

The Winner

In the hills bordering Lake Superior's northern shore, Krumholtz was lost. Behind the wheel, searching for a landmark, he had not seen a road sign or any other indication of a human presence for miles. The surface on which he had been driving had altered from asphalt pavement to rutted dirt, and the route appeared to be undecided about its direction. It had been headed north, but after a sharp curve, it had angled south again. The rotting telephone poles, without wires, had been listing down toward the ground and now had disappeared entirely, swallowed up by forest-matter.

Having advanced for the last half-hour feeling that he had moved back into an era of primeval undergrowth, Krumholtz found himself in a thick wooded area of spruce and maple trees. They were edging closer to the road as one mile followed another. He had lost sight of the lake and was getting anxious about the time. He pulled his rental car over—there was no shoulder, just a patch of weedy grass—to consult his directions, which appeared to be contradictory. The rental car's GPS system wasn't working. Having little idea of where he was, exactly, he turned off the engine and got out of the car.

The sharp raw pine scent made him think of his childhood in rural Oregon. He closed his eyes and noticed a hawk circling above him. Nearby to the right, a sumac

bush displayed deep autumnal red leaves. When he looked at it, the leaves trembled, as if his gazing had caused the bush to shiver.

He took in a deep breath, then coughed. Slowly and with careful deliberation over word choices, he began cursing.

Krumholtz was a free-lance journalist and had been assigned by *Success* magazine to interview the subject of February's cover story. Just as *Playboy* always had a foldout, *Success* always had a Winner. February's Winner, James Mallard, lived back in this forest somewhere in a large compound of his own design, Krumholtz had been informed. His article on Mallard was to include a combination of background information and personal narrative--the rise to fortune, lifestyle choices, opinions, etc.—along with anecdotes about the winner's current well-being. To deserve a place in *Success*, the subject had to have made a significant mark measured in dollars. These feature articles, celebratory but not effusive or craven, would have as their subtext an understanding of the *complexity* of achieving great wealth. Seasonings of wit and irony were acceptable if dropped knowingly here and there throughout the article, but even a hint of skepticism in the face of affluence would be ruthlessly blue-penciled. "*Vogue* does not mock fashion, and *we* do not mock riches," Krumholtz's editor had told him. "The amassing of a large fortune is to the readers of our magazine a sweetly solemn thought."

James Mallard, pronounced Mall *aard*, British style, accent on the second syllable, had been difficult to research. The biography was paltry. He was almost an

unknown. The Wikipedia article on him was “under revision,” and several other web articles on him had been withdrawn or were impossible to access. The print media had mostly ignored him. Mallard appeared to have lived and worked in the shadows. According to one source, he “valued his privacy.” Colleagues of his had been reluctant to discuss anything about him over the phone. Voices dropped melodramatically whenever his name was mentioned, “I haven’t talked to you, and you haven’t made this call,” one of Krumholtz’s interviewees said to him.

A photographer, a stringer, would supposedly be sent out to do portraits-and-poolsides a few days after Krumholtz’s interview, but that prospect now seemed unlikely, even preposterous, given the remoteness and isolation of Mallard’s compound.

Krumholtz had never heard of Mallard before getting his assignment but was glad to have the work. Given the current economic climate, feature-article jobs like this one were drying up, as subscription levels plunged and newsstand sales declined. Even *Success* itself had experienced its first red-ink quarter, as if the act of reading about fortunes had become too laborious for the average would-be Winner to master.

He checked his watch: two-thirty. The hawk was still circling above him, and from the west a breeze touched his face. He heard a distant songbird, a melancholy warbling. He felt as if the song might be directed to him or against him.

According to the other scattered pieces of information that Krumholtz had cobbled together, his subject, James Mallard, had been born on a farm in Iowa. The

young man had lettered in football and had quarterbacked the hometown team in his senior year to a conference championship. He had been named Prom King and class valedictorian before attending Dartmouth on a full scholarship, where he had participated in intramural sports including water polo and rugby. He had graduated *cum laude* with honors in Economics. His nicknames had been “Duck” and “the Duckster.” After having dropped out of business school at Northwestern, Mallard had attended Columbia Law (graduating in ’93, specialty: patent law). Soon after receiving his law degree and passing the bar exam, he had married the former Jane Estes (Columbia, class of 1992) with whom he had had two children, James (“Jiminy”) Mallard Jr. and Mary Stuart (“Gubbie”) Mallard. His hobbies were listed as mountain climbing and art collecting. Using finance capital borrowed from a fellow-student at Dartmouth, Mallard had bought several apartment buildings in Lincoln, Nebraska, and Ann Arbor, Michigan. He had fixed them up, converted them to condos, sold them for a good profit, and then had escaped from the real estate market before the bottom fell out of it. As a consequence, he had won the annual King Midas Award from the Omaha C of C. A year later, with an electrical engineer as partner, he had founded a privately held medical tech start-up; this company, InnovoMedic, had formulated a proton-based imaging device now commonly used for diagnoses in hospitals worldwide, the financial rewards for which—Mallard owned the patent; he had bought out his partner—were in the high nine figures. After acquiring these great riches, Mallard had divorced Jane Estes, and

in 2004 had married Eleanor (“Ellie”) Bacon-Starhope, no college degree listed, and had fathered two more children, the twins, Angus and Gretel, both home-schooled. He owned several houses including a brownstone on the Upper West Side in New York, another one in the desert southwest, and this one, in Minnesota, near Lake Superior and the city of Duluth. Mallard also owned a fresh-water yacht, the *Temps Perdu*, which apparently he rarely sailed. He was noted as a fundraiser for the Democratic Party. He served on the boards of several hospitals and charities; however, he had not appeared in public for eighteen months.

Krumholtz’s typical procedure was to research the Winner and then to do follow-ups after the face-to-face interview. Most Winners left behind them a slime trail of ex-wives and embittered business partners. But neither Mallard’s ex-wife or his business partners would agree to speak to Krumholtz.

He was watching the hawk circling slowly above him. Aloud, Krumholtz said, “I am lost. I am *nowhere*.” He took out his cell phone to check the time. No signal.

How many places could you find in the world where a cellphone wouldn’t work? Krumholtz checked his watch again, a cheap drugstore brand, and noticed that it had stopped. The time was still two-thirty and would be two-thirty from now on. He was very late. Folding himself back into his car—he was a big man, and the top of his head had almost continual bruises and bumps from lintels and beams and overhead luggage racks and door frames—he started the engine and edged forward back onto the road. Overhead, the hawk circled away.

Ahead of him the road began another series of indecisive twists and turns, heading into a forest so dense that a desolate canopy of branches blocked the sky and shielded the road from the sun. He felt as if he were drifting into a tunnel of vegetation where the usual norms had been reversed. Here the trees were permanent, but the route was temporary and subject to disappearance. At almost exactly the moment when Krumholtz thought he should turn the car around and head back, he came upon long expanse of hurricane fencing with razor wire at its top. He saw a driveway on the right-hand side, and a high gated barrier with the word MALLARDHOF carved in wood at the top. The driveway, behind the fencing, angled up to a high bluff. A sign in front of the gate announced Valhalla Drive. The hurricane fence stretched away in both directions, north and south.

An intercom with a white button stood in front of the gate. Krumholtz drove up in front of it and pressed the button.

“Yes?” A woman’s voice.

“It’s Jerry Krumholtz.” He waited. The silence continued for five seconds, ten seconds, almost half a minute. “From *Success* magazine. I have an appointment? With James Mallard?”

From the forest came an insucking breath of wind.

“This interview was set up *a long time ago*. And . . . and a photographer will be here in a few days for the artwork.”

He waited. The engine of the rental car hummed quietly.

“This *has all been arranged*. It’s been agreed to.”

“You don’t have to plead,” the voice on the intercom said. “Do you believe in angels?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a simple question.”

“Well, it may be simple, but I don’t know.”

“You don’t know if you believe in angels?” Just then, the gate lifted as if on invisible wires, and Krumholtz drove in. He had the impression that video surveillance cameras were trained on him as his car made its way up a switchback dirt road around the bowl of a valley to the crest of the bluff, where he saw the house splayed out lengthwise across the top.

The house, built of concrete and glass, commanded a distant view of Lake Superior in one direction and the forest in another. A green Jeep speckled with dried mud sat in the driveway along with another car whose make Krumholtz didn’t recognize. A small perennial garden had been planted to the right of the garage. From where he had parked, Krumholtz could not quite see where the house ended; it just went on and on, a spatialization of the infinite. Near the front door was a display area consisting of a fragile-seeming pile of rocks, like a cairn, possibly a sculpture of some kind, encircled by bricks. The austere lavishness of the house presented the viewer with ostentatious neutrality, as if the old styles of grandiose display—Italian palazzos,

Tudor palaces, and castles—had given way to nondecorative fortress brutalism of glass and stone. How the floor-to-ceiling glass supported the concrete roof was a mystery, unless the glass was thicker than it appeared to be and was load-bearing. Krumholtz did not feel like getting out of his rental car, but when he saw a woman emerging from the front door, he thought he had better get to work.

“Hello hello *hello!*” she said, smiling with what must have been forced cheer, but the smile was so dazzling that Krumholtz thought for a moment that she might actually be happy to see him. She wore beige Capri pants and a simple gray blouse, and she looked, as the wives of the rich often did, like a professional beauty. In fact she was terribly beautiful, so much so that he could hardly keep his eyes on her. Beautiful women had always made him shy, and gazing at this one was like looking at the sun. After a few seconds, he had to turn away. “Mr. Krumholtz,” she said, holding out her hand. “I’m Ellie Mallard.”

“Jerry,” he said. “Please call me Jerry.”

“I shall call you Mr. Krumholtz,” she said, holding her ground. “For the sake of your *dignity*.” Her skin, which at first he had assumed to be deeply tanned, he now saw had a permanent attractive darkness to it. Did she have an African-American mother or grandmother? Or was her family Persian? How to ask such a question? Her black tangled hair fell down to her shoulders, and gold hoop earrings sparkled against her skin in the fading light. “Please come in,” she said, holding the door open for him. “You must be tired out.”

“Well, I got lost,” he said.

“Everyone does. Absolutely *nobody* knows how to get here. I still get lost myself sometimes when I’m not paying attention. But anyway here you are now, and welcome to Mallardhof.”

“Why is it called Mallardhof?” he asked.

“No reason at all!” she said with a practiced dry humor. She moved fluidly, like the perfect beauty she was. “We just decided that it needed a name and that’s the name we gave it. Maybe we should find another name. It’s so German. What would *you* call it? Did you like the sculpture out in front? It’s a Rocco Steiner.”

“Very impressive,” Krumholtz said absent-mindedly. He was looking down the front hallway into the depths of the house: the corridor disappeared in the distance as if replicating the geometry of infinity. “My goodness,” he said, under his breath.

“Goodness had nothing to do with it,” she said, quoting Mae West, “but it *is* rather stupendous, I’ll grant you that.” The diamond on her finger was the size of a grape. “Of course we love it, but sometimes it’s simply white-elephant time around here, especially on cleaning days and wash days.”

“Yes. I’ll bet. So. How many square feet *is* this house, anyway?” he asked, feeling her hand on his back as she guided him toward a living room—which he imagined to be the first of many—down the front hallway.

“No idea,” she said. “Quite a few, but we never counted them up. Would you like a drink? Something to eat?” From invisible speakers came the sound of music: Bach,

or Handel. Baroque something, performed on the original instruments: court music, yes, *The Water Music*, that was it. “You must be starving.”

“No, thank you, I’m quite all right.” On the wall, two side-by-side flat-panel video screens showed a man’s face contorting in agony, relaxing, smiling, then contorting in agony again. Hung next to it was another screen showing a woman who appeared to be shouting soundlessly for help. “What’s that?”

“Oh, that diptych? That’s an installation by Herb Furcht, the video artist. He’s a wonderful guy, do you know him? He’s become *such* a good friend. It’s called *Agony #6*. It’s a poor title. I begged Herb to change it, but I do love his work, and after all Herb’s a thoughtful guy even with his irony, and he has the right to name his pieces, because he’s the artist. But, you know, there never was an *Agony #5*. Isn’t that odd? Maybe it was the wrong kind of agony.” The face on the video screen began to smile and then froze into that genial expression, as if shocked suddenly by open displays of sodomy. The effect was terrifying. “You see? It’s *not* agony at all. You have to think about it. You’re sure you wouldn’t like something to drink? The sun’s almost past the yardarm.”

“No, really. I should really start my interview with Mr. Mallard.”

“Well, I could be mistaken, but I think Jimmy’s in the tub. Earlier today he was outside making furniture, and I think he probably worked up quite a sweat. He was expecting you, you know, and after waiting for a while for you, and you didn’t come, he went outside, and now he’s back. He didn’t expect you to be late.”

“Yes,” Krumholtz said. “I’m very sorry about that.” Had she really just touched him on the cheek with the tips of her fingers? Why would she do such a thing?

“Why don’t I show you around the house first?”

“All right. But if you don’t mind my asking, what did you do before you met Mr. Mallard?”

“Me? Oh, that.” She laughed humorlessly. “The past life. That’s completely over, that life. I was a model. And I did some acting. Some TV movies and whatnot.” The interior walls consisted of poured concrete, and now, when she touched part of the wall, a section of it gave way under her hand—it was actually a door, invisibly hinged—and they stepped into another entryway, and then into a classroom, where two rather beautiful children were sitting at a long table, writing under the eye of a young Asian woman with straight black hair and reading glasses. Beyond them, the window, from floor to ceiling, gave a view of the woods. The young woman, the teacher, was also a great beauty. “That’s our hired tutor, Ping,” she said under her breath. “The children are home-schooled. Bonjour, Ping!”

“Bonjour, Madame.”

“Ping is from Beijing by way of Paris,” Ellie Mallard said to Krumholtz. The children, Angus and Gretel, glanced up quickly at Krumholtz and, finding nothing in particular that interested them, turned back to their writing. They were dressed in identical shirts, trousers, and shoes. “All their classes are taught in French and Mandarin.”

“Except science,” Angus said sourly without looking up. “We do science in English.”

“Do you have children, Mr. Krumholtz?” Ellie Mallard asked, gazing directly into his eyes. He forced himself not to look away. What a weapon beauty could be, and only the rich could own it.

“Yes,” he said. “I have two daughters.”

“Jimmy and I, we believe in public schooling,” Ellie Mallard said, waving her hand at the school room and the overhead projector and maps of the world, “but the local school is *much* too far away, and the school bus doesn’t even come out here, as you can imagine. So there’s no way to get there. We’re just lucky to get the *mail*! Besides, I think children should learn foreign languages, don’t you? Given the world that they will be entering?”

“Maybe so,” Krumholtz said. “But French? I understand the need for Chinese, but French”

“Mandarin for work, French for *play*!” Ellie Mallard said brightly. “Well, we mustn’t take up any more of the children’s time.” She closed the concrete door behind her. Krumholtz heard Gretel saying goodbye as the door silently shut.

“I’d be teaching them Spanish, myself,” he said.

“Oh, Spanish is so easy, they can just pick it up along the way. And, what, they’re going to live in *Mexico*?” She threw her head back and laughed. “It’s just a *hobby* language, don’t you think? Or of servitude?” Krumholtz’s older daughter was learning

Spanish and finding it difficult going. “Now here,” she said, returning to the main hallway, “is one of our Bento Schwartz photographs. Do you like it?” She gazed at it thoughtfully. “I think it’s *quite* marvelous.”

The photograph was large, three feet by about five feet. It appeared to be a photograph of a trash heap. “What is it?” Krumholtz asked.

“Well, it’s part of a series called *Disposed*,” she said.

“Ah.”

“This one, by coincidence, since we were just talking about Mexico, this one is of the Mexico City landfill. It’s a digital photograph, but Bento has *personally* colored some of the objects in it, such as that bucket in the foreground. Isn’t it a beautiful blue? I think it’s ravishing. He paints over certain objects to give them, I don’t know, a *feeling*. I always find something new in the photograph to study every time I look at it. It has quite an aura.”

“Hmm.”

“Because of the colors. And the detail. And the dynamic negative space. Do you know Bento’s photographs?”

“No,” Krumholtz said. “Bento Schwartz?”

“He’s very well known,” she said doubtfully. Krumholtz had taken out his small notebook and was taking down the names of the artists he had heard her mention, and he was making an effort to get the details about the photograph. Squatters’ shacks rested on the landfill, and Krumholtz could see the squatters, miserable wretches,

inside them. Krumholtz felt an old familiar hatred of the rich welling up inside him. They were often obtuse in an almost comical way. He looked down and saw that Mrs. Mallard was barefoot. “Why did you ask me about angels?”

“Excuse me?”

“When I was in the car, at the gate, before you buzzed me in, you asked me whether I believe in angels.”

“I did? No, I don’t think so. Why would I do that? I didn’t buzz you in. It might have been Lorraine. Lorraine is the other woman. Incidentally, I should have asked you whether you’d like to freshen up.” She turned and gazed at him again. “The bathroom’s right here.” She pointed at the opposite wall.

“Oh, okay,” he said. “Where is it? I don’t see it.”

She touched the wall, and the concrete gave way again, and Krumholtz, who now felt like an angry resentful ambassador-without-portfolio from a third world country, walked in. The lights flickered on automatically, as did the exhaust fan. He was surprised to find an ordinary toilet, humiliated by its functionality, in front of him, but on the wall above the toilet was a small signed pencil drawing by Paul Klee, and near the washstand and toilet was a waist-high table on which were piled several books. At the top rested a signed first edition of Kurt Vonnegut’s *Mother Night*. Beneath it were other signed editions of James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, Adrienne Rich’s *Selected Poems*, and T. S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, just the book to have around when you were scrubbing your hands. So far, he hadn’t seen books anywhere

else in the house. Krumholtz washed up, splashing soapy water on his face before soiling the hand towels, and when he returned to the hallway, Ellie Mallard was standing in exactly the same spot where she had been before, smiling pensively, her right foot half-raised and planted with the arch on her left leg, a dancer's position. "Do you believe in angels?" she asked.

"No," he said.

"Well, neither do I, but I used to," she said, proceeding down the hallway toward an open doorway. Krumholtz followed her and noticed a Bonazzi painting next to a Hockney—no, it wasn't a Hockney, though it looked like one, with a nude male swimmer underwater—and a Dentinger, a Fabian, and a huge Dierking that went all the way up to the ceiling, the dirty-brown and grayish paint mixed in with what looked like rusted metal fragments expressive of terrible agony on an epic scale. When he turned the corner, he found himself in what appeared to be a master bathroom placed in the middle of the hallway with a large whirlpool bath built into the floor. Leaning back in the bathtub with his eyes fixed on Krumholtz, was the February Winner, James Mallard.

"Ah, so at last you're here," Mallard said. "We thought you must have been a little lost, being late. As you were. What happened to you?"

"Yes, I'm sorry," Krumholtz said, putting his notebook away. "I got lost. I was misdirected."

“Oh, that’s all right.” Mallard stood up and stepped out of the whirlpool bath. He was quite magnificent, still in possession of a sculpted athlete’s body, classically muscled and proportioned. Somewhere else in this house, Krumholtz knew, would be a fully equipped gym and possibly a full-time personal trainer. “We wondered what had gone wrong with you,” Mallard muttered flatly, as if Krumholtz’s absence actually had been a matter of the greatest indifference. Without a trace of shyness, and still wet, Mallard stepped toward Krumholtz and shook his hand, hard. He had a strong wet grip and large, thick fingers. Having finished with the handshake, Mallard stepped backward toward a grooved section of wall, where he pressed a recessed button. Hot air came blowing out on him from louvers in the wall, drying his body as he pivoted, his arms held slightly up. Krumholtz glanced over at Mallard’s wife, who was gazing appreciatively at her husband. Like the gods, these people had no timidity or shame. “Darling,” Mallard said to his wife, “would you hand me a towel?”

She reached over for a red bath towel, with a JM monogram, and handed it to her husband, though not before giving him a peck on the cheek. Mallard dried the back of his legs and his hair, still in full view of Krumholtz, whose hand was now sopping wet. After drying himself, Mallard tossed the bath towel onto the floor.

“Well,” he said. “How shall we conduct this interview? This *little* interview?”

“Perhaps in your den?” Krumholtz asked. “I have a digital recorder—“

“--Wouldn’t you rather be *doing* something?” Mallard asked. “Something physical? Do you hunt? It’s deer season, and we could go hunting. Actually, no. Unfortunately

for us, the light is going, and it's too late in the day. We could go out tomorrow, if you wish."

"Well, no, I don't hunt," Krumholtz said. *Here I am*, he thought, *talking to this naked man, while his wife looks on*

"We could chop some wood," Mallard said. "There's time. We could do that."

"But you've just washed. And I have to take notes."

"You mean there's a rule?" Mallard laughed. "Didn't know there was a rule." He walked into the bedroom on the other side of the bathroom and put on the worn clothes he had apparently just taken off. "There's never a rule. That's the first thing you have to learn. Come on."

Outside, in the back yard, Mallard, or someone, had set up a small platform of slatted wood, and, a few feet nearby, a sawhorse. Off to the side were axes, hatchets, a steel wedge, and a chain saw neatly arranged inside a wooden holding-frame with pegs at the top from which to hang other tools. A large pile of unsplit logs had been dumped a few feet away, and now Mallard picked up a log and stood it up on the platform. He took out an axe before stepping away from the log. With one powerful blow, he raised the axe and brought it down on the log, splitting it cleanly in two.

"Is this your hobby?" Krumholtz asked. "Splitting wood?"

"It's not a hobby, no. Hobbies are for others. It's an activity, a physical exertion, that we like," Mallard said. Again he placed a log vertically on the platform, and again

the axe came down in one clean arc. The two parts of the log dropped away on either side. “A few minutes, and then you can take over.”

Krumholtz took a long look at Mallard’s face, which now, in the diminishing light, seemed to have a rock-jawed solidity with eyes set far apart and a heavy five o’clock shadow over a thick neck. Wherever Mallard turned, he gave off an air of command: the velvet glove over the iron fist had grown very thin, with him. He split logs with efficiency, Krumholtz thought, but also as if he were in a permanent rage.

“So, you have questions? Ask questions,” Mallard said, his breath coming out in snorts. “Ask me questions.”

“Why did you move out here? It’s a bit remote.”

“We didn’t want to see any neighbors. So we bought up the entire valley. You can look in any direction, and you won’t see anybody. It gives you a . . . freedom, you know?”

“Yes, well. Something else I meant to ask right away. This can be on or off the record, but your wife mentioned something about ‘the other woman,’ and I think she said her name is Lorraine. When I came to the gate—“

“—Lorraine?” The axe came down. “Are you doing a gossip sheet? I thought this was for *Success* magazine. Well. This isn’t for publication. Lorraine’s my girlfriend. My *mistress*, if you will.”

“She’s here?”

“Of course she’s here. You didn’t meet her? Sometimes—” He set up another log, then took off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt. “Sometimes Lorraine stays down at her end of the house. Or she’s out in back.” He waved his arm at the air.

“Your wife doesn’t mind? Your having a live-in girlfriend?”

“Off the record? Or on it? Well, write what you please. We don’t care. No, she *doesn’t* mind. She knows that a man like me needs more than one woman. That’s how it happens to be. Always has been. From the start. We simply choose not to lie about it and not to indulge in the usual middling hypocrisies. I could tell you about men who have a different mistress *every month*. If you can afford it, you can do it. Everyone knows and nobody cares. So. Have you met Lorraine?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you go back into the house and go back toward the other wing and introduce yourself to her and get her version of things then come back and split some logs? Obviously, you need to get the girlfriend thing out of the way. Then we’ll have a drink.” Mallard pointed at the door.

Walking down the hallways in a kind of trance, with the artwork appearing to register his presence—here was another video installation, switched on possibly for his benefit, this one by an artist, Frederic Winkelman, whose work he recognized, the flat screen showing a woman staring straight out at the viewer, this same woman

wearing a slightly antique stained silk chiffon bridal gown à la Miss Havisham but posed sitting in a folding chair on a busy urban sidewalk (it looked like midtown Manhattan somewhere near 42nd Street) while all around her the blurry pedestrians parted and then reclustered—walking away from this visual disturbance, and then past more artistic plunder perfectly mounted and framed, Krumholtz thought first of his wife, Cathy, working at her desk at the agency, and then of the remote castle in *Beauty and the Beast*, not the Disney version (his daughters' favorite movie, both of them addicted to princess-figures), but the Cocteau film with the hallway chandeliers consisting of bare human arms holding candlesticks, and all the other inanimate objects having taken on resentful life as servants, everything under a spell that could only be broken by love, by a kiss. Cathy would be headed home about now, picking up the girls at after-school care, driving them homeward while she tried to quiet them and to think of what to serve for dinner, and he wondered if she would have a thought for him out on this assignment, and at that particular moment he turned another corner near an open door and saw a woman, the one who must certainly be the girlfriend, Lorraine, lying back on a fainting couch. She was reading a glossy magazine and glanced up when Krumholtz entered.

“Oh,” she said. “You must be that guy.”

After a moment Krumholtz realized that this woman, this Lorraine, was wearing flowered pajamas. The roses on the pajamas had a slightly sinister efflorescence. “Yes,” he said, “I’m that guy.” He examined her. Unlike the wife, she was not particularly

beautiful. On her left cheek was a birthmark in the shape of a candle flame. “I’m the guy you asked about angels. You were at the intercom.”

“The guy from the magazine? You didn’t answer my question.”

“No, I suppose not.” He pointed at her. “You’re wearing pajamas. It’s mid-afternoon. Been napping?”

“What did you say your name was?”

“Krumholtz. Jerry Krumholtz.”

“Jerry, did you think Jimmy looked okay?” Lorraine asked. “I’m worried about him. He hasn’t been himself lately, and no one knows why.”

“He looked all right. What do you think could be bothering him?” Krumholtz asked, getting out his notebook.

“Me? What do I think? It could be anything. He’s restless. I think he’s run out of worlds to conquer. And that makes him sick.” She tossed the glossy magazine onto the floor. “He’s got everything. What would you do if you had everything?”

What a preposterous question. Krumholtz took out his pen. “Doesn’t Ellie— doesn’t the wife—mind that you’re here?”

“What did you say your name was?” She was unapologetic about her forgetfulness, apparently.

“Jerry Krumholtz.”

“Oh, right. Where did you ever get a name like that?”

A moment passed while he absorbed her question. “My parents gave it to me. I think I was asking about whether the wife minds that you’re here.”

“Here? In this room, or here in the house? No. Oh, you mean my *existence*, here on earth, taking up the sexual slack? Why should she mind? Maybe you don’t understand the situation. Or maybe you don’t understand about men like Jimmy. He’s just bigger than other men. Everything about him is bigger and stronger than they are. Those *herd* men. All the little Shmoos. So *unimportant*. He’s just richer and smarter and more . . . beautiful than they are. He’s at the top of the pyramid. The rules for the little doofusses don’t apply to him. Do you understand that? If you don’t understand that, Krumholtz, you don’t understand anything.”

“So this is the harem?”

“Because otherwise,” she continued, as if she hadn’t heard him, “there’s no point in your being here. Or doing this story. He loves both Ellie and me. He has more than enough love for both of us, and the children. And the previous wife and the previous children. He flies to see them. He has a private jet. He’s not like ordinary men, is what I’m saying. I satisfy some of his needs, and Ellie satisfies other needs, and that’s how it is, and if it isn’t bourgeois enough for you, that’s too bad.”

“What needs do you satisfy?” Krumholtz asked.

“What sort of question is that? Is this going into the article?”

“It might. We’ll see.”

She stood up and walked over toward him. “You don’t get it, do you?”

“Maybe I do. So explain it to me.”

“I don’t have to explain it,” she said. “I can do a demo.” She leaned in to him, reaching around his back, and, in what Krumholtz could tell instantly was a cruel practical joke, brought her face close to his and planted a long kiss on his lips, with the slightest suggestion of tongue. The kiss constituted sheer mockery of his unimportance. She might as well have been kissing a lampshade. “That’s what I give him,” Lorraine said, leaning back. “And that’s just for starters. Get it now?”

“Yes, I suppose I get it,” Krumholtz said. She was wearing a French perfume, which he recognized as one of the varieties of Plage de Soleil.

“I’m good at what I do,” Lorraine said with a fixed smile. “I’m a spellcaster. An energizer. I’ve got Jimmy in my grip and he has me in his.”

“And the wife?” Krumholtz asked. “Ellie?”

“If you only believed in angels, Mr. Krumholtz, you might be lifted up now and then out of your pathetic little life.” Lorraine had touched him gently on the cheek.

“But, sadly, no.”

From outside came the sound of a rifle shot.

“No one knows how we live,” she said. “And no one’s going to.” She lifted her head and listened. “Now I wonder what Jimmy’s shooting at?” She stepped backwards and dropped into the fainting couch. Krumholtz saw that she was wearing a small ankle bracelet of brilliant gold. “You can go,” she said.

Krumholtz returned to the corridor, again walking past the video of the midtown Miss Havisham, but he could not find the door out to the back terrace. He touched the thick glass in an effort to find the doorway. Night appeared to be descending on trembling batlike wings, and inside Mallardhof the music continued to float down from the invisible built-in speakers. At the moment, they were playing first book of the Debussy *Preludes*. Krumholtz had once been a pianist, playing keyboards in a rock band in high school, and had played in another band, Sweat Stain, in college, but had found no way of making a living from it and after majoring in music had gone into journalism, thinking that he might preserve some elements of artistic work in what he did. He had been a good enough pianist to work in a cocktail lounge to pay for his tuition, but greatness was far beyond him, and he knew it.

Cathy would be sitting the girls down about now, for dinner. They would be gathered under the kitchen light, maybe eating spaghetti together. Cathy made a great sauce. Her spaghetti sauce was one of her little glories. Krumholtz went through a brief shudder of longing for his wife and daughters and home. He had never felt anything but love for Cathy from the moment he had met her. He thought of asking someone in this infernal Olympian household for a telephone, so he could call to check up on her, see how she was doing. Lately he had been a bit worried about her. She had appeared to be distracted and preoccupied and hardly listened to him when he was talking to her. The job at the agency, she had told him, had been getting her down. She was absent from the house some evenings without explanation.

All at once he found the door out to the back terrace where Mallard had been chopping firewood. When he saw Mallard now in the distance, Krumholtz could make out that the man was covered with blood. He was bent over something with a knife in his hand and was cutting it lengthwise.

“A deer, dammit,” Mallard said. “Somehow it got on the property. You know, they eat everything. There must be a hole in the fencing. They can be very aggressive. And destructive.” Mallard had in his hand a four-inch field knife and another tool Krumholtz didn’t recognize. “Have you ever done this?” he asked. Without waiting for an answer, he said, “Some hunters bleed the deer. They cut its throat. But that’s ridiculous, because after all the heart isn’t pumping, so you have to hang the damn thing with its head down so the blood drains out. Anyway, we don’t do that. So what you do is, you get the deer on its back. Maybe you know. You look like you may be a hunter.”

“Yes, I can see what you’re doing,” Krumholtz said. Would this scene would provide him with the opening of his article? *A Winner not afraid of blood . . .*

“After you’ve cut the diaphragm away, you get the knife up to cut the esophagus out. Once that’s cut—maybe you could get us a flashlight—you pull the lungs and the heart out, but that’s tricky because they’re attached with peritoneum, and if there’s anything left of the intestines they just go with them. The heart’s good. Always save the heart. You can eat the heart. We do. Skinning comes later. You can help with that. God damn it, the light’s bad. We’ll have to hang this thing up.” He turned

around and stood, blood dripping down from his gloves. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I’m just watching.” He waited. “You said ‘we.’ Does your wife do this too?”

He turned around. “Another way to do it is, you get the cutting tool up past the ribcage and just sever the windpipe off as far up as you can. When you perform the action properly the heart and lungs will also just come dropping out. Also, there’s the blood, maybe you want to drain the animal. Blood, yes . . . blood. Sausage? If the thing is a male, you cut the reproductive organs and then you also—“

Krumholtz couldn’t be sure that he was hearing James Mallard properly. The man’s words weren’t making any sense. The Winner seemed to be slipping into a verbal salad, a garble of ejaculations and non-sequiturs as he worked. “You push! Bloody the flashlight, slipcase the meat sauce, bloodstop the tenderloin—and offal! A whitetail--umph!--sealing intestines sausage blood wedding drool! A house marine edible brains! Venison salad pepper cake? Or not?”

Perhaps he had mis-heard. He hadn’t had anything to eat after gulping down that drink in the airport lounge. His heartburn was acting up again. Feeling light-headed, Krumholtz backed away from Mallard and let himself into the house. In what appeared to be a sitting room close to the central hallway, he deposited himself onto a coal-black sofa. On the opposite wall another work of art had been installed, an enormous monochromatic study of what appeared to be human teeth reconsidered in a post-cubist style, close-up, so that they resembled mountains. Krumholtz, turning

his gaze away, looked down at the floor and noticed that he had tracked dirt in from the back yard through the hallway and onto the carpeting in the sitting room. He felt tired and hungry. For a moment, he closed his eyes.

When he opened his eyes again, he saw Angus and Ping standing in front of him, staring at him. “What’s the matter with you?” the little boy asked. “You’re as white as a sheet.”

“I felt faint.”

“Sight of blood do that to you?” Ping asked. Who was she? The tutor? Yes, the tutor. She was also possibly, no, *probably*, another one of the mistresses.

“Well, it’s just that I just haven’t eaten since breakfast,” Krumholtz said.

“You want something?” Angus asked. He was tossing a tennis ball up in the air and catching it with his right hand. “I could get you a cookie.” He didn’t move. “In Chinese, it’s *qu qi*, and in French it’s *petit gâteau*.”

“Yeah,” Krumholtz said. “I know. Yes. Maybe something to eat.”

“You’re the person who came to ask us questions. Ask me a question,” Angus said. Apparently he wasn’t about to get anything for Krumholtz after all. A request for a cookie meant nothing to this child.

“Okay. Here’s a question for you. How come you get to be happy?”

“How come? That’s a *hard* question,” the boy said. “I don’t know. I’ll go get Mom.” When he left the room, Ping went with him, smiling mysteriously. Perhaps

she was amused by his question. You weren't supposed to ask such question of the rich. They would resent inquiries and of that sort and find the means to punish you. Krumholtz shut his eyes again, imagining his wife. When he opened them, both James and Ellie Mallard were standing in front of him. Wearing a crisply ironed pair of black slacks and a thick wool sweater, James Mallard was bending toward Krumholtz, a drink in his hand.

"Scotch?"

"No thanks, not just yet. What happened to all the blood? You were covered in blood, last I saw you."

"You're sure you don't want a Scotch? It'll warm you up. Single malt."

"No. That's all right." He took the glass and drank from it. "Thanks."

"His mind rejects it, but his hand accepts it," Ellie Mallard said with delight. "Will you have dinner with us?"

"I really should get back into town. It's time to go. I'll come back tomorrow."

"You'll get lost!" He noticed that she was very exclamatory. "You'll never get back. Weeks later, searchers will find you. Oh, but where are you staying?" Ellie sat down opposite him on a loveseat, and James Mallard sat down beside her. She raised her legs so that they were crossed on her husband's lap. He began to massage her feet.

"In D_____, " Krumholtz said. "I have a reservation at a hotel there."

"You'll never get there. A hotel! Those smoky rooms! Those TV sets!" She pretended to shudder. "Oh, stay with us," Ellie said. "Never go away!"

“Yes,” Mallard said, agreeing with his wife, though unsmilingly. “Ask us the questions that you want to have the answers to, and maybe, just maybe,” he said, with the ghost of an ironic smile, “we’ll answer them.”

Krumholtz took another slug of the Scotch. “All right,” he said. “Here’s my question.” He took out his digital recorder and pretended to turn it on.

“Shoot,” Ellie Mallard said pleasantly. As her husband massaged her feet, she closed her eyes in bliss.

“Why do you get to be happy?” Krumholtz asked. “I asked your boy Angus this very same question a minute ago, and he was stumped.”

“*Why do we get to be happy?*” Mallard repeated. “What an absurd question. But I’ll tell you. We all worked for it, and there were some rewards. You know the saying? *Geld macht frei*. We worked for it, we worked very hard, long days and long nights, and then of course we were lucky.”

“The royal ‘we’ again?” Krumholtz muttered to himself. More loudly, he said, “Yes, it’s the luck I’m interested in. About that ‘luck.’ The reason I asked is that other people, little people, work long days and long nights, very long days, days that go on for longer than twenty-four hours, days that go for weeks at a time.” He felt a sudden lift-off. “That kind of day, you know, a working day that lasts for weeks. And *they’re* not happy, a lot of them, and, well, maybe that’s because they’re *not* lucky. Also, they have to live with neighbors, you know, that *Rear Window* situation? Just surrounded

by mere people with every sort of problem. And I wondered what you thought about that.”

Krumholtz heard what sounded like a grandfather clock ticking somewhere down the hallway to his left. In front of him, the teeth opened ever so slightly.

“Is there a question in there somewhere?” Ellie Mallard asked, still not opening her eyes.

“You take me, for example,” Krumholtz said, feeling some crucial disconnection. “We, that is, my wife and I, have neighbors. And the two of us, we . . . well, I was once a musician, and she wanted to be a social worker, and she *was* a social worker for a while before they cut the state and federal funding, which they never restored, and then, well, this *thing* happened to us, and this, what I’m about to tell you, this was about eighteen months after we were married, and she became pregnant. And immediately she had complications.” He took another swig of the Scotch, emptying the glass. “For the last four months of the pregnancy, she was spotting, so they kept her in bed. But she got through it. The baby . . . it was a breech, so they had to perform a Cesarean, and they didn’t give my wife, Cathy, enough anesthetic, so the whole procedure took a bad toll on her, she was in terrible pain there for a while, but our son was born, Michael, and it seemed as if everything would be all right. And we would recover.”

Mallard had stopped massaging his wife’s feet, and both he and his wife were staring at Krumholtz, their attention fixed on him. Mallard lightly dropped his wife’s

legs on the floor, rose, and took Krumholtz's glass, refilling it, and then returned it to him. Krumholtz could not stop himself. Where had this story come from? It wasn't untrue, exactly, even though it hadn't happened.

“And Michael seemed to be all right for a while, and he thrived, and by the time he reached his fifth birthday, we thought we were out of the woods. But then, and I wouldn't be telling you this if it weren't the end of the day and I weren't tired out—“

“—Go right ahead,” Ellie Mallard said. “Disunburden yourself.”

“Thank you. He . . . he became sick. It began with coughing, and he lost his appetite, and he was pale, and he never had any energy, which you're not expecting in a child that age, they're animals really, or they *should* be, running and shouting all the time, that's what nature intended, I mean, but instead he, I mean Michael, would sit in a chair morning until night, listlessly, you know, and usually watching television was all he could do, and we at least gave thanks for that . . . well, we couldn't get a diagnosis from the pediatrician, and of course, it was understandable. Who knows how to look? Or where? We did one blood test after another, I mean, *they* did, *they* did one blood test after another, beyond what our insurance could pay for, those ghouls, though I suppose I shouldn't say that, they mean well, those medical professionals, and each time, *each time* we went in, my son would start crying before they had even taken the blood, which tore at my heart. Michael would just see the exterior office door, which was painted this bright terrible frightening red, not comforting at all, and he'd start howling. How can you get used to the suffering of a

child? I mean, you can't. You can't get used to it. Or you *shouldn't*. There's nothing there in that situation you should ever accept. And Michael was bleeding from the nose all the time, and sometimes from his mouth, for no reasons that we knew and then finally we got a diagnosis."

"What was it?" Ellie Mallard asked in a whisper.

"Chronic thrombocytopenic purpura," Krumholtz said. He had once written an article about the disease and knew something about it. "That's the medical name for it. And there's no cure and no treatment and invariably it's fatal. So . . . well, we had a certain amount of time. There was this question we were facing. What should we do? *What should we do with the time we had left with our little boy?* It's such a terrible decision. I mean, no one can make a decision like that. Of course we asked Michael what he wanted to do, we had to ask him, what he wanted to do more than anything else in the world. He didn't want to go to any of those destination places. He said he wanted to sit by the window."

Krumholtz took another swig of the Scotch.

"Michael sat by the window, and he would narrate what he saw, almost as if he could imagine what his adulthood might have been like. People going to work in the morning, people coming home in the evening, laboring at their jobs.. And the sun, traveling across the sky. And the street. And the birds. And squirrels. There was one particular bird, a sparrow that came by for the breadcrumbs that Michael put out on his windowsill. And then, when Michael died, the sparrow came by waiting for him,

for the food he had put out there. The bird would hop out on the sill and chirp. Then one night we heard a terrible thump against Michael's window. The next morning we found the sparrow on the lawn. It seemed to have flung itself against his window. When I bent down to pick it up, I discovered that its heart had stopped."

Well, he had his triumph: the Winner's wife was in tears, and the Winner was contemplating Krumholtz with a kind of baffled annoyance while he attempted to comfort his wife. The damn tears: against the riches of the world, they changed almost nothing. Nevertheless, Krumholtz felt a power surging through him. No one would dare move him from his comfortable position on the sofa opposite the painting of teeth. He took another swig. "Oh, stop," Ellie Mallard said, touching a hankie to her face. But he wasn't finished. The boy, Angus, had come into the room and was looking at his mother with alarm. And now here in the doorway was Gretel, dressed just like her brother, listening intently and obviously distressed by the parental weeping. Lorraine would appear shortly. Krumholtz could go on all night. They would have to shoot him to get rid of him. He did not intend to budge: he would sit there with his audience in front of him, elaborating this story of suffering and pity and terror for as long as he pleased. He had just gotten started.