Sandstorm

At thirty-three—having misspent his twenties dithering and drinking too much—Paul Wakeling was proud of how far he'd come. He was married, a new father, three years sober, and had recently gotten hired on as an adjunct at the Big Local University. He taught two writing classes a week, for a pittance really, but he loved the work and the environment, the stately, serious buildings and the brick campus paths flanked by Victorian-era poplars. It was a heady time, during which he felt both grateful for what he had and determined to achieve more. Every morning, he woke up eager to meet the day and its challenges, and he had even started working out, his boxy torso slowly becoming triangular. He trimmed his habitual hobo's beard and shaved the patch between his thick eyebrows.

His wife, Meredith, an attorney for the oldest law firm in the area, made six-and-a-half times what he did. Her salary had enabled them to buy a handsome Victorian two blocks from campus. The house dwarfed the other places they'd lived and featured original oak floors, a fireplace, and a bronze historical-site plaque hammered into a pillar on the front porch. Built in 1872. Sometimes in the morning, Paul—who grew up poor in Sandusky, Ohio—would walk outside with his coffee and, as

he looked at the gleaming plaque and the splendid neighboring homes, feel a giddy shiver of unreality that this was where he lived.

He didn't kid himself about who was footing the bill. On *his* paycheck, they would be living in one of the dismal apartment complexes off University Drive, taking the bus to work. Yes, it was "their money," but he wasn't delusional about the actual source. Still, he didn't feel emasculated: in his own way, he pulled his share. His paycheck did make a difference, allowed them little luxuries like an espresso machine and satellite radio for the car. Also, he'd talked his younger sister, Beth, into moving down from Ohio to be a live-in nanny for their baby boy, Isaac, which was a huge help. Finally, besides everything else, he worked every day on his novel, the value of which, Meredith agreed, could not be measured in financial terms.

He'd been working on the book for two years, since Meredith had become pregnant. It was provisionally entitled *Biscuit* and was about their son. "About" was insufficient. It was a paean to Isaac, whom Paul loved with an intensity he himself at times found frightening. Biscuit was his nickname for the baby. After work, he would often stand over the crib as the boy (his boy!) took his afternoon nap and feel as though he was drawing power from him, like a time-lapse flower straightening toward the sun. Thus recharged, he would sit at his desk next to the kitchen and hammer out five hundred more words. And though, at certain low moments, he may have had the occasional, passing doubt about the project, he really had no choice. Ever since the first time he saw the tiny, curled fingers, the surprisingly long eyelashes, the face so much like his own, he was in love and wanted to tell the world about it. He'd published before—a book of short stories from a now-defunct press—but it seemed irrelevant now. Biscuit and *Biscuit* were his life's work.

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His second semester of teaching Intro to Creative Writing, he met Mark Peltz. Peltz was an undergraduate, although old for it, in his late twenties. He had recently gotten out of the army and reenrolled to finish his degree. Paul's students were usually blank-faced babies, mildly interested, at best, in writing their stories about dorm-room romance and smoking weed. Peltz, on the other hand, was an adult, with graying stubble on his chin, short hair grown out a half-inch from a high and tight, and an unnervingly intense demeanor. He sat in the middle of the class, in the front row, and paid relentless attention to Paul. His opinions, about writers and writing, were mature and often intimidating.

One day, a month into the semester, the class was discussing Raymond Carver's "Cathedral," one of Paul's favorite stories. Without raising his hand—he never raised his hand—Peltz said, "Okay, but isn't 'Cathedral' kind of clichéd bullshit?"

"How so, Mark?" said Paul.

"I mean, it's the story of a blind man who teaches a guy to see." Peltz rendered his mocking synopsis in a quavering voice of faux wonder. "And the guy who can see is really the blind one!"

"Well. Yeah, I guess that's true. It's still a great story, though."

"Is it? If one of us turned in a story about a guy taught to really see by a blind man, what would you think?"

"If you turned the story in, or if Raymond Carver turned it in?" The class tittered, suddenly attentive.

Peltz leaned forward at his desk and said, "You haven't read my stuff yet. Let's just say a generic story about the blind man who teaches a guy to see. You'd think it was crap, wouldn't you?"

"But that's the thing," Paul said. "The quality of writing matters. The brilliance of Carver is that he can write that tired story and get away with it. Because he's a great writer."

Peltz rolled his eyes and made a puffing noise. Paul said, "I take it you disagree."

In a loud monotone, Peltz said, "*He opened the door. He went to the cupboard. There was a bottle of gin in it. He grabbed the bottle. He poured himself a glass. He pulled a chair out from the table. He sat in the chair. He drank the gin. It was warm.*"

The class laughed, louder this time. Paul wiped his sweating palms on his pants and said, "Well, different strokes, I guess. We can't all single-handedly invent a new literary style. I'll look forward to reading your first submission this week." He avoided Peltz's eyes and said, "Now, does anyone else have any thoughts about why the narrator doesn't want to meet Robert?"

Walking home after class, he felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Peltz, and the anger he'd tamped down earlier instantly resurfaced. "Yes?"

Peltz said, "Listen, I'm sorry about all that."

"It's fine."

"No, it was shitty." Peltz looked at the ground as he spoke, and Paul felt his shoulders relax.

"Really, Mark, it's no big deal. You're entitled to your opinion." They exited campus and walked along a narrow sidewalk. Paul turned left, down his street, and Peltz followed him. It was a cold, early February day, as cold as it got in the South, which seemed almost springlike to Paul. His earliest memory was looking up at a snowdrift covering the window of their first-floor apartment. Two undergrad girls trudged by in brightly colored galoshes and fur-lined parkas.

Peltz said, "I just really give a shit about it, you know? I love reading great writing and I want to be great myself. I want all writing to be great. And I think when you really give a shit about something, all bets are off. Like, I doubt Shakespeare walked around worrying about hurting people's feelings."

"Actually, by historical accounts, Shakespeare worried a lot

about people's feelings, if they had money and could provide patronage."

"You know what I mean. If you want to be great at something, you have to be ruthless. To yourself and everyone else." The rhetoric had a vaguely adolescent ring to Paul's ears—it reminded him of feverish nights spent talking to his best friend, Ryan, in high school. The primacy of art and the will to creative power and blah blah. But the look in Peltz's eyes as he glanced over was stone-serious and adult. He reminded himself that this was a guy who'd served two tours in Afghanistan—who might have killed people, or at least seen people die.

"Yeah, I know what you mean."

Peltz said, "Hey, you want to get a beer or something? You ever been to the Library?" The Library was a dungeon close to campus that sold Natural Light on draft for a dollar. Although going there with Peltz sounded repellent, Paul was conscious of craving a beer for the first time in years. He said, "Maybe some other time, okay? I've got to take care of my son."

"What's his name?"

"Isaac. I'm writing a book about him." He immediately wondered why he'd mentioned it.

"No shit. I'd like to read that. This your place?" They had stopped walking in front of Paul's house. Paul had his keys out and one foot on the first step up to the porch. Peltz stood there smiling, as if waiting to be asked in.

Paul said, "Yeah. Looking forward to your story on Friday."

"Okay, cool."

Paul walked up the stairs and let the door shut behind him. He had an odd feeling that Peltz might still be on the sidewalk, smiling up at the house. But when he peeked through the living room curtains, no one was there.

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