

The Telephone Pole

JAY BARUCH

Everyone leaves—the medics, the police, the coroner, the late night news crew—and Gabe starts photographing tread marks, the bruised telephone pole, the crushed SUV and the indestructible vodka bottle resting on the passenger seat. The scalp remains where they found it, hanging from the shattered windshield. Gabe's gut contracts, the sweat starts up again. New to the job, Gabe suspects the scalp abandoned as part of an initiation prank. Pretend it isn't there, he tells himself and turns his attention to the bank of the road, to daylight sneaking up behind the charcoal clouds. His knees weaken, his balance disturbed by sympathies that align more with the scalp than the scalped driver, a well-known judge entangled in a alcohol-related crash two years earlier; one where a college freshman was killed.

"Drunk driving was never proven," says Shep, his boss at the Bureau of Roads Protection and his brother-in-law, when he calls Gabe's cell to check on him.

"The judge got zero punishment," says Gabe. "Bad press, that's all."

"Poor guy broke six ribs," Shep says. "He was handed a shitload of pain."

"A young man died."

"A tragic mistake."

"What if he had killed Oliver instead of that boy. Or Blaze? What if one of our boys happened to be the object of his mistake?"

"We need to focus. What's past is past," says Shep.

"Shakespeare wrote 'what's past prologue,'" says Gabe.

"Luckily Shakespeare never worked for the Bureau of Roads Protection." Shep coughs into the phone. "Can you have a preliminary report to me by lunch?"

"Brunch," Gabe says. "No problem."

"Who's better than you?" says Shep.

Gabe grunts, slips the cell into his shirt pocket, and approaches the scalp. Closer examination reveals what's most troubling about the divit of silver hair: it doesn't seem out of place. No longer bleeding, it sways in the breeze as if it naturally grows there, has no choice but to grow there. Perhaps the coroner had reached a similarly twisted revelation, Gabe reconsiders, and purposefully left the scalp where it now asserted itself.

Daybreak finds Gabe completing field sketches. Back at the office, he analyzes the fatal crash scene, scribbles pages of calculations. He rules out illumination, road conditions and weather. Fatigue wraps itself around his aching bones when his report, padded with computer simulation, lands on Shep's desk. He concludes that human factors were responsible, speed was a consideration, and the role of alcohol wasn't insignificant.

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A chill spreads through Gabe's veins the next morning when Shep informs him about an urgent request to appear before the State Committee on Automotive Mishaps (SCAM). This quirky state he now calls home has been a perpetual source of fascination, bafflement and ulcer-stoking angst. Enthusiastically triumphant, even as it takes on water and sinks in dry dock; with its breathless coastlines and bright donut shops, great universities and weak public schools, old industrial work ethic and crippling unemployment, climate of friendliness and

good-natured disregard for one of the highest drunk driving mortality rates, per capita, in the country.

The latter problem spurred the Governor to create the position of Accident Reconstructionist in Shep's Bureau of Roads Protection, which operates under SCAM in ways that Gabe was discovering in his first months on the job in this new world. A popular teacher in the Department of Engineering and Physical Sciences at the local college, Gabe resigned when denied tenure. His Chairman expressed regret that Gabe thought well-intentioned but hollow. Shep hired him despite accusations of nepotism. Gabe's CV quieted the loudest critics. This state job demanded a certain education and skill set, one that most people with political ties, born and raised and schooled in the state, sorely lacked.

"What government committee has meetings in a coffee shop?" he asks Ellen.

"One that knows the best coffee in the state." She and Shep were natives, high school sports legends, and evangelical in their local pride. "Relax. Shep will be there."

Stan Bigly, SCAM's chairman, pops up from a group of men huddled around two round café tables pulled together and greets Gabe with a bone-crushing handshake.

"What's your poison? Cappuccino? Latte?"

"Tea."

"Tea?" Stan Bigly's dental work and overbite combine in such a way that makes Gabe feel silly. He reaches for his wallet. Stan waves him off. "Sit. We have an account here." A younger man sporting a dark suit similar to the other men at the table ignores the line

stretching out the entrance and catches the eye of the tattooed server. He yells at Stan Bigly, who taps Gabe on the shoulder. "You want a biscotti, or maybe a cookie? They have great cookies here."

"I'm fine, thanks," says Gabe, finding this scene recognizable but far from real.

"Your report displays obvious intelligence," says Stan Bigly.

Gabe smiles. Stan Bigly rubs his tortoise face. "But you ignore the biggest issue."

"I included everything relevant to the crash."

"Except the possibility that we have a rogue telephone pole problem on Route 6."

Gabe shoots a look at Shep, who opens his face, an expression Gabe doesn't know what to do with. "The judge was drunk. We have a drunk driving problem."

Stan Bigly grins painfully at Gabe. "Have you ever been here?"

Gabe shakes his head, feeling lesser for it.

"Take a look. People reading the paper before work, powerbrokers and lawyers, medics, hipsters, a smattering of ne'er-do-wells, college students studying books with titles I don't understand. This crowd of geniuses, leaders, future leaders, past leaders, working Joe's, fuck-ups and future fuck-ups share a common purpose for being here. Is it love of excellent coffee? Fuck, no. The need for belonging, for community. They're part of this place. And now you're here, Gabe, a citizen of the coffee shop."

His passport reveals that Gabe is still a citizen of Canada, though he crossed the border permanently eighteen years earlier, after marrying Ellen and leaving the University of Toronto to finish his PhD

dissertation in Boston. Despite taxes he's paid, the hours coaching Oliver's little league teams, and later his son's middle school math team, he still feels an outsider in this state where natives cross-pollinate as children. Stan Bigly was a high school buddy of the Governor, and Shep played football with Bigly's younger brother. The Governor appoints the members of SCAM, a group of mysterious purpose, but one with enviable health benefits and a robust pension.

Stan Bigly tends to tabletop crumbs before placing a large coffee, and not a tea, before Gabe. "This kills me," he says. "People can't treat public spaces with respect?"

"Are you treating poles with respect?" Gabe paused. "Accusing them of murder?"

The committee members raise their collective eyes from their Blackberries and shake their heads; their hair colored the same shade of black, skin thickened with the same Florida tan, disappointment razored with the same pity.

"The judge is only one incident," says Stan Bigly. "There have been six deaths in the last two months alone."

"Alcohol played a major role in each of them," Gabe says.

"So was that pole," says Stan Bigly, who owns several popular bars.

"We have a pole problem," says Shep, injecting himself into the conversation. "I know it. You know it. And Gabe knows the judge didn't die a senseless death."

Stan Bigly stands, pulls Gabe up with him. "Put yourself in these people's shoes. Bars serve a public good. They bring people together. Just like coffee shops."

The young man in the suit leers indignantly. Gabe nods as if his neck is in spasm. Perhaps mistaken coffee for tea was a purposeful accident. After a tense minute of silence Gabe understands the meeting to be over.

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"You didn't have my back, Shep. I did a good job," says Gabe, searching Ellen's face for support. She's tossing salad, staring at her big brother. "A damn good job."

"Definitely," says Shep, nervously picking the label off his beer bottle.

"Be straight with me," says Gabe.

Ellen aggressively slices a freshly baked loaf of olive bread. The knife knocking cautionary warnings on the cutting board, lest Gabe forget his nine jobless months, her phys. ed teacher paycheck and stipend for coaching girls soccer stretching only so far, and Shep securing this job when Gabe was sending resumes into an economy of silence.

"So what's the problem?" says Gabe.

Shep smiles white teeth, musses his blonde hair. Still the surfer, though thick in the face and gut, he is friendly and nonconfrontational. Shep would have charmed the Tenure Committee, Gabe thinks, no matter that he dropped out of college. "Have you thought about the judge's family," says Shep. "His wife and three boys?"

"I was hired to reconstruct accidents, perform root cause analysis and improve the safety of the roads."

Ellen calls up the stairs for Oliver to put down his homework and join them for dinner. Gabe sets the table with ill-temper. He notices she's limping again as she returns.

"Hip still bothering you, isn't it?" he whispers to her as he sets the wine glasses.

Ellen's face is stiff. Gabe can't decide whether it reflects her serious intent on this issue, a willful resistance to his question, or the pain she's fighting and trying to conceal.

"I want safer roads, too," says Shep.

"We all do," says Ellen.

"But...the poles are at fault." Gabe studies his wife. "You believe this?"

"We must keep an open mind, and not be quick to judge," says Ellen.

"Judge the judge?" says Shep.

Ellen laughs as she pours the wine. "Come, let's eat."

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The headline above the fold in the morning paper states: Telephone Poles Open Hunting Season. Below it a picture of Stan Bigly at a news conference after the judge's memorial service. "Telephone poles are preying on drivers exercising their right to intoxicated self-expression," he said. "Poles don't want us returning to our loving families after a bottle of wine with dinner or one last round with our buddies." A sidebar describes one reporter's attempts to get a response from Lori Davis, the mother of the boy killed by the judge years before. An ICU nurse, she was stopped outside the hospital after an evening shift. "No, I'm not happy," she says. "My sympathies to his family. The family suffers most when someone dies."

Ellen drops the spoon from her yogurt and sliced fruit as he reads the word "dies." The unspoken prospect of death has been floating in the air the past few weeks, ever since a routine right hip X-ray for unexplained pain revealed what her doctor described as a bone

lucency of uncertain significance. When Gabe asked the doctor if the lucency meant cancer, Ellen didn't allow her doctor to finish. "I run twenty eight miles a week."

"Not anymore," said Gabe. "What's the next step?" he asked the doctor.

"I eat great," Ellen said. "Even my weaknesses are healthy—red wine and dark chocolate."

"A bone scan would be recommended," said the doctor.

Ellen's blue eyes widened. "Who wants to challenge me to push ups?"

Gabe later went to the internet and found too much information and not enough answers. He thought lucency meant clarity, but in radiological terms it signified absence. Normal bone appeared white on X-ray because it was opaque and the beams didn't penetrate. Any loss of bone structure allowed the X-ray beam to travel through. These areas appeared dark or black—a lucency—on the film. A bone lucency appeared empty, but Gabe learned they harbored many meanings, benign cysts to an endless palate of cancers with prognosis ranging from hopeful to haunting.

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Gabe is exhausted but can't sleep; telephones poles joining the ranks of the living and the culpable, his wife kicking off bedsheets, unable to find that space unoccupied by pain. She paces the room, urgent lumbering thumps.

"Can I get you anything," he asks, "tylenol, ibuprofen, an ambulance?"

"Go to sleep," she snaps back. He's disarmed by this outburst, a new piece to her personality. He suspects it isn't his desire to help that upset her, but his witnessing of a moment she believes to be, needs to be, private.

His shuts his eyes and listens, endures her enduring.

"I'm fine," she says. "I've been walking too much the past few days. I thought walking might do some good.."

"That doesn't explain the spot on the X-ray," he says, as if talking in his sleep.

"If not for the X-ray, we wouldn't know about it, and you'd agree that all the walking might have something to do with the pain."

"So you admit to having pain?"

"An ache. More like a stiffness."

Her resistance irritates him, grates at his sympathy, and he's about to tell her this when his cell phone goes off. He curses the phone, the ungodly time, the thwarted sleep.

"Get up and get here," says Shep.

"Hello to you, too," says Gabe.

"Tyffany Hynds, young single mother barhopping with friends. The pole on Route 6 again. We must respond to this, right now."

"Shit. Another one?" Gabe rubs his eyes, swings his legs up and out of bed, and yawns. Why dream, he thinks, when reality feels more and more like a hallucination?

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Gabe trawls the ground surrounding the pole. He screws his face into seriousness, takes a wooden tongue blade and wedges it between the pole and hard dirt. "There's no gap, no tilt to the soil," he says, as if citing a genuine discovery.

"What are you saying?" says Shep.

"There is no evidence the pole moved."

"Find some," said Shep.

Gabe settles in, takes photographs and measurements, draws sketches with painstaking detail. The stink of burnt rubber and gasoline fumes, the bitter sweetness of pear tree blossoms, gives Gabe a headache. If spring ever lost hope, let itself go, stopped showering and hit the bottle, this is what it might smell like.

Gabe spots a reporter, the mother of one of Oliver's friends, interviewing Shep.

"Records show the driver had a suboptimal pole encounter two weeks ago."

"I don't think this is a coincidence," says Shep.

"How worried should the public be?" the reporter asks.

"This is a tragedy," says Shep. "Our sympathies to Tyffany Hynds family. They should know my team at the Bureau of Roads Protection is investigating."

The reporter snatches Gabe's sleeve and doesn't let go. "Any comments, Gabe?, Why are telephone poles targeting drunk drivers and sparing the sober ones?"

Through a camera lens designed to capture, record, and transmit reality from one end only, Gabe pretends he can view the viewer. He sees Ellen, a former division one soccer player, limping about their bedroom like a felled lion, fashioned in his collared shirt and her rationalizations. Embracing the possibility that poles can move, that she can caulk the lucency in her hip by will alone, smacks of courage and fear, the need for modern fairytales, beliefs Gabe finds romantic, unhealthy and ultimately absurd.

"We haven't found evidence suggesting threatening pole behavior." Gabe speaks into the camera, his frustration targeted at his wife.

OR that poles possess any behavior."

"Two pole attacks in two weeks," says Tyffany Hynds father, when informed of Gabe's comment. "They were stalking my daughter." Her children, two preschoolers fathered by different men, cling to his leg. Tears swell the eyes of a man possessing the heft and desperation of a mobile home. "Is he telling me it's my little girl's fault?"

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Gabe drops the report on Shep's desk knowing full well that data fails to capture the essence of the crash. Sleep sits behind his eyes, sending him home for a quick rest. Instead of repose he finds two neighbors stomping the sidewalk. Chants of "Pole Sympathizer" echo beneath the leafy oaks shading his otherwise quiet street.

"What the hell?" he says to Sid and his son Charlie.

Sid constructs a grin out of white skin, neck fat, and light green eyes. "You're looking at the founder and president of the new neighborhood chapter of D3."

"D3?"

"Drunks for Drunk Driving."

"Weren't you in AA?"

"The definition of addiction includes relapse."

"Damn it, Sid," says Gabe, wishing his brain didn't feel like a wet rag. "I'm sorry you can't find work. I really am. But don't you have anything better to do?"

"We saw you on the morning news," says Charlie. "Folks are pissed."

"Oh really? Well I'm pissed," says Gabe.

From the back pocket of his loose jeans, Sid pulls out the morning paper. "Let's check the headline." He reads aloud as if a formal

decree. "Poles Falsely Accused."

Gabe grabs the paper from Sid's hands. Below the headline sits his photo, directly under the word "Accused." Gabe bites his lip. The night before he was aware that he was speaking into a camera, but the moment felt like harmless chatter.

"Go back to Canada," yells Charlie.

Gabe shakes his head. Awarded the No Child Left Behind Junior Scholar citation at high school graduation two years before, Charlie now lives with Sid.

"Do you know where Canada is?" Gabe asks Charlie.

"Next to Toronto," Charlie answers.

Sid lowers his head, a father weakened, his love bleeding pride.

Gabe's eyes seize upon the washed-out color photograph on Charlie's placard. He angles closer, squints against the sun. "Is that a fetus?"

"Abortion clinic doesn't open until 9am," says Charlie.

"You can't protest outside my house."

"Let's ask the First Amendment," says Sid.

Gabe hangs his head, unable to resist sleep or refute Sid's reasoning. He nods at the placard. "At least use proper imagery. You're misrepresenting your problem with me." Sid bobs his head, conceding a point well made.

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Gabe stakes out the pole on Route 6 the next night. He sets up a video camera, lines the pole's base with white chalk. Stan Bigly isn't happy with Gabe's comments and orders Shep to find irrefutable proof. Gabe now sinks shamefully into the peaceful, front seat discomfort of his government sedan. He's waiting for a fatal crash.

The proof he needs demands that another person die. He listens to the radio. He hums along to "Blue Bayou," a dedication from Mae in Albany, who wants to start over with her ex-boyfriend. "Go get him, Mae," he cheers, guilt-ridden for leaving his wife and her inscrutable night noises to watch a pole not move.

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Gabe returns home to find Sid and Charlie demonstrating again. Their placards now scream "Pole Lover" in red and black strokes. Worry works into Gabe's bones.

"Are you happy?" says Sid as Gabe slumps by.

"Encouraged," says Gabe, fighting the sun. "We're getting somewhere."

"Where's that?" says Charlie.

"Once we get there, let's hope we'll know where we are."

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Shep joins him on the stakeout the next night. Gabe frets his brother-in-law's true motives and what might be exacted from him. But Shep jabbers on about his ex-wife, his child support highcolonic, and Blaze's partying and vandalism. Then, disguised as an after-thought, Shep says, "I told him I was disappointed. He mouths off that he hates me."

"Shit. I'm sorry," Gabe says. "It's just a stage kids go through."

"Out of nowhere. He hates me?" Shep pauses. "Has Oliver ever said that to you?"

Gabe fiddles with the radio, thinks about the two cousins: Blaze a varsity linebacker, loud and insecure long before his parents divorce; Oliver more like his father, unafraid of solitude, second clarinet in the orchestra and solid member of varsity cross country. "Not yet. But he will."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"Getting older, exerting independence, testing his parents, peer pressure."

"Nothing makes me believe Oliver would ever tell you or Ellen that he hates either one of you. How can you say Blaze's comments are normal?"

Gabe stares out the driver's side window, begging for a car to fly into the pole and end this conversation. "OK. Not exactly normal."

"What is it then?"

"A normal variant."

"I'm trying to have a real conversation," says Shep. "This isn't easy for me."

Gabe softens to Shep's hurt. "It isn't normal, but it's not dangerous either," he says, staring at the pole long enough to conjure a ripple of suspicion.

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"Have I ever given you any reason to hate me?" says Gabe to Oliver.

"When mom drives me to school, she bugs me about girls. Whatever happened to a stress free drive?"

"Doesn't exist," says Gabe. He chuckles, a distracted, mock seriousness. The hour is early, but for his body it's late. "Mom's not feeling well."

"What's up with that?"

Gabe realizes that Ellen has managed to quarantine her pain from everyone but him. He lowers the radio to minimize distractions. It's only 7:45am, but he's worried about drunks on the road.

"You're driving like an old lady," says Oliver. He turns up the

volume and speeds through the stations. He finds a synthesized tune that sets him grooving shyly.

"I like old ladies," says Gabe. "One reason is: they're old." The song sounds no different than any other pounding the airwaves. "You really like this stuff?"

Oliver shrugs, leaks a grin, bobs his head. His son's pleasure in the music kids are expected to like provides a cushioning of the masses, offers Gabe an illusion of safety.

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Shep drops in at dinnertime, his habit whenever he works late and misses happy hour at Vincy's. "They're sniffing up my ass," he says. He shakes off food, but makes orgasmic sounds when he finds a beer in the back of the fridge.

"Who?" says Gabe, uncorking his favorite bottle of \$7 red.

"Obviously someone without a clue to your personal hygiene," says Ellen.

"It's Stan Bigley and his crew."

"What does he want?" says Gabe. "I've been humping."

"He wants a pole to hang," says Shep.

"That's ridiculous," says Gabe, filling Ellen's glass, then his own.

"Give him one," says Ellen.

Gabe searches his wife's eyes. "You don't believe..."

"If it's necessary." Her elbow brushes the cork off the counter. She leans over and stops. Her face knots. Gabe fears any pain that demands such effort to push away. He lays his hand upon her back, shows attention and not concern, which would upset her more.

"It isn't easy," says Shep, genuinely flummoxed, not noticing his sister stricken. "I want to deliver."

"Wanting. That's your problem," says Ellen, standing up, proudly holding the cork to her brother's nose. "The necessity isn't there."

Gabe has never seen Shep this pale. His facility in navigating any conversation useless in tides this complicated and unpredictable.

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A thirty-seven year old mother of three, a seventy-two year old great grandfather, and twenty-one year old construction worker are all victims of fatal pole attacks during Memorial Day weekend. A thirty-seven year old lawyer, a cousin of Stan Bigly, survives his crash. He refuses a breathalyzer on the scene, and a judge denies a court ordered blood alcohol level. "He's been through enough," says the judge, letting him plead to a misdemeanor charge of refusing a breathalyzer test. "Let him heal."

The holiday weekend is frenzied, Gabe returning home for naps before being called out again to investigate another scene, another pole. By Monday night he's drained, his patience grinding. "Poles don't kill," he tells the news. "They're the victims."

The day after Memorial Day he's called before Stan Bigly and the State Committee on Automotive Mishaps for 8am coffee. Nobody stands to let him sit. And when he does, he's fenced in by silence. No offers of mis-ordered coffee are coming.

"How do you explain what happened to my cousin?"

"He's a habitual offender. Four violations for refusing a breathalyzer. He also left the scene after striking a bicyclist."

"Never proven," says Stan Bigly. "He's a good kid. A damn good lawyer."

"Keep him in the courtroom," says Gabe. "And off the road."

Stan Bigly peers over his bifocals

Shep jumps up. "Excuse Gabe. He's busting his balls. He's frustrated, that's all."

Gabe sucks his teeth at Shep's protection, whose hand always had the pulse on his sister's welfare. He came through when overeducated Gabe couldn't grovel up a job. Stan Bigly opens his arms to symbolically embrace all the patrons in the coffee shop. "Why would these people, your neighbors, crash into poles?"

Gabe's head rocks from side to side, as if shaking away the question.

"He's overworked," says Shep. "He's not in his right mind."

"Is this true?" says Stan Bigly.

Regardless of how he answers Stan Bigly, Gabe knows he'll leave irreversibly dented.

"I can't say what's true anymore," says Gabe, words scraping over a dry tongue.

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Intolerance pushes Gabe to the living room window to watch Sid and Charlie, now joined by angry others. Some are parents he once chatted up at school events. Their placards show Gabe's face mashed onto a pole body. They're chanting, POLE LOVER, NOT OUR BROTHER. They stop when he steps out onto the porch.

"Don't blame me for doing my job," he says. "Allow us a quiet breakfast."

Someone yells unintelligibly. Charlie charges the front stoop. Gabe steps up to greet him. "Get off my stairs, or this becomes a police matter."

"Fuck that," someone yells. These are neighbors, Gabe reminds himself.

Gabe identifies true commitment in Charlie's crooked smile, a serious belief that he owns this moment. Still, he's surprised when Charlie swings the placard, missing Gabe's ducked head by a wide margin. A victim of his own momentum, Charlie's foot slips on the top step. His body careens downward, coming to rest only after his skull strikes the sidewalk with a dull, horrid sound. After a brief seizure, quiet.

Sid drops beside his son, calls his name, but does nothing for the bleeding scalp. "The ambulance is coming," says Ellen, rushing out the front door holding one of her good bath towels. Gabe takes it and jumps down to care for Charlie.

"You fucking idiot," Sid yells, standing over Gabe. The crowd moves forward.

Gabe leaves the blood-soaked towel clumped against Charlie's head, scales back up to the porch to protect Oliver and Ellen. He can't predict what this crowd will do, probably nothing, but Gabe knows with certainty that whether it's a stampede or serenity, they'll all do it as a group. Blood streams down Charlie's face and cheek. "Put pressure on the wound," says Ellen, but Sid stands there, lost like a child. She rushes to Charlie, kneels in his puddle of blood to staunch the hemorrhaging. "Your boy needs you," she lashes out in a whisper.

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Protesters fill the sidewalk the next day.

Ellen serves freshly baked chocolate chip and oatmeal cookies and coffee.

"What are you doing?" Gabe says, when she returns inside the house.

"They're neighbors," says Ellen. "They're hurting."

"They're protesting against me," Gabe says.

"Don't take it so personally."

"Why not?" He watches them gathered on the sidewalk, sipping from paper cups. Some yelling, others laughing. He takes her in his arms, lowers his touch to her hips. His love exerts a gentle pressure. "Poles are objects. The poles haven't done anything."

"Then they won't mind." She winces to his focused caress, then gestures outside. "You're worsening their pain."

"By being honest?" he says.

"No, by being selfish."

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State lawmakers craft the Party to Economic Prosperity Bill, which allows "intoxicated drivers to operate non-commercial vehicles after demonstrating the requisite proficiency during the Intox," a new part of the standard driving test. Flying through the House and Assembly in a week, the Governor signs the bill into law sipping a pint of stout. Driving at night, Gabe hugs the right lane. He knows safe havens didn't exist, a looped driver will always find you, whether you're driving on the road, strolling on the sidewalk, or relaxing in your living room.

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Before slipping into bed, Gabe bends to the tune of cracking knees, bows his head and prays. Never before has religion played a presence in his life and he doesn't know how to work it. Staring upward and speaking to the clouds feels too easy, and he doesn't believe anything of undeniable worth was ever attained easily.

"Keep Oliver and Ellen safe," Gabe says, maybe louder than necessary. He doesn't explain his absence all these years, doesn't make false promises about recommitting his faith, or engage in spiritual

bartering. He wants. He's greedy and lazy and maybe even cowardly in his request, but he's desperate too.

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The next few days spring offers calm breezes. Gabe finds Ellen stretching, her Breast Cancer 10K shirt drenched with sweat.

"You OK?" he asks.

"Absolutely," she says, "An easy three miles."

Ellen blows him a kiss, as if his skepticism was a flame easily extinguished. "No pain," she says, smacking her hand against her hip. "It feels normal. Beyond normal."

Gabe fears the distortion of extremes; when ominous symptoms improve, one can be deceived into believing the new state of things to be better than they were.

"What about the lucency?"

"Probably filled in. Because I feel great." The joy in her face says don't argue. He kisses lips that taste of sweat and promise.

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That night Gabe pleads to the heavy clouds, offers to do anything, absolutely anything, as long as the one of the three bodies with bloodied high school jackets isn't his son. The tented hood, the entire front end, is buckled like the beer cans strewn about the car. The face of the driver is embedded into the cracked windshield. Firefighters disarticulate the car from the pole. Gabe breathes violently as each body is examined for what remains of an identity. He calls home. Ellen answers, informs him that Oliver went out to a party. "Anything wrong?" she asks.

He pauses. "Nope," he says, his heart racing. "Just checking in."

"At least those boys took it to that pole," says Shep. "They died on the attack."

The anti-pole insanity, Gabe thinks. He hates himself for thinking this, but he doesn't care who these boys are, as long as they're not Oliver.

Gabe's heart contracts to a cube of ice when the coroner finds a driver's license in one boy's pocket and waves him over. There's no reason the coroner should need him. He prays. This is the punishment, he believes, for his egocentric and reckless disregard for the boys. "Shep's kid," the coroner says. "Maybe you should tell him."

"Blaze?" says Gabe, his cold shock mixed with relief. His thumb rubs Blaze's photo, insolent even at the DMV. Dead? Beyond the lamplight, at the fringe of the woods, Gabe vomits as quietly as he can, hoping the others didn't notice when he slinked away from the accident scene. Shep charges over. "You've got to toughen up," he says. "You're embarrassing yourself."

"I know," says Gabe, stomach acid burning the inside of his nostrils. "Maybe you aren't cut out for this type of work?"

Gabe gathers himself, slips the license into Shep's palm, silently points to the wreck. He reaches for Shep's shoulder, but gets pushed away. Shep stares at the license for the longest time, wandering over to the pole as if sleepwalking. Then his spine straightens, his fists ball up. He heaves one punch into the pole's body, yells in pain, swallows, then follows it with another. More punches come, faster and harder.

"Hold the bastard," Shep screams. "Will someone be kind enough?"

Gabe steps forward, stops. He wonders if his own expression bears the same dumb disbelief worn by everyone else. He hugs the pole from behind, hands low, ear pressed against the cool wood.

"OK," says Gabe. "Go." He hears bones crack with each blow,

feels sweat leap with each grunt, smells blood from fingers swollen like raw sausages. Gabe tightens his hold, comforted by hugging something undeniable, that represents exactly what it is. Then he detects gasping from the pole, and a whiff of movement; or believes he does, or wants to believe, begs to believe. A policeman sidles up to Shep. Enough, Gabe thinks. But the police offers his black club. Shep grunts as he unclaws his hands to fashion a grip and hacks away as if felling a tree. Wood shards fly. The police, EMS and the coroner are arranged into a semi-circle, offering equal parts space and protection.

Gabe grabs his arm. "Stop, Shep."

"It's not your son, is it?" he says. "It's not your son."

When grief pushes someone to such violence, Gabe wonders, is it still grief?

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Sunlight smears the east windows as Gabe sits at the kitchen table with Ellen and Oliver. War on Poles cries the headline in the morning paper, a quote from Stan Bigly. Below the fold, a photo of Shep wielding his club with the caption: Justice.

"How's your brother?" Gabe asks Ellen, who had spent most of the night in Emergency, trying to calm Shep as doctors tended to the broken bones in his hands. Gabe was busy through the night analyzing the crash scene, thinking about his report.

"The doctors kept him. A psychotic break," she says, absently rubbing her own hands.

"Blaze is dead. That's not right," says Oliver, his complexion transparent.

Ellen wipes tears from his eyes. "Your cousin could be an asshole sometimes, but he didn't deserve to die."

"That's not nice," says Oliver. "He's dead."

"Assholes die, too," she says, wiping her eyes with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. "And they die as assholes. Death isn't a road to self-improvement."

"A bone scan is," says Gabe. "Some questions have answers."

Ellen runs the back of her hand over his oily forehead and burning cheek.

"I feel great."

"What was it, then?" he asks, not letting her off this easily.

"Hopefully we'll never know." Ellen shrugs. "Even with insurance it's a hell of a lot of money, and that's with both of us working." She pauses. "And we can't count on two incomes, not for the immediate future anyway."

She'd overheard him talking with Stan Bigly, knew about the emergency meeting called for the coffee shop in two hours, the preliminary report expected to be faxed to them in an hour. Shep wouldn't be there to buffer him. He washes his face, brushes his teeth, and leaves for his office. Trudging to his car, he finds Sid alone on the sidewalk.

"How's Charlie?" says Gabe.

"They don't know. They say prognosis is tricky." Sid pauses.

"He'll be OK."

"Tell him I'm sorry."

Sid clears his throat. "It's not your fault."

"I didn't say it was," says Gabe. "But I feel terrible that it

happened."

Sid averts his gaze down the street. "It's sad to hear about Blaze. And Shep."

"Thanks," says Gabe, grateful for those simple, true words.

"Will Shep recover?"

Gabe sighs. He wants to give Sid a real answer. "It's up to Shep."

Dizzy with the prospect of losing his job, Gabe drives stiffly to his office, worried about his first Stan Bigly meeting without Shep. He revisits the pole on Route 6. Apologetically, he rubs his hand over the bludgeoned wood. The grain and shards stained with Shep's blood had already darkened from crimson to a stately maroon; one might conclude it's due to a harsh weather-beating. His eye skips from Shep's morning paper photograph stapled into the wood to the targets emblazoned with the words Aim Here. But he pauses and considers the blurred photocopy of a missing kitten; someone found the pole useful.

At the coffee shop, Stan Bigly and the State Committee on Automotive Mishaps surround two corner tables. A large tea and Gabe's report marks one empty seat.

"Sit," says Stan Bigly, who reads aloud Gabe's conclusion. In lieu of the direct impact the vehicle had with the pole, and that the occupants were found dead on scene, one can conclude the pole is the immediate cause of death. If the vehicle had jumped off the road and the pole hadn't been there, it's safe to assume the boys might have incurred minor injuries, but avoided fatal consequences.

"This is a masterpiece," says Stan Bigly. "Shep isn't coming back to work anytime soon," he says, shaking his head. "A shame. The man's a talent."

Gabe settles into his chair, tunes into the din of the coffee shop.

“We think you might be ready to take his job on an interim basis?”

The men aren't friendly, but they acknowledge his presence, don't look away.

“What do you say?” says Stan Bigly, his tone impatient with Gabe's silence. “Because we've heard that Jersey barriers are stepping up their attacks.”

Gabe takes a sip of green tea, inhales the burnt oils of roasting whole beans, grins to Miles Davis “Kind of Blue” playing low in the background. He's comfortable at this moment. □