

# Biography: Checkpoint

Laura Mullen

---

I'm recording or maybe creating the story of one man's survival. *After*. . .

It's the triumph of the human spirit, a paean to the power of life itself, or the desire for life. I can almost hear the voiceover in my head as I write, "One man . . . in a distant country . . ."—etc. It's that he survives—after events that should be, according to some, left in merciful silence if they can't be erased. After experiences that, according to my editor, *empty words of meaning and leave us distrusting reason itself*. . . It's almost a terrible joke: he survives, the editor says, smiling ruefully—he's lost so much. . .

In some versions it's others who save him, in others he demonstrates a ferocious, desperate 'will to live' that embarrasses all of us.

An obstacle course I run in the effort to get the story through intact, the details are rubble, dead bodies, smoke, fire, and finally ash, and then rain, and then the scent, heavy but sharp, of wet ash. Static erodes the words to broken sounds and some intern at the somewhat famous publishing house keeps asking if I can repeat that. What one man in a not so distant country might be willing to do to survive and what another, not so far away, might be willing or actually curious to read about. Sad trash—hurried into print before the notoriously short attention span of the target audience is *kaput*. The exhausting, repetitive work of survival: whatever he can find to eat—oh go ahead—always just barely enough to give him the strength to go on looking for the next. . . Oh go ahead, sure, why not—hold your nose, I say to myself, or, just don't look at it.

You're breaking up, I say. What matters, the actual editor's pretty assistant repeats, is his survival, as an example of the strength of the human spirit, under stress. "Stress," here meaning the impossible conditions existing just over the border I'm getting a feel for, I'm coming to understand by living them with him for part of the week, each week. That

was the pitch: the authentic. But in the brute fact of our daily existence it's hard to keep sight of the vision: what good can come out of . . . ? It's like a bad joke there's hardly time for: he isn't the only one here trying to eke an existence out of what little is left. I try to explain: we need to rethink this I say. At which point we're invited to cross the border for a business lunch.

They were carried away from the first by the beauty, the stark pure beauty is how they put it, of what they imagined his life must be like. Every gesture is necessary, they whispered, fascinated. There ought to be a record: that's what they thought and then the editor's assistant gave them my name then there were some negotiations. I wasn't that much in demand, to tell the truth. There ought to be a record—not corresponding exactly to the facts, necessarily ("corresponding"?): not skulking like a rat among the facts. A record: testimony to the greatness of the human spirit, "a luminous portrait," and so forth.

It was understood, I'm reminded, that "our" readers, would probably be appalled by the physical hardship and worn numb or just bored, for instance, by the struggle to live from one day to the next and the limited range of the actual emotions he lives with, which are mostly an impotent rage and then regret. My job is to make him exemplary, to give him redeeming qualities: hope, culture, talent—some human beauties, something we all can admire—to pull a moral lesson, about "courage," etc., from the wreck. I nodded to show I agreed: this could certainly be a triumphant homage to the human spirit, or "can teach us what it means to be human," etc., etc. In the version they'll accept he has the time and energy to, for instance, occasionally find enough water to splash his face if not for a hot (unbelievable in this context) bath. After which a scene in which he sacrifices half a loaf of bread for a little girl, moved to pity by her hunger when in fact. . . . But we cut that part. They read a couple of sentences *sotto voce*, at lunch, to show me what a mistake

it would be. My subject had his attention on the dish the publisher had ordered for him when I glanced over (but it's not his first language) to see if he was listening to us.

He'll forget what happened, they laugh knowingly. He'll be glad to remember it our way, after, and so will you. They almost smirk, but they aren't completely unsympathetic. Maybe you'd like a liqueur, the editor suggests. The truth is important for those who have nothing at stake, they say. They tend to wax philosophical after these lunches the voluptuous details of which would take almost as long to write as to digest and anyway. . . .

*It's a tale of struggle*—the editor, drunker than I realized, remains with us after the others, wrapped in their good coats, depart, but drink makes him only more insistent. *Schtruggle! Triumph o' the god-damned human schpeer-it!* We're waiting for the “doggie bags.” Hopefully the leftovers arrive before the dearly bought patience of the wait staff runs, like a meter, out, or the ill effects of the rare, rich and expensive meal make themselves obvious in my subject.

There's always some touch they think of to add: scene where he finds, in his hunt for food, a can with a little white paint left in the bottom of it, and—marking out a rudimentary keyboard on the concrete—spends hours teaching himself to play the piano. (Or *remembering*, the publicist suggests, couldn't he have known how, in another life, I mean his past, I mean it's mysterious, his past, right?) He finds music scores! He can read music? I ask, looking dubious. Our protagonist belches. He learns to read music! They are so enthusiastic, the jowls of the publisher tremble on the first two syllables of “triumphant,” they argue with each other: Beethoven, no, Bach, Mozart! Nothing modern, at least they agree on that. And he finds paper, a pen . . . no, the stub of a pencil! They love this. And begins to write! What? The book! It's *his* story, right?! *Garcon*, the editor calls out, and then turning back to us, it's like Proust. Coffee? Brandy? I'm a ghost-writer? I ask. The dessert tray comes to rest as far away as possible from the subject of this discussion, which is the only sign that the extremely well-trained wait staff remembers us.

The stub of a pencil!  
Can you beat that?!

Thanks, I say, I'll have a grappa. I order grappa because when I say the word grappa I hear in my head the husky voice of a woman I was in love with, saying “Grappa makes me crazy.” There was a pencil involved in the scene with the little girl in fact, in the unacceptable, unsellable, world of fact, and I'd like something very strong . . . it's a cliché to say I'd like to forget. I'm going to remember: what I'd like is not to feel it. A grappa, says the editor. They love their ideas and always, whenever they are writing in their heads this ideal book, we're friends. Just for now they aren't going to pretend to be poor but are willing to admit—with a kind of child-like wonder—that it all goes onto an expense account. Go ahead, they say, it's on the House, and they laugh. Later they'll edit out the rats, the ‘gnawing cold,’ the despair, the illness, the obstacles . . . wondering if they compromised the experiment, if they spoiled us both, with these lunches—it's the uncertainty principle, they'll say, nervously, it's all a matter of. . . .

I order a grappa. She glowed in the candlelight. *Crazy*, she said and she laughed her intimate laugh.

They're bored by the draft I turned in last month: “All he's feeling is regret!” I agree. But they decided the rage had to go and I “down played,” as they requested, the hunger—which made them feel guilty. Guilt, sighs the editor, doesn't sell books. I can't imagine anyone who'd want to read something like this either. But I'm a little drunk when she calls, the editor's pretty blond assistant, or I'd never admit it, or add that I'm not so good at making things up.

He finds the end of a can of white paint, he finds some charcoal (the charred edge of a shattered chair or table, the publicist murmurs, perfect) and—is it on the floor or the wall, I want to know; is it (using a shard of mirror) a self-portrait or (through a window) a sketch of the ruined cityscape? They like the former but I suggest the latter as providing a moment for larger social considerations (what do these ruins remind you of?), rather than the former which has more potential to end in regret and it takes them awhile to understand what I mean but then they say yes and almost think maybe it was worth it after all, my advance, a little steep, still, but maybe. . . .

“Ish amazin' he shur-vyviish.”

“One man,” I say, “yearning to define himself. . . .”

*Thash id--ex-shact-ly!* He shuts his eyes and presses his ice-filled water glass to his forehead.

There’s a list of things that actually happened—they gave me—to leave out.

A little too *outré!*

A bit . . . you know. . . .

Just . . .

Not for our audience.

But they want to hear some of it, quickly, before the editor arrives with his new assistant. What really happened, they ask. It reassures them. I don’t know how else to explain it.

He suffers? They ask.

He suffers.

He certainly seems to like his lunch they laugh.

I refuse to look.

I try to get as close as I can to his point of view, I told her, to tell the story from inside. She seemed so sympathetic. Was he ever, is he ever (in that basement, say, before I get there--arriving like consciousness itself), an “I”? Should it be told in the first person? It’s a question none of us thought to ask. I’m the only one here who wonders, probably, and in the final version I barely exist.

After the 2nd bottle of chardonnay is gone they’re thinking maybe they could or should hire an artist to do a sketch or two. “A drawing of ‘my plate’: nohing else, just a white, bare, chipped plate! But it’s really good china--you can tell that.” “My teacup!”

“Empty! Cracked!”

“Oh my god,” the publicist practically moans, “it’s genius!”

They don’t want to hear about the long cold wait at the checkpoint on the way here and again on the way back. Let’s make it lunch, they say, because of the curfew, and that’s as close as they’ll come to recognizing what they call “the difficulties.” *Indeed*, the editor’s secretary (setting up the meeting) says crisply, *we understand there have been incidents*. They like to pretend we’re all equal. It’s not easy for anyone right now they say. But when the publicist says the word “refugee” it’s a kind of caress. In a narrow window of time, on a special pass, we cross the border. We meet them for

lunch. They like to check in, they say; they want, as they joke (it isn’t a joke) to keep an eye on their investment. He makes terrible sounds when he eats. Sounds: I try not to look. Fear and desire, the publisher says, nodding sagely, or hunger: now *those are feelings*. And he winks.

Of course you feel like you’re the only sane person at this table don’t you, the editor’s assistant laughs. Is she flirting? Of course, I say, why do you think I’m writing this?

The light in the “little bistro” they like is low and flattering, glowing in the wine, glinting off the tines of the many different forks. The salad of is sun-dried cherries, fresh baby greens, and cheese, and each item is given a pedigree, a point of origin, so we know it’s special, so we know it’s the best. Organic, free-range, farm-raised, corn-fed, heirloom, hand-picked. . . .

The guards are abrupt, brutal, on edge, at the checkpoint. It takes a long time to go through, to “be processed”: we all have to be searched. The rusted car sputters to a halt before the lowered guns and shut gate. Hurry up! Papers! Everyone out! There’s the clatter and thump and jangle of suitcases roughly emptied, pockets turned inside out, purses and bags shaken upside down above the frozen earth: women scrabbling in the icy mud among shining boots for the last little coin, the torn photograph. There’s the sound of a motor, trying and failing to restart. There’s the unmistakable click of someone taking the safety off. They are frightened, the guards, I remind myself. They repeat their orders, they motion us past with their guns, they watch our hands, there’s no eye contact.

Anyone can seem human in the right context. The point is to find the right context.

“I think each of us, as we read this book, will look deep into our own hearts to face the question: if we could survive under these conditions, how we would survive, and what we might have been willing to do to survive if we were in this man’s place. Human, all-too-human, and deeply flawed, this luminous portrait teaches us all an important lesson about the spirit we share and the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of humanity itself.”

How’s that?

It's a start.

It's rough, but it's the right sort of thing.

Pass the salt.

They pick his lunch for him. They claim that since it isn't really his language (they keep saying "mother-tongue") they want to be sure he won't order something he won't like. I know better than to say here that I've seen him eat garbage . . . and worse. They choose carefully, consulting even the assistant editor, who doesn't usually get a vote. The truth is that they are thinking of the future: the book tours, the public appearances. They don't want him to get fat--and nothing I say can convince them that he only gets a meal like this when we see them, they won't let me tell them how we eat or rather don't eat. Not now, they say, and I'd give a lot for his metabolism, or, we're all watching our weight these days, though of course they aren't, or there's no evidence of it. If I could eat like this every day who knows what I'd look like. How's his weight? It's usually, on the phone, the publicist who calls to ask: who slips the question in at the end as if it were an afterthought.

Don't worry about it.

Is he suffering?

Yes.

Can you tell that just by looking at him?

I have to go.

The camera makes *everyone* look fat.

On a good day his life seems flexible to them, something they might easily embellish if not make up. The cup is hand-painted, an antique--the editor says earnestly, eyes half-shut--but chipped! It's genius. Listen, the mud should be *silky*, the cold's an excuse to see his breath, he breathes: he's human--I'm really seeing this. *Tremble, shiver*. Some of your recent descriptions have been, well, over the top. His world should be realistic, sure, but it can still be beautiful (life is beautiful) what do you gain from grossing people out? It's the editor's assistant, on the phone, meaning this last chapter bombed, the editor himself, I'm assured, will get back to me later, meaning he won't. It's your prose we're counting on, she says. The line sounds rehearsed. It's your prose we're counting on to bring his world to life, she enthuses, or, she'll say, at some other more business-like point, *to get it across*. None of them ever say "to sell it." Sure he suffers, okay, but unless your audience can *feel* it. . . . If a tree falls in the forest

and no one wants the movie rights . . . —I joke. And there's a silence I can hear static gnawing at.

After he'd finished with her. . . . She must've been what? 8? 9 at the most. They stay so small when they don't get enough to eat, their eyes so huge, their bones so sharp: ageless as little rats. After he'd finished with the little girl she was still alive. Those small broken noises following us out of the basement. The phrase that haunts me is the one where someone says they put so & so "out of their misery": the misery belonging to so & so, who is put out of it, as if it were, what, a house. Only . . . once out there's no house. Whose country is it now, I have him ask in this 'authorized' version: what are its borders, and who are we now, the stateless peoples of that vanished. . . . He becomes a spokesperson for others in this version and, as the jacket copy says, "a stranger to himself." I watch the clock: late in the afternoon I am allowed to walk away from the desk and to have a drink, maybe two. After the second I call the editor's assistant, to ask if she wants to have dinner. There's a meeting she says, maybe, she says, it will be late. That's fine. How's it going. Me or the book? You, silly. Don't worry I say. I'll call you after the meeting. I'll be here. If they'd let me leave it in I would have said that one of us put that child "out of her misery," though it isn't true and that phrase always troubles "my" peace. The editor had a blond assistant then, now she's a brunette. This one seems more spunky as well as more efficient, but the blond had a more sensual voice--she sort of whispered things, everything: I remember pressing the phone to my ear hard to catch the details of a suggested revision or future appointment. The difference between feeling like you don't have any choice and not having any choice keeps getting harder to locate. Nothing too artsy, they say, nothing too philosophical. I wish I had something to remember her by. You'll get your book, I say. And you'll get your money, they laugh.

Oh go ahead, why not. Oh go ahead, that's what I say to myself sometimes when he's doing (as he so often is) something far from 'triumphant,' something there's 'no room for' in the book. He doesn't need any encouragement. It's I who need something (hold your nose, don't look) to get me through it. But in that basement . . . all I could think of was to get us both out of there fast.

He's just tired of arguing with you, the editor's assistant sighs

when she finally calls me back. It's the 21st century: no one is retiring to the study with the dogs and the brandy and a fine cigar to peruse a manuscript, no family is gathered around the fire after dinner to listen breathless to the next installment of the masterpiece; we're dealing with a technology which has practically outlived its moment. You have to hold their attention on a bus or a plane or in the minutes before the sleeping pill kicks in while they're trying desperately not to worry about the kids and the bills or (good night dear, good night dear) the marriage itself. That's the reality, now. So you tell me: what's the definition of a good book? Look, she says, relenting a little, you don't have to love the guy, but. . . . The connection vanishes and there's that hollow swishing noise that means that no one is there any longer but because it isn't a dial tone I can't quite bring myself to hang up.

It's Vivaldi on the restaurant's sound system: those slicing notes meant to imitate rain. Under which the harsh, wet sounds of my subject chewing away with gusto, open-mouthed.

I think we need a happy sequence.

Something bright--to set the darkness off.

Human warmth!

A romance?

No, but something warm...like, a scene around a fire at night?

Gypsies!

Gypsies--god, says the publicist, that is so brilliant.

Music, firelight. The glow in the eye of the dog or the burro or something, animal, you know, but wise. . . .

And patient.

Sort of rave meets creche the editor's assistant enthuses, and then they all look at her and she starts to blush, I mean, I mean it's a great idea, she says, and stops.

And then the publisher pats her hand, letting his own rest on hers too long, and her smile goes tense.

Gypsies, she tries, brightly, that's perfect, she smiles, pulling away to lift her wineglass.

Sometimes they ask what it's like for me, spending so much time on the other side. No, that's not it. Sometimes they make some noises that stand in for asking, for thinking they ought to ask. They look concerned, they say take care of yourself

. . . and give themselves citizen points for that because, after all, they don't have to ask. I received my advance. It must be pretty difficult they murmur and they keep that grave expression for a couple of minutes, pleased with themselves. I know better than to try to tell them about it. It takes a while to convince the guards at the checkpoint that we are expected, even wanted, beyond the gate. I shrug. Better you than me is in the air unuttered. They get hearty. Well, one of them laughs wryly, motioning to the waiter, you must *certainly* like your work.

There's always some version of the moment when, amazed, they realize he's eaten even the parts you're not supposed to. They're better than I am at not hearing the noises: I knew exactly at what point he was finished with the smaller bones and started on the larger. One of them has a friend who eats the tails of the shrimp, they say, laughing, but this! When we come in the maitre de makes a discreet signal to the bartender and the music gets a bit louder, the slicing attack of the violins a little more pronounced.

You see what we want, right?

The rough strumming of guitars and the crackle of laughter, sparks drifting up from the fire into a night sky thick with stars, themselves like sparks, but permanent, fixed.

Bingo.

After he cracks the bones with his teeth I can hear him sucking the marrow out. It's a damp irregular sort of almost whistling with little abrupt halts. There's a low nearly inaudible growl over that. There's no proof that I'm the only one who notices. I might just be the only one unable to pretend I don't.

It's so human, hunger.

It's beautiful. It's so pure I think it has a kind of holiness.

Desire.

The desire to live, the editor's assistant shyly suggests.

But this description of how he was sick—it's too long. Vividly written, and the editor looks sort of queasy for a moment, but there's far too much detail: condense or better just cut. There's no other motivation for the theft of the pants, I object (though I told myself I wouldn't get into one of these arguments, swore again I'd just take notes, trying to

look like I was at least considering their advice). It doesn't make any sense. Maybe he likes the pants. Yes, maybe he just liked them. The editor's new assistant thinks the way he dresses is "cool," my subject: she's interested in the overlay of patterns and textures, Annie Hall meets Anna Sui, she cracks, fluttering her eyelashes. She thinks he's sexy because he looks dangerous. I don't know how much the restaurant gets paid to let him in but I suspect it's quite a bit. He's filthy, he stinks. I'm not much better at the end of a week on that side of the fence. I try to explain: he wants food and when he's been fed, either rest or, if it isn't too difficult to achieve, the thing he describes as vengeance. When he's had all of the above he feels satisfied, if we stumble across a little booze we feel more satisfied still, and then—at the end of that—there's regret. You make it sound, she says, not taking her eyes off him, so dreary, almost . . . tedious. I hope, she says, noticing he's returning her look now and turning to me, trying to act as though she hasn't noticed, the book's not like that. And she laughs a little practiced-sounding laugh.

We keep on the move, I say, when (or rather if) they ask. It's all about finding the right thing in the right place at the right time, or just—if that's too much to hope for—not finding the wrong thing, or being in the wrong place. I don't know what he did with the souvenirs, I admit: I was just glad he didn't have them on him at the checkpoint. Well, the publisher says uneasily, yes. He waves at the editor and his assistant, coming across the long elegant room, and he changes the subject.

A book made of fragments, anonymous, scrawled on the walls of whatever temporary shelter, all slogan and subjectivity, traces of transient existence, caught or expressed in whatever was handy or all too abundant: blood, shit. . . .

I should go soon, I say. Don't get up.

What time is it, she murmurs, how long did I sleep?

Not so long, I say, but I have to get back.

Oh, she says, yes. And then, where's my bra?

We took our clothes off like the lovers in movies who just can't wait: a trail of undergarments (but where is her bra?) leads back to jeans, shirt, skirt and that cute little jacket. . . .

Our shoes are somewhere near the door. I no longer know whether I felt the way these signs would indicate, but I'm pleased by the mess.

He suffers terribly, doesn't he, she murmurs.

Sure, I say, "terribly," but—I add, I can't stop myself—that doesn't mean he's ready for a committed relationship.

She blushes and shrugs, and turns away to hook up the bra she found tangled in the sheets.

Look, I say (it's my awkward apology), not all the accusations are false.

But some of them are! In just her black lace bra she stares me down: she's younger than I realized, and more passionate.

I was just joking I say. I say I'm sorry, and then, I wish I could tell you . . .—and I stop.

It's fine, she says.

No, I say, really, but. . . . And I stop.

I was like you once, I could say, or just now you reminded me of myself. How can one be reminded of oneself: how can one not. Incidents like the one we left out are much—or so I like to think—less frequent since I started the project. Having a biographer makes him a little more self-conscious. Or so I hope. For all I know it makes him worse. Such a pretty day, just the first hint of spring or that's how I remember it, in a newer sector, maybe slightly less devastated, I couldn't tell yet: I was trying to get a feeling for the place. The mother was almost a child herself, trying to keep the family together in the ruins of their house. It's a cliché, they were right, the brave single mother, but I forgot all about him as she spoke. I was wondering why I hadn't thought of a story like hers, maybe I could give a chapter to this family, would it fit? When I turned around he was gone. An onion is made up of nothing but layers, I want to tell the editor's pretty new assistant, that's how it is now: there is no core truth. I just want to excuse myself, excuse after excuse. Bad actors clutch handkerchiefs holding cut sections of onion up to their eyes to simulate grief and the eyes respond to a painful odor like a painful thought. Blink and the tears start. Maybe it was just that the sun got lower or a shadow stretched out: suddenly I wondered where he was. We listened for a moment to the silence. It was getting dark. He was here just . . . . Where's your friend she asked, her eyes flashing. It happened before you were hired, I could start. I imagine her voice or the voice of another woman who, after a couple of drinks, tells you what we call a "home truth," says something like You'd do anything to get this book published, wouldn't you? There's nothing you haven't compromised, no story you wouldn't sell, not one single

truth you'd refuse to distort. So you're just being difficult—for what? And then I'm trying to apologize again, stumbling through the “painful but honest” self-assessment I'd carefully prepared for just such a moment. . . . I want her to put my doubts in perspective, I need her there to say It's the 21st century, or something like I know you did the best you could, turning away, shrugging, saying don't worry about it, smiling a little grimly, saying, a man's gotta eat. I need her to say that—and I don't really see why she can't.

They worked it out that the editor's new assistant leaves first, escorted by the publicist and that we are to remain at the table—watched over by the editor—for at least half an hour after they set off.

It's the injustice that gets me the editor says, waving off the waiter who wants to “tempt” us with a touch more coffee, one more liqueur, another dessert. The publicist stands beside the table waiting for the editor's assistant to come back from the restroom. Exactly, he says, if we can just make the book buying public feel that. Meanwhile the publisher's “taking care” of the check meaning he's gone through the baroque intricacies of the ritual which begins with an ostentatious calling for the bill, the announcement (greeted each time with surprise and delight) that--“this one's on me”--he'll “take care” of it, the search for his glasses, the reading, the dispute over some more or less trivial sum with first the fawning waiter and then the maitre de (who assumes the air of a trusted friend and co-conspirator against the evil and so unfortunately utterly unreasonable management at these moments) and then at last the flourishing of a gleaming rectangle of corporate plastic. . . .

It is a little tedious.

The editor heads to the bathroom after the publisher leaves. My subject is finishing, as quickly as possible, everything left on the table, scraping the other dessert plates onto his, draining each glass into his own and gripping it, as the busboys descend on us like furies, and depart, taking with them everything but what he held onto by force. I put what he needs within reach. He tosses the mixture down, chokes slightly, coughs, and emits a long ugly belch, and then he laughs, slyly. None of which can go in the book. Words like “sly” listed among those likely to endanger the uneasy

identification with. . . . There's only so much the public can take. We all have our limits. I look at my watch.

I remember thinking I'd better go find him, and feeling the first faint tug of nervousness. I'll send her home if I see her, I said. She didn't look at me again but turned away and went on calling her daughter, her voice roughening, her repeated, unanswered call increasingly harsh.

Not “sneaks.” *Verbotten*, that verb, the editor's assistant tried a laugh, but she wasn't joking. She was calm, but firm. She was wearing a power suit. It was a power lunch. Nothing had ever happened between us and nothing would, that was the message. You've lost the reader's sympathy there, she says sternly. Try. . . . She was like a page from a heavily edited thesaurus. This isn't the real you, I tried to suggest.

“Let me go,” she pleads. She pleads—but we cut that part.

We want them on our side, right? Right?

The editor sits back down, motions to the waiter, let's get drunk he says, which means he already is.

There are worse ideas.

We laugh.

When he's drunk he lets his hair down, that's what he'd call it, where do they come up with phrases like that? He laughs when I do my imitation of the movie voice-over: “in a war-torn country, in a time of changes, one man . . .,” I start.

Our toast is “Triumph of the human spirit”: whoever starts drinking before the “it” of spirit or thumps their empty glass down last buys the next round. The one pronouncing the speech has the power: knows when to drag it out and when to speed up. After “human” we're both on edge, glasses lifted, maybe tilted, a drop or two of some precious booze spreading in the tablecloth.

“Triumph. . . .”

The doggie bags arrive which means the publicist has called to say we can go now. These “leftovers” are made up in the kitchen and added to the bill. A ruse to keep us here a little longer: I'm proud of whoever came up with it.

You know what you need to fix, she said, the last time I talked to her.

Yeah.

I didn't want to say much, I just wanted to hear her low, her throaty, as they say (meaning you can hear that there's a body there, and almost feel a breath), voice.

It doesn't matter that it happened: what *hasn't* happened? What haven't we done to each other already? What makes you think—she sounded almost desperate—everyone wants to read about it? You know what you need to do and you won't do it! People can change: it's up to us to imagine the possibility, to make the space for it in our lives—that's what you said you would do so why can't you just . . . just once. . . .

It's okay.

No, no, it's not. . . .

They bring out our coats in the garbage bags they dumped them in when we arrived. Even over the reek of disinfectant there's a strong whiff of grease, offal, feces, and smoke. The editor makes his usual joke about the coat check but then—he's never done this before—he holds out his hand to my subject, who takes it and shakes it once, firmly, with a dignified gratitude that lends him, for a moment, a sort of grace. It's a completely unexpected gesture and afterwards there's an awkward silence.