Because 'it' (the very word, even unspoken, caused Colin to grind his wisdom teeth) was on a Saturday, he'd been left no choice but to come into the city on a weekday if he wanted any chance of stopping it. Now, wedged in traffic, the baking heat radiated up from the blacktop and made the Hudson River below appear like a massive, cruel mirage. The air conditioning in his pickup sputtered and coughed warm air; he turned the fan back on. The smell of rabbit shit and Beagle piss – faint and almost homey on the interstate with the windows open – was now curdling into something noxious. From beside him, the sub-sonic pulsations had been for twenty minutes shaking the truck and with it Colin's tender bladder (which he called 'arthritic,' and refused to be corrected by the one doctor he'd seen). He had gone at the last rest stop, where from the parking lot the new Freedom Tower was visible. But then, for reasons that escaped Colin, twenty lanes of traffic had collapsed into one, suspended above the water. He rolled down the window again and, for the first time, was struck ('assaulted,' he would have said) by the lyrical counterpart to the over-amplified bottom end.

Black G.I. Joe, money, guns and hoes, nigga –

Colin tried to look away but *that* word (he was insensitive to 'ah' and 'er' endings) set off in him a bewildering panic and, like most panicked people, he stared doe-eyed at the thing that had panicked him, willing the lyrics to stop. The sports car's window rolled down and a young Latina stared out the window at him, stone-faced for a moment before cracking into a slight smile as the volume – impossibly – ratcheted up further. The lyrics continued, unrestrained by Colin's will.

Black American hero, commas and zeroes – in my paycheck, respected on tha blocks I stay set –

The woman shouted at him – 'what the fuck, Gramps?' – but Colin was hypnotized by the sound of the words, vowels popping like wet peas, the consonants cracking (like the harsh Teutonic edges of those words his older brother had come home from the war with). He tried to narrow his

eyes, to look unaffected. Perhaps they only wanted a reaction. He thought of his own children, who would goad him by waiting until he left the living room for the bathroom and then replacing his Bing Crosby records with Chuck Berry – and later, Lynyrd Skynyrd and Led Zeppelin (those band names that struck Colin like the words spoken in tongues at Pentecostal churches). Back then, he would return, calmly ignoring the transgression; now he found himself staring.

Howitzers and forty calibers, titty-fucking at all hours ah – bitches suck my dick or get the kung-fu grip

A chorus of horns shook Colin and he realized a dozen car-lengths had opened up ahead of him. The pickup belched and rolled forward and, when the traffic settled to a stop again, the sports car and its noise safely enough behind him. The spell broken, he realized he had been holding his breath. He felt the lingering unease of sexual obscenity on his skin like motor oil (had anyone else been there, Colin might have said, 'how could anyone, let alone a woman, listen to *that*?'). His abdomen hurt, a dull pressure that broke into lacerating pain until he removed his seatbelt. He glanced at the red plastic scoop, a reverse watering can – 'a trucker's urinal' – and sighed.

He'd use it if necessary. He didn't want to stop. He wasn't sure he'd have the nerve to start up again, now that the flow of traffic was pulling him into the city. He'd be in that maze – those dazzling canyons, those thousands, millions – and he'd either find his grandson's apartment (on West 13th Street, in the West Village, a place that Colin, more than a bit behind the times, had just begun to associate with homosexuality) or flee the labyrinth entirely. And he couldn't flee. His grandson John was going to make a fool of himself. A *marriage?* Colin knew there were people ('like that,' he would say). His brother Patrick had joked, once or twice, about *queers* and *nancies* in the Army. His grandchildren called each other 'gay,' but seemingly in jest. And there were those ubiquitous stories about prison. But a marriage? To stand up before God, before *people* ('for Christ's sake,' the post-war Patrick would have been bold enough to say) and make a mockery of marriage.

And to ask *him* to bless it? He was glad Miren was gone, that she had been spared this, the mad decadence of her grandchildren. And he was glad he had time, still, to stop it from happening.

*

The last time Colin had been to the city was late spring, 1945. The streets had erupted in Cherry blossoms and ticker-tape; the Lexington Amory was buried in what appeared to him to be an unseasonable and slightly pink snow-bank. And, from things he had overheard from his parents about the city (Colin had, from an early age, developed excellent hearing), he believed this – pink snow – to be possible. As his mother said, 'the city is dazzling, just don't be dazzled.' A smart woman, God rest her. But he *was* dazzled; they all were – his younger brother and sister, his father, even his mother. They pressed their faces to the windows of the Packard and their jaws fell open: the blinding gleam of the Chrysler Building, the incomprehensible height of the Empire State Building, the hundreds upon thousands of people, the roar, and the smell. And of course the men – the soldiers, like Patrick – in their uniforms, their medals, and their star-struck Red Cross nurses and WACs clinging to their shoulders. Patrick was a war hero, two purple hearts – one in Cologne, another outside Berlin – and a Congressional medal for mounting a Nazi ('gnat-see,' Patrick pronounced it) tank and stuffing a canvas satchel full of grenades into the turret.

When the parade was over, Patrick pulled Colin aside and told him, 'The gnat-sees had vampire soldiers, they bred 'em in secret labs in Norway. They captured beautiful blonde women and made them give birth to the *Untotenkommando*. I staked one, caught him creeping up on me when an artillery flare went off over the trench. There he was, blood-red mouth open, fangs dripping with my buddies' blood. I staked 'em and he turned to dust. But I kept this.' And Patrick showed him a ring, much like one he had won at a carnival game in Camden the previous year. It was a metallic

skull with lightning bolts framing its black and gaping eye-sockets; unlike the carnival ring, this one was heavy, pulling Colin's hand downward as Patrick placed it in his palm.

He had been ten. The world terrified and delighted him, Nazi vampires and pink snow, atomic death and girls in skirts with sheer stockings. He wanted in, wanted all in, wanted to be a part of it, to get a part of it, more than part, all. All, all, all – that was the bullhorn mantra of New York City.

But he had never gone back. He married his high-school sweetheart (a term that would eventually burn off its earnest shell and leave a charred ironic pit, but that at the time was unquestionably the mark of a blessed American life). He had children. He worked in a printing press until the advent of desk-top computers economized his job out of existence. His children had children. Retirement. Rabbit hunting, fishing. Great-grandchildren. Miren, his wife, died in her sleep, and even his most cantankerously secular grandchildren agreed she was a saintly candidate material. Now the end was near. There had been a mild stroke, last year, and medication that he frequently neglected to take. Colin was reconciled to it. He had lived a good life, raised a family – two generations – and secured his acre of Earth. He was ready, save for this thing about his grandson.

*

And so he had left it, the peace and quiet, fishing in the morning, a beer on the dock, stacks of *Reader's Digest* to be read – undisturbed – in the bathroom and battered Bob Hope tapes warbling through the stereo (his grandchildren had explained that *all* of his music, Sinatra, Crosby, Irving Berlin, could now be put on a tiny metallic device, but he had recoiled – 'what if I lose it?' – and the children had let it go). Now he was sitting in his truck, his bladder an angry, heavy cyst sinking in his gut, the distant throbbing voices of angry black men like the baying of hounds behind a rabbit. The

city stunk and screamed, towered before him. It was a wonder God hadn't destroyed it. He had certainly threatened. But here was Colin, not just looking back but *going* back. What had been dazzling had become an abomination, the sublime pushed into the grotesque, magnified and approaching horror. And Colin was driving headlong into it, in a finicky pickup truck with no air conditioning.

After a dizzying sequence of elevated switchbacks – Colin thought of his one abortive attempt to drive through the Catskills – he arrived on the campus of Columbia University and – for the first time since leaving the last rest stop – felt some manner of control over the pickup, where it went, how fast he drove. The campus was crowded with students who reminded him, pleasantly, of his grandchildren. Their dress was of the same ridiculous sort and, for the young girls, almost obscene, but on this spring day they were shouting and laughing, nearly all of them smiling and signing along to the music in their tiny metal devices. A group of students, sitting on a long sloping lawn, were listening to something on a portable juke-box that sounded very much like Arlo Guthrie (who, although Colin repeatedly denounced him as a Communist, was one of Miren's favorite artists, and not completely unlistenable, and – anyway – 'Alice's Restaurant' was a staple at their house around Christmas). He waved out the window and the students waved back (they were likely tripping on industrial doses of psychotropics).

You can have anything you want, at…

The blocks rolled by, couples walking dogs, more students, older men in smoking jackets with patched elbows. Colin was starting to feel at ease, thinking – at least – there must be one or two history professors, maybe even a religion expert? If he was stranded here – if the truck died, if his bladder mounted an insurrection – he could find some common ground with these people. Communicate. At least hear himself over their music. And then the light changed and Colin crossed a broad intersection, bigger than the block he had grown up on, and on the far side an oversize truck

– an SUV, though no sports were ever entertained in something so excruciatingly polished and waxed – pulled alongside him, its stereo hammering words into the cabin of his pickup.

Yo, hack-saw a nigga's trigger finger off, then kick it at my crib with the ringer off –

Colin instinctively braked – to the angry pealing of rubber and honking of horns – and let the truck pass him. It was a Cadillac, though nothing like the one his father had always dreamed of owning (the one Elvis had driven after the war, the same one Patrick had bought with a G.I. loan and, in a fit of self-destruction to rival the King's own, ran off an intra-coastal bridge down near Stone Harbor in New Jersey, taking it with him to a brackish grave). The Cadillac emblem made Colin think of his father, but the vivid shard of lyric – 'trigger finger' – summoned Patrick's face, floating like a mirage over the roasting asphalt. There were not enough years to bury the memory of Patrick, describing with wicked glee how he had sawed the finger off the hand – 'my Bowie knife went right through the flesh, but his super-soldier bone was harder than steel, so I had to get a blow-torch from the quartermaster' – even though his previous story had the vampire soldier evanescing into dust. When Colin pointed out the discrepancy, Patrick had smiled, held the skull-ring up to the light, and said 'leaving only the hand, Colly-boy, the hand of the *Untotenkommando*, the hand of *fucking* death.'

Another fusillade of horns jolted Colin back into the center lane in time to stop for a traffic light. He could see signs for the Central Park and the brilliant knife tips of the newest midtown skyscrapers appeared above the walk-up tenements. A brief gust cooled him for a moment, a wave of chills settling over his back. His stomach gurgled – bullied out of alignment by his swollen bladder, he assumed – and he undid his belt buckle. He would buckle it again when he got to his grandson's apartment. He gritted his teeth. The traffic light swayed, the red light prismed into rainbow halos by the wet, roiling heat. Through the crosswalk a man pushed a shopping-cart, full of broken electronics and topped with a large portable stereo. The man was swaddled in snow-pants

and an oversized ski-jacket. For a moment, Colin smiled – pink snow in early summer – and then the words, on their feeble battery power, made their way to him.

So many fucking keys they call me mister piano – straight from Columbia! Fucking Columbia!

Colin tried to ignore it, wondered whether they meant the college or the country – was it near Mexico, or maybe further south, and weren't they at some point Communist? – while trying to block out the relentless obscenity.

I got the money, cuz, I got those fucking tools – like Juan Valdez I got Columbian mu—

The song abruptly stopped and a new barrage of lyrics, these somehow sharper and louder, cut through the air.

…got a fat ass and birthing hips, dick sucking lips and nursing tits –

The light changed and Colin pressed the gas down hard. He disliked it when people spoke to their inanimate things – guns, cars, fishing poles, outboard motors – but he begged the pickup to respond; it felt like he was pushing the pedal down into briar muck. The pickup's beleaguered inline four spat and whined. Colin was left shuddering down the avenue, slowly making his way down from 120th Street to the nineties to the mid-eighties, trying to clamp his mind's eye shut, trying not to think about Miren, or – more to the point – Patrick's ungentlemanly assessment of her beauty (what Patrick said, Colin had never repeated, but it was apparently 'beyond the pale,' ever for a man like Patrick). The only sound was the rushing noise of cars passing him on both sides, but he could hear his brother's words.

And then he could hear Miren, in the quiet hours after the children were asleep. She had been, to his private mortification, more worldly than him – she kept up with the news, the revolutions in Asia and South American, the revolutions in literature (Colin finished full stop at Dickens), and in the children's music (he did once actually once ask, in an attempt at civility, 'which one is Pink?'). And she knew things about the other revolution, too: the discovery (really only the

latest the rediscovery) of physical love beyond the rhythm method of the Church. She had suggested things and, when she did, she had seemed more like the woman Patrick had described – more like one of Patrick's women – than the chaste Junior he had taken to the prom. And image of her body threatened to coalesce in space, but Colin shook his head.

'They're dead,' he shouted inside the cramped cab, 'they're dead, Christ almighty, let them be dead in peace.' Then, embarrassed, he drove in silence for a dozen blocks. He was now deep in midtown; gone were the discount stores and fried-chicken joints and pizzerias, gone was the booming music. Steel and glass rose up around him, faceless and seemingly unpeopled. It was frightening, in a way, but also soothing, awing his mind into relative silence. He quietly said an 'Our Father,' and apologized for taking the Lord's name. He focused. Thought about printing fonts – Perpetua, Garamond, Times Roman, Courier – thought about the gentle shaping of serifs. Once, when Miren was in a difficult childbirth (with Mary, John's mother), and Colin was banished to the waiting room with nothing to do and no way to help, he had consoled himself with the fonts. But now, every thought, every word, seemed like a live wire, a raw nerve, which he'd no sooner touch than recoil in pain. In remembrance. Patrick and his women – his father called them 'lady friends' – but Colin's friends knew they were prostitutes. Patrick himself would tell Colin in twisted detail about the things he did with them. About the 'go-pills' he had saved from the war and, later, the newer, more potent ones he got from black musicians in the city. About being awake with two or three girls for days at a time, drinking case after case of beer. And then there were the other stories, the ones he heard from his friends, from people at the local pub. About Patrick in the city.

Colin was saved, momentarily, from the reverie by the appearance of West 14th Street – one of several signposts he had forced himself to memorize – and turned right. The stabbing pain returned, the most forceful spasm yet, and he momentarily considered pulling over to use the plastic urinal. But he was close, too close to stop now. He undid the button on his slacks and made a series

of quick turns, feeling he was drawing closer. The streets were quiet, cobblestoned and tree-lined – this was a neighborhood he could handle – and pleasant looking couples strolled down the sidewalks. Colin waved at a few and they waved back. Then he came to an intersection – West 4th and West 13th – and the sting of panic touched his chest. The clear grid of the city – like the rows and columns of the printing press – had twisted in on itself. The pain spiked and Colin – thinking that he at last knew what all those gut-shot rabbits felt like before he took Patrick's old Bowie to their throats – doubled up in the cab, pressing his head against the steering wheel. Looking up he saw a car pull out of a spot. He pulled in behind it (unaware that this was a spectacular piece of Manhattan luck) and struggled out into the street. The pain was spreading up to his sides and, embarrassingly, down into his groin, but he tried to keep himself together, looking up at the street signs.

Two men approached him, holding hands and Colin stumbled out of the way, fumbling the scrap of paper with John's street address out of his pocket. His vision was going blurry and he wanted to sit down. But he feared he'd be unable to rise again. He headed down West 4th – not thinking, hoping only that he would see his grandson – and then onto Horatio Street when he saw a small park with a bathroom. Holding his pants up around his waist and thinking only of the relief, of the razor-wire cinching around his guts, he rushed headlong into another couple, two men, who cried out in surprise and amusement – 'watch it, pervert' – at this white haired old man, limping like a wounded animal towards the playground. Colin's head spun, the bathroom twinned in his shaky vision. Then something pounded in his chest ('the big one,' Colin would have thought) and words thudded in his ears.

I have descended from the Heavens, with wings like the Albatross –

He leaned against a fence, panting.

Eyes made of fire and plat-i-num Kalashnikovs –

Still thinking he was having a coronary, he whispered to himself, 'no, Jesus, not like this.'

The king of all kings, the boss of all bosses –crucifying motherfucking doubters to the crosses –

The black Cadillac SUV pulled up, parked across the street. Out of the driver's side stepped a tall, light-skinned black man dressed in a flowing clothes (likely a dashiki, though Colin wouldn't have recognized one). He crossed the street and Colin felt a terrible certainly: this was the angel of death. He thought about his father, and Patrick, and the vampire commando, blood dripping from his teeth. He thought about the death's head skull. Then man came closer – he was saying something but Colin couldn't hear him – and suddenly Colin felt a sense of calm. The man was surely an angel, but not an evil Nazi angel. His features – so far from Aryan, the broad nose, the thick lips, the dark eyes and densely curled hair – were somehow comforting, familiar. He looked, for a single moment, like the son of God. And then a great release came over Colin and he felt light and warm. He blacked out.

*

Out of the darkness, resolving slowly, came an imagine: cedar-stained water lapping at a corn-colored cove. It was summer, and it could have been any summer between '45 and '50, when Colin's family spent the month of August at Lake Lenape. In those years, Patrick was in college on the G.I. Bill. He had kept the Army muscle on and hadn't let his hair go long yet. Girls from other campsites would come by and flirt with him. He'd take them out canoeing, his strokes so powerful that the girls, sitting in the front of the canoe, would be lifted up out of the water. Colin would watch from the beach, at fourteen an early sexual inkling in his mind.

Now, Patrick takes Colin with him (this is how he knows, in some sense, that it is a dream), in a larger rowboat. Two girls – sisters, from the summer camp across the lake – sit in the prowl,

and Colin and Patrick sit side by side, each with an oar. Patrick rows gently and Colin with all his might, and still the boat lists, their course forever nudged to one side by Patrick's strength. They row to an island and have a picnic. Patrick gives Colin and the younger sister two bottles of beer, still improbably cold from the store, and then disappears with the older sister. Without fanfare, the younger sister pulls her shirt off, tiny breasts pale and freckled. She sits on Colin's lap and kisses him and whispers in his ear, 'I want you.' Such a timid thing, by modern standards, but Colin's head is a supernova of joy and fear.

The younger sister takes off her shorts and for a brief moment Colin is mesmerized by the dark patch of hair at the juncture of her thighs. She walks into the woods – the island is suddenly much larger – and Colin follows her. The woods grow deeper and darker, until Colin realizes that the thicket has become brick and the sand under his feet has become concrete. It is so dark Colin can see only the glowing pale skin of the younger sister, the curve of her hips. She turns over her shoulder, an act too erotic for a girl her age – but this is, after all, a dream – and Colin is caught by the way the tips of her front teeth glisten beneath her swollen upper lip. He follows her down what is now an alley and then she is gone into the city night.

Instead there is Patrick, on his knees, hair hanging long in front of his face, hands grasping the caramel colored thighs of a young man. The man is thrusting himself into Patrick's face and Patrick is moaning and then looks up at the man with a half-smile and kisses his hip. And then, from out of the darkness, the vampire soldier appears, laughing, blood dripping from fangs – not just two but a whole mouthful of fangs, each like the tip of a Bowie knife – and pointing at Colin. Patrick stands and watches as Colin backs away, screaming, the pitch of his voice slipping up into an inaudible range. Colin finds himself pounding on the vampire's chest with a broken piece of his oar but the vampire just laughs again, wrapping both hands around Colin's neck, each finger heavy with

a death's head ring. The vampire squeezes and forces Colin to kneel and Patrick, looking on, shakes his head and whispers, 'you aren't man enough.'

*

Colin woke to see John standing over him – whispering, 'Grandpop? What are you doing here?' – and then realized, with a hot stab of shame, that he had urinated himself. The black man from the car was also standing over him, speaking to his grandson – 'Jesus, baby, who cares why he's here. Let's get him inside' – and then looking down at him. Without realizing it, Colin gave his hand to the man and allowed himself to be helped up. The man gave him a towel to wrap around himself and Colin nodded with mute gratitude. They walked back up the block to where he had parked his pickup. John touched Colin's shoulder and said, 'I saw your truck, I thought maybe you'd just call. You didn't have to come all the way into the city.'

The black man elbowed John, 'just get him inside okay?'

A few doors down from where Colin had parked, the three of them walked down into a garden apartment. Colin had not had concrete expectations about John's apartment, but he had not imagined this; the décor (not the word Colin would have used) reminded him more of his own mother's house, or the way Miren had decorated her sewing room, than the fragmentary images he had conjured up: boarded windows, an old wooden cable-spool on its side as a table, a broken stove full of odds and ends. They sat Colin down on a couch, still wrapped in the towel. John asked if he wanted coffee and Colin again nodded silently. The man introduced himself, 'I'm Terrence, John's friend.'

Colin spoke before he could think, 'I know what you are.'

Terrence crossed his arms and sighed, then said, 'I think we're about the same waist, let me see if I can find you some clean pants, okay?'

Colin tried to apologize, but his throat had gone dry. He managed to croak out 'Sorry.' Sitting alone in his urine-soaked pants, Colin could hear his grandson and the young man whispering in the kitchen, their voices so low that he could only make out fragments, unsure of whom had said what.

Don't need. Do. You do. What? Blessing? Don't. Don't. You do. You do. Family.

Colin touched his forehead; it was warm and sore, like sunburn. His mouth tasted dry and salty. He tried to remember all the things he had been prepared to say. About John's grandmother, his family. About what people would say. What would people say? What had people said about Patrick? The words, like shards of glass in his ears. *Queer. Cocksucker. Nigger-loving faggot.* Patrick the Nazi killer, the vampire slayer, the war hero. Who had stood at the gates of Dachau and seen people like himself ('like that') in cages. In graves, bodies ten deep and a thousand across. (And though he never told Colin about it, Patrick had in fact caught a *Totenkopfverbände,* a death's head guard, loading a belted machinegun, preparing to massacre a hundred or so men jailed in a long, narrow cage – triangles and stars, yellow, pink, black, and blue, at that point all mixed in together. He had beaten the guard severely but not quite fatally and, while the man was bleeding to death, Patrick had sawed a finger off of his hand and taken the SS ring. Why he told Colin the vampire story – for Colin's protection or his own, or simply as a sick B-horror joke – remains unknowable, as Patrick took his stories and memories alike to the grave.)

It still stung Colin, all these years later. Korea came too soon, Vietnam came too late, and too openly, publicly horrible. He'd never had the chance to prove himself. Miren had always said it didn't matter. That there were other ways to be a man. Colin shook his head. She had been speaking

about both of them, of course, but he hadn't realized it. She meant too much with her words, they dug too deep into things. She had seen clearer than him, and without her, he couldn't see at all.

The arguing was still percolating softly in the kitchen.

Bible-thumping. Yes. Racist. Don't. Your. No. Grandfather. No. Yes. No. Family.

Outside his grandson's window, the city roasted and clanked like some industrial forge. Inside the apartment, it was quiet and cool. On the mantle over an old brick fireplace, there was a family portrait from the early eighties or late seventies. It was all three generations, Colin and Miren standing in the middle. Mary stood next to Miren, a baby in her arms. John. A man, now. Standing in the kitchen. The man Colin had come to, what? Confront? Convert? Convince? Convict? The words chased their tails in Colin's mind, fading into echoes. Nonsense. His grandson.

He looked so much like Patrick it made his heart ache.

Terrence came back into the room with a pair of khakis and said, 'there's a bathroom, through the kitchen, down the hall.' John stood behind Terrence, a hand on his shoulder, and held a cup of coffee in a large porcelain mug, stenciled with all the old font designs. It had been a gift to Mary when she'd gotten her first apartment, many years ago. She must have handed it down to John.

John smiled, 'here, this'll help. Terrence makes great coffee.'

Colin looked up, eyes wet, and opened his mouth – to say 'thank you' – but all that came out was a low, wordless cry.