**INTIMATE STRANGER**

On the same day my wife’s divorce papers mandate I vacate our house of nineteen years, my Doctor requires me at the hospital to undergo a colonoscopy. A procedure to rule out cancer, I had been bleeding for several months.

My wife, soon to be ex-wife, graciously allows me to remain in the house, built by *my* grandparents seventy years prior, for five-and-one-half hours past the 12:01am deadline. Had I been the one to file for divorce, she’d be leaving. Like chess, it’s all about the first move.

When I walk out the kitchen for the last time, I let the wood screen door slam proclaiming my departure. I leave behind four generations of family and experiences lost on my watch.

Loving my wife was trench warfare, long periods of emotional inactivity, the lines static, punctuated by heated battles, pointless and merciless carnage waged on the vast plain between us that belonged to no one. Exhausted and wounded, the hostilities stayed, we slugged back to our respective shelters mollifying the pain with new indulgences until the over expenditures gave us strength to ascend the trenches, sounding the bugle once again.

I proceed to the hospital aware I’m not supposed to drive for twenty-four hours after the anesthesia. I choose to give my doctor twelve hours – rationalizing the consequences of losing my marriage, home, and children have more deleterious effects on my central nervous system than the most potent of medications.

The Pine Sol cologne of the surgical center assails my senses, and the fluorescent lights scour everyone to a common blue. The elastic tourniquet wrests several hairs from my upper arm, and I shiver from the cold hands of the IV therapist as she lies about only a quick pinch. I close my eyes to a cacophony of sounds, tracked curtains opening and closing, the shrill of wheeled IV poles on the tiled floor, and murmurs from behind masked faces, where I read only eyes, caviling about the switch to instant potatoes in the employee cafeteria.

I wake to arid and coagulated nostrils, a brambly throat, and the taste of coppered salami. At first, I believe I’m home in bed, but a nurse rasps my sternum with her knuckles, “Are you still with us? Wake up sugar. The doctor will be in to speak with you in several minutes. Would you like some ice chips? We’re going to start off slow. No real food for several hours.”

I attempt to talk, but my hinged jaw remains closed like a swollen door, and the words trickle from my eyes.

“Give it a few minutes hon’. Anesthesia takes longer to wear off on some than others. You’ll be fine.”

I nod with a blink.

I wake again to a white light piercing one eye, then the other, and a different set of knuckles rolling across my chest the way we trampled the wooden steps pf our childhood home.

“How are you feeling? A little foggy still?”

“All right I guess.” I say in the recollected haze of why I lay in the hospital bed. Thoughts that I can’t go home, my marriage has ended, and I’ll no longer wake to my children, somersault into my present like a Netherland’s tide.

Sensing battle fatigue, the doctor sits on the edge of the bed and places his hand on my arm, “You have a lot on your plate, but health-wise everything looks okay. I removed a few polyps. They appear benign, and I sent one to be biopsied – a standard procedure. My guess is your bleeding has been from stress. Give yourself time to heal.” He pats my shoulder in a paternal gesture as he stands.

I mumble, “Thanks.”

“My office will call you with the biopsy results, but I don’t expect anything. Come see me again in three years. I’m going to keep you here a while longer and no driving for twenty-four hours.”

“No problem.”

“Do you have someone to pick you up?”

“A friend,” I lie.

After tolerating ice chips and another nap, I change into my clothes and sign myself out. When I exit the surgical center, I have several hours to kill and head downtown. I feel disconnected and can’t sense my foot upon the sidewalk. I trip ascending a curb and abrade the palm of my hand as I catch myself.

I decide to limit my vulnerabilities and enter the next restaurant, a sports tavern with a waxed wooden floor coated with a dander of peanut shells. My eyes struggle adapting to the dark interior.

“Just opened, need about twenty minutes until we’re serving. Sit where you like,” says a silhouetted voice from behind the bar followed by the sound of glasses stacking. A scintilla of peppers, onions, and garlic sauteing drifts from the kitchen.

I sit at a table by the front window and capture the sun’s warmth suffusing through gauzy drapes. I stare at the populace passing by, each with their own lives, their own problems. For the first day in four and a half decades, I have no place to call home, and when my children return from school, they will find their father gone. In silence, tears stream down my cheeks, warm when they leave my eyes, cool when they ebb on my neck. Bile wells in my throat rising like morning damp.

The plink of glass on the urethaned table and the sliding deposit of a plastic bowl of peanuts nested in wax paper draws my attention to the back of a green aproned apparition.

“I’ll have one of my girls bring you a menu,” she says as she walks away. Tendrils of rebellious black hair fly behind her as she returns to the bar whispering a visage of defiance.

I retrieve the Ziploc bag from my blazer pocket that holds my car keys, watch, and wedding ring, possessions removed for the morning’s procedure. I don my watch over my wrist, a Christmas present from years prior that ticks away at my resentment. I slide the ring to my first knuckle before I remember. I return it to the bag, the ghost-blanched band on my fourth finger screams like a cold and naked child.

Although I haven’t always treated it as such, I am proud of my twenty-two year marriage, and the concept of divorce seems unfathomable. We have four children, and with each successive child, the cement that held us together should have cured and hardened. Instead, like aging mortar, it cracked and languished, the weaknesses in the foundation compounding until the structure collapsed upon itself.

A young girl with an eyebrow ring and a butterfly tattoo on her wrist bubbles over to the table and hands me a menu. Her hair is red and her skin Irish milk-white, her voice Celtic and humid. “Would you like to know our specials?”

“No thanks,” I say glancing at the menu and selecting the first item I see. “A bowl of lobster bisque please. We’ll see how that settles and go from there.”

She cocks her head in confusion. Her ponytail remains plumb, “Okay then. More water? Peanuts?”

“Club soda please. Hold off on the peanuts.”

The idea of dating does not intimidate me. The arduousness of getting to know another someone does. I eye passersby on the sidewalk, my gaze hidden by the reflected sun off the window. I speculate how long it will take until I know every little story, one’s mood by the sound of their footsteps and the pace of their stride.

I ponder a bowl of too hot soup, spooning away from me as my grandmother implored, blowing the steam with pursed lips and searching for the elusive piece of lobster. Looking around the tavern filled with small bouquets of people, I feel self-conscious eating alone. The waitress has left a second place-setting rolled tight with a green napkin as if I expected someone.

Behind the bar, a Middle Eastern woman, skin the color of nut butter, organizes her arsenal, bottle labels facing forward, wine glasses hanging inverted from overhead racks. She slices lemon and lime wedges, and when she moves under the skylight, shafts of sun iridesce chestnut highlights in her hair. Her face appears sculpted and polished, each proportional feature completing a mosaic. Cerulean shadow accentuates aquamarine irises that when fused with pouty and mutinous lips reveal a face that hovers on the edge of combustion, one that flashes sexuality in a wild and sudden way. Tight black clothes encapsulate an abundant and voluptuous figure, and her bearing as staff approach suggest authority and the proprietary voice I heard upon entering the restaurant.

She happens upon me staring, my soup spoon in mid arc, mouth open, and the woman smiles at me like a chocolate martini before she catches herself. She turns away and moves out of the aurora from the skylight.

In her thirties, she wears silver bands on her thumbs and earrings of decreasing concentric loops. She’s the kind one expects to see male patrons fawning over, eating at the counter, petitioning for a date. Yet, the seats at the bar remain empty.

My stomach tolerates the soup, and I order a roast beef sandwich not sure if I feel hunger or the taste of curiosity. The more I observe the woman behind the bar, the more she withdraws further and further into herself. Aware of my attention, gusts of emotion ripple across her face that chill more than caress, and the corner of her mouth turns down as if she’s swallowed bitter news.

Even though I witness staff taking checks to the bar to close out a bill, I craft to do such on my own, feigning ignorance as a way to encounter this woman. I don’t wish for conversation, only a desire to assuage my rampant insecurity.

My waitress delivers the check, and I pretend to nurse the last of my club soda while gazing out the window, “I’ll take that when you are ready,” she says in a moist brogue and continues on with drinks to another table.

When the waitress enters the kitchen, I place my napkin on the table and my silverware at

the three o’clock position. I proof the bill, leave a tip, and meander up to the bar to pay my tab.

The Middle Eastern woman behind the counter looks down, washing glasses, and spares me knowing she had seen me stutter mid-step, eyes unblinking, suddenly aware as if I had plunged into a pail of freezing water.

From where I sat in the front of the restaurant, I had observed this woman’s left profile, my mind doubling the other half creating the vision of the full face. One did not mirror the other. Like the two ends of a piano, each produced opposite effects.

A rending and cratering scar imploded where her right cheek bone had once been dropping her eye half an inch. Her mouth had been wrested open and stitched coarsely back together. Tissue avulsed, it did not close fully revealing a peep of tongue and missing teeth. White knobs from old suture holes protrude through sedimentary make up which does as much to hide her disfigurement as rouge upon the dead. Her right ear is mostly gone, and scar lines trespass into her scalp. She attempts to cover them with hair which she tucks behind her left ear throwing the bulk of her mane to her right. Her shoulder depresses in the middle, and I surmise she lost her collar bone.

Her appearance is not the result of genetic disfigurement, but of a violent explosion, and the absurd incongruity of her face, a distortion beyond my eye’s power of correction, both repulses and compels.

She accepts the payment, looking at the counter, trying to save us embarrassment because not staring is a way of staring, pretending one doesn’t see the tsunami from behind the sandbag. Bearing the scars for some time, she had become proficient in minimizing collateral damage.

When the woman with nut butter skin and aquamarine irises turns her back to open the register, my mind’s eye envisions her face full again, and I see her in the bar length mirror looking back at me, safe in the reflection, catching me reassembling her face.

She permits me to see once more as she returns my change focusing on my outstretched palm counting the bills and coins. Her voice quiets and drops an octave filling my ears with lustral prose. She smells of honeysuckle and narcissus, and I inhale her breath.

I keep my hand out after she finishes, a way to sustain the touch. As her hand grazes in the nest of mine, I feel the ardor of her fingers through which trickle many passionate tears. I ponder the tortured landscape of her face, a paradox of beauty and grotesque, co-existing in the same plane, equal in size, and interchangeable. In her disfigurement, there is beauty, and in the violence of her appearance, grace, and in the touch of her hand, warmth. I allow my hand to enclose hers. She looks up, a softened smile, and then her hand retracts as if burned, a print that stains me long after it fades.

She turns her back once again, a practiced gesture and gazes at me in the mirror. Her liquid and luminous eyes, an abyss of sadness moments before, reflect back at me like glowing coals of a late night’s dying fire. She holds the posture, the intimacy concluded, as I stand on a bridge of glass that shifts beneath my feet as I leave the restaurant.

Rents of mid-spring sun gash between buildings and bits of trash scatter along the worn cobblestones. In the distance, I hear the high-lows of a siren dancing between the octaves, and in the air wafts the scintilla of bread rising.

I check my watch deciding enough time has elapsed since anesthesia and head to the car. Before me stretches the portentous unsettling road of a different life and the knowledge I will never go home again.

**THE END**