

Fortunata

JAY BARUCH

Lawrence Wellbourne, CEO of Poultrice Pharmaceuticals, announced to a roomful of vice-presidents the ominous news: they hadn't any new drugs in the pipeline — now, or in the near future. "Our position on Wall Street will soon be doggy style," said Wellbourne. "There will be cuts, obviously. The cuts will hurt. I'll hurt." He shrugged and nodded wistfully. "Sometimes bad things happen to good people."

Simon Dunn's chest buzzed uncomfortably as he watched colleagues curse and sink into their seats, dumbstruck. Simon wanted to ease their worries. Hadn't they all been in this precarious place before? Didn't they survive and even thrive as a result? Simon grabbed at his heart, nervously padded the front of his wrinkled suit jacket. His cell was vibrating within the inside pocket. He breathed easier, and became excited when he saw it was Sydney, his daughter, calling from college. He excused himself, ignored the gauntlet of disbelieving stares as he pushed his tall, hulking frame through the door. They expected him to say something, not leave the room.

"Not at all," he said to Sydney, who was sobbing. "It's a perfect time."

Two long weeks had past since Simon returned her to campus after winter break. Sydney cursed the heavy traffic while Simon celebrated the extra time with her, secretly coveted roadwork and broken-down vehicles. Her voice now thrilled him with fresh longing. Her tears hurt, but he was entirely confident in his ability to alleviate the grip of her sorrow. She recounted in painful detail what she was

learning in a medical ethics course: landmark abuses of human subjects in clinical research—Nazi Germany, Tuskegee, Willowbrook.

"And recent creepy third-world AIDS research. Terribly poor, uneducated people were given a study drug or a sugar pill," she said. "But did they give *informed* consent? Did they understand there was a good chance they'd receive a dummy pill and die?"

Blood pounded his temples. Simon loosened his shirt collar, pulled at his tie.

"Did they understand they were part of a drug trial? Did they know the white coats were researchers testing a drug, and not clinicians with their best interests at heart?"

"How should I know?"

"Because Poultrice ran some notorious clinical trials. You were involved. You! Simon Dunn, Director of Clinical Applications and Public Information. My father."

"It's very complicated," said Simon. "You're not thinking of the greater good."

"I thought I knew about your work. But you have a secret life. You're a Nazi."

"Half the people were given state-of-the-art medications. They wouldn't have received any treatment if not for the trial."

"And the other half..."

"We gave them a dose of hope. They were left no worse. Status quo."

"Their quo. Inadequate quo. Poverty quo."

"Listen. Baby," he said, "you were told only one side of the story."

"You, your company, and the Nazis: all in the same class."

"Are you done?" Simon thumbed his eyes hard. The line rippled with silence.

"Anything else on your mind?"

"Well, could you spot me some cash until next week?"

"How much of my tainted money do you need?"

"Sydney called me a Nazi," Simon complained to Autumn as he prepared a breakfast to nourish and entice his wife out of her recent depression: Cheddar, mushroom, and onion omelets; sliced melon; and plenty of black coffee.

Autumn hunched over the morning paper, reading, sipping from a Poultrice coffee mug bearing their motto *One step ahead*. She chewed a forkful of omelet, eyes closed, her face leaking delight. "She'll grow out of it, honey,"

"She's twenty. She's grown," said Simon.

"Nineteen. But you're right. Maybe she won't."

Autumn finished the article, slapped the headline. *Honor student slain outside high school*. "Argh," she groaned. "Trevor Jones. Captain of the basketball team. Big Brother volunteer to some kid even poorer than he. Police think the bullets were intended for a drug dealer walking nearby." She pushed back her chair, took an exasperated breath.

Autumn directed Kids Now, a nonprofit organization doomed to shut down soon for lack of funds. She worried about the fates of all the poor families—mostly poor mothers—caring for kids who are sicker and more deprived than any kid deserves to be.

"What should I do about Sydney?" Simon asked.

Autumn grunted, tossed her stylish black-framed reading glasses onto the table and ran bitten fingernails through short, silver-streaked black hair. She sank her teeth into a wedge of melon. "Why do bad things always happen to good people?" she asked.

Her sympathetic look, her soft world-weary tone, warmed him. He wanted to talk more about their daughter's skewed perception of him and his work. He bent and kissed her. But through her hesitant, preoccupied lips, he realized she had been referring to Trevor Jones, a stranger, a dead stranger. He examined the boy's photograph. Seeing the handsome face lifted him out of the tragedy. He became someone's son. "Hmm," Simon grunted. A sick feeling played with his stomach. He turned away.

"One bullet scratched the drug dealer's ear. A scratch!" Autumn closed the newspaper. "I mean it. Why do bad things always happen to good people?"

"Trevor might have done good things, but that doesn't necessarily mean he was a good person. What were his intentions? What if he did those things to buff up his..."

"His what? His obituary? He did these things to have a kick-ass obit?"

Simon felt off-balance. The appropriate words eluded him, the wrong ones kept coming. "I'm saying he *could* have had a dark side. Even people we're close to remain, at some level, incompletely penetrated. Sometimes bad things happen to bad people."

"A young person died," said Autumn. "Is that ever good?"

"The south side of the city is a tough place," said Simon. "People die."

"Did you really just say that?" Autumn asked, standing slowly.

"You did."

"C'mon. Sit down." Simon knew his weak apology sounded condescending.

Autumn swooped up her beaten leather brief case. Simon knew she was headed to the office of Kids Now, a former barbershop with

three swivel chairs upon which kids loved to ride up and down, a wall length mirror, and a sign on the wall that might explain why one business, and now a second, had failed. *All haircuts \$10, except long hair.*

Simon worried about her as she drove off in her fifteen-year old Subaru, not the coltish BMW he had bought for her fiftieth birthday three years earlier. "Did bad things really happen to good people?" he wondered. If so, Autumn was a walking bull's eye.

Simon was accustomed to waiting on airport security lines. He stood in his socks, big toe curling through a hole. He patiently held his wingtips, belt and laptop, at peace with the delays. He traveled often to speak on behalf of Poultrice Pharmaceuticals. The best part was watching the audience's bright-eyed anticipation as he was introduced, his personal accomplishments at Poultrice listed, his seventeen years of employment noted. His longevity, he believed, attested to his character. His personal investment in Poultrice's mission earned him the audience's immediate attention, if not full-blown respect.

Wellbourne's announcement chilled him more than he cared to admit. What if he was fired, or laid off? There were rumors. "We need to become leaner, more efficient, at all levels," said Wellbourne at a recent manager's meeting. "Money wasn't the issue. Simon had saved, invested wisely in his 401K. But if he wasn't from Poultrice, would any audience bother to listen to him? Would they care about his opinions, what he had to say? Apart from Poultrice, who was he?"

"Omelets again?" Autumn said, sitting at the butcher block island, her hands cupping a glass of bourbon as if it contained a warm fire.

She still wore her ski jacket. Simon beat the eggs, nodded in agreement. His cooking expertise was limited.

"You should have come with me to the ICU this evening. She was laying there, a sweet little girl connected to all these tubes, struggling for her life."

"Don't blame me for Maria Sanchez. We don't even make asthma meds."

Autumn had told him the story repeatedly. Cute six-year-old with severe asthma; family forced to choose between pricey medications and food, or rent, or electricity.

Kids Now had helped find the necessary inhalers for Maria in the past. Autumn even had a pro bono lawyer pressure the Sanchez's landlord to fix the leaky pipes, the mold, the cockroaches. The landlord agreed but never did a thing, and threatened to evict the family—husband, wife, three children and a cousin—if they pushed the issue.

Autumn emptied the glass, smacked her lips, and went upstairs. Simon found her shivering on the wrought iron balcony outside their bedroom, staring out over their small and usually dreamy backyard. Winter had pushed its way back into March. The moonlight appeared like scars in the frozen pond. Lamps cast a mournful glow on a Japanese garden that for now was growing only sand and stone.

"You did what you could," said Simon, carefully embracing her from behind. She pushed him away.

"It wasn't enough."

"No," said Simon, "but enough doesn't exist."

Maria Sanchez's recovery was as quick and striking as the original assault. Autumn acquired her next month's medications, footed the bill without telling the family Kids Now was broke.

"What happens when these meds run out?" asked Simon. "What about the next kid who needs meds? Where do you draw the line?"

"She's going back to the same bad environment that put her in the hospital."

"Talk with Dick Levy. Accept the grant. It will stop the bleeding."

Dick Levy was VP of Charitable Gestures at Poultrice. Despite the anticipated slash in profits, he offered to float Kids Now for another year.

"I won't accept money from Levy and Poultrice," said Autumn. "People will think I'm in the pocket of the big bad wolf."

"Nobody has to know."

"I'll know," she said.

"Is it about you, or the kids?"

"Stealing from the rich to give to the poor is still stealing."

"But we're giving you the money."

"You're still the big bad wolf."

Simon waited at the traffic light, fingered through the small bag of groceries in the passenger seat of his BMW searching for the chocolate donut. He promised Autumn he'd lose thirty pounds. Chocolate donuts weren't part of any diet plan he was aware of, but one bite and he'd feel satisfied in some cheap, immediate, and short-lived manner. If only he could isolate the kernel of that artificial comfort and put it in a pill; one with a sugary glaze and a hole in the middle. He'd call it Chocolot, or perhaps Gigglecoca. Sell it in thirteen-pill packs; a baker's dozen. The idea was silly, but he understood fully how silly ideas could make a career.

Seven years earlier, Poultrice had two blockbusters coming off patent and faced profit loses in the billions. Simon proposed the "Whimsical Drug Campaign," where previously successful drugs were combined in quirky ways. The result was Coldchol, the antihypertensive and lipid lowering drug targeted for fast-food eating salesman; Polarity for both anxiety and erectile dysfunction (the pill, in clown colors, was bent like a hockey stick); and Nicdatsperm, the only drug for both birth control and smoking cessation. The Wall Street Journal hailed his revolutionary line of drugs. Poultrice promoted him. Since Simon's salary and bonus freed Autumn of income expectations, she withheld judgment.

Simon knew Autumn was sitting in a barber chair with its cracked, hard leather, phoning for information on Trevor Jones, writing an Op-Ed piece for the local paper.

But what did her good intentions get her? Her tireless work with Kids Now earned her many community awards, usually presented at buffet lunches, dried chicken warming over Sterno and pasta salads. But she couldn't return Trevor Jones back to his mother and sisters. Senseless gun violence wouldn't end. He sank into his office chair, buttery leather so soft an air cushion wasn't necessary when his hemorrhoids flared.

"How's tragedy watch?" he asked Gideon Leaf, his assistant. Simon had wanted data. Did a disproportionate number of bad things really happen to good people?

"Fire me," Gideon said, sending a heavy report thumping upon Simon's desk. Gideon had mined newspapers, television, and the

internet for victims of sudden, tragic events to ascertain as best he could whether these people were good or bad. His prematurely thin hair was tussled. He hadn't slept much.

He nervously watched Simon run his fingers over brightly colored pie-graphs.

"You labeled a huge chunk of pie 'Unfortunate.' What does that mean?"

"Being a teacher, a nurse, or a social worker, doesn't necessarily make a person good. All I can say with absolute certainty is a hell of a lot of bad things happen."

Simon shut the binder, asked Gideon to sit. "Focus on drunk drivers," said Simon. "They often escape the awful shit that happens to the poor shmucks they crash into."

Gideon moved uncomfortably in his chair. "Drunk drivers might have shown poor judgment drinking and driving, but does that necessarily make them bad people?"

Simon sat back, studied his young protégé. "You look like crap."

"I'm a pretty happy guy. But reading all that stuff really burns me out."

"Good." Simon smiled. "It should. What are you going to do about it?"

"Go to bed. And stay there."

Simon liked this kid. He graduated with honors from a shitty college and was endlessly trying to prove he belonged with the Ivy League thoroughbreds on his team. Gideon didn't have endless options like the others. Gideon could be trusted.

"Dysluckia is a real diagnosis," Simon told Gideon. "Ask Trevor Jones."

They were walking outside Poultrice Pharmaceuticals, which sat on former wetlands. The formidable steel and dark windowed building dominated the landscape off the interstate. Deer, wild rabbits and bird sanctuaries were gone, but their leather loafers kicked along a rutted path made by tractor wheels, a future paved nature walk.

"Dysluckia is a new silent killer, and we might have a treatment."

"But you made it up," Gideon said, defiant and whiny like a child.

"A few years ago, we had a promising antihypertensive drug, Tweeta, that fizzled. The study was done well. Randomized, double-blinded. But the drug proved to be no better than M&Ms in controlling high blood pressure."

"Tweeta?" asked Gideon. "I don't remember it."

"We never got around to publishing the results," said Simon.

"And you can get M&Ms without a prescription."

"I'm serious. Something about the study stuck in my head," said Simon. "Many subjects in the placebo group dropped out due to awful, weird shit: car wrecks, random beatings, lightning, electrical fires. The Tweeta group escaped such fates."

Gideon smiled skeptically, raised his face to the warm licks of sun. "Finally, spring has come."

"Remember minoxidil, the antihypertensive?" asked Simon.

"A side effect, the growth of hair, opened up a huge market. What if Tweeta treats Dysluckia?"

"You need to prove this," said Gideon.

"We will," said Simon, ear tuned to the vehicles hurtling at bone-crushing speeds on the interstate. At a distance they produced a calming hum. "Listen up," he said. "There is a Dysluckia epidemic in this country."

Simon told Autumn he had no business going to Trevor Jones's memorial service. He didn't know the kid. But Autumn insisted, and Simon found himself in the south side of town, fearing for his BMW in the church parking lot.

Trevor's mother didn't look much older than his sisters. She cashiered during the week, waitressed in the evenings and on weekends. Family and friends took turns singing Trevor's praises and holding each other upright. The boy's blighted promise limited their capacity to resist gravity. The family asked Autumn to read her Op-Ed piece. "Amen" catcalls shot out from the audience, more and more as she roared to her conclusion.

Trevor Jones fell victim to the part of his life he couldn't control: the violence in which he lived. The bullets that found this poor boy were meant for a convicted felon who remains healthy and free to add to his criminal record. Trevor's neighborhood is darker as a result of his death, and dirtier because of who survived.

Simon pushed himself higher in the back pew. Her voice raged with judgment. Normally balanced and fair minded, she had transformed before Simon's eyes, as did the crowd. Their grief, isolating and fragile before, galvanized and hardened. The morning sun burned through the stained glass. Through Simon's inspired gaze the sweating faces blurred into a washed-out, anonymous glow; the good folks filling the pews ceased being mourners and became an ideal community of research subjects.

Simon shopped for dinner. The lemon chicken recipe seemed manageable. He liked lemon only in vodka soda, but lemon chicken reminded him of sunny chicken, a happy meal, unless you're the chicken. Autumn had grown distant and monosyllabic as her last minute pitches to funding agencies found empathetic rejections.

Before heading to the cashier he turned into the bakery aisle to snatch a chocolate donut when his cart crashed into a speeding wheelchair. The young man wore gloves cut at the knuckles, a Muldoon High School sweatshirt.

"Sorry," the young man said. "My brakes are shot." He held a Fosters-sized can, the label calling for donations to support spinal trauma research.

"Are you one of Jerry's kids?" asked Simon.

"People think every young person in a wheelchair belongs to Jerry. Fuck Jerry."

Simon admired the handsome face. Raw acne screamed out from beneath a tight-fitting hood. Insolent eyebrows arched stiffly. He rattled the can.

Simon playfully kicked the rubber wheels, peeled a twenty from his money clip. "Take this, get your brakes fixed."

"Why help people if you're not going to be nice about it?"

Simon puffed a laugh. He imagined Sydney sitting there, then rubbed his forehead to erase that thought. "Sorry. My daughter went to Muldoon. Sydney Dunn."

"I know Sydney. Don't worry, we weren't friends," he said, as if reading Simon's expression. "Marching band. I played the clarinet, too."

Simon knew better than to stare at the wheelchair. His eyes locked on the wheels anyway. They didn't seem ideal for marching.

"Legs used to work. A drunk driver ran into my bike."

"You're Roy Milligan," said Simon, remembering his horrible accident before graduation. This was the kid Sydney and her friends visited in the hospital. Doctors said he might not pull through. "I'm sorry. What shit luck." He gave Ray another twenty.

Roy crumpled the bill in his fist with the first twenty, threw the clump back. Shocked, Simon silently flattened the creases, folded the bills back into his clip.

"Tell Sydney that Roy says hi," he said, wincing bravely. "It boggles the imagination that she's your daughter. She must take after Mrs. Dunn."

Simon forced a grin, unable to respond. If the comment held a certain degree of truth, could he consider it an insult? He headed back to the bakery section. This would be a two-donut drive home.

Simon turned Autumn's desk right-side up, raised the toppled file cabinets. Two police officers and Autumn kicked through a paper blizzard on the office floor of Kids Now. Her reflection sliced and vanished completely at the holes in the wall-length mirror.

"Is anything missing?" asked an officer. "That you can tell?"

She paused thoughtfully. "I don't know. Obviously someone doesn't like me."

"I know dislike," said Simon, dizzy from all the damage. "There isn't this much cleaning up after acts of dislike."

"How about enemies?" asked a second officer.

Autumn surveyed the chaos. She looked pale. "I'm feeling whoozy," she said.

"No. Definitely not," Simon answered, easing her outside into the morning chill. The sun crouched low in the horizon. There were more cars in the parking lot than stars in the sky. Loiterers, thought Simon, up to no good. Besides Kids Now, the strip mall contained a card shop, a dollar store, and a nail salon, all of whom wouldn't be open for another three hours.

"I have a guess about who trashed the place," Sydney said. She had returned home for spring break and was helping Autumn clean and pack the Kids Now office.

Autumn jumped. "Speak!"

"Your Op-Ed piece came down real hard on the guy who escaped with a scratch to his ear. Would the neighborhood really be a better place if the bullet killed him?"

"I was angry," Autumn said unapologetically.

"That kind of talk really pisses people off. He might be a dirtbag, but he's somebody's kid, too. He has a story. Attacking him accomplishes nothing."

Autumn stared out the glass storefront into the parking lot.

"Relax. Nobody's out there," said Sydney, unaware that parked at a distant angle, Simon sat in his car, laptop open, keeping a worried watch. Autumn's banana yellow fleece in the storefront made her a sniper's dream. Burger wrappers and stray fries filled the passenger seat. He had to prove Tweeta treated Dysluckia and soon. First round of layoffs at Poultrice were starting. The desperate mood at work only intensified at home. He even considered breaking up a Tweeta pill and hiding it in Autumn's food, except sunny chicken wouldn't camouflage such subterfuge.

That evening Autumn and Simon went to the police. They had already spoken to the drug dealer with the scratched ear. "Kids Who?" was his answer. There were no fingerprints. No witnesses. The police weren't surprised. The street honored silence.

Simon feared that honor. Could the responsible person or persons strike closer to home? His neighborhood was too sedate, the stone walls too perfect and high, the old brick Tudors too far from the street, to possess an intimidating street code.

He couldn't sleep. He patrolled the neighborhood in the breezy spring evenings. He considered getting a dog, which thrilled Autumn. A dog would offer protection, peace of mind, an acceptable excuse for skulking around the neighborhood. Simon wasn't a dog person, however. He knew it would sniff out his insecurities in seconds.

Simon checked out suspicious cars, kicked about neighbor's backyards, not really certain about what he was looking for. Dewy grass clung to his leather shoes, the cuffs of his suit slacks. He wore a suit well; it hid his thirty extra pounds, his man titties. His tailor knew how to translate his width into sturdy authority, even disguise it as muscle.

"Your mother told me you're considering med school," Simon said late one night after Sydney returned from the ER, where she was volunteering during spring break.

"Maybe," she said. "The sight of blood makes me sick."

"That could pose a problem," said Simon. The kitchen was dark, lit only by his laptop. He moved papers and folders so she could sit. She hadn't been talking with him much, still shunning him for his role in Poultrice's overseas research.

"I'm going to Africa this summer to work at a rural health clinic," she said. "It will be inspiring to be around people who care so much about others."

Simon ignored her self-righteous tone. He closed his laptop and smiled. "I didn't know. That's terrific," he said, expecting her to say more. She sipped hot chocolate, slowly chewed a cheese sandwich. Besides sounds of eating and sipping, there was silence. "What kind of stuff have you seen in the ER?" asked Simon.

She covered her mouth. "I can't say. Patient confidentiality. It's unethical."

"Ah, yes." Simon grinned. "Unethical."

Simon reminded himself that this was the same little girl who cuddled on his lap as he read "The Velveteen Rabbit."

"Does it ever bother you that your company, your industry makes such huge profits," asked Sydney. "And people are dying because they can't afford their meds?"

"Research and development involves a lot of money and a lot of risk. Why should we apologize when the gamble pays off?"

"You spend more money on marketing than research. The drugs are expensive because it's what the market can bear, not because it costs a king's ransom for research."

"It pays for your college tuition," said Simon. "Do you want to get a job or take out loans?" he asked. He found the vulnerability in her tough gaze, which quickly wilted. "I ran into Roy Milligan a few weeks back. He asked about you. He said hi."

Sydney looked away. "That's nice. He was a nice guy."

"He didn't look past tense to me. He looked like he could use some company."

She hung her head. "Maybe I'll stop by." Then, just as when she was little, she abruptly changed subjects, changed moods, and moved on. "Tonight someone dropped off a gunshot victim. Bang, bang, bang. Three times in the groin."

Simon winced. She smiled at his discomfort.

"The doctors examined the bullet wounds, certain they'd find serious damage. The groin is packed tight with important stuff. Major blood vessels, nerves, the bladder, the family jewels." A lustrous gleam filled her face. "But the bullets missed everything."

"Lucky dude, huh?"

"The guy was cursing everyone. The police said he'd raped a friend's sister. A doctor said if the patient had been a nice guy he'd probably be dead."

Simon turned on his laptop and started typing.

"This is confidential stuff. You promised."

Simon mimed locking his lips and swallowing the key.

"How can you swallow the key *after* you've locked your mouth?"

Simon picked an abandoned movie theater at the edge of town. A planned renovation had ceased for unknown reasons years before. Simon stood captivated on the balcony beside Gideon, who couldn't stop coughing. Mildew and buttered popcorn thickened the air. Gold tassels tied the voluptuous burgundy curtains to the sides of the ripped movie screen. Many houselights were blown. "It's perfect," Simon said.

Gideon's face was pale. He felt sick. "You can't be serious."

The Poulitce Executive Committee nodded soberly as Simon spoke.

"Two study groups, arranged randomly, will stand in a movie theater. Half have taken Tweeter; half only sugar pills. They are further divided into good and bad people. Three blindfolded men will direct bullets at them from the balcony above and we'll assess the resultant damage."

Simon expected the gasps, the pale faces. After all, his colleagues rightfully considered themselves good people.

"The subjects will be protected," said Simon. "To a degree."

"Do the legal people know about this?" asked Dick Levy. Incredulous whispers about the safety of research subjects echoed later in the bathroom. During the meeting, however, not a single dissenting voice was heard. A second round of layoffs was expected by year's end, and this drug had people giddy. A new drug for a new disease spelled blockbuster. Wellbourne was caught dancing in his office. The name of the new drug? Fortunata.

But Gideon darkened the celebratory mood, insisting that all subjects be protected head to toe by state of the art armor. "What are you doing?" Simon asked. "You're on our team. We agreed on riot helmets, bullet proof vests to cover chest and back."

"Hard armor or soft armor?" asked Gideon during his Powerpoint talk listing the merits and limitations of KEVLAR, VECTRAN and Biosteel, spider silk twenty times stronger than a similar strain of steel.

"Counting bullet holes in armor isn't enough. We need suitable risk exposure," said Simon. "Location can't predict penetration." People squirmed in their seats. "C'mon folks," Simon pressed. He retold

Sydney's ER story. "Swiss cheese groin, and the guy's back masturbating in a few days. Harm is necessary. It's a measure of outcome."

The legal people insisted on full protection, head to toe, or no study.

"Exactly," said Gideon, staring at his pen. "Isn't this the 'saving lives' business?"

"Fine," said Simon, sour-faced, hurt. "But, I've learned quite well that you can't make omelets without breaking a few eggs."

This setback didn't temper the chill of Simon's excitement when one hundred blindfolded people geared up like riot police were escorted into the decrepit theater. From a microphone near the screen he informed them again about what was about to happen. "You'll be exposed to ten seconds of low level weaponry from three blindfolded men. One will be shooting blanks," he said, pointing to the balcony behind and above them. "Half of you have been taking the study drug for a month, the other half a sugar pill. We don't know who has been taking what. Only you know if you've been naughty or nice."

Good and *Bad* people were recruited by a contract group expert in such work. They agreed with Simon and Gideon; such judgments were subjective at best. There were surprises. Screening ex-cons for the *Bad* group, they discovered classic sufferers of *Dysluckia* who qualified for the study as part of the *Good* group.

Each person received five thousand dollars. Not bad, Simon thought, for ten seconds of work. As well as health coverage for injuries resulting directly from the study.

Screams. Diving and colliding bodies. Simon stood in the balcony, mesmerized, horrified, frozen by his accomplishment. In the ten seconds, Simon felt his legacy harden. He was rejoicing, and at the same time wanted the gunfire to stop. What if Sydney found out about this? How would he find a way into an explanation? Maybe later, when much older and seasoned from making complicated choices herself, she might permit understanding. He wasn't as concerned with Autumn. She had lost threads in her idealism. She wouldn't approve, or understand, but like the ugly birthday sweater Sydney once got for her, she'd wear it stoically.

Gideon stood beside him, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, as if tears weren't pouring down his fine features. "They're fully protected," Simon yelled to assure him, unable to hear his own voice. Then only screams remained, and gun smoke fog resembling dust in projector light. The chaos below could be the climactic scene in any blockbuster, where heroes and villains are clearly identified, the ending hopeful and satisfying. But it wasn't.

Gideon couldn't release his grip from the balcony rail. He stood motionless, ossified, wiped clean of emotion.

Private ambulances lined up behind the theater, alongside dumpsters still brimming with demolition from the renovation that never was. Inside the theater, each person was thoroughly examined, first with their body armor and riot helmets on. Researchers recorded where the bullets landed, at what angle, and the projected course when travel was abruptly thwarted.

Simon monitored the examinations taking place behind two snack bars, privacy guarded by makeshift screens and curtains. Simon wasn't entirely comfortable with the mercenary EMS workers, making a month's salary for a harried hour at most, and the supervising doctors, who already served as consultants to Poulitice. They were experts in their respective fields, which meant they published widely and didn't touch patients much. Through the glass counters, devoid of Milk Duds and Nonpareils, Simon could spy the people being examined and studied, without armor, without helmets.

This was when Simon felt he'd been shot through the heart.

Sydney was wearing a sports bra, black leggings. Her knee was wrapped; ice was placed on her scalp. His daughter was laid out on her back. If she were seriously injured, an ambulance would have rushed her to the hospital like the others. He was aware of, yet disconnected from, rational thought. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Making five thousand dollars," she said, being helped to her feet.

"How did you find out about this?"

Sydney braced herself tentatively on his arm. "It was out there."

He wrapped his arm tightly around her narrow frame. She buried her face into his chest. She was shivering. He squeezed her tight. His daughter was fine. He trembled, in shock from the blessing, immune to the brute fact that she had escaped him. They walked slowly between people laid out on stretchers, sitting breathlessly on folding chairs. Trevor Jones' mother was panting into an oxygen mask as medics put IVs in each arm. The mother of Maria Sanchez, the little asthmatic girl, escaped with two bullets embedded in the vest over her heart. Roy Milligan sustained no personal injuries, except his bent

left wheel thumped as the chair moved forward. Sydney stepped up to help him.

"What are you doing here, golden girl? Look around, these are desperate folks."

"I can't be desperate?" she asked, stepping up to push Roy's chair from behind. "And you?" she asked. "You don't need the money? You're flush with options?"

He turned awkwardly. "It's too late for pills. I came for the free bullets."

Trevor Jones' mother had raised her hands to protect herself. The bullet entered under her arm, a vulnerable spot in the body armor. Her lung collapsed, blood poured into her chest cavity. Simon and Sydney went to the emergency department to check on her, and were startled to discover Autumn at her bedside. She'd been called by the family.

Autumn raised an eyebrow, a strained look of surprise and fury. "We heard you were here with Mrs. Jones," Sydney said, before Simon could say anything. She did her best to conceal her limp when hugging her mother.

Mrs. Jones shrugged off questions about the shooting. Where was she? What was she doing? All participants had sworn to secrecy. A plastic tube drained pinkish fluid from her chest. Narcotics for the pain left her grinning mischievously.

Stunned family surrounded Mrs. Jones. How could tragedy strike again?

Simon wanted to tell her, "I'm sorry. I didn't intend to take advantage of you." But that wasn't exactly true. He never intended to take advantage of people he knew.

"Full protection saved lives," said Gideon proudly at the debriefing. Simon nodded silently. What was missed by preventing a bullet from completing its mission? Hearts rip open. Vertebrae shatter. Or maybe the bullet passes through the body causing little, or at worst, repairable damage. There was truth in that. Now the truth was gone. If he had known Sydney was a subject, would he still be thinking this way? Definitely. Maybe. Answering that question hurt too much, and he turned his attention to the study results. An equal number of good and bad people taking the sugar pill were struck by bullets. To Simon's dismay, Fortunata didn't reduce one's exposure to unfortunate events. It seemed to minimize the severity of potential damage, however, and Wellbourne encouraged Simon to draw up plans to market Fortunata as a "Risk Stabilizer."

When Wellborne announced Fortunata, stock prices soared. Meanwhile, Autumn had shut down Kids Now permanently. A tattoo parlor would be moving into the space. She spent nights curled up with bourbon and a historical novel. Days were longer. She tended to her garden, endured visitors curious to know how she was holding up. "Why waste your time with gimmicks?" Autumn asked Simon, gesturing wildly with garden shears. "People die from known preventable diseases and you're hawking snake oil for a disease you created. And people believe you."

"They need to believe," said Simon. "They might not have of a choice. They can't find hope any other way."

"Bullshit," she said, spiking the shears into the soil, the blades buried. For many years she had tolerated his work, before Kids Now folded.

Simon now realized it was more than a job, a career, or a passion; it was a grand moral gesture, an apology for their comfortable life, their brick house and his work.

Simon was promoted, awarded a fat bonus, and slightly ashamed how easily it was attained. Gideon refused his promotion and bonus. He resigned, mumbled something about divinity school. "Go, if you want to do god's work," Simon told him, "but if you want to do work that god wished he could do, you'll stay."

School had ended. Sydney was busy packing for a summer trip to Italy and France, where studying art history sounded better than malaria and HIV in the bush. "Mom knows something about the study," she said to Simon.

"Does she know something, or everything?"

"I didn't say a word." She made the motion of locking her lips. "But I found a draft of an article on the computer."

"Not another Op-Ed piece?" Simon said sympathetically, cringing pitifully, as if her empty moral gestures were a disease that required immediate treatment.

Poultice beefed up their legal department to fend off inquiries prompted by publication of the study. They had to publish their findings. They were groundbreaking. Besides, there was a long precedent of alleged abuses in medical research in this country: Tuskegee; Willowbrook; injecting cancer cells into healthy victims. The investigators weren't arrested or castigated. Awards were bestowed upon them for their contribution to science. Legal concerns didn't bother Simon. He considered all critics future customers.

Mrs. Jones stopped by to visit with Autumn. She could now breathe without pain, and was gaining strength, which she'd need to find work. Her bosses at the cashier and waitressing jobs both sent cards when she was hospitalized. By the time she had finished healing, however, other people had taken her place,

Autumn stared blank-eyed over her garden, effusively in bloom. "I wish I could help," she said, cutting a rose, painstakingly snipping the thorns. "This is all I have to give you."

Mrs. Jones smiled, buried her nose into the petals. "It's enough." She squeezed Autumn's hand. "You OK?" she asked.

Autumn wiped soil and sweat from her face. "I am, kiddo."

Simon met up with Mrs. Jones at her car. "How you doing?"

Mrs. Jones flexed her arm and made a muscle that was hard like a steel pipe.

"The study was a good thing, right?" Simon asked.

"Of course. I'm five thousand dollars richer."

"And a greater good will come from it."

"Trevor was shot for no reason at all," she said. "I can't leave the house, or sit by the living room window, without thinking about when the next bullet is coming. You offered me a lot of money for a risk I take every day for free."

"If Trevor had taken Fortunata, maybe *he'd* have the ear abrasion," said Simon.

Mrs. Jones looked defeated. "Then someone else, some poor child just as nice and innocent, but not taking the drug, would be a victim."

Dick Levy stopped by, on Simon's suggestion, to talk with Autumn about directing the new South Side clinic.

"Can these people care for their families when they're not healthy?" asked Levy.

"The people in this neighborhood need access to doctors," said Simon.

"You mean doctors who prescribe Fortunata," said Autumn.

"These are good people. They deserve good healthcare," said Levy. Autumn swirled her bourbon, staring into it as if it would divine an answer. "I'll think about it," she said, breaking a stiff, plaintive smile.

Levy clapped his hands. "Good." He hugged Autumn. "This is good."

That night, after Sydney called from Nice, buoyant, asking if she sounded tan, Autumn kissed Simon on the cheek and headed up the stairs to bed.

"I worry about you, Simon."

Simon tried to respond. He pulled off his tie, worked it in his hands wishing words handled as easily as silk. "Take a walk, maybe?" he asked her.

She started to speak, then stopped, exhaled thoughtfully.

They strolled the sidewalk hand in hand, not talking. Simon pretended he could take this starlit sky and wrap it snugly around her soft shoulders, now peeling from too much sun, and keep her safe, when an explosion like a backfiring car jolted them. Simon anxiously groped her from head to toe, toe to head, feeling for bullet wounds.

"What are you doing, Simon? You're hurting me," she giggled.

"Stop it."

Assured she wasn't injured, he crushed her with a hug. It had been a long time since they seriously held onto each other. An icy tightness seized his chest: What was this feeling? Not pain. He couldn't take a finger and point to its location. It was vague, unidentifiable, and terrifying. Simon looked up and down the now quiet street.

"What's wrong?" asked Autumn.

"I'm not a good person," he said with relief, thinking about bad things happening to good people. The study didn't confirm that. But the lack of objective data didn't ease Simon's fears. The world was cruel, the imagination, too. ◻