy said."

"Nobody can fix that shit," Max said.

"Art Rheingold can," Andy said without a second thought. Rheingold was Samantha's uncle, her only relative.

Max ran his hands through his curly black hair.

"I don't like that guy," Max said.

He wheeled his finger around his ear.

"Cuckoo."

Andy's breath shortened. He'd already set his nerves on edge by bringing up Rheingold, stirring up the first thoughts of the day about Samantha, but now Max had insulted her uncle, and it brought out the cop in him, the need to defend her family's honor. Against his own family.

He sipped his beer.

Max shrugged.

"I'm gonna catch the pricks," he said.

A bird flew in through the hole and sat on a shelf.

"And I'm gonna cut their nuts off."

Andy followed him back to the office.

"You check your tapes yet?" Andy asked.

"Nah," Max said. "Can't see anything out back."

"Call Davis with the city," Andy said. "Maybe some other people got vandalized."

"Don't like that guy either," Max said.

Sure you don't, Andy thought. He sent you to juvie for doing the exact same shit.

"I'll talk to him," Andy said.

"Would you?" Max said. "And Rheingold?"

Andy sipped at the last drops of his beer to cover a sigh.

"Got another?" he said.

After his second beer, Andy went up High Street toward the old stores that had been converted into art studios. Arthur had a little place there where he sold paperweights and other glass objects. Nice stuff but pricey. Andy figured he must sell it on the Internet, too, because you couldn't stay in business with that stuff just off townspeople and the trickle of tourists that came through on their way to the shore.

Arthur sat behind a glass counter reading a book about religion. He didn't acknowledge Andy when he entered, just flipped a page. Andy wandered around the carpeted space for a few minutes, looking at the merchandise, making a show of being there to shop. Arthur never reacted, never offered assistance, and Andy knew he used the Internet. It's what he would have done.

"Hey, Art," he said.

Arthur looked up and pushed his glasses up his nose. He set his book down on the counter and smiled. He could be friendly if he wanted.

"Andrew," he said, "how are you?"

"Fine, fine," Andy said.

"Good."

Andy glanced down at the items in the case below Arthur. He saw two naked figures surrounded by green, a snake crawling towards them, and an enormous hand above them, all in a baseball-sized piece of glass. Five other pieces surrounded this one, all identical. None had price tags.

"Those aren't for sale," Arthur said.

Andy nodded. Even if they were, he couldn't have afforded them.

"My brother's store got vandalized," Andy said.

"Oh, dear," Arthur said. "Are you here on police business?"

Andy looked up.

"No, no," he said. "Nothing like that."

"Because I wouldn't know anything."

"Of course not."

"Terrible," Arthur said. "You know, I teach out at the community college."

"Oh, yeah?" Andy said.

He expected Arthur to elaborate, but he didn't, simply nodded.

"So, uh," Andy said, "you're still doing glasswork."

"Yes, yes," Arthur said, and again he looked as if he might elaborate, but he didn't.

"Think you could do up a windowpane?"

Arthur's jowly features sunk. He scratched his chin.

"Certainly," he said. "You'll have to install it, though. I'm not good with heights."

"You need to go look at it?"

Arthur shook his head.

"As I recall," he said, "I had to fix quite a few when your brother was younger."

"Right," Andy said.

They stood there for another minute, neither one speaking. Finally, Arthur picked up his book and began to read again, and Andy noticed that he read aloud under his breath. Andy reached the door and felt shaky, warm. Should have eaten before drinking. He felt himself turn around, heard himself speak.

"Say, Arthur," he said, "how's Samantha these days?"

Arthur looked up.

"What's that?" he said.

You have an out, Andy told himself. Make something up, ask about sand or his book or the Phillies.

"I just – " he scratched his cheek. He'd forgotten to shave. "Just wondering how Samantha is."

"Oh," Arthur said. "Fine, I think. Says she might be moving."

"Really," Andy said. "Well, uh, tell her hi for me."

Arthur nodded, and Andy turned around and opened the door.

"Andrew," Arthur said.

Andy turned around again, hoping he had a message from her, the fantasies already running on to their inevitable conclusions of marriage and kids.

"The pane will be ready Wednesday."

"Thanks," Andy said.

He stepped out into the summer air and collided with Samantha.

Samantha stumbled back but didn't lose her balance. She couldn't say the same for Andy, who fell back against the door with a thud. She brushed her hair out of her face and waited for him to right himself. She hadn't seen him up close in months, if not years, and she took him in. Mostly, he seemed the same, thick and muscular in a working man kind of way, short hair, square jaw. He had gotten a little soft around the middle. Cop diet. He looked at her, then looked away. Great. Samantha would have to assume his feelings because he obviously hadn't grown out of his shyness. She wanted to punch him.

"Good to see you, stranger," she said.

"Yeah," he said with a nervous chuckle. "Just talking to your uncle."

"No crime in that," she said.

"No, ma'am," he said and wiped at his face, probably embarrassed.

"Listen," she said. "I got to tell you about something."

"OK," he said.

"These kids, they tried to mug me or something last night."

"In town?"

"Right by Slim's," she said.

He looked at her, puffed out his chest a little.

"What – what time?"

"Threeish."

His face dropped. He knew that he could have stopped them.

"D-description?" he said.

"Uh, three of them," she said, "wearing black."

He folded his arms across his chest and nodded, trying to stay professional.

"One of them, a real skinny guy, wore glasses," she said. "Was real...theatrical.

Seemed kind of familiar"

"How?"

"Like I'd seen him on TV or in a magazine."

"OK."

"It's what I got."

"The others?"

"One was tall," Samantha said, "the other stocky."

"OK," Andy said. "You tell Chet?"

She shook her head. She didn't want to tell her boyfriend.

Andy nodded.

"I'll take it down to Davis," he said.

Damn protocols. She fumbled through her purse for a cigarette. He waited while she lit it and took a few drags.

"I'd kind of like it," she said, "if you didn't use my name."

"I might have to," he said.

She flicked some ashes onto the sidewalk and stepped closer to him. She smelled beer on his breath.

"If that's the case," she said, "then maybe you could look into it, you know, on the side."

He looked at his feet.

She stepped away again. She wanted to persuade him but not with the suggestion of sex. That would be unfair.

"There's talk," she said. "I heard it long before last night. About these kids."

"I never – "

"You would have at Slim's," she said more snidely than she'd intended. "I thought it was a – what do you call it – urban legend."

She looked around to make sure no one was listening. She didn't need to air her troubles with everyone in town. People spent enough time staring or averting their gazes or feeling sorry for her.

"They wear all black," she said, "and they go around causing trouble."

"I see," Andy said.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said. "Just making conversation."

"They're like a gang," she said.

He nodded.

"You don't believe me," she said.

He scratched his chin. His cheeks flushed. He was having some sort of internal struggle, cop versus suitor.

She dropped her cigarette on the ground and stamped it out.

"You would if you'd stuck around a little longer," she said.

He looked straight at her, his jaw clenched, then waved his hand as if swatting at a mosquito.

"I'll look into it," he said, his voice shaking.

He walked back towards his brother's hardware store.

"Andy," she called.

"Said I'll look into it," he said without looking back.

"Christ," she muttered.

Even before her parents died, before he stopped coming around, Samantha and Andy had danced this strange dance, inching closer to one another almost to the point of openness, or touching, and then one of them would say the wrong thing, and it would shove them back apart, like a teacher breaking apart students for dancing too close at homecoming. Andy strode down the sidewalk with his arms at his side, his chest puffed out, that cop walk that belied his nature.

Samantha went in the store to see her uncle. Arthur wasn't at the counter when she entered. She made a point of visiting him at least twice a week if he didn't come into Slim's for dinner. She loved Arthur, but she didn't always like being around him. He could become so absorbed in his work or whatever propelled him that he didn't extend basic courtesy or the kind of warmth and humor she remembered from her childhood when he'd been a regular presence in her life. Now sometimes you could ask him about the weather and he'd talk about God.

She went around the counter and through a door into his studio. Arthur sat hunched over a drawing table, mumbling to himself as he drew. He pulled the mounted t-square down its tracks and drew a line. Samantha rapped on the door. He

didn't answer. She'd give him a minute. She looked around the dark studio, saw the rods for blowing glass hanging from a wooden rack, pieces of various colored glass in handmade jars on shelves, the furnace for heating the glass, a fire rumbling inside, the long chimney pipe snaking along the wall and rising to the roof. She rapped on the door again. Arthur jumped and swiveled around in his chair. He took off his glasses, rubbed his eyes, and smiled.

"Samantha, dear," he said.

Samantha stepped toward him to hug him, but he turned back towards his table.

"Let me just tidy up here," he said, "and we'll get some coffee."

"Sure," she said. "I'll – I'll be out front."

Samantha was halfway through her second cigarette when he walked outside. He stretched a set of keys from a key caddy on his belt and locked the door, humming instead of mumbling. When he turned around, Samantha hugged him and kissed his cheek. He patted her back.

"Shall we try the fancy place?" he said, pointing across the street.

"Slim will be mad," she said.

"There's only so much of Slim's coffee a man of my age can take," he said.

Samantha laughed.

Arthur stepped off the sidewalk and started crossing without looking. He didn't need to. He had a sense about these things, he'd told her many times. Inside the coffee shop, South Jersey Java, air conditioning replaced the outdoor heat, the scent of roasting coffee replaced the odor of overheated asphalt, and warm mood lighting against dark wood walls replaced the bright afternoon sunlight. Some sort of acoustic jazz-like music played on the sound system, and a few college-aged kids huddled at a table in the back, chatting over large mugs of coffee and clove cigarettes. A girl with purplish-red hair greeted them.

"Hey, Mr. Rheingold," she said.

Arthur nodded, but Samantha could tell he didn't recognize the girl.

"Did you get that sand cleaned up?" she said.

He furrowed his brow.

"Front row?" he said.

"Rhonda," she said, "but people call me Honda."

"This I should remember," he said. "Honda, this is my niece Suzuki."

Honda laughed, and it seemed genuine. Samantha had spent enough of her life waiting tables to recognize the difference between a "tip me, please" laugh and a real one.

"Samantha," she said.

"You work at Slim's," Honda said.

"Yep," Samantha said, then whispered, "Don't tell anyone I was here."

"Our secret," Honda whispered back. "What can I get you?"

"Espresso for me," Arthur said. "Samantha may prefer something a little less erudite."

Honda arched her eyebrow at Samantha, and Samantha wondered if Arthur acted this way when he taught.

"Surprise me," Samantha said.

"I know just the thing," Honda said.

"As long as it has caffeine."

"But of course."

While she made the drinks, Samantha and Arthur sat down at a table by the window. Arthur looked out at the street, looked back, and offered a wistful smile.

"I would very much like to lament the state of downtown," he said, "but this new spirit suits me more than I could have imagined."

The Rheingolds had emigrated from Germany after World War II. Samantha's grandfather had been held as a prisoner of war not from town and had grown to love the area so much that he returned. Samantha's mother was a baby when they arrived and learned German and English at the same time, but Arthur was seven and had to learn English as a second language. Though he had no accent, his diction had remained overly formal.

"Do you get much business?" she said. He'd only had his shop/studio open for a couple months.

"Not yet," he said. "Tourists every now and again. The Internet keeps me paid still."

She nodded. He knew more about technology than she ever would.

Honda brought over the drinks. Arthur's was tiny of course, but Samantha's was a large, green mug overflowing with whipped cream, chocolate sprinkles, and coffee frothing at the brim as it mixed with the whipped cream.

"Jesus," Samantha said.

"It's my own concoction," Honda said. "The coffee has chocolate melted in it and raspberry flavoring."

"Have you been reading my diary?" Samantha said.

Honda tapped her temple.

"Psychic chick," she said.

She left them alone and went to the end of the counter near the college kids, leaning on it and listening to their conversation.

"How's teaching?" Samantha asked.

"I had a good day," Arthur said. "I talked about glass."

His eyes widened with delight. He loved nothing more than glass – working with it, talking about it, studying it. Every now and then he would tell her that he believed glass could save the world.

"Andy Weichert stopped by today," he said.

"I saw him outside," she said.

"Oh," he said. "No need to say he was asking about you then."

She spooned some whipped cream into her mouth, savoring its richness as she cursed herself again for pushing Andy's buttons.

"He's a good man," he said.

"Sure he is," she said. "He is a cop."

He sipped his espresso.

"I'll say no more," he said.

"So," she said, "what were you working on?"

He looked out the window again, sipping his espresso.

She worked at her own drink and waited for him to return from his daydream.

A scrawny boy in black stood near Arthur's shop. She dug in her purse to find her cell phone so she could call Andy, but when she looked up again, the kid had vanished.

Arthur finished his espresso and patted Samantha's hand.

"Something big," he said and left.

Honda kept an eye on the street as she wiped down the counter with a damp cloth. She had spotted Rory on the street for a moment, but the next time she looked up, he'd disappeared. She wanted to believe he'd been watching her, but she had the feeling he had other business in town. She wrung the cloth out in the sink and dropped it in an aluminum pan of soapy water. Then she turned back to the store and checked: the kids in the corner seemed content; clean tables; no dirty dishes except Arthur's cup; Samantha alone. After making a drink for herself, she wandered over to Samantha's table and reached for the cup. Samantha looked up from her drink and smiled.

"He'll remember it at some point," she said.

"What's that?" Honda said.

"Your name," Samantha said. "You."

"I'm sure."

Samantha glanced around, taking in the room.

"Just you?"

"Until 5:00," Honda said. "I'm sort of a manager."

Samantha nodded.

"Slim doesn't have that complicated a division of labor," she said. "Waitresses, cooks, dishwashers, and Slim."

Honda laughed. Samantha reminded her of Meg. They shared a certain world-weariness, a certain edge.

"Mind if I sit for second?" Honda said. "My feet are killing me."

Samantha looked down at her sneakers.

"No wonder," she said. "You need better shoes."

Honda took that as an invitation and sat.

"How come you still work there?" Honda said.

Samantha's eyes widened slightly, and she stirred her coffee with a spoon.

Finally, she shrugged.

"I sort of drifted off course," she said, "a couple years ago. Haven't righted myself, I guess."

Honda knew about her parents but in her impulse toward conversation and bonding had temporarily forgotten. She'd feel guilty about that the rest of the day, so she decided to change the subject.

"That guy you were with outside," she said, "friend?"

She winked.

"What are you implying?"

"Not a thing," Honda said.

Samantha laughed.

"His ears must be on fire," she said.

"Well?"

Samantha leaned over.

"We're just – " she said. " I don't know what we are, to be honest."

"Been there," Honda said, though if she were perfectly honest, most of the friendships she'd considered potential romances hadn't even been friendships.

"Andy's a mystery," Samantha said.

"Been there, too," Honda said, and she wanted to blurt out her whole situation with Rory, but she decided against it. Why not to send Samantha running out the door?

"Eh," Samantha said. "Guy I'm seeing now, Chet, he has no mystery to him at all. He is who he is, and that's it. Like McDonald's. You know what you're getting."

"Tastes good," Honda said, "but not good for you?"

Samantha cleared her throat.

"No comment," she said.

Outside, Rory emerged from the knickknack shop and went into Arthur's.

"Do you know that kid?" Samantha said.

"Just from class," Honda said. "Why?"

Samantha downed the last bit of her coffee.

"No reason," she said.

A man and woman entered, and Honda got up.

"Got to work," she said. "See you, Samantha."

"Same, Honda," Samantha said, the slightly wide-eyed look on her face again.

She left a tip on the table and headed out.

As she worked, Honda felt a pang of anxiety, a slight tightness in her chest. She supposed knowing Rory was across the street had something to do with it, but she wondered if Samantha's eerie distance did, too. Why would the sight of Rory cause that reaction? More mystery.

Rory had stopped when he saw the man and woman talking in front of Arthur's shop. He didn't want to have to push past them. Then as he neared them, he heard the woman mention kids in black harassing her, and he'd ducked into the store next to Arthur's, one of those places that sold things for prettying up your house – potpourri, fake crafts, baskets, dried flowers and grains, jars of spices and vegetables in some type of preservative. Once or twice, Rory had been in houses decorated that way, but his mother certainly didn't use any of it.

As he pretended to browse, he tried to avert his eyes from the older woman working behind the counter. She looked like an elementary school librarian. He glanced at the objects without really even thinking about what they were. Instead he thought how lucky he was to have stayed home last night instead of going out with Scott and the others. He didn't spend much time with them anymore, but they'd called, said they had big plans, had scored some X. That's when he decided to stay home. No more of that shit for him.

He kept an eye on the window. The man and woman still talked. The shopkeeper approached him. She was tall and thin and looked over her half glasses with something that could have been sympathy or disdain, neither of which he appreciated.

"Are you finding what you're looking for?" she said.

He shrugged.

"Anything in particular you're interested in?"

"I'm – I'm not sure," he said. "Something for my mom."

She nodded.

"Let me know if I can help," she said.

"Kay."

She busied herself adjusting arrangements and picking up dried wheat seeds from the floor, keeping an eye on him. Rory'd been watched enough times by clerks to know when someone was watching him. Of course, if he were with Scott, they might have stolen something, or at least Scott would have made a scene, drawn attention to himself. He spent most of his time either complaining about people hating him or doing things to make sure that they did. Yet he never got in much trouble. He claimed to have family in high places. The more he misbehaved, the more Andre and Grant liked him. It had bugged Rory long before he had any reason to actually hate him.

Outside, the man walked down the street, his chest puffed out like a bodybuilder's. The woman went into Arthur's store. Rory sighed. He wanted to talk to Arthur or at least listen to him. He could tell from class that he knew more than he let them hear, knew some secret to life, and Rory wanted to know that secret, maybe learn from it so his life would stop sucking. Besides, he'd heard Arthur was some kind of artist, and he wanted to see the art, see what that told him, maybe get Arthur to look his art, mostly sketches of comic book characters and ideas for tattoos.

Arthur and the woman walked across the street to the coffee shop. Rory sighed again as he fiddled with the hinged door on a bird house. He didn't ever go in the coffee shop. One, it was too expensive, and two, the same kids who hadn't liked him in high school hung out there. He had seen a girl from his art class working there, Rhonda, and he thought she was kind of cool, had dreamed about her.

"That's a nice item," the shopkeeper said.

"Yeah," Rory said, letting the lid fall.

"It's not too expensive," she said.

"I don't know," he said. "We don't have too many trees."

"Well," the woman said in her grandmotherly voice, "I'm sure we can find something."

Rory looked at her now, and she offered a thin smile. He liked old people, he told himself. They'd made it through the shit somehow or something. Maybe that was why he liked Arthur.

"I don't know," he said.

Kindness, however, made him uneasy. He suspected the motive behind it, assumed kind people wanted something in return or would use it to screw him over when the time suited them. That's what Scott had done. That's what his mom did all the time.

"I got to go," he said.

He went outside, bells jingling behind him. He walked over to Arthur's shop and looked through the window, but the afternoon sun glared off it, and he couldn't see anything distinct. He stood in the recessed area between the two windows and looked across the street. Arthur and the woman sat by the window, and Rhonda stood by their table, talking to them. He wasn't thrilled with her current choice of hair color, but he liked that she changed it a lot. Rhonda left. The woman looked out at the street. She saw him, he was sure. When she looked away, he ducked back into the other shop.

"You're back," the shopkeeper said.

"Yeah," Rory said.

He dug in his pockets and found a wadded up five-dollar bill.

"What can I get for five bucks?" he said.

She smiled again and led him to a shelf of little wooden figurines. They were smooth and painted and looked like Amish people and Indians.

"These are nice," she said. "Two for five dollars."

He picked one up and studied it.

"What do people do with them?"

"Oh, they're just decorations," she said. "I suppose you can't do much with them other than that."

He thought about playing with action figures from thrift stores as a kid and moved an Indian toward an Amish man, tapping the Indian against the Amish man until it fell over. The woman laughed but then waved her hand as if to dismiss her laugh.

"I guess you could do that," she said. "Very clever."

Outside, Arthur headed across the street alone. Rory scooped the two figures into his coat pocket and handed the woman the five.

"Thanks," he said as he headed out the door.

When the door opened for a third time in one day, Arthur first felt cursed. Then he considered it a sign, not one sent by God or fate because he didn't believe in signs from God or fate, but rather a seemingly random incident that in light of his own developing philosophy took on a greater significance, a second meaning. He needed to

turn his philosophy into action, time to make the first steps in his part of the process of healing humanity of its singular woe. When he turned around and saw Rory McDonough scratching his dirty hair, he knew he'd received a sign, not a curse.

"Hello, Rory," he said.

"Hey," Rory said.

His mouth hung open as if in preparation for another word, but the word never arrived. Arthur searched for his own next words. Jazz, he told himself. Conversation is like jazz, and one must respond to the moment, and yet there had to be some structure, a basic chord pattern or scale, a beat, something to set the music in motion. As in class, perhaps a question would be the best choice.

"What brings you here?"

Rory swallowed, and Arthur heard the popping saliva of thirst. Rory's eyes darted around the room.

"I, uh, you know," Rory began, his voice dovetailing into a nervous laugh.

He scratched his cheek just beneath his eye.

"I heard you did art," he said in a quiet voice, punctuated with another laugh.

Arthur waved his hand around the room.

"Indeed I do, young man," he said. "In fact, I even built the cases that hold the art."

He thrust his eyebrows up, his own punctuation.

Rory looked around the room again and moved toward the case to his right.

First he looked down through the top of the case but then knelt, looking straight in at the pieces, figurines of mythic creatures made from looping tubes of colored glass.

Arthur thought well enough of the pieces, but they were his least expensive and really designed to draw in fantasy lovers at craft shows and the annual Renaissance Fair.

Rory held his hand an eighth of an inch from the case and moved it across, never touching the case. His mouth hung open again, and Arthur realized he couldn't help it. He had too many teeth jammed into his small mouth, and clearly his family didn't have the money or insurance to fix the problem.

Arthur allowed him another minute alone with the pieces before approaching and standing near him. Rory looked up at him and nodded, then turned back to the pieces. What did he see in them? Escape, no doubt. Old dreams perhaps. Arthur took off his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief.

"What do you think?" he said.

"Cool," Rory said without looking up.

"Thank you," Arthur said, "but I have a sneaking suspicion you'll think less of them after you've had a full semester of art history."

"It's like they're from another time," Rory said.

"Well, as I said in class – "

"No," Rory said softly, looking up. "Not historical time but, you know, mythic time before there was history."

Arthur nodded. He'd often wished for a mythic time, and it had only been his passion for that mythic time, in his case the time of Eden before the fall, that eventually led him to, instead, a state of crisis. He almost said something, but as in class, he held back. Not yet. No need hitting the wrong notes until it made sense to hit the wrong notes, until the wrong notes changed the sense of right and wrong and became the right notes.

"Are you interested in fantasy then?" Arthur said.

Rory stood up, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"I like myths better," he said. "You don't know who made them so you can, uh, sort of still believe them."

"I know what you mean," Arthur said. "I suspect you like art, too."

Rory scratched his face again.

"I – I draw some."

"Excellent," Arthur said, clapping him on the shoulder.

Rory didn't jerk away. Instead, he sort of rolled away from Arthur's hand by slouching.

"You might not like it," Rory said.

"Well," Arthur said, "Let me be the judge of that. Would you like to see the studio?"

Rory looked over Arthur's shoulder where a clock hung on the wall. His eyes widened.

"Got to go," he said and headed for the door.

"Well, see you Wednesday," Arthur said.

As he opened the door, Rory turned and waved. Arthur followed him out. Rory stopped when he reached the corner of High and Main and leaned against a wall while waiting for the light change. Bells jingled from the shop next door, and Mrs. Hoover stepped out and looked down the street in Rory's direction. When she turned to go back in the store, she noticed Arthur.

"Hello, Art – Mr. Rheingold," she said.

"Mrs. Hoover," he said. "How's business?"

She waggled her hand.

"So-so," she said.

"I keep telling you," he said, "the Internet."

"I can barely turn on my cash register," she said, laughing at her own joke.

In the distance, Rory crossed Main Street. Arthur turned to look at Mrs. Hoover.

"Say," she said, "do you know that boy that rushed down the street just now?"

"One of my students," he said.

She nodded.

"He was in my shop earlier," she said. "I have to say, I was a little worried at first, but he didn't seem like the thieving type. Nervous, you know, but for some other reason."

"I suspect, Mrs. Hoover," Arthur said, "that his is not the easiest of lives."

"Whose is?" she said.

Arthur looked directly at her, and he thought he saw a hairline crack in the air between them.

"It won't always be so," he said.

The corners of her mouth turned up, but the crack did not vanish.

"Good night," she said.

Arthur bowed slightly. Her smile broadened, and the crack lessened. She locked her door and headed in the same direction Rory had, though Arthur knew she would cut down a cross street before she reached High Street. Just before she did, she looked back at Arthur and waved. He waved back.

"It won't always be so, Barbara," Arthur said with growing confidence.