Church was bunk. Scarves were bunk. The cold was bunk. Robert Fancer’s
grandfather, the man he was wheeling back from afternoon service in a crappy
chair, was massively bunk. There wasn’t a word for the level of bunk Fancer’s
grandfather was. Especially when the wheels of the chair were coated in brown
gritty slush, like they were just then, on the way back from the church, and
the grandfather was trying to tell him shortcuts that didn’t even exist anymore,
places that had been bricked up years before or fenced in or protected by loud
dogs, and his grandfather smelled and was losing his mind and he apologized
even though he didn’t mean to apologize, even when he was trying to do the
opposite of apologizing underneath the apology.

“If you had turned down that alley, we’d be home by now,” he said, pound-
ing his fists against his thighs.

“That wasn’t an alley. That was a newsstand.”

“I’m sorry about that, Robert. But if there was an alley there, and there
should be, we would be home.”

Before, Fancer’s mother had taken care of everything—the catheter, the
vinyl sheets, the runny bowels—all of the horrible things that happened to
Fancer’s grandfather in the course of a day. She executed these tasks with such
precision that they attained a transparency. It was only through the yellowed
lens of her death that Fancer saw how profound her influence was over the
apartment, how much discord had been held back by her fierce, silent vig-
ilance. She was dead and he could no longer pay for the Pakistani nurse to
come, the one with the fantasy name he couldn’t even pronounce whose voice
was thin and sweet, always on the verge of song. She would come once in the
morning and again in the afternoon and when she came the second time her
voice was always lower, as if weighted down. Fancer missed the nurse. He felt
a pitted longing for the wind she carried through the house, the brief flurry
that stirred the still, dim rooms, sheets snapping and halving under the direc-
tion of her sure hands as she stood next to his grandfather’s bed. Fancer wanted
to ask her where she had learned to do these things with such dispassion, under
what circumstances she had happened into this part of the world tending to the small brown apartment he shared with his grandfather, which seemed a profound disgrace. He wanted most of all to hear the voice, to drape it over himself like a shawl, but he could barely muster speech in the presence of the nurse, and so he never asked, just left the money in an envelope on the small table by the front door and waited for her to leave. Then he got fired from the supermarket for crashing a delivery truck packed with snack cakes and his grandfather’s pension was barely enough for them to keep hold of the apartment. He called the agency that sent the nurse, asking for a temporary extension of credit, but they did not do credit, they were a cash-only establishment.

Fancer and his grandfather made it back to the apartment building. Fancer bent down and hefted the old man, who weighed less than a stick, onto his back. This was the only way they could get up the stairs because the chair would wobble when he tried to lug it up backwards and Fancer worried something would break or that he’d lose his grip on the rubber handles and his grandfather would tumble down the long narrow flight, his bones snapping like kindling.

“You’re good for doing this, for making sure I get to mass,” Fancer’s grandfather said, clinging to him with feathery arms. “I’m very thankful. Do I seem thankful to you?”

“Yes.”

“I want to make sure you know I am thankful. I was never thankful, not to your mother or to your grandmother before her. They both died resenting me. I know it.”

“They did not. It’s fine.”

“That’s nice of you, Robert. But I can tell. I can feel it. I can feel them looking down from heaven. I can feel the pressure of their eyes above me, bearing down.”

Fancer carried his grandfather into the apartment, laid him out on the special bed, covered him in a crocheted afghan, and turned on the news. The first story involved a group of nuns who had been raped and murdered by soldiers in El Salvador. Father Gregory had mentioned the women in his homily. He told the congregation to turn their anger into prayer because the sentiment would multiply like the loaves and fishes and spread out into the world in the form of peace. After the story about the nuns the news anchors talked about the hostages in Iran, a warehouse full of abused cats that had been discovered in White Plains, a new advance in heart medicine, and the Dallas Cowboys. The male anchor made a joke about the Dallas Cowboy cheerleaders at the expense
of the female anchor. The female anchor laughed, concealing a grimace, and
the news ended.

“Why didn’t they mention the election? When does the election happen?”
Fancer’s grandfather asked, clicking laboriously through the channels, which
were mostly jagged bands of static. The wand worked only intermittently and
only when you rolled the batteries back and forth while clicking. Mostly they
kept it on the same station and hoped.

“Grand-dad, come on. Already happened.”
The grandfather stopped clicking. “You’re serious.”

“Yes. You saw it.”

“Who won?”

“Come on, Grand-dad. Reagan won. You know this.”

“Oh, god. I hate this head. It won’t work.” The grandfather blinked and
scrubbed a veinous hand over his scalp, smacking with his elbow a Tupperware
bowl full of unpopped and half-popped corn kernels left over from the day
before.

Fancer knelt on the floor and began picking the oily kernels out of the carpet
pile.

“I’m sorry, Robert. About the mess I’ve made. Not just there, the mess on
the floor. I mean the mess inside me. I hate when that happens, when I forget.”

“It’s fine.”

“But I really am sorry. You can’t understand what it’s like. I have these huge
holes in my head where all of the memory goes. Like down a drain. Do you
understand?”

Fancer paused, crouched on his elbows and knees. “Stop apologizing,
please.”

“But I want you to know. My life is going away, slowly, down these holes.”

“Please stop. That’s what happens. There’s nothing to apologize for.”

“Don’t let your life fall away from you like this. It’s pathetic.”

“Stop it.”

“When you’re done with that, could you bend the TV over this way more?
That yellow spot—the reflection from the hall light—is making it hard to see.”

Fancer moved the television for his grandfather. On the program there was
a detective investigating an assassination. He wore a thick moustache and
rubbed his chin vigorously, pointing with his free hand at a crumbling apart-
ment building across the street. It looked like Fancer’s neighborhood, but no
building he recognized specifically.

“How much longer do I have to stay awake today?”
“You don’t have to stay awake.”
“Be good and bring me some of the drink.”

“When it gets to commercials,” Fancer said, but he went to the kitchen any-
way because he knew he wouldn’t be able to bear sitting through the detec-
tive program while his grandfather stewed in the special bed. He went to the
refrigerator and mixed some vodka into a tall glass of orange juice. He handed
the drink to his grandfather, who began immediately slurping away the pulp
from the surface like a young boy. Soon his attention drifted back to the tele-
vision.

Fancer retreated gingerly to his bedroom and lay down on his stomach on
the bed. He reached under the bed for the long red box and dragged it out so
he could see it. He opened the box and looked at the Kalashnikov. It looked
mean, like a dragon’s tooth with a trigger and a stock. He lifted it from the fit-
ted case. It was freeezing cold in his hand. He breathed on it, which only made
it wet. The people’s rifle. He put it back into the case. He sometimes bought
weapons for Craig, who couldn’t buy them himself since he was arrested that
time in Queens. Craig would be coming for the Kalshnikov soon. Fancer
wondered what it would take to convince Craig to let him keep it. He thought
about the rifle constantly. Its presence in his room forced a clarity to erupt
through the measured torpor of his life; it revealed, for the first time in years, a
sense of purpose. He wanted to use it for something big, something that only
big people did, the ones who took up huge chunks of the world, crowding out
everybody else. He was ready for it—he’d compressed and sharpened his years
of isolation into a jagged courage. He just needed a target.

The bell rang. Fancer’s son, Thuan, was at the door, holding a paper bag with
his things. Fancer had made the boy with a captured Vietnamese resistance
fighter named Binh, whom he’d guarded at the prison camp in Bien Hoa. Binh
tailored shirts in a factory and was addicted to some sort of diet pills that were
actually really high-quality speed and she was across the street at the bus stop
reading a magazine. Thuan was named after Hai Thuan, who was someone
important to the Vietcong. Thuan, the boy, had happened to Fancer and Binh
after a lengthy, botched interrogation session. The investigator could not get
any useful information out of her. He wiped his face with a thin, stiff towel
and threw it at Fancer’s neck before leaving the room, disgusted. Binh hud-
dled in a corner, panting, her wrists and fingertips browned with dried, crusted
blood. When Fancer went to pick her up she fell into his arms, a motion he
interpreted as a sort of resigned, fatigued passion. A few days later, she was
removed in a prisoner exchange, so that Fancer didn’t find out about his son until 1977 when she tracked him down in Harlem. He remembered little about the morning Thuan was conceived, just that Binh mumbled in slushy fractured sentences and that one of her arms was just barely shorter than the other. There was a mustiness to her, a robust and impermeable scent like a soiled wool coat. It was the scent of prison, of communism. She glowed in the shady periphery of the windowless interrogation chamber and when he embraced her it was partially to shut out the light that seemed to emanate from her naked torso.

“Hey,” Fancer said.

The boy looked up and said something that sounded like “google.”

Both of them watched Binh get on the bus and take a seat toward the back. Binh was the boy’s mother but Fancer was only Fancer, despite a series of early attempts to bore his way into the boy’s world. Binh brought Thuan out to him whenever she needed to be in the city. The bell would ring and Fancer would hurry down the steps to the front where the boy always stood holding a paper bag with his things.

“Can I have a cigarette?” the boy asked.

“How old are you now?”

“Ten.”

“That seems too young to smoke.”

“It’s not.”

“Let me think about it.”

The boy opened his bag and carefully removed a crumpled pack of cigarettes. “I will hold these while you think about it.”

“What do you want to do today?” Fancer asked.

“Just play video games.”

“Okay.”

They walked three blocks to a narrow, poorly heated arcade. On the way the boy slid a flattened cigarette from the pack and lit it.

“I didn’t say you could have that,” Fancer said.

“I get tired of waiting.”

“Could you put it away? It looks wrong.”

“What does?” The boy held the cigarette expertly between his forefinger and middle finger and when he exhaled he blew the smoke discreetly away from Fancer. The boy had a point—he looked oddly mature. Fancer had stopped smoking when his mother died, mostly out of respect since it was the peachesized tumor in her throat that killed her. But he hated to quit and thought often about the sweet burning in his mouth, the light, drowning sensation.
“You just look too small to be doing that. People are staring at us.”
The boy did not respond, just took a long drag and exhaled through his nose.

At the arcade Fancer changed a five-dollar bill for a handful of quarters. The boy made it through seven levels of Galaxian on a single quarter. Fancer didn’t really know how the game was played but the boy commanded the furious pixels with such exactitude and determination, immobile except for the pair of synchronous spastic hands, that he felt his heart rise up against the walls of his chest.

Afterward they bought wet, translucent fries from a Middle Eastern man on the street and ate them in a vacant lot where four girls were trying to jump rope with a partially unthreaded telephone wire.

“How did you learn how to play those games?” Fancer asked the boy, who was sitting on his hands to warm them.

“I don’t know. I just tried them.”

“I try those games sometimes,” Fancer said. “I always die right away.”
The boy nodded, staring into his lap. “You’re older.”

“Maybe, you know, you could teach me how.”

Thuan didn’t answer, just fished for something in his jacket pocket. He looked uncomfortable.

“How is school?”

“It’s just school.”

“Any bullies?”

“What’s that?”

“Kids who mess with you. Push you down. Call you names. Like that.”

Thuan shook his head slowly, as if unsure.

“Anybody there that you just wish you could take out?” Fancer said, rolling a charred pebble around on the blacktop with his heel.

The boy, smoking again, inhaled and just held the smoke inside, like he was trying to store it for later. “You mean who I would kill? That kind of thing?”

“Yeah.”

“Why you asking me this again?”

“I’ve asked you this?”

“You ask every time I come.”

“Oh. Shit, sorry.” Fancer slid his hands between his thighs. He could feel his cheeks going sour and red.

“You don’t remember things.”

“I said I was sorry.”

MATTHEW DERBY
“Can we go somewhere else now?”

There were many things in Fancer’s life that he did not like. Being told by someone he had taken part in creating that they knew more about him than he himself knew was maybe the thing he hated most. It made him want to get up and leave the boy there on the park bench. He wanted to walk away forever, to escape the city, to lose himself in a thick forest somewhere. It would be a glowing place, and he would walk barefoot and feed deer from his cupped palm, and he would no longer have to change the fetid bedsheets of his grandfather or listen to a small boy he loved tear him down on the small, rippled half-circle of cracked pavement behind the arcade, crisp sunlight flashing brilliantly in the mounds of dry snow.

They walked down to Central Park in silence, the boy taking the lead, tapping things with a twig he’d torn from a tree. It was too cold to walk, and way too far, but Fancer didn’t want to spend money on bus fare and anyway they had a whole day to get through.

Thuan started walking with his eyes closed. “Hey,” he called back to Fancer. “You tell me if I’m about to hit something.”

Fancer closed his eyes as well. He could only get four or five steps before chickening out. Then he started to walk with his head pointed straight up. He craned his neck back so far that he could see the tops of the buildings. He wondered how far the Kalashnikov could fire. He wondered if it could hit a target at the top of the tallest skyscraper. Peg a guy off the top of the north tower. A feverish urge to smile cascaded through his insides, but he did not smile, just cued the laugh track inside his chest while a smaller version of himself mugged and took a bow in front of a studio audience.

Up ahead he saw a very well-known singer signing an album cover for a young woman on the sidewalk outside an old stone hotel. The singer was someone Fancer had admired for many years, as far back as he could remember. Fancer considered the singer a top-notch performer, maybe the best in the world. He looked hard at the singer for a long time to make sure he was right. There was no question—it was the same narrow, hook-nosed face he’d pored over on album covers and promotional posters for years. The voice that streamed through the bunk radio at midnight in Bien Hoa.

“Hey,” he said, rushing up behind Thuan, poking him gently. “Look there—it’s . . .”

Thuan squinted. “I don’t know who that is.”

“Come on, sure you do.”

“No.”
Fancer had followed the singer’s career for many years, had even seen him perform once at Madison Square Garden. Fancer was twenty-four at the time. He hadn’t been back in the United States for very long. He still felt, at night, the dizzying claustrophobia of the jungle canopy as he lay absolutely still on the grandfather’s sagging old bed. The singer had changed greatly from the well-dressed young man Fancer remembered from his adolescence. He had grown his hair long, and mockingly wore fatigues onstage. But his performance at the Garden made Fancer feel something he couldn’t explain—a giddy trembling at the back of his head, right at the base of his neck, something he had never felt anywhere else at any other time.

The singer’s hair was short again, and he wore a white T-shirt beneath a faded denim jacket, an outfit that seemed outrageously unseasonable. The young woman, whose dark pageboy cut accentuated a punchbowl face, was wearing some sort of gingham peasant skirt. Her brow was furrowed in concentration as though she were working very hard to record every detail of the transaction—each word the singer spoke to her a separate parcel to be numbered and shelved. Each brief, hysterical reflective streak in the record’s shimmering plastic wrap to be drawn and redrawn later in some sacred headspace.

He was close enough for her to touch.

It felt as if the moment had been hovering there in the future all along, waiting for Fancer to find it. It was like a note someone had written to him—a note or a set of instructions, a document that would be revealed to him only when he was ready to receive it. Maybe someone had written it there on the night that Fancer had seen the singer walk out onto the stage, dwarfed by the cacophonous rioting of the young people in the aisles, or maybe even since the day Fancer was born. Maybe the moment formed as he exited his mother’s womb, crystallizing in whatever city the future is stored, just waiting for him to stumble upon it and find the anchor point for his life’s trajectory, to recognize the truth—that when he did the big thing—when he carried out the detailed plan that was slowly unfurling inside his head—the rifle would come apart into a million pieces in his hand and inside would be a small pure song, like a bead of light.

When they got home Fancer’s grandfather was on the floor sleeping. He was holding a plastic jug of Magic Shell ice cream topping. He’d been drinking it straight from the bottle.

“What the—hey, get up off the floor,” Fancer shouted, swiping the container from the old man’s hand. The grandfather opened his eyes briefly and then shut them again.
Thuan went into Fancer’s bedroom and closed the door.

“Hey,” Fancer said, giving his grandfather a sharp, restrained kick in the thigh. “I mean it. I’m done picking you up after you’ve done something you’re not supposed to. You got to learn to stop that.”

The grandfather opened his eyes again but did not look at Fancer.

“My kid saw this. My son saw this. How am I supposed to explain this to him?” Fancer bent down and lifted his grandfather back on the bed.

The grandfather rested his forehead against the metal bars on the side of the bed, the ones that were there to keep him inside. “I’m sorry,” he said, and closed his eyes again.

Fancer went into the kitchen and riffled aggressively through the cabinets looking for a meal that the boy would eat. There was nothing he could combine to make a full meal so he broke off a hunk of frozen peas and ate it over the sink. On the radio on top of the refrigerator someone was talking about the raped, dead nuns. There was an interview clip of one of the family members, a father who sobbed incomprehensibly. Then a song came on, a song by the singer, and Fancer stopped crunching the brick of peas to listen. He remembered how close he had just been to the singer; that the singer was, right then, moping around in the same air mass, moving objects around in the same city. The coincidence of the sighting and the song rose up sharply inside Fancer. It was possible, suddenly, to see the two separate incidents as the interlocked hemispheres of a vast, shadowy world in which he found himself increasingly entangled.

“Hey,” his grandfather called from the next room. “Turn off the radio and come in here. I haven’t seen you all day. Where did you go? I was calling for you. And why did you try to kill me? You almost killed me with that jug of syrup.”

“You drank the syrup.”

“Come here and tell me what happened today. Bring the boy.”

Fancer let the shard of frozen peas fall into the sink, where it shattered and slid in wet chunks down the disposal.

“What was that?” his grandfather called out.

“Nothing. Peas.”

“Peas?”

Fancer opened the door to his bedroom. Thuan was already lying on the floor, setting up a tiny group of articulated plastic figures on the burgundy shag rug.
“Do you want to watch TV?” he asked, leaning over the threshold, one hand on the knob.
The boy shook his head and reached in the bag for a vehicle.
“Your grandfather wants to see you.”
Thuan continued to move the figures around on the floor.
Fancer went into the TV room and turned on the set.
“Leave that,” said the grandfather.
“No.”
“You’re going to tell your grandfather what you did today, so turn that thing off.”
“No way. The Muppets are going to be on.”
The grandfather fell back against the pillow and let his head roll back and forth a little. His mouth was still ringed with half-dried Magic Shell syrup. “To think that a boy would sooner watch a puppet than tell his own grandfather about the world. It’s horrible. I’ve been stuck in here all day, imprisoned in this damn —” and then he stopped, aware that Fancer was no longer listening to him.

The woman slipped the magazine into a plain brown bag and slid it toward Fancer, purposefully avoiding eye contact. Fancer had been out for most of the afternoon, looking for “help wanted” signs in shop windows, sipping dry, rancid coffee, paging through monthly magazines in store after store, picking up bits of stray newspapers left on half-smashed benches, anything to destroy the empty hours of the day. He’d seen the magazine behind the counter, the magazine with an exclusive interview with the singer, and, even though it was a dirty magazine, even though he was blowing lunch money for the next couple days, he’d weathered the embarrassment of the purchase for a chance to read what the singer had to say for himself.

He walked for a long time before finding a busted toy kitchenette behind a dumpster where he could read the article without being seen. He drew the magazine slowly from the bag. “January 1981” it said, even though it was only December. This was a startling, liberating impossibility. The future—a month Fancer hadn’t even lived through yet—had already been documented. The future was known. All Fancer had to do was follow the path that was already in front of him.

He hunched forward on the flimsy plastic furniture, which collapsed slowly under his weight. There was a half-famous actress on the cover, dressed in a tattered nylon outfit, but Fancer was not interested in the woman or her body.
He skipped straight through to the feature on the singer. The interview went on for many pages. Fancer read each of the singer’s responses carefully, fingering each line of text even though his hands ached from the cold. He didn’t want to miss anything. He knew it was ridiculous, but he kept sensing that the singer might suddenly mention his name; that, somehow, he had been on the singer’s mind as much as the singer had been on his. As he read, the probability of this increased, until, at the end, it seemed inevitable, so that when he was not mentioned he felt belittled and cheated.

He chucked the magazine under the lid of the dumpster and started erratically down the street, no longer sure where he was, in search of a pay phone.

“Hey, is this Craig?” Fancer said softly into the receiver.

“That you, Bobby?”

Craig was someone Fancer had met on the way back from the war. He was just a person who talked too much on the plane, who kept writing letters to Fancer after they landed. He worked for a company that was trying to get computers small enough to fit in a house, and sometimes when he was in the city for a convention they went to bars together. He also liked rare weapons. He’d send Fancer a package that had directions to a grayed tenement rubber-banded to a cigar box stuffed with bills. Craig needed the weapons, he told Fancer, because they were like a bridge between the two parts of his life he no longer cared about, the before and the after.

“I was wondering—that thing you had me get you, right?”

“Yeah. I said I would be by tonight to pick it up, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. I was wondering, actually, if I could keep it for a while longer.”

“No way.”

“Can I, like, rent it from you?”

“No man. That is a Soviet piece. Pro-grade. Totally impossible to come by. Do you know how hard that was to get? Way hard.”

“Just—how long will you be in town?”

“Three days.”

“Okay. Can I just—can I keep it until then?”

“Man, I kind of have to think about that. I don’t feel right about it.”

“Please.”

There was a sound like glass breaking on the other end of the line. Then a girl laughing, talking in another language. “Hey,” Craig said, finally. “I sort of have to go. Can you meet me at the car rental place the day after tomorrow?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. You can keep it ’til then.”
Fancer opened his eyes without moving the rest of his body. Just opened his
eyes and, without blinking, looked at the ceiling, trying to figure out what the
scratching sound was. He listened to it until it turned into something else, a
faint, ancient voice, telling him he had no more time to waste. He had only
hours left before he had to meet Craig—so few he could taste them each indi-
vidually, like they were spice drops. Anxiety welled inside him and seeped
painfully from every pore.

He sat up in his bed. Thuan was asleep on the floor next to him, half off the
foam mat. The noise became more pronounced. It was erratic, desperate—it
came from another room.

“Hello?”

He opened his door. He could see, down the short hallway into the TV
room, the grandfather’s feet, crossed one over the other, like a dead bird.

“No,” he said. “Please not today.”

The grandfather was stretched out on the floor trembling, one arm extended
underneath the emerald recliner next to his bed. His eyes were mashed shut.
Fancer knelt and rolled him over onto his back. His face was all wrong, like
the flesh had come loose from the sinews or ligaments or whatever kept skin
tight against the skull. His lips were wet and rubbery and a little bluish. The
scraping sound was the grandfather’s fingernails against the cardboard under-
side of the recliner.

Fancer went back to his bedroom. Thuan was sitting cross-legged on the
floor, his eyes thick with sleep.

“Hey, Pop-Pop’s really sick. We have to go to the hospital right now.”

“Okay.”

“I have to call an ambulance or something. I need to think about what I’m
supposed to do.”

“Okay.”

“But don’t get alarmed or anything. Just hang out in here. Just stay here until
I come back in and say it’s okay. Okay?”

Thuan sat down on the bed, resting his bag next to him.

Fancer walked Thuan over to the area the emergency room attendant had
motioned to, a bench of fused orange plastic chairs next to a vending machine
that sold hot drinks. They sat at opposite ends, Thuan leaning against the
machine with his eyes closed, steam from the photograph of hot coffee seem-
ing to rise directly out of his small head.
They waited for a long time. It was impossible for Fancer to tell how long because from where they were sitting they could not see the single wall clock mounted behind the help desk and there were no other indicators of the passage of time anywhere. Just a loose group of people waiting, splayed out on identical chairs, some bloodied, others just shaking or silently wailing in slow motion. It was almost like there was no time happening at all. It was as if he and the boy were fixed in a diorama lit by fluorescent tubes, just sitting there outside time.

A young man with feathered hair emerged with a clipboard. He told them they needed to run another battery of tests.

“Can you give me a ballpark figure of how long it will take?” Fancer asked, chewing at a hard, pebble-sized lump on the inside of his cheek.

“Sorry, not at this time.”

“Do I—that is, would I have time to run some errands while you do this—these tests?”

The attendant looked hard at Fancer. “Please stay close, in case things get worse—not that they will get worse, but—just, it would help all of us if you could stick around.”

Fancer sat down next to Thuan.

“What did they say?” the boy asked.

“Nothing. They don’t know anything. They’re doing more tests.”

“Oh.”

Fancer crossed his arms and bent over, resting his forehead on his knees. He pursed his eyes shut until he saw colors. Then he whipped back, making himself dizzy.

“I have to go out for a few minutes.”

Thuan stood up, zipping his coat.

“No, I need to go by myself.”

“I’m going to stay here?”

“They might have news about Pop-Pop.” Fancer took a brief survey of the room to see if anyone was listening.

“I don’t want to stay here.”

“You’ll be fine. It’s safe here. That’s why it’s called a hospital.”

He held the boy’s head in his hands and kissed his forehead.

“Be good,” he said, and handed over a one-dollar bill and some change.

He took a cab back to the grandfather’s apartment, using the money he’d saved in his breast pocket specifically for the plan. The dark outside was startling, or maybe it just felt so oppressive because Fancer had been in the bright
hospital waiting room for so long. Looking out the smudged window of the cab he saw only the occasional flare of a neon sign between the black buildings and trees.

“When we get to my apartment can you wait outside and then take me someplace else?” he asked, hunching over in the seat. Fancer had never asked this of a cab driver before but he’d seen it done in the pictures. The driver made an indecisive motion with his head and shoulders, one that told Fancer nothing and discouraged him from asking any further questions.

The driver pulled up in front of the grandfather’s apartment. Fancer sprinted up the concrete steps, winding himself by the time he made it to the door. A load of something hot and sharp balled in the back of his throat as he turned the key in the lock, a mucosal clot that tasted like relief or shame or both together, vying for a spotlight in his head. He was close enough to the plan now to feel its heat. It was a real thing surging through him, coursing through his blood, looking for a way out.

The floor in the hallway was scuffed and splintered from when Fancer and Thuan had hurriedly dragged the grandfather out to the stairwell. This was what the investigators would see afterward, he thought. These rooms would be photographed, samples would be taken, evidence collected. Detectives standing in the crowded corridor, their faces simplified in the newsprint ink, an image that would streak its way into the future, outliving everyone and everything.

He entered his darkened bedroom the way a stranger would—cautiously, one foot touching down delicately in front of the other, sliding his hand along the wall to search for the light switch. Lit from above by a single bulb, it looked like a room someone went to do something illegal. He squatted before the bed and yanked out the red box. Taped on top was a sheet of ruled paper. On it, the boy had written in smudged, boxy script, “IS THIS FOR REAL? Please check one: Yes; No.” He folded the paper and put it in his pocket.

Fancer rushed down the steps, hugging the red box with both arms. The driver was standing beside the running cab with his legs crossed, tamping a pack of cigarettes repeatedly on his thigh, and he slowly dropped his head as Fancer approached the cab to amplify his disinterest. Fancer finally saw the man’s moon-shaped face in full. Each of his features mirrored the spherical contours of his head—round, heavy-lidded eyes, round mouth and lips, rounded nostrils.

They entered the cab without speaking. Fancer sat up straight in his seat, the red box in his lap, his hands resting evenly on its surface.

They had to stop often for red lights. Fancer watched the pedestrians swarm
around the cab, toting holiday gifts in thick paper bags. Soon they would
know him, would understand the cosmic necessity behind the thing he was
about to do, and never forget his face.

At Seventy-second Street, the driver tapped the brakes. Fancer’s heart slowed
suddenly, cooled to a low, even drone as he recognized the spot where he’d
seen the singer that day with Thuan.

He had the driver pull up across the street from the singer’s hotel near a stand
of well-trimmed bushes. He squatted over a patch of dirt that had been wor-
ried to a porcelain sheen by sleeping bums. He opened the box and assembled
the Kalashnikov in the amber half-light cast by the streetlamps. He was cool
and efficient, his hands steady in their work, just the way he’d practiced.

Cars passed on the street. A well-dressed older couple walked quickly by,
pretending not to notice Fancer’s head peeking over the brush. He didn’t care
if he was seen. Better, he thought, if he was seen. He imagined the couple the
next morning, the woman briskly unfolding the paper, reading the account,
asking her husband whether he remembered the funny-looking man in the
bushes, the one with the lopsided head and small, pointed eyes, working on
something made of metal.

The cold began to wear at him. His toes stung inside his useless, flattened
combat boots. He longed for a meal. He thought about the dollar he had given
his son. He hoped the boy was eating, or blowing on a waxed paper cup of
piping hot chocolate. He hoped a nurse would come and take pity on the boy,
maybe play a game with him while they waited for someone to come along
and claim him. Maybe, when no one came, the boy would end up with peo-
ple who could actually take care of him. He imagined the couple who’d just
passed by—they would read about the abandoned boy in the newspaper and
feel vaguely responsible for his welfare. They’d adopt the boy, move him out to
a well-appointed neighborhood far from the city, a green and iridescent place
peopled with helpful, friendly neighbors, the aisles of the supermarkets stacked
with fresh produce glistening with beads of moisture from the automatic mis-
ter. Someone, Fancer decided, would love the boy fiercely, teach him actual,
like, things. Maybe, then, Fancer, crouching in the bushes, waiting to kill a
person he’d never even met, was putting the final touches on his only fatherly
gesture.

A long black car pulled up in front of the hotel. Fancer knelt, just the way he
had remembered, and shouldered the weapon. He saw the singer’s wife emerge
from the car and then the singer himself, wearing the same outfit as before. He
traced their movement through the reticule. Everything inside him tightened.
When he heard the first shot, Fancer thought he’d pulled the trigger himself, though there was no heat or kickback. Across the street he saw a man in a dark overcoat braced in combat position, holding a pistol. Fancer had seen the man earlier, loitering outside the hotel, reading a paperback book. As he brought the man into focus, Fancer saw the barrel of the gun burst through the night four more times. Ahead of him on the sidewalk, the singer was sprinting erratically, waving his arms, followed by his wife, whose mouth gaped in an awful rictus. Fancer could hear the singer making gurgling sounds like a loud balloon losing air underwater. The singer somehow made it inside the hotel before collapsing, his ruined back dark with blood. The singer’s wife threw herself on top of him, covering him with her body. Sound started to come out of her mouth, a tight, high-pitched tone, ribbon-thin. Fancer looked back at the man on the sidewalk, who stood under a street lamp, lifting one hand and then dropping it again, as if unsure what to do next. Then he removed his hat and overcoat and threw them into the bushes. The hotel’s doorman appeared. He approached the man without a coat. “Do you know what you’ve done?” he shouted, again and again, as if calling out into the wilderness, while the man tittered like a goofy adolescent and shuffled backwards, leaning against the brick hotel wall.

Fancer set the rifle down on a mound of hard snow and rose slowly, the street lamps illuminating his lower half in dishwater light. He had failed to put into motion even this, his last attempt to push something back out into the world instead of taking it, once again, in. If he had been a better man, a more reasonable man, hardened by life instead of merely weakened by it—if he had been a man who planned out a day instead of mincing his way through, bitching out the hours one by one until they disappeared up the steel column of night, he might have made something of the moment, put his signature on it. He might have set a special, public fire. But this other man beat him to it. He felt a clean tremor of recognition—clean because it was like the wispy white center of an ice cube—at what the man across the street had done, what he had failed to do himself. The man had cut a hole in the history of the world, and fallen in, and Fancer was standing at the freshly torn edge, peering down.

The police came and surrounded the man, and he did not resist. They led him away to a squad car that was hastily parked halfway on the curb. The man lay down in the back seat, hiding from the officers and bystanders that surrounded the car, but Fancer could swear he saw the man’s terrified smile still hanging in the place he’d just been standing, burned into the night air, the way you could see, on the evening news, ghostly white trails from the flashlights of the search crew in El Salvador, examining the site where the nuns had been killed—a bright reminder of the video camera’s shortcomings, an impression of the world as created by a faulty, primitive
system. Fancer stared hard at the smile, blinking against the chill, trying to wipe it from his vision. The mouth opened then and seemed to say, “There is nothing left to do with a life but wait.” It was nonsense—there was no mouth. There were no words. It was just a failure of the senses, an illusion, a string of garbage that became something else, something real and heavy as it took shape before him, staining his eyes for good.