

WAIL!... The CBZ Journal

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Beast of the Heartland

By Lucius Shepard

Mears has a dream the night after he fought the Alligator Man. The dream begins with words: "In the beginning was a dark little god with glowing red eyes . . ." And then, there it stands, hovering in the blackness of Mears' hotel room, a twisted mandrake root of a god, evil and African, with ember eyes and limbs like twists of leaf tobacco. Even after it vanishes, waking Mears, he can feel those eyes burning inside his head, merged into a single red pain that seems as if it will go on throbbing forever. He wonders if he should tell Leon about the pain—maybe he could give Mears something to ease it—but he figures this might be a bad idea. Leon might cut and run, not wanting to be held responsible should Mears keel over, and there Mears would be: without a trainer, without anyone to coach him for the eye exams, without an accomplice in his blindness. It's not a priority, he decides.

To distract himself, he lies back and thinks about the fight. He'd been doing pretty well until the ninth. Staying right on the Cuban's chest, mauling him in the corners, working the body. The Cuban didn't like it to the body. He was a honey-colored kid a couple of shades lighter than Mears and he punched like a kid, punches that stung but that didn't take your heart like the punches of a man. Fast, though. Jesus, he was fast! As the fight passed into the middle rounds, as Mears tired, the Cuban began to slip away, to circle out of the haze of ring light and vanish into the darkness at the corners of Mears' eyes, so that Mears saw the punches coming only at the last second, the wet-looking red blobs of the gloves looping in over his guard. Then, in the ninth, a left he never saw drove him into the turnbuckle, a flurry of shots under the ribs popped his mouthpiece halfway out and another left to the temple made him clinch, pinning the Cuban's gloves against his sides.

In the clinch, that's when he caught sight of the Alligator Man. The Cuban pulled back his head, trying to wrench his right glove free, and the blurred oval of his face sharpened, resolved into features: blazing yellow eyes and pebbly skin, and slit nostrils at the end of a long snout. Although used to such visions, hallucinations, whatever this was, Mears reacted in terror. He jolted the Alligator Man with an uppercut, he spun him, landed a clubbing right high on the head, another right, and as if those punches were magic, as if their force and number were removing a curse, breaking a spell, the Alligator Man's face melted away, becoming a blurred brown oval once again. Mears' terror also grew blurred, his attack less furious, and the Cuban came back at him, throwing shots from every angle. Mears tried to slide off along the ropes but his legs were gone, so he ducked his head and put his gloves up to block the shots. But they got through, anyway.

Somebody's arms went around him, hemming him in against the ropes, and he smelled flowery cologne and heard a smooth baritone saying, "Take it easy, man! It's

over." Mears wanted to tell the ref he could have stood up through ten, the Cuban couldn't punch for shit. But he was too weak to say anything and he just rested his head on the ref's shoulder, strings of drool hanging off his mouthpiece, cooling on his chin. And for the first time in a long while, he heard the crowd screaming for the Cuban, the women's voices bright and crazy, piercing up from the male roar. Then Leon was there, Leon's astringent smell of Avitene and Vaseline and Gelfoam, and somebody shoved Mears down onto a stool and Leon pressed the ice-cold bar of the Enswell against the lump over his eye, and the Cuban elbowed his way through the commission officials and nobodies in the corner and said, "Man, you one tough motherfucker. You almos' kill me with them right hands." And Mears had the urge to tell him, "You think I'm tough, wait'll you see what's coming," but instead, moved by the sudden, heady love that possesses you after you have pounded on a man for nine rounds and he has not fallen, Mears told him that one day soon he would be champion of the world.

Mears wonders if the bestial faces that materialize in the midst of his fights are related to the pain in his head. In his heart he believes they are something else. It could be that he has been granted the magical power to see beneath the surface of things. Or they may be something his mind has created to compensate for his blindness, a kind of spiritual adrenaline that inspires him to fiercer effort, often to victory. Since his retinas became detached, he has slipped from the status of fringe contender to trial horse for young fighters on the way up, and his style has changed from one of grace and elusiveness to that of a brawler, of someone who must keep in constant physical contact with his opponent. Nevertheless, he has won twelve of seventeen fights with his handicap, and he owes much of his success to this symptom or gift or delusion.

He knows most people would consider him a fool for continuing to fight, and he accepts this. But he does not consider himself a greater fool than most people; his is only a more dramatic kind of foolishness than the foolishness of loving a bad woman or stealing a car or speculating on gold futures or smoking cigarettes or taking steroids or eating wrong or involving yourself with the trillion other things that lead to damage and death.

As he lies in that darkened room, in the pall of his own darkness, he imagines attending a benefit held to raise his medical expenses after his secret has been disclosed. All the legends are there. Ali, Frazier, and Foreman are there, men who walk with the pride of a nation. Duran is there, Duran of the demonic fury, who TKO'd him in 1979, back when Mears was a welterweight. The Hit Man is there, Thomas Hearns, sinister and rangy, with a cobralike jab that had once cut him so badly the flesh hung down into his eyes. Sugar Ray Leonard is there, talking about his own detached retina and how he could have gone the same way as Mears. And Hagler, who knocked Mears out in his only title shot, Hagler the tigerish southpaw, he is there, too. Mears ascends to the podium to offer thanks, and a reporter catches his arm and asks him, "What the hell went wrong, Bobby? What happened to you?" He thinks of all the things he could say in response. Bad managers, crooked promoters. Alimony. I forgot to duck. The classic answers. But there is one answer they've never heard, one that he's nourished for almost two years.

"I traveled into the heartland," he tells the reporter, "and when I got done fighting the animals there, I came out blind."

The reporter looks puzzled, but Ali and Foreman, Frazier and Hagler, Duran and Hearn, they nod sagely, they understand. They realize Mears' answer is partly a pride thing, partly intuitive, a summation of punches absorbed, hands lifted in victory, months of painful healing, hours of punishment in the gym. But mainly it is the recasting into a vow of a decision made years before. They would not argue that their sport is brutally stupid, run by uncaring bastards to whom it is a business of dollars and blood, and that tragedies occur, that fighters are swindled and outright robbed. Yet there is something about it they have needed, something they have chosen, and so in the end, unlike the asbestos worker who bitterly decries the management that has lied to him and led him down a fatal path, the fighter feels no core bitterness, not even at himself for being a fool, for making such a choice in the folly of youth, because he has forsworn the illusion of wisdom.

Mears is not without regrets. Sometimes, indeed, he regrets almost everything. He regrets his blindness, his taste in women, his rotten luck at having been a middleweight during the age of Marvin Hagler. But he has never regretted boxing. He loves what he does, loves the gym rats, the old dozers with their half-remembered tales of Beau Jack and Henry Armstrong, the crafty trainers, the quiet cut men with their satchels full of swabs and chemicals. He loves how he has been in the ring, honorable and determined and brave. And now, nodding off in a cheap hotel room, he feels love from the legends of the game returned in applause that has the sound of rushing water, a pure stream of affirmation that bears him away into the company of heroes and a restless sleep.

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Three mornings later, as Mears waits for Leon in the gym, he listens happily to the slapping of jump ropes, the grunt and thud of someone working the heavy bag, the jabber and pop of speed bags, fighters shouting encouragement, the sandpapered whisk of shoes on canvas, the meaty thump of fourteen-ounce sparring gloves. Pale winter light chutes through the high windows like a Bethlehem star to Mears' eyes. The smell is a harsh perfume of antiseptic, resin, and sweat. Now and then somebody passes by, says, "Yo, Bobby, what's happenin'?" or "Look good the other night, man!" and he will hold out his hand to be slapped without glancing up, pretending that his diffidence is an expression of cool, not a pose designed to disguise his impaired vision. His body still aches from the Cuban's fast hands, but in a few weeks, a few days if necessary, he'll be ready to fight again.

He hears Leon rasping at someone, smells his cigar, then spots a dark interruption in the light. Not having to see Leon, he thinks, is one of the few virtues of being legally blind. He is unsightly, a chocolate-colored blob of a man with jowls and yellow teeth and a belly that hangs over his belt. The waist of Mears' boxing trunks would not fit over one of Leon's thighs. He is especially unsightly when he lies, which is often—weakness comes into his face, his popped eyes dart, the pink tip of the

tongue slimes the gristly upper lip. He looks much better as a blur in an onion-colored shirt and dark trousers.

"Got a fight for us, my man." Leon drops onto a folding chair beside him, and the chair yields a metallic creak. "Mexican name Nazario. We gon' kick his fuckin' ass!"

This is the same thing Leon said about the Cuban, the same thing he said about every opponent. But this time he may actually be sincere. "Guy's made for us," he continues. "Comes straight ahead. Good hook, but a nothin' right. No fancy bullshit." He claps Bobby on the leg. "We need a W bad, man. We whup this guy in style, I can get us a main event on ESPN next month in Wichita."

Mears is dubious. "Fighting who?"

"Vederotta," says Leon, hurrying past the name to say the Nazario fight is in two weeks. "We can be ready by then, can't we, sure, we be ready, we gon' kill that motherfucker."

"That guy calls himself the Heat? Guy everybody's been duckin'?"

"Wasn't for everybody duckin' him, I couldn't get us the fight. He's tough, I ain't gon' tell you no lie. He busts people up. But check it out, man. Our end's twenty grand. Like that, Bobby? Tuh—twenty thousand dollars."

"You shittin' me?"

"They fuckin' desperate. They can't get nobody to fight the son of a bitch. They need a tune-up for a title shot." Leon sucks on his cigar, trying to puff it alight. "It's your ass out there, man. I'll do what you tell me. But we get past Nazario, we show good against Vederotta—I mean give him a few strong rounds, don't just fold in one—guy swears he'll book us three more fights on ESPN cards. Maybe not the main event, but TV bouts. That'd make our year, man. Your end could work out to forty, forty-five."

"You get that in writin' 'bout the three more fights?"

"Pretty sure. Man's so damn desperate for somebody with a decent chin, he'll throw in a weekend with his wife."

"I don't want his damn wife, I want it in writin' 'bout the fights."

"You ain't seen his wife! That bitch got a wiggle take the kinks outta a couch spring." Delighted by his wit, Leon laughs; the laugh turns into a wet, racking cough.

"I'm gon' need you on this one," says Mears after the coughing has subsided. "None of this bullshit 'bout you runnin' round all over after dope and pussy while I'm bustin' my balls in the gym, and then showin' up when the bell rings. I'm gon' need you really working. You hear that, Leon?"

Leon's breath comes hard. "I hear you."

"Square business, man. You gotta write me a book on that Vederotta dude."

"I'll do my thing," says Leon, wheezing. "You just take care of old Señor Nazario."

The deal concluded, Mears feels exposed, as if a vast, luminous eye—God's, perhaps—is shining on him, revealing all his frailties. He sits up straight, holds his head very still, rubs his palms along the tops of his thighs, certain that everyone is watching. Leon's breathing is hoarse and labored, like last breaths. The light is beginning to tighten up around that sound, to congeal into something cold and gray, like a piece of dirty ice in which they are all embedded.

Mears thinks of Vederotta, the things he's heard. The one-round knockouts, the vicious beatings. He knows he's just booked himself a world of hurt. As if in resonance with that thought, his vision ripples and there is a twinge inside his head, a little flash of red. He grips the seat of the chair, prepares for worse. But worse does not come, and after a minute or so, he begins to relax, thinking about the money, slipping back into the peace of morning in the gym, with the starred light shining from on high and the enthusiastic shouts of the young fighters and the slap of leather making a rhythm like a river slapping against a bank and the fat man who is not his friend beginning to breathe easier now beside him.

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When Mears phones his ex-wife, Amandla, the next night, he sits on the edge of the bed and closes his eyes so he can see her clearly. She's wearing her blue robe, slim-hipped and light-skinned, almost like a Latin girl, but her features are fine and eloquently African and her hair is kept short in the way of a girl from Brazzaville or Conakry. He remembers how good she looks in big gold hoop earrings. He remembers so much sweetness, so much consolation and love. She simply had not been able to bear his pain, coming home with butterfly patches over his stitched eyes, pissing blood at midnight, having to heave himself up from a chair like an old man. It was a weakness in her, he thinks, yet he knows it was an equivalent weakness in him, that fighting is his crack, his heroin—he would not give it up for her. She picks up on the fourth ring, and he says, "How you been, baby?"

She hesitates a moment before saying, "Aw, Bobby, what you want?" But she says it softly, plaintively, so he'll know that though it's not a good thing to call, she's glad to hear his voice, anyway.

"Nothin', baby," he says. "I don't want nothin'. I just called to tell you I'll be sendin' money soon. Few weeks, maybe."

"You don't have to. I'm makin' it all right."

"Don't tell me you can't use a little extra. You got responsibilities."

A faded laugh. "I hear that."

There is silence for a few beats, then Mears says, "How's your mama holdin' up?"

"Not so good. Half the time I don't think she knows who I am. She goes to wanderin' off sometimes, and I got to—" She breaks off, lets air hiss out between her teeth. "I'm sorry, Bobby. This ain't your trouble."

That stings him, but he does not respond directly to it. "Well, maybe I send you a little somethin', you can ease back from it."

"I don't want to short you."

"You ain't gon' be shortin' me, baby." He tells her about Nazario, the twenty thousand dollars, but not about Vederotta.

"Twenty thousand!" she says. "They givin' you twenty thousand for fightin' a man you say's easy? That don't make any sense."

"Ain't like I'm just off the farm. I still got a name."

"Yeah, but you—"

"Don't worry about it," he says angrily, knowing that she's about to remind him he's on the downside. "I got it under control."

Another silence. He imagines that he can hear her irritation in the static on the line.

"But I do worry," she says. "God help me, I still worry about you after all this time."

"Ain't been that long. Three years."

She does not seem to have heard. "I still think about you under them lights gettin' pounded on. And now you offerin' me money you gon' earn for gettin' pounded on some more."

"Look here—" he begins.

"Blood money. That's what it is. It's blood money."

"Stop it," he says. "You stop that shit. It ain't no more blood money than any other wage. Money gets paid out, somebody always gettin' fucked over at the end of it. That's just what money is. But this here money, it ain't comin' 'cause of nothin' like that, not even 'cause some damn judge said I got to give it. It's coming from me to you 'cause you need it and I got it."

He steers the conversation away from the topic of fighting, gets her talking about

some of their old friends, even manages to get her laughing when he tells her how the cops caught Sidney Bodden and some woman doing the creature in Sidney's car in the parking lot of the AThe way she laughs, she tips her head and tucks her chin down onto her shoulder and never opens her mouth, just makes these pleased, musical noises like a shy little girl, and when she lifts her head, she looks so innocent and pretty he wants to kiss her, grazes the receiver with his lips, wishes it would open and let him pour through to her end of the line. The power behind the wish hits his heart like a mainlined drug, and he knows she still loves him, he still loves her, this is all wrong, this long-distance shit, and he can't stop himself from saying, "Baby, I want to see you again."

"No," she says.

It is such a terminal, door-slamming no, he can't come back with anything. His face is hot and numb, his arms and chest heavy as concrete, he feels the same bewildered, mule-stupid helplessness as he did when she told him she was leaving. He wonders if she's seeing somebody, but he promises himself he won't ask.

"I just can't, Bobby," she says.

"It's all right, baby," he says, his voice reduced to a whisper. "It's all right. I got to be goin'."

"I'm sorry, I really am sorry. But I just can't."

"I'll be sending you somethin' real soon. You take care now."

"Bobby?"

He hangs up, an effort, and sits there turning to stone. Brooding thoughts glide through his head like slow black sails. After a while he lifts his arms as if in an embrace. He feels Amanda begin to take on shape and solidity within the circle of his arms. He puts his left hand between her shoulder blades and smooths the other along her flanks, following the arch of her back, the tight rounds of her ass, the columned thighs, and he presses his face against her belly, smelling her warmth, letting all the trouble and ache of the fight with the Cuban go out of him. All the weight of loss and sadness. His chest seems to fill with something clear and buoyant. Peace, he thinks, we are at peace.

But then some sly, peripheral sense alerts him to the fact that he is a fool to rely on this sentimental illusion, and he drops his arms, feeling her fading away like steam. He sits straight, hands on knees, and turns his head to the side, his expression rigid and contemptuous as it might be during a staredown at the center of a boxing ring. Since the onset of his blindness, he has never been able to escape the fear that people are spying on him, but lately he has begun to worry that they are not.

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For once Leon has not lied. The fight with Nazario is a simple contest of wills and left hooks, and though the two men's hooks are comparable, Mears' will is by far the stronger. Only in the fourth round does he feel his control slipping, and then the face of a hooded serpent materializes where Nazario's face should be, and he pounds the serpent image with right leads until it vanishes. Early in the fifth round, he bulls Nazario into a corner, and following a sequence of twelve unanswered punches, the ref steps in and stops it.

Two hours after the fight, Mears is sitting in the dimly lit bar on the bottom floor of his hotel, having a draft beer and a shot of Gentleman Jack, listening to Mariah Carey on the jukebox. The mirror is a black, rippling distance flocked by points of actinic light, a mysterious lake full of stars and no sign of his reflection. The hooker beside him is wearing a dark something sewn all over with spangles that move over breasts and hips and thighs like the scattering of moonlight on choppy water. The bartender, when he's visible at all, is a cryptic shadow. Mears is banged up some, a small but nasty cut at his hairline from a head butt and a knot on his left cheekbone, which the hooker is making much of, touching it, saying, "That's terrible—lookin', honey. just terrible. You inna accident or somepin'?" Mears tells her to mind her own damn business, and she says, "Who you think you is, you ain't my business? You better quit yo' dissin' 'cause I ain't takin' that kinda shit from nobody!"

He buys her another drink to mollify her and goes back to his interior concerns. Although the pain from the fight is minimal, his eyes are acting up and there is a feeling of dread imminence inside his head, an apprehension of a slight wrongness that can bloom into a fiery red presence. He is trying, by maintaining a certain poise, to resist it.

The hooker leans against him. Her breasts are big and sloppy soft and her perfume smells cheap like flowered Listerine, but her waist is slender and firm, and despite her apparent toughness, he senses that she is very young, new to the life. This barely hardened innocence makes him think of Amandla.

"Don't you wan' go upstairs, baby?" she says as her hand traces loops and circles along the inside of his thigh.

"We be there soon enough," he says gruffly. "We got all night."

"Whoo!" She pulls back from him. "I never seen a young man act so stern! 'Mind me of my daddy!" From her stagy tone, he realizes she is playing to the other patrons of the place, whom he cannot see, invisible as gods on their bar stools. Then she is rubbing against him again, saying, "You gon' treat me like my daddy, honey? You gon' be hard on me?"

"Listen up," he says quietly, putting a hand on her arm. "Don't you be playin' these games. I'm payin' you good, so you just sit still and we'll have a couple drinks and talk a little bit. When the time comes, we'll go upstairs. Can you deal with that?"

He feels resentment in the tension of her arm. "OK, baby," she says with casual

falsity. "What you wan' talk about?"

Mariah Carey is having a vision of love, her sinewy falsetto going high into a gospel frequency, and Mears asks the hooker if she likes the song.

She shrugs. "It's all right."

"You know the words?"

"Uh-huh."

"Sing it with me?"

"Say what?"

He starts to sing, and after a couple of seconds the hooker joins in. Her voice is slight and sugary but blends well with Mears' tenor. As they sing, her enthusiasm grows and Mears feels a frail connection forming between them. When the record ends, she giggles, embarrassed, and says, "That was def, baby. You sing real good. You a musician?"

"Naw, just church stuff, you know."

"Bobby Mears!" A man's voice brays out behind him, a hand falls heavily onto his shoulder. "Goddamn, it is you! My fren', he saying, 'Ain't that Bobby Mears over there?' and I said, 'Shit, what he be doin' in here?' "

The man is huge, dark as a coal sack against the lesser darkness, and Mears has no clue to his identity.

"Yes, sir! Bobby 'the Magician' Mears! I'm your biggest fan, no shit! I seen you fight a dozen times. And I ain't talkin' TV. I mean in person. Man, this is great! Can I get you a drink? Lemme buy you one. Hey, buddy! Give us another round over here, OK?"

"'Nother draft, 'nother shot of the Gentleman," says the bartender in a singsong delivery as he pours. He picks up the hooker's glass and says with less flair, "Vodka and coke."

"Sister," the man says to the hooker, "I don't know what Bobby's been tellin' you, but you settin' next to one of the greatest fighters ever lived."

The hooker says, "You a fighter, baby?" and Mears, who has been seething at this interruption, starts to say it's time to leave, but the man talks through him.

"The boy was slick! I'm tellin' you. Slickest thing you ever seen with that jab of his. Like to kill Marvin Hagler. That old baldhead was one lucky nigger that night. Ain't it the truth, man?"

"Bullshit," Mears says.

"Man's jus' bein' modest."

"I ain't bein' modest. Hagler was hurtin' me from round one, and all I's doin' was tryin' to survive." Mears digs a roll of bills from his pocket, peels a twenty from the top—the twenties are always on top; then the tens, then the fives. "Anybody saw that fight and thinks Hagler was lucky don't know jack shit. Hagler was the best, and it don't make me feel no better 'bout not bein' the best, you comin' round and bullshittin' me."

"Be cool, Bobby! All right, man? Be cool."

The hooker caresses Mears' shoulders, his neck, and he feels the knots of muscle, like hard tumors. It would take a thousand left hooks to work out that tension, a thousand solid impacts to drain off the poisons of fear lodged there, and he experiences a powerful welling up of despair that seems connected to no memory or incident, no stimulus whatsoever, a kind of bottom emotion, one you would never notice unless the light and the temperature and the noise level, all the conditions, were just right. But it's there all the time, the tarry stuff that floors your soul. He tells the man he's sorry for having lashed out at him. He's tired, he says, got shit on his mind.

"Hey," says the man, "hey, it's not a problem, OK?"

There follows a prickly silence that ends when Aaron Neville comes on the jukebox. Mears goes away with the tune, with the singer's liquid shifts and drops, like the voice of a saxophone, and is annoyed once again when the man says, "Who you fightin' next, Bobby? You got somethin' lined up?"

"Vederotta," Mears says.

"The Heat, man? You fightin' the Heat? No shit! Hey, you better watch your ass with that white boy! I seen him fight Reggie Williams couple months back. Hit that man so hard, two his teeth come away stuck in the mouthpiece."

Mears slides the twenty across the bar and says, "Keep it" to the bartender.

"That's right," says the man with apparent relish. "That white boy ain't normal, you ax me. He jus' be livin' to fuck you up, know what I mean? He got somethin' wrong in his head."

"Thanks for the drink," Mears says, standing.

"Any time, Bobby, any time," the man says as Mears lets the hooker lead him toward the stairs. "You take my advice, man. Watch yourself with that Vederotta. That boy he gon' come hard, and you ain't no way slick as you used to be."

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Cold blue neon winks on and off in the window of Mears' room, a vague nebular shine that might be radiating from a polar beacon or a ghostly police car, and as the hooker undresses, he lies on the bed in his shorts and watches the light. It's the only thing he sees, just that chilly blue in a black field, spreading across the surface of the glass like some undersea thing, shrinking and expanding like the contractions of an icy blue heart. He has always been afraid before a fight, yet now he's afraid in a different way. Or maybe it's not the fear that's different, maybe it's his resistance to it that has changed. Maybe he's weaker, wearier. He is so accustomed to suppressing fear, however, that when he tries to examine it, it slithers away into the cracks of his soul and hides there, lurking, eyes aglow, waiting for its time. Vederotta. The man's name even sounds strong, like a foreign sin, an age-old curse.

"Ain't you wan' the lights on, honey?" asks the hooker. "I wan' you be able see what you doin'."

"I see you just fine," he says. "You come on lie down."

A siren curls into the distance; two car horns start to blow in an impatient rhythm like brass animals angry at each other; smells of barbecue and gasoline drift in to overwhelm the odor of industrial cleaner.

Training, he thinks. Once he starts to train, he'll handle the fear. He'll pave it over with thousands of sit-ups, miles of running, countless combinations, and by fight night there'll be just enough left to motivate him.

The hooker settles onto the bed, lies on her side, leaning over him, her breasts spilling onto his chest and arm. He lifts one in his palm, squeezing its heft, and she makes a soft, pleased noise.

"Why you didn't tell me you famous?" she asks.

"I ain't famous."

"Yeah, but you was."

"What difference it make? Bein' famous ain't about nothin'."

She moves her shoulders, making her breasts roll against him, and her hot, sweet scent seems to thicken. "Jus' nice to know is all." She runs a hand along his chest, his corded belly. "Ain't you somepin'," she says, and then, "How old're you, baby?"

"Thirty-two."

He expects her to say, "Thirty-two! Damn, baby. I thought you was twenty-five, you lookin' good." But all she does is give a little *mmm* sound as if she's filing the fact away and goes on caressing him. By this he knows that the connection they were starting to make in the bar has held and she's going to be herself with him, which is what he wants, not some play-acting bitch who will let him turn her into Amandla,

because he is sick and tired of having that happen.

She helps him off with his shorts and brings him all the way hard with her hand, then touches his cock to her breasts, lets it butt and slide against her cheek, takes it in her mouth for just seconds, like into warm syrup, her tongue swirling, getting his hips to bridge up from the mattress, wise and playful in her moves, and finally she comes astride him and says, "I believe I'm ready for some of this, baby," her voice burred, and she reaches for him, puts him where she needs it, and then her whole dark, sweet weight swings down slick and hot around him, and his neck arches, his mouth strains open and his head pushes back into the pillow, feeling as if he's dipped the back of his brain into a dark green pool, this ancient place with mossy-stone temples beneath the water and strange carvings and spirits gliding in and out the columns. When that moment passes, he finds she's riding him slow and deep and easy, not talking hooker trash, but fucking him like a young girl, her breath shaky and musical, hands braced on the pillow by his head, and he slides his hands around to cup her ass, to her back, pressing down so that her breasts graze and nudge his chest, and it's all going so right he forgets to think how good it is and gives himself over to the arc of his feelings and the steady, sinuous beat of her heart-filled body.

Afterward there is something shy and delicate between them, something he knows won't survive for long, maybe not even until morning, and maybe it's all false, maybe they have only played a deeper game, but if so, it's deep enough that the truth doesn't matter, and they are for now in that small room somewhere dark and green, the edge of that pool he dipped into for a second, a wood, sacred, with the calls of those strange metal beasts sounding in the distance from the desolate town. A shadow is circling beneath the surface of the pool, it's old, wrinkled, hard with evil, like a pale crocodile that's never been up into the light, but it's not an animal, not even a thought, it's just a name: Vederotta. He holds her tight, keeps two fingers pushed between her legs touching the heated damp of her, feeling her pulse there, still rapid and trilling, and he wants to know a little more about her, anything, just one thing, and when he whispers the only question he can think to ask, she wriggles around, holding his two fingers in place, turns her face to his chest, and says her name is Arlene.

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Training is like religion to Mears, the litanies of sparring, the penances of one-arm push-ups, the long retreats of his morning runs, the monastic breakfasts at four A.M., the vigils in the steam room during which he visualizes with the intensity of prayer what will happen in the ring, and as with a religion, he feels it simplifying him, paring him down, reducing his focus to a single consuming pursuit. On this occasion, however, he allows himself to be distracted and twice sleeps with Arlene. At first she tries to act flighty and brittle as she did in the bar, but when they go upstairs, that mask falls away and it is good for them again. The next night she displays no pretense whatsoever. They fuck wildly like lovers who have been long separated, and just before dawn they wind up lying on their sides, still joined, hips still moving sporadically. Mears' head is jangled and full of anxious incoherencies. He's worried about how he will suffer for this later in the gym and concerned by what is happening

with Arlene. It seems he is being given a last sweetness, a young girl not yet hardened beyond repair, a girl who has some honest affection for him, who perhaps sees him as a means of salvation. This makes him think he is being prepared for something bad by God or whomever. Although he's been prepared for the worst for quite a while, now he wonders if the Vederotta fight will somehow prove to be worse than the worst, and frightened by this, he tells Arlene he can't see her again until after the fight. Being with her, he says, saps his strength and he needs all his strength for Vederotta. If she is the kind of woman who has hurt him in the past, he knows she will react badly, she will accuse him of trying to dump her, she will rave and screech and demand his attentions. And she does become angry, but when he explains that he is risking serious injury by losing his focus, her defensiveness—that's what has provoked her anger—subsides, and she pulls him atop her, draws up her knees and takes him deep, gluing him to her sticky thighs, and as the sky turns the color of tin and delivery traffic grumbles in the streets, and a great clanking and screech of metal comes from the docks, and garbage trucks groan and whine as they tip Dumpsters into their maws like iron gods draining their goblets, she and Mears rock and thrust and grind, tightening their hold on each other as the city seems to tighten around them, winching up its loose ends, notch by notch, in order to withstand the fierce pressures of the waking world.

That afternoon at the gym, Leon takes Mears into the locker room and sits him on a bench. He paces back and forth, emitting an exhaust of cigar smoke, and tells Mears that the boxing commission will be no problem, the physical exam—like most commission physicals—is going to be a joke, no eye charts, nothing, just blood pressure and heart and basic shit like that. He paces some more, then says he's finished watching films of Vederotta's last four fights.

"Ain't but one way to fight him," he says. "Smother his punches, grab him, hold him, frustrate the son of a bitch. Then when he get wild and come bullin' in, we start to throw uppercuts. Uppercuts all night long. That's our only shot. Understand?"

"I hear you."

"Man's strong." Leon sighs as he takes a seat on the bench opposite Mears. "Heavyweight strong. He gon' come at us from the bell and try to hurt us. He use his head, his elbows, whatever he gots. We can't let him back us up. We back up on this motherfucker, we goin' to sleep."

There is more, Mears can feel it, and he waits patiently, picking at the wrappings on his hands while he listens to the slap and babble from the gym.

"Member that kid Tony Ayala?" Leon asks. "Junior middleweight 'bout ten years ago. Mean fuckin' kid, wound up rapin' some schoolteacher in Jersey. Big puncher. This Vederotta 'mind me of him. He knock Jeff Toney down and then he kick him. He hold up Reggie Williams 'gainst the ropes when the man out on his feet so he kin hit him five, six times more." Leon pauses. "Maybe he's too strong. Maybe we should pull out of this deal. What you think?"

Mears realizes that Leon is mainly afraid Vederotta will knock him into retirement,

that his cut of the twenty thousand dollars will not compensate for a permanent loss of income. But the fact that Leon has asked what he thinks, that's new, that's a real surprise. He suspects that deep within that gross bulk, the pilot light of Leon's moral self, long extinguished, has been relit and he is experiencing a flicker of concern for Mears' well-being. Recognizing this, Mears is, for reasons he cannot fathom, less afraid.

"Ain't you listenin', man? I axed what you think."

"Got to have that money," Mears says.

Leon sucks on his cigar, spits. "I don't know 'bout this," he says, real doubt in his voice, real worry. "I just don't know."

Mears thinks about Leon, all the years, the lies, the petty betrayals and pragmatic loyalty, the confusion that Leon must be experiencing to be troubled by emotion at this stage of the relationship. He tries to picture who Leon is and conjures the image of something bloated and mottled washed up on a beach—something that would have been content to float and dream in the deep blue-green light, chewing on kelp, but would now have to heave itself erect and lumber unsightly through the bright, terrible days without solace or satisfaction. He puts a hand on the man's soft, sweaty back, feels the sick throb of his heart. "I know you don't," he says. "But it's all right."

* * *

The first time he meets Vederotta, it's the morning of the fight, at the weigh-in. Just as he's stepping off the scale, he is startled to spot him standing a few feet away, a pale, vaguely human shape cut in the middle by a wide band of black, the trunks. And a face. That's the startling thing, the thing that causes Mears to shift quickly away. It's the sort of face that appears when a fight is going badly, when he needs more fear in order to keep going, but it's never happened so early, before the fight even begins. And this one is different from the rest. Not a comic-book image slapped onto a human mould, it seems fitted just below the surface of the skin, below the false human face, rippling like something seen through a thin film of water. It's coal black, with sculpted cheeks and a flattened bump of a nose and a slit mouth and hooded eyes, an inner mask of black lusterless metal. From its eyes and mouth leaks a crumbling red glow so radiant it blurs the definition of the features. Mears recognizes it for the face of his secret pain, and he can only stare at it. Then Vederotta smiles, the slit opening wider to show the furnace glow within, and says in a dull, stuporous voice, a voice like ashes, "You don't look so hot, man. Try and stay alive till tonight, will ya?" His handlers laugh and Leon curses them, but Mears, suddenly spiked with terror, can find no words, no solidity within himself on which to base a casual response. He lashes out at that evil, glowing face with a right hand, which Vederotta slips, and then everyone—handlers, officials, the press—is surging back and forth, pulling the two fighters apart, and as Leon hustles Mears away, saying, "Fuck's wrong with you, man? You crazy?" he hears Vederotta shouting at him, more bellowing than shouting, no words, nothing intelligible, just the raving of the black beast.

* * *

Half an hour before the fight is scheduled to start, Mears is lying on a training table in the dressing room, alone, his wrapped hands folded on his belly. From the arena come intermittent announcements over the PA, the crowd booing one of the preliminary bouts, and some men are talking loudly outside his door. Mears scarcely registers any of this. He's trying to purge himself of fear but is not having much success. He believes his peculiar visual trick has revealed one of God's great killers, and that tonight the red seed of pain in his head will bloom and he will die, and nothing—no determined avowal, no life-affirming hope—will diminish that belief. He could back out of the fight, he could fake an injury of some sort, and he considers this possibility, but something—and it's not just pride—is pulling him onward. No matter whether or not that face he saw is real, there's something inhuman about Vederotta. Something evil and implacable. And stupid. Some slowness natural to sharks and demons. Maybe he's not a fate, a supernatural creature; maybe he's only malformed, twisted in spirit. Whatever, Mears senses his wrongness the way he would a change in the weather, not merely because of the mask but from a wealth of subtle yet undeniable clues. All these months of imagining beasts in the ring and now he's finally come up against a real one. Maybe the only real one there is. The one he always knew was waiting. Could be, he thinks, it's just his time. It's his time and he has to confront it. Then it strikes him that there may be another reason. It's as if he's been in training, sparring with the lesser beasts, Alligator Man, the Fang, Snakeman, and the rest, in order to prepare for this bout. And what if there's some purpose to his sacrifice? What if he's supposed to do something out there tonight aside from dying?

Lying there, he realizes he's already positioned for the coffin, posed for eternity, and that recognition makes him roll up to his feet and begin his shadowboxing, working up a sweat. His sweat stinks of anxiety, but the effort tempers the morbidity of his thoughts.

A tremendous billow of applause issues from the arena, and not long thereafter, Leon pops in the door and says, "Quick knockout, man. We on in five." Then it goes very fast. The shuffling, bobbing walk along the aisle through the Wichita crowd, hearing shouted curses, focusing on that vast, dim tent of white light that hangs down over the ring. Climbing through the ropes, stepping into the resin box, getting his gloves checked a final time. It's all happening too quickly. He's being torn away from important details. Strands of tactics, sustaining memories, are being burned off him. He does not feel prepared. His belly knots and he wants to puke. He needs to see where he is, exactly where, not just this stretch of blue canvas that ripples like shallow water and the warped circles of lights suspended in blackness like an oddly geometric grouping of suns seen from outer space. The heat of those lights, along with the violent, murmurous heat of the crowd, it's sapping—it should be as bright as day in the ring, like noon on a tropic beach, and not this murky twilight reeking of Vaseline and concession food and fear. He keeps working, shaking his shoulders, testing the canvas with gliding footwork, jabbing and hooking. Yet all the while he's hoping the ring will collapse or Vederotta will sprain something, a power failure,

anything to spare him. But when the announcer brays his weight, his record, and name over the mike, he grows calm as if by reflex and submits to fate and listens to the boos and desultory clapping that follows.

"His opponent," the announcer continues, "in the black trunks with a red stripe, weighs in tonight at a lean and mean one hundred fifty-nine and one-half pounds. He's undefeated and is currently ranked number one by both the WBC and WBA, with twenty-four wins, twenty-three by knockout! Let's have a great big prairie welcome for Wichita's favorite son, Toneee! The Heat! Ve-de-rot-taaaaa! Vederotta!"

Vederotta dances forward into the roar that celebrates him, arms lifted above his head, his back to Mears; then he turns, and as Leon and the cut man escort Mears to the center of the ring for the instructions, Mears sees that menacing face again. Those glowing eyes.

"When I say 'break,' " the ref is saying, "I want you to break clean. Case of a knockdown, go to a neutral corner and stay there till I tell ya to come out. Any questions?"

One of Vederotta's handlers puts in his mouthpiece, a piece of opaque plastic that mutes the fiery glow, makes it look liquid and obscene; gassy red light steams from beneath the black metal hulls that shade his eyes.

"OK," says the ref. "Let's get it on."

Vederotta holds out his gloves and says something through his mouthpiece. Mears won't touch gloves with him, frightened of what this acquiescence might imply. Instead, he shoves him hard, and once again the handlers have to intervene. Screams from the crowd lacerate the air, and the ref admonishes him, saying, "Gimme a clean fight, Bobby, or I'll disqualify ya." But Mears is listening to Vederotta shouting fierce, garbled noises such as a lion might make with its mouth full of meat.

Leon hustles him back to the corner, puts in his mouthpiece, and slips out through the ropes, saying, "Uppercuts, man! Keep throwin' them uppercuts!" Then he's alone, that strangely attenuated moment between the instructions and the bell, longer than usual tonight because the TV cameraman standing on the ring apron is having problems. Mears rolls his head, working out the kinks, shaking his arms to get them loose, and pictures himself as he must look from the cheap seats, a tiny dark figure buried inside a white pyramid. The image of Amandla comes into his head. She, too, is tiny. A doll in a blue robe, like a Madonna, she has that kind of power, a sweet, gentle idea, nothing more. And there's Arlene, whom he has never seen, of whom he knows next to nothing, African and voluptuous and mysterious like those big-breasted ebony statues they sell in the import stores. And Leon hunkered down at the corner of the ring, sweaty already, breath thick and quavery, peering with his pop eyes. Mears feels steadier and less afraid, triangulated by them: the only three people who have any force in his life. When he glances across the ring and finds that black death's head glaring at him, he is struck by something—he can see Vederotta. Since his eyes went bad, he's been unable to see his opponent until the man closes on him, and

for that reason he circles tentatively at the beginning of each round, waiting for the figure to materialize from the murk, backing, letting his opponent come to him. Vederotta must know this, must have seen that tendency on film, and Mears thinks it may be possible to trick him, to start out circling and then surprise him with a quick attack. He turns, wanting to consult Leon, not sure this would be wise, but the bell sounds, clear and shocking, sending him forward as inexorably as a toy set in motion by a spark.

Less than ten seconds into the fight, goaded in equal measure by fear and hope, Mears feints a sidestep, plants his back foot, and lunges forward behind a right that catches Vederotta solidly above the left eye, driving him into the ropes. Mears follows with a jab and two more rights before Vederotta backs him up with a wild flurry, and he sees that Vederotta has been cut. The cut is on the top of the eyelid, not big but in a bad place, difficult to treat. It shows as a fuming red slit in that black mask, like molten lava cracking open the side of a scorched hill. Vederotta rubs at the eye, holds up his glove to check for blood, then hurls himself at Mears, taking another right on the way in but managing to land two stunning shots under the ribs that nearly cave him in. From then on it's all downhill for Mears. Nobody, not Hagler or Hearns or Duran, has ever hit him with such terrible punches. His face is numb from Vederotta's battering jab and he thinks one of his back teeth may have been cracked. But the body shots are the worst. Their impact is the sort you receive in a car crash when the steering wheel or the dash slams into you. They sound like football tackles, they dredge up harsh groans as they sink deep into his sides, and he thinks he can feel Vederotta's fingers, his talons, groping inside the gloves, probing for his organs. With less than a minute to go in the round, a right hand to the heart drops him onto one knee. It takes him until the count of five to regain his breath, and he's up at seven, wobbly, dazed by the ache spreading across his chest. As Vederotta comes in, Mears wraps his arms about his waist and they go lurching about the ring, faces inches apart, Vederotta's arm barred under his throat, trying to push him off. Vederotta spews words in a goblin language, wet, gnashing sounds. He sprays fiery brimstone breath into Mears' face, acid spittle, the crack on his eyelid leaking a thin track of red phosphorus down a black cheek. When the ref finally manages to separate them, he tells Mears he's going to deduct a point if he keeps holding. Mears nods, grateful for the extra few seconds' rest, more grateful when he hears the bell.

Leon squirts water into Mears' mouth, tells him to rinse and spit. "You cut him," he says excitedly. "You cut the motherfucker!"

"I know," Mears says. "I can see him."

Leon, busy with the Enswell, refrains from comment, restrained by the presence of the cut man. "Left eye," he says, ignoring what Mears has told him. "Throw that right. Rights and uppercuts. All night long. That's a bad cut, huh, Eddie?"

"Could be a winner," the cut man says, "we keep chippin' on it."

Leon smears Vaseline on Mears' face. "How you holdin' up?"

"He's hurtin' me. Everything he throws, he's hurtin' me."

Leon tells him to go ahead and grab, let the ref deduct the fucking points, just hang in there and work the right. The crowd is buzzing, rumorous, and from this, Mears suspects that he may really have Vederotta in some trouble, but he's still afraid, more afraid than ever now that he has felt Vederotta's power. And as the second round begins, he realizes he's the one in trouble. The cut has turned Vederotta cautious. Instead of brawling, he circles Mears, keeping his distance, popping his jab, throwing an occasional combination, wearing down his opponent inch by inch, a pale, indefinite monster, his face sheathed in black metal, eyes burning like red suns at midnight. Each time Mears gets inside to throw his shots or grab, the price is high—hooks to the liver and heart, rights to the side of the neck, the hinge of the jaw. His face is lumping up. Near the end of the round, a ferocious straight right to the temple blinds him utterly in the left eye for several seconds. When the bell rings, he sinks onto the stool, legs trembling, heartbeat ragged. Exotic eye trash floats in front of him. His head's full of hot poison, aching and unclear. But oddly enough, that little special pain of his has dissipated, chased away by the same straight right that caused his temporary blackout.

The doctor pokes his head into the desperate bustle of the corner and asks him where he is, how he's doing. Mears says, "Wichita" and "OK." When the ref asks him if he wants to continue, he's surprised to hear himself say, "Yeah," because he's been doing little other than wondering if it would be all right to quit. Must be some good reason, he thinks, or else you're one dumb son of a bitch. That makes him laugh.

"Fuck you doin' laughin'?" Leon says. "We ain't havin' that much fun out there. Work on that cut! You ain't done diddly to that cut!"

Mears just shakes his head, too drained to respond.

The first minute of the third round is one of the most agonizing times of Mears' life. Vederotta continues his cautious approach, but he's throwing heavier shots now, headhunting, and Mears can do nothing other than walk forward and absorb them. He is rocked a dozen times, sent reeling. An uppercut jams the mouthpiece edge—on into his gums and his mouth fills with blood. A hook to the ear leaves him rubber—legged. Two rights send spears of white light into his left eye and the tissue around the eye swells, reducing his vision to a slit. A low blow smashes the edge of his cup, drives it sideways against his testicles, causing a pain that brings bile into his throat. But Vederotta does not follow up. After each assault he steps back to admire his work. It's clear he's prolonging things, trying to inflict maximum damage before the finish. Mears peers between his gloves at the beast stalking him and wonders when that other little red—eyed beast inside his head will start to twitch and burn. He's surprised it hasn't already, he's taken so many shots.

When the ref steps in after a series of jabs, Mears thinks he's stopping the fight, but it's only a matter of tape unraveling from his left glove. The ref leads him into the corner to let Leon retape it. He's so unsteady, he has to grip the ropes for balance, and glancing over his shoulder, he sees Vederotta spit his mouthpiece into his glove, which he holds up like a huge red paw. He expects Vederotta to say something, but all Vederotta does is let out a maniacal shout. Then he reinserts the mouthpiece into

that glowing red maw and stares at Mears, shaking his black and crimson head the way a bear does before it charges, telling him—Mears realizes—that this is it, there's not going to be a fourth round. But Mears is too wasted to be further intimidated, his fear has bottomed out, and as Leon fumbles with the tape, giving him a little more rest, his pride is called forth, and he senses again just how stupid Vederotta is, bone stupid, dog stupid, maybe just stupid and overconfident enough to fall into the simplest of traps. No matter what happens to him, Mears thinks, maybe he can do something to make Vederotta remember this night.

The ref waves them together, and Mears sucks it up, banishes his pain into a place where he can forget about it for a while and shuffles forward, presenting a picture of reluctance and tentativeness. When Vederotta connects with a jab, then a right that Mears halfway picks off with his glove, Mears pretends to be sorely afflicted and staggers back against the ropes. Vederotta's in no hurry. He ambles toward him, dipping his left shoulder, so sure of himself he's not even trying to disguise his punches, he's going to come with the left hook under, he's going to hurt Mears some more before he whacks him out. Mears peeks between his gloves, elbows tight to his sides, knowing he's got this one moment, waiting, the crowd's roar like a jet engine around him, the vicious, smirking beast planting himself, his shoulder dipping lower yet, his head dropping down and forward as he cocks the left, and it's then, right at that precise instant, when Vederotta is completely exposed, that Mears explodes from his defensive posture and throws the uppercut, aiming not at the chin or the nose, but at that red slit on the black eyelid. He lands the shot clean, feels the impact, and above the crowd noise he hears Vederotta shriek like a woman, sees him stumble into the corner, his head lowered, glove held to the damaged eye. Mears follows, spins him about and throws another shot that knocks Vederotta's glove aside, rips at the eye. The slit, it's torn open now, has become an inch-long gash, and that steaming, luminous red shit is flowing into the eye, over the dull black cheek and jaw, dripping onto his belly and trunks. Mears pops a jab, a right, then another jab, not hard punches—they don't have to be hard, just accurate—splitting Vederotta's guard, each landing on the gash, slicing the eyelid almost its entire length. Then the ref's arms wrap around him from behind and haul him back, throwing him into ring center, where he stands, confused by this sudden cessation of violence, by this solitude imposed on him after all that brutal intimacy, as the doctor is called in to look at Vederotta's eye. He feels light and unreal, as if he's been shunted into a place where gravity is weaker and thought has no emotional value. The crowd has gone quiet and he hears the voice of Vederotta's manager above the babbling in the corner. Then a second voice shouting the manager down, saying, "I can see the bone, Mick! I can see the goddamn bone!" And then—this is the most confusing thing of all—the ref is lifting his arm and the announcer is declaring, without enthusiasm, to a response of mostly silence and some scattered boos, that "the referee stops the contest at a minute fifty-six seconds of the third round. Your winner by TKO: Bobby! The Magician! Mears!"

Mears' pain has returned, the TV people want to drag him off for an interview, Leon is there hugging him, saying, "We kicked his ass, man! We fuckin' kicked his ass!" and there are others, the promoter, the nobodies, trying to congratulate him, but he pushes them aside, shoulders his way to Vederotta's corner. He has to see him, because this is not how things were supposed to play. Vederotta is sitting on his stool,

someone smearing his cut with Avitene. His face is still visible, still that of the beast. Those glowing red eyes stare up at Mears, connect with the eye of pain in his head, and he wants there to be a transfer of knowledge, to learn that one day soon that pain will open wide and he will fall the way a fighter falls after one punch too many, disjointed, graceless, gone from the body. But no such transfer occurs, and he begins to suspect that something is not wrong, or rather that what's wrong is not what he suspected.

There's one thing he thinks he knows, however, looking at Vederotta, and while the handlers stand respectfully by, acknowledging his place in this ritual, Mears says, "I was lucky, man. You a hell of a fighter. But that eye's never gon' be the same. Every fight they gon' be whacking at it, splittin' it open. You ain't gon' be fuckin' over nobody no more. You might as well hang 'em up now."

As he walks away, as the TV people surround him, saying, "Here's the winner, Bobby Mears"—and he wonders what exactly it is he's won—it's at that instant he hears a sound behind him, a gush of raw noise in which frustration and rage are commingled, both dirge and challenge, denial and lament, the final roar of the beast.

* * *

Two weeks after the fight he's sitting in the hotel bar with Arlene, staring into that infinite dark mirror, feeling lost, undefined, sickly, like there's a cloud between him and the light that shines him into being, because he's not sure when he's going to fight again, maybe never, he's so busted up from Vederotta. His eyes especially seem worse, prone to dazzling white spots and blackouts, though the pain deep in his head has subsided, and he thinks that the pain may have had something to do only with his eyes, and now that they're fading, it's fading, too, and what will he do if that's the case? Leon has been working with this new lightweight, a real prospect, and he hasn't been returning Mears' calls, and when the bartender switches on the TV and a rapper's voice begins blurting out his simple, aggressive rhymes, Mears gets angry, thoughts like gnats swarming around that old reeking nightmare shape in his head, that thing that may never have existed, and he pictures a talking skull on the TV shelf, with a stuffed raven and a coiled snake beside it. He drops a twenty on the counter and tells Arlene he wants to take a walk, a disruption of their usual routine of a few drinks, then upstairs. It bewilders her, but she says, "OK, baby," and off they go into the streets, where the Christmas lights are gleaming against the black velour illusion of night like green and red galaxies, as if he's just stepped into an incredible distance hung here and there with plastic angels filled with radiance. And people, lots of people brushing past, dark and shiny as beetles, scuttling along in this holy immensity, chattering their bright gibberish, all hustling toward mysterious crossroads where they stop and freeze into silhouettes against the streams of light, and Mears, who is walking very fast because walking is dragging something out of him, some old weight of emotion, is dismayed by their stopping, it goes contrary to the flow he wants to become part of, and he bursts through a group of shadows assembled like pilgrims by a burning river, and steps out, out and down—he's forgotten the curb—and staggers forward into the traffic, into squealing brakes and shouts, where he

waits for a collision he envisions as swift and ultimately stunning, luscious in its finality, like the fatal punch Vederotta should have known. Yet it never comes. Then Arlene, who has clattered up, unsteady in her high heels, hauls him back onto the sidewalk, saying, "You tryin' to kill yo'self, fool?" And Mears, truly lost now, truly bereft of understanding, either of what he has done or why he's done it, stands mute and tries to find her face, wishes he could put a face on her, not a mask, just a face that would be her, but she's nowhere to be found, she's only perfume, a sense of presence. He knows she's looking at him, though.

"You sick, Bobby?" she asks. "Ain't you gon' tell me what's wrong?"

How can he tell her that what's wrong is he's afraid he's not dying, that he'll live and go blind? How can that make sense? And what does it say about how great a fool he's been? He's clear on nothing apart from that, the size of his folly.

"C'mon," Arlene says with exasperation, taking his arm. "I'm gon' cook you some dinner. Then you can tell me what's been bitin' yo' ass."

He lets her steer him along. He's too dazed to make decisions. Too worried. It's funny, he thinks, or maybe funny's not the word, maybe it's sad that what's beginning to worry him is exactly the opposite of what was troubling him a few seconds before. What if she proves to be someone who'll stand by him no matter how bad things get, what if the pain in his head hasn't gone away, it's just dormant, and instead of viewing death as a solution, one he feared but came to rely on, he now comes to view it as something miserable and dread? The darkness ahead will be tricky to negotiate, and the simple trials of what he's already starting to characterize as his old life seem, despite blood and attrition, unattainably desirable. But no good thing can arise from such futile longing, he realizes. Loving Amandla has taught him that.

Between two department stores, two great, diffuse masses of white light, there's an alley, a doorway, a dark interval of some sort, and as they pass, Mears draws Arlene into it and pulls her tightly to him, needing a moment to get his bearings. The blackness of street and sky is so uniform, it looks as if you could walk a black curve up among the blinking red and green lights, and as Arlene's breasts flatten against him, he feels like he is going high, like it feels when the man in the tuxedo tells you that you've won and the pain is washed away by perfect exhilaration and sweet relief. Then, as if jolted forward by the sound of a bell, he steps out into the crowds, becoming part of them, just another fool with short money and bad health and God knows what kind of woman trouble, who in another time might have been champion of the world.

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