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For almost a year now, he has been taking photographs of abandoned things. There are at least two jobs every day, sometimes as many as six or seven, and each time he and his cohorts enter another house, they are confronted by the things, the innumerable cast-off things left behind by the departed families. The absent people have all fled in haste, in shame, in confusion, and it is certain that wherever they are living now (if they have found a place to live and are not camped out in the streets) their new dwellings are smaller than the houses they have lost. Each house is a story of failure—of bankruptcy and default, of debt and foreclosure—and he has taken it upon himself to document the last, lingering traces of those scattered lives in order to prove that the vanished families were once here, that the ghosts of people he will never see and never know are still present in the discarded things strewn about their empty houses.

The work is called trashing out, and he belongs to a four-man crew employed by the Dunbar Realty Corporation, which subcontracts its “home preservation” services to the local banks that now own the properties in question. The

sprawling flatlands of south Florida are filled with these orphaned structures, and because it is in the interest of the banks to resell them as quickly as possible, the vacated houses must be cleaned, repaired, and made ready to be shown to prospective buyers. In a collapsing world of economic ruin and relentless, ever-expanding hardship, trashing out is one of the few thriving businesses in the area. No doubt he is lucky to have found this job. He doesn't know how much longer he can bear it, but the pay is decent, and in a land of fewer and fewer jobs, it is nothing if not a good job.

In the beginning, he was stunned by the disarray and the filth, the neglect. Rare is the house he enters that has been left in pristine condition by its former owners. More often there will have been an eruption of violence and anger, a parting rampage of capricious vandalism—from the open taps of sinks and bathtubs overflowing with water to sledgehammered, smashed-in walls or walls covered with obscene graffiti or walls pocked with bullet holes, not to mention the ripped-out copper pipes, the bleach-stained carpets, the piles of shit deposited on the living room floor. Those are extreme examples, perhaps, impulsive acts triggered by the rage of the dispossessed, disgusting but understandable statements of despair, but even if he is not always gripped by revulsion when he enters a house, he never opens a door without a feeling of dread. Inevitably, the first thing to contend with is the smell, the onslaught of sour air rushing into his nostrils, the ubiquitous, commingled aromas of mildew, rancid milk, cat litter, crud-caked toilet bowls, and

food rotting on the kitchen counter. Not even fresh air pouring in through open windows can wipe out the smells; not even the tidiest, most circumspect removal can erase the stench of defeat.

Then, always, there are the objects, the forgotten possessions, *the abandoned things*. By now, his photographs number in the thousands, and among his burgeoning archive can be found pictures of books, shoes, and oil paintings, pianos and toasters, dolls, tea sets, and dirty socks, televisions and board games, party dresses and tennis racquets, sofas, silk lingerie, caulking guns, thumbtacks, plastic action figures, tubes of lipstick, rifles, discolored mattresses, knives and forks, poker chips, a stamp collection, and a dead canary lying at the bottom of its cage. He has no idea why he feels compelled to take these pictures. He understands that it is an empty pursuit, of no possible benefit to anyone, and yet each time he walks into a house, he senses that the things are calling out to him, speaking to him in the voices of the people who are no longer there, asking him to be looked at one last time before they are carted away. The other members of the crew make fun of him for this obsessive picture taking, but he pays them no heed. They are of little account in his opinion, and he despises them all. Brain-dead Victor, the crew boss; stuttering, chatterbox Paco; and fat, wheezing Freddy—the three musketeers of doom. The law says that all salvageable objects above a certain value must be handed over to the bank, which is obliged to return them to their owners, but his

coworkers grab whatever they please and never give it a second thought. They consider him a fool for turning his back on these spoils—the bottles of whiskey, the radios, the CD players, the archery equipment, the dirty magazines—but all he wants are his pictures—not things, but the pictures of things. For some time now, he has made it his business to say as little as possible when he is on the job. Paco and Freddy have taken to calling him El Mudo.

He is twenty-eight years old, and to the best of his knowledge he has no ambitions. No burning ambitions, in any case, no clear idea of what building a plausible future might entail for him. He knows that he will not stay in Florida much longer, that the moment is coming when he will feel the need to move on again, but until that need ripens into a necessity to act, he is content to remain in the present and not look ahead. If he has accomplished anything in the seven and a half years since he quit college and struck out on his own, it is this ability to live in the present, to confine himself to the here and now, and although it might not be the most laudable accomplishment one can think of, it has required considerable discipline and self-control for him to achieve it. To have no plans, which is to say, to have no longings or hopes, to be satisfied with your lot, to accept what the world doles out to you from one sunrise to the next—in order to live like that you must want very little, as little as humanly possible.

Bit by bit, he has pared down his desires to what is now approaching a bare minimum. He has cut out smoking and

drinking, he no longer eats in restaurants, he does not own a television, a radio, or a computer. He would like to trade in his car for a bicycle, but he can't get rid of the car, since the distances he must travel for work are too great. The same applies to the cell phone he carries around in his pocket, which he would dearly love to toss in the garbage, but he needs it for work as well and therefore can't do without it. The digital camera was an indulgence, perhaps, but given the drear and slog of the endless trash-out rut, he feels it is saving his life. His rent is low, since he lives in a small apartment in a poor neighborhood, and beyond spending money on bedrock necessities, the only luxury he allows himself is buying books, paperback books, mostly novels, American novels, British novels, foreign novels in translation, but in the end books are not luxuries so much as necessities, and reading is an addiction he has no wish to be cured of.

If not for the girl, he would probably leave before the month was out. He has saved up enough money to go anywhere he wants, and there is no question that he has had his fill of the Florida sun—which, after much study, he now believes does the soul more harm than good. It is a Machiavellian sun in his opinion, a hypocritical sun, and the light it generates does not illuminate things but obscures them—blinding you with its constant, overbright effulgences, pounding on you with its blasts of vaporous humidity, destabilizing you with its miragelike reflections and shimmering waves of nothingness. It is all glitter and dazzle, but it offers no substance, no tranquillity, no respite.

Still, it was under this sun that he first saw the girl, and because he can't talk himself into giving her up, he continues to live with the sun and try to make his peace with it.

Her name is Pilar Sanchez, and he met her six months ago in a public park, a purely accidental meeting late one Saturday afternoon in the middle of May, the unlikeliest of unlikely encounters. She was sitting on the grass reading a book, and not ten feet away from her he too was sitting on the grass reading a book, which happened to be the same book as hers, the same book in an identical soft-cover edition, *The Great Gatsby*, which he was reading for the third time since his father gave it to him as a present on his sixteenth birthday. He had been sitting there for twenty or thirty minutes, inside the book and therefore walled off from his surroundings, when he heard someone laugh. He turned, and in that first, fatal glimpse of her, as she sat there smiling at him and pointing to the title of her book, he guessed that she was even younger than sixteen, just a girl, really, and a little girl at that, a small adolescent girl wearing tight, cut-off shorts, sandals, and a skimpy halter top, the same clothes worn by every half-attractive girl throughout the lower regions of hot, sun-spangled Florida. No more than a baby, he said to himself, and yet there she was with her smooth, uncovered limbs and alert, smiling face, and he who rarely smiles at anyone or anything looked into her dark, animated eyes and smiled back at her.

Six months later, she is still underage. Her driver's license says she is seventeen, that she won't be turning eighteen

until May, and therefore he must act cautiously with her in public, avoid at all costs doing anything that might arouse the suspicions of the prurient, for a single telephone call to the police from some riled-up busybody could easily land him in jail. Every morning that is not a weekend morning or a holiday morning, he drives her to John F. Kennedy High School, where she is in her senior year and doing well, with aspirations for college and a future life as a registered nurse, but he does not drop her off in front of the building. That would be too dangerous. Some teacher or school official could catch sight of them in the car together and raise the alarm, and so he glides to a halt some three or four blocks before they reach Kennedy and lets her off there. He does not kiss her good-bye. He does not touch her. She is saddened by his restraint, since in her own mind she is already a full-grown woman, but she accepts this sham indifference because he has told her she must accept it.

Pilar's parents were killed in a car wreck two years ago, and until she moved into his apartment after the school year ended last June, she lived with her three older sisters in the family house. Twenty-year-old Maria, twenty-three-year-old Teresa, and twenty-five-year-old Angela. Maria is enrolled in a community college, studying to become a beautician. Teresa works as a teller at a local bank. Angela, the prettiest of the bunch, is a hostess in a cocktail lounge. According to Pilar, she sometimes sleeps with the customers for money. Pilar hastens to add that she loves Angela, that she loves all her sisters, but she's glad to have left the house now, which

is filled with too many memories of her mother and father, and besides, she can't stop herself, but she's angry at Angela for doing what she does, she considers it a sin for a woman to sell her body, and it's a relief not to be arguing with her about it anymore. Yes, she says to him, his apartment is a shabby little nothing of a place, the house is much bigger and more comfortable, but the apartment doesn't have eighteen-month-old Carlos Junior in it, and that too is an immense relief. Teresa's son isn't a bad child as far as children go, of course, and what can Teresa do with her husband stationed in Iraq and her long hours at the bank, but that doesn't give her the right to pawn off babysitting duties on her kid sister every other day of the week. Pilar wanted to be a good sport, but she couldn't help resenting it. She needs time to be alone and to study, she wants to make something of herself, and how can she do that if she's busy changing dirty diapers? Babies are fine for other people, but she wants no part of them. Thanks, she says, but no thanks.

He marvels at her spirit and intelligence. Even on the first day, when they sat in the park talking about *The Great Gatsby*, he was impressed that she was reading the book for herself and not because a teacher had assigned it at school, and then, as the conversation continued, doubly impressed when she began to argue that the most important character in the book was not Daisy or Tom or even Gatsby himself but Nick Carraway. He asked her to explain. Because he's the one who tells the story, she said. He's the only character with his feet on the ground, the only one

who can look outside of himself. The others are all lost and shallow people, and without Nick's compassion and understanding, we wouldn't be able to feel anything for them. The book depends on Nick. If the story had been told by an omniscient narrator, it wouldn't work half as well as it does.

Omniscient narrator. She knows what the term means, just as she understands what it is to talk about *suspension of disbelief*, *biogenesis*, *antilogarithms*, and *Brown v. Board of Education*. How is it possible, he wonders, for a young girl like Pilar Sanchez, whose Cuban-born father worked as a letter carrier all his life, whose three older sisters dwell contentedly in a bog of humdrum daily routines, to have turned out so differently from the rest of her family? Pilar wants to know things, she has plans, she works hard, and he is more than happy to encourage her, to do whatever he can to help advance her education. From the day she left home and moved in with him, he has been drilling her on the finer points of how to score well on the SATs, has vetted every one of her homework assignments, has taught her the rudiments of calculus (which is not offered by her high school), and has read dozens of novels, short stories, and poems out loud to her. He, the young man without ambitions, the college dropout who spurned the trappings of his once privileged life, has taken it upon himself to become ambitious for her, to push her as far as she is willing to go. The first priority is college, a good college with a full scholarship, and once she is in, he feels the rest will take care of itself. At the moment, she is dreaming of becoming a registered

nurse, but things will eventually change, he is certain of that, and he is fully confident that she has it in her to go on to medical school one day and become a doctor.

She was the one who proposed moving in with him. It never would have occurred to him to suggest such an audacious plan himself, but Pilar was determined, at once driven by a desire to escape and enthralled by the prospect of sleeping with him every night, and after she begged him to go to Angela, the major breadwinner of the clan and therefore the one with the final word on all family decisions, he met with the oldest Sanchez girl and managed to talk her into it. She was reluctant at first, claiming that Pilar was too young and inexperienced to consider such a momentous step. Yes, she knew her sister was in love with him, but she didn't approve of that love because of the difference in their ages, which meant that sooner or later he would grow bored with his adolescent plaything and leave her with a broken heart. He answered that it would probably end up being the reverse, that he would be the one left with a broken heart. Then, brushing aside all further talk of hearts and feelings, he presented his case in purely practical terms. Pilar didn't have a job, he said, she was a drag on the family finances, and he was in a position to support her and take that burden off their hands. It wasn't as if he would be abducting her to China, after all. Their house was only a fifteen-minute walk from his apartment, and they could see her as often as they liked. To clinch the bargain, he offered them presents, any number of things they craved but were too strapped to buy

for themselves. Much to the shock and jeering amusement of the three clowns at work, he temporarily reversed his stance on the do's and don'ts of trash-out etiquette, and over the next week he calmly filched an all-but-brand-new flat-screen TV, a top-of-the-line electric coffeemaker, a red tri-cycle, thirty-six films (including a boxed collector's set of the *Godfather* movies), a professional-quality makeup mirror, and a set of crystal wine glasses, which he duly presented to Angela and her sisters as an expression of his gratitude. In other words, Pilar now lives with him because he bribed the family. He bought her.

Yes, she is in love with him, and yes, in spite of his qualms and inner hesitations, he loves her back, however improbable that might seem to him. Note here for the record that he is not someone with a special fixation on young girls. Until now, all the women in his life have been more or less his own age. Pilar therefore does not represent an embodiment of some ideal female type for him—she is merely herself, a small piece of luck he stumbled across one afternoon in a public park, an exception to every rule. Nor can he explain to himself why he is attracted to her. He admires her intelligence, yes, but that is finally of scant importance, since he has admired the intelligence of other women before her without feeling the least bit attracted to them. He finds her pretty, but not exceptionally pretty, not beautiful in any objective way (although it could also be argued that every seventeen-year-old girl is beautiful, for the simple reason that all youth is beautiful). But no matter.

He has not fallen for her because of her body or because of her mind. What is it, then? What holds him here when everything tells him he should leave? Because of the way she looks at him, perhaps, the ferocity of her gaze, the rapt intensity in her eyes when she listens to him talk, a feeling that she is entirely present when they are together, that he is the only person who exists for her on the face of the earth.

Sometimes, when he takes out his camera and shows her his pictures of the abandoned things, her eyes fill up with tears. There is a soft, sentimental side to her that is almost comic, he feels, and yet he is moved by that softness in her, that vulnerability to the aches of others, and because she can also be so tough, so talkative and full of laughter, he can never predict what part of her will surge forth at any given moment. It can be trying in the short run, but in the long run he feels it is all to the good. He who has denied himself so much for so many years, who has been so stolid in his abnegations, who has taught himself to reign in his temper and drift through the world with cool, stubborn detachment has slowly come back to life in the face of her emotional excesses, her combustibility, her mawkish tears when confronted by the image of an abandoned teddy bear, a broken bicycle, or a vase of wilted flowers.

The first time they went to bed together, she assured him she was no longer a virgin. He took her at her word, but when the moment came for him to enter her, she pushed him away and told him he mustn't do that. The *mommy hole* was off-limits, she said, absolutely forbidden to male

members. Tongues and fingers were acceptable, but not members, under no condition at any time, not ever. He had no idea what she was talking about. He was wearing a condom, wasn't he? They were protected, and there was no need to worry about anything. Ah, she said, but that's where he was wrong. Teresa and her husband always believed in condoms too, and look what happened to them. Nothing was more frightening to Pilar than the thought of becoming pregnant, and she would never risk her fate by trusting in one of those iffy rubbers. She would rather slit her wrists or jump off a bridge than get herself knocked up. Did he understand? Yes, he understood, but what was the alternative? The *funny hole*, she said. Angela had told her about it, and he had to admit that from a strictly biological and medical standpoint it was the one truly safe form of birth control in the world.

For six months now, he has abided by her wishes, restricting all member penetration to her funny hole and putting nothing more than tongue and fingers in her mommy hole. Such are the anomalies and idiosyncrasies of their love life, which is nevertheless a rich love life, a splendid erotic partnership that shows no signs of abating anytime soon. In the end, it is this sexual complicity that binds him fast to her and holds him in the hot nowhereland of ruined and empty houses. He is bewitched by her skin. He is a prisoner of her ardent young mouth. He is at home in her body, and if he ever finds the courage to leave, he knows he will regret it to the end of his days.