

VISIBILITY

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We pulled into the parking lot at Santa Mira Beach just as the sun blurred into the sea, stopping the station wagon at the edge of the tar, facing the pale ocean.

I got out first while Miles fumbled with his seat belt latch, looking over the roof of the wagon at the motels and restaurants on the other side of the thin highway, their large, handwritten names red and yellow against the darkening hills. In the unlit lot behind Goddess of the Sea a fistfight was ending, two teenagers pushing a third out of sight behind a green garbage bin.

Although the band of sky nearest the earth was still peach and turquoise, the low winter sun turning the telephone wires to white cotton strings, the farther up you looked the darker blue it became. Straight up, the earth's sky was already gone, black and white universe looking down.

It was a sky usually described as 'beautiful'.

A few couples still strolled down near the shine of the shore, holding hands, heads bowed, out on third dates, and a guy still jogged splish-splash with his dog running alongside just beyond the reach of the surf, but otherwise the miles-long wet curve of the beach was deserted.

Miles had the back of the wagon up, pulling out our air tanks by their canvas straps, setting them down carefully, clink and clink, on the hard black tar. He looked up at my approach and smiled, his black-rimmed glasses matching his straight, combed-back black hair. An old-fashioned face, a square's face, a face in which you can't any longer see what the child's face must have looked like. Middle-aged like me, only a few months past a divorce he didn't want.

We didn't know each other well yet, so instead of just smiling back, I said something about how warm it was, looking not at him, but around the lot. A group leaning against the backs of their cars were staring unemotionally, as we often do when part of a group, at a lone male walking to his van.

We stripped at the back of his wagon as the sun sunk further, down to our swimming trunks. His body was wide and pale and bony. He wore a briefer pair of trunks than I would have expected for someone his age.

Sitting on the edge of the station wagon's opened back, we pulled on our black neoprene wetsuits, always hard to do, the material bunching up at knees and elbows to where you had to grip the rubbery slack below each joint and laboriously pull the tight black coils up over each bend.

Night dive.

I had tried talking him out of it, but he was really looking forward to it. A chance to get out.

Fully suited now, black and lean in our neoprene, we walked stiffly side by side down the soft sand under the weight of the oxygen tanks on our backs, to the darkening shore.

At its edge, we bent forward, wriggling our feet into our black flippers, pulling our masks down over our faces.

He swung his square face towards me, wide eyes blinking under black eyebrows. His right arm lifted too slowly, as if he were standing on someone else's planet, giving me the thumbs-up.

We walked backwards into the phosphorescence, surf soon splashing up around our waists; easier to do it this way, only the backs of our ankles having to cut through water, rather than walking face-forward where we'd have to lift the weight of the ocean on our frog flippers with each step.

When we had waded out to shoulder-depth we fitted the black-lipped oxygen respirators into our mouths, turned around, facing the now hard-to-see horizon, facing the pale gold path tapering to the still-visible top of the sun, and, reaching out and holding hands, submerged our heads under the waves.

My flippered feet kicked off the ridged sand bar, body straightening out horizontal just beneath the waves. The coldness of the winter ocean seeped through the seams of the neoprene against my bare

body, chilling me, but only for the moment it took for my body warmth to raise the temperature of that layer of salt water against my skin. Right hand still holding Miles' left hand, I twisted my head sideways. He was horizontal too, suspended in mid-depth, free hand on his far side waving in the dark water, maintaining his position beneath the ocean's surface.

Nodding our heads silently at each other, still holding onto each other's hand, our black-flipped feet started raising and lowering, propelling us farther and deeper into the ocean. I pointed my mask straight down as I swam, hearing my breaths in my ears, intimate as heartbeats, and that odd, deep pulse you hear underwater, my concentration on staying close to the uninteresting bottom of the sea.

Occasionally I felt, in my grip, Miles' body start to lift, but then with a tug he'd correct his efforts and be swimming alongside me again. After ten minutes we reached the kelp bed offshore and stopped there as pre-arranged, still holding hands, curling our bodies upright into fetal positions. We were at a depth now where I could not see him next to me, knew he was there only by the feel of his grip in my hand in the cold, dark depth. My eardrums hurt from the pressure, a terrible, spiky pain. His hand bobbed in my grip in a way that told me he was reaching behind him. The bobbing stopped, and a moment later a foot-long tube of neon green flared in front of us, held in his free hand. Now we could see ourselves in the midst of the underwater kelp jungle: the dark green pods and strands swaying densely around us. As we hung in mid-water only a few feet from the shelled bottom, small, two-dimensional fish curved into the bright green light and twisted as a school out of it, illuminated just long enough to show the red and yellow dots towards their tails. Miles jiggled my hand, jiggled it again after I didn't respond, and I reached behind, over my bulky oxygen tank, and pulled forward my own cylinder, the bottom of which I broke, spreading a second glow of pale green light across a yard or so at the bottom of the ocean. His black-rubber face

mask twisted in my direction, the greenness of my flare reflecting off the sideways oval of his mask, his nose and chin ghostly behind. He pointed forward with a black-gloved index finger. So we swam deeper into the undulating kelp, still holding hands. After five minutes of waving our way through the kelp we came out on a clearing, bare, rippled sand below, broad, fifty-foot high strands of kelp disappearing upwards beyond the reach of our green lights. Stopped, we felt the pull of the current even more, our arms and legs having to wave slowly in the sway of the ocean to keep our bodies where we were. A time to check our gauges in the darkness to see how much oxygen we had left, needles still to the right. There we hung for a minute or so, trying to decide what to do next, when he, after looking all around, raising his green tube as he half-turned to the left, half-turned to the right, tugged my hand he held, and started wriggling towards a waving edge of the kelp. In the undulating green there, rising up out of the dark emerald below, long, upright, thin strands of what looked like yellow in the bright green light. His face mask turned towards me. Something to look at! The thin, rising yellow strands seemed like they might be the explorations of something living. With his free black-gloved hand he delicately waved the dark green kelp out of the way, teasing the yellow strands away from the pods until the strands were free, floating a yard wide in the cold, dark underwater, and just as high. Thumbs-up signal to me. We had discovered something, some meek marine mollusk, maybe. Since he had gloves on he didn't mind digging down into the yellow strands, into the jungle of kelp underneath, pulling up, pulling up, dislodging, until the slowly swirling yellow strands rose, and a pale upright oval hardness followed underneath. He let go as the forehead rose, then the closed eyes, the open mouth; paddling backwards, almost breaking his connection with my hand. Grasp shaking in mine, but grasp even tighter, he waved himself a little closer, looking at the young girl's face, her long blonde hair swaying witch-like above

her. Gesturing to me, he reached further down, digging in the kelp for an armpit. I found the other one, and we hoisted her up out of the kelp, into our garish green light, her drowned face revolving backwards on her neck under our flat illumination, mouth open, pearl and pink, gentle, frozen; her naked body rising, tethered to our black-gloved hands, lovely, slender, swaying, lost, caught amidst the white bubbles floating up from our mouthpieces. Violently pointing our joined hands, he gestured to the distant shore. We had to swim her in between us. Switching hands underwater, we headed in with each no longer grasping onto the other but instead one of her bony, dead wrists. The swim in actually seemed shorter, to where I was surprised when his black-suited legs suddenly went vertical and he stood. I felt down with my own black-flipped feet, feeling hardness underneath, and stood up, back in gravity.

Standing in the gloaming surf, the shore empty, moon up, palm trees silhouettes, we pulled her jointy body through the surf to the wet sand.

The station wagon looked a long way away.

Miles yanked his face mask up over the top of his head, letting it drop behind him in the ebb tide. He looked at me bug-eyed. "Oh, my God!"

"Let's get her up to the wagon."

He nodded, but not at me: at the thin naked girl sprawled in the sand on her side. I could see he was starting to hyperventilate, wide bony chest rising, rising.

"Come on, Miles. Let's get her to the station wagon."

He swung his head towards me, eyes blinking, then looked back down at the body. Lowering a black-gloved hand he hesitated, now that she was on shore, and visible. Grab her hand? Her foot? Lift her over his shoulder? But I couldn't see him doing that, staggering up the beach with her on top of his shoulder, her opened mouth hanging down by his spine.

I put a hand on his upper arm.
"We'll carry her between us. I'll take the wrists. You take the ankles."

He ran a glove over the neoprened top of his head. "Right."

Stooping over clumsily in his wetsuit, he grasped an ankle in each glove, looking across her at where I put my gloves around her wrists. "On three."

I nodded. "Okay."

"One. Two. Three."

We both straightened up, her body lifting off the sand, both of us feeling the wet weight of her against our palms.

Miles was panting already. "I don't. Kevin, I don't know if I can carry her all the way to the wagon."

I pulled up a little higher on her wrists, looking over my shoulder at the distant station wagon, too far away for its license to be read. "We'll do it. We can put her down and rest whenever we need to."

"Okay." He pulled her ankles up higher. "Let's go."

Staggering sideways with the heavy sling of her between us, we started a slow scuttle back up the beach towards the parking lot. What would happen if someone jogged by now and saw what we were doing, two middle-aged men carrying this young body between us? Would they run? Raise an alarm? Offer to help?

About halfway there Miles' foot slipped and he fell to his knees, panting. The girl's back flopped onto the cooling sand. His face was stricken. "Sorry!" He said to her. "I'm sorry!"

We rested, sitting in the sand, breathing through our mouths. Miles said nothing; kept looking back at the ocean, as if he couldn't believe what we had found there, or maybe because he was too embarrassed to look at the girl.

After about five minutes I stood up again. He jerked his face out of his own thoughts, up at me.

We carried her around to the side of the wagon. Miles set her bare feet carefully down on the tar, and helped me pull her upright, both of us leaning against her in our

neoprene suits, resting her back against the wagon's side window.

Working my shoulder under her jaw to keep her from sliding down, I pointed with my forehead at the wagon's rear. "Pull the gate down and we can slide her in."

"Right." He got his car keys out of his zippered black pocket, dropped them, picked them up, found the right one, and got the gate down.

Between the two of us we maneuvered her upright around the side of the wagon, bent her at the waist, and pushed her down to a sitting position on the lowered gate.

Except for her nakedness, she looked almost normal. Early teens, body unfully formed yet, long blonde hair dried in the time it had taken us to get her here.

Miles, looking at her, shook his head, shook his head, screwed his big square's face up, and burst into tears.

I didn't know what to do. I stood next to him, watching his shoulders jerk as he sobbed, one black glove hiding most of his face. After awhile, I put a glove on his shoulder, feeling it shake against my palm.

Finally he stood back, taking his glove down from his face, both gloved hands held out in front of him, palms up, moving aimlessly side-to-side, face wet and wrinkled. "I just-- this is so horrible. She's so young."

"I know."

Tires screeched behind us.

We both wheeled around.

A red Corvette was trying to get around a group of people standing in the middle of the highway, one of them throwing a rock through the front windshield. The Corvette skidded leftwards, bouncing over the median, heading towards one of the motel parking lots, the group running behind it, feet slapping across the white dashes of the lanes, trying to catch up.

We both instinctively moved in front of the girl sitting on the gate, blocking her from sight. I glanced at Miles.

"Probably someone trying to steal the car. Corvettes are popular with thieves."

He nodded solemnly. "Do you think they saw us?"

I squinted at where the Corvette's taillights had disappeared behind the motel. It hadn't reappeared on the other side. "No."

Putting our gloves against her narrow back, we gently lowered her upper body to the bed of the wagon, stepped back to her feet, and slid her in head first.

I undid the canvas straps across my chest holding my tank on my back, then bent my knees to let the weight of the tank guide itself to the tar. After Miles had his down he started pulling off his gloves. He glanced over at me. "I'm going to take my suit off."

"Good idea."

Once the black neoprene was off, I was able to move my limbs so much more freely. I rubbed circulation back into my arms, after noticing Miles doing the same thing.

He slid the two tanks into the wagon, one on either side of her body. Reaching down, he picked up the black pieces of his suit. "I was...what I'm going to do is pad my suit around her....the wagon moving, the tanks are going to roll around back there...I wouldn't want them hitting her. Banging against her."

I smiled, passing my own suit over to him.

Once he had her sides padded with the neoprene to his satisfaction, he pulled down the gate and locked it.

Behind the wheel in his swimming trunks, he twisted the ignition key clockwise, the engine starting up, vibrating the floor beneath our bare feet. He put the gears in reverse, then did a double-take. "Where are we going?"

"Oh." Sitting side by side in the front seat we stared at each other a moment, then burst into laughter, horribly inappropriate with the dead girl laying on her back just beyond the headrests of our seats, but the tension-releasing laughter that washes over you, that's sometimes so difficult to stop.

After it did stop I rubbed my nose, head bent, then pointed at the windshield.

"There's a sheriff's substation, about a mile down the highway."

Only one other car was parked in the substation's lot.

Miles shut off the engine, put both hands back in the ten and two o'clock positions, looking down like a little boy at the logo in the center of his steering wheel. "What now? Do we...should we carry her in, or leave her in the back and....just walk in ourselves? Tell them we have her out in the car?"

We decided to leave her where she was, as much because it would be easier having several people bring her in, as the fact we didn't want to enter the substation with her slung between us.

I don't know what we expected when we went up the three wide concrete steps and pushed open the glass double doors. We hadn't even decided who would do the talking.

The substation inside was high-ceilinged, brightly lit, empty.

There wasn't a lot of furniture. Some light-blue metal folding chairs, their backs pushed against the wall on one side, forming a waiting area. No magazines. Directly ahead, a chest-high green counter that blocked the back of the room, public service posters tacked to its front. On the wall behind the counter a black and white clock, an opened door leading into a rear room, a old-looking cardboard sign below the clock: Parking Tickets Paid After 3:00 P.M. Are Not Credited Until The Next Business Day. A radio filling the sterileness of the space with Rachmaninoff's Warsaw Concerto.

I put my right hand on the counter, looking at the opened door. "Hello?"

Miles joined me, glancing up at the clock.

From the other room came the sound of something closing, followed by footsteps.

Miles swallowed, standing a little closer to me.

A tall man in a gray uniform appeared in the doorway. He looked like he

had just woken up, and was trying to appear alert. His voice was deep. "What is it?"

"We..." Miles looked to me.

"We were on a night dive. We found a body."

The Sheriff blinked, just once. His black eyes switched back and forth between the two of us in our bathing trunks, sizing us up, right hand coming up slightly to rest on the handle of the gun strapped to his hip.

Finally: "Where?"

Miles took that one. "Out by the, by Santa Clara Beach, in the water."

"In the water?"

Miles nodded. "By the, out off the beach, in the ocean, in a bed of kelp about a hundred yards out."

"Is this a joke?"

"No sir, we're serious."

"A human body?"

"Yes sir."

"Where is it now?"

"It's, uhm, in the back of my station wagon. Parked out front here."

The Sheriff looked past us, towards the front double doors of glass. His eyes pulled back to us. "You both have identification?"

"We do, in our clothes. In the station wagon. We have identification there."

"Stand in the middle of the room."

We backed away from the counter, looking around at the blue folding chairs on one side, the black windows on the other.

He lifted a section of the countertop and approached us, walking around us, taller than either of us. Stood in front of us then in his gray uniform, hand still on the grip of his holstered pistol, us in our swimming trunks, staring at us without saying anything.

Miles bobbed his head. "I have a medical practice in town."

"Let's go outside."

It was black outside now, the moon and stars above. The air felt chilly against our bare skin. We padded over to the rear of the wagon, turning around. I touched the shut gate's rectangular window. "She's in there."

"Step back. To the side, over there."

He brought a big flashlight up in his left hand, shined it against the back window, putting yellow circles on the glass, bringing the flashlight and his face closer and closer until the inside illuminated.

The silver flashlight tilted up and down in his hand as he put his face against the window. Still squinting in, he said, "Did you know her?"

"No."

"No."

"Let's get her out of there."

The two of us carried her across the small parking lot back up the three concrete steps. The sheriff held the double glass doors open for us.

Back inside the substation, he clicked off his flashlight, told us to carry her into the back room.

In the back room he cleared some boxes off a large rectangular table to one side under a dark window, and told us to lay her down on it.

As we settled her on it he dipped his knees and watched the creaking table legs, to make sure they supported the weight.

I looked around the room. It was small. A desk faced one of the walls, black phone on it, corkboard with overlapping slips of paper tacked to it on the wall the desk faced. The doorway we walked through had a door swung inwards against the wall. Black letters centered in its square of frosted glass read, ETAVIRP.

The Sheriff walked up to the edge of the table near her head, looking down at her frozen face for a long time, then glancing perfunctorily at the rest of her body.

"We had a call earlier tonight about a missing child. She disappeared yesterday. I have the father's phone number." He turned around and looked at both of us. We didn't say anything.

He sat down at the desk, looking too big for it, and picked up the phone. His right index finger pressed the grey square with the 0. "This is Ralph. Put me through to this number." He read it off the back of an envelope.

We watched him sit with the phone to his ear, probably hearing rings. His head

ducked slightly. "Hello? Who's this?" He listened. "I want to speak to Mr. Belicec. This is the Sheriff." Listened. "Where can I reach him?" He flipped the envelope around, looking for a clear space, picking up a pen, crossing his legs. "If he calls you, tell him to call the Sheriff at the same number he called around seven." His thumb held down the button. To us, he said, "Babysitter." He got the operator again, gave her a new number. "Is this Mr. Belicec? This is the Sheriff. I'm calling about the report you filed with me a couple of hours ago. Well, why don't you come down here? I'd rather discuss it here. Do you know where I am?"

He hung up. Looked up at us. "He'll be here soon. He isn't far away." He glanced again at the table. "I have a tarp in that filing cabinet. Why don't we cover her?"

The three of us sat in the back room, waiting for the father to arrive. Neither Miles nor myself attempted any small talk. After the silence among us had lasted for ten minutes, the Sheriff raised his head, looking over at where Miles sat in a wooden folding chair, head down, holding his hands by his knees. "You said you live here in town?"

Miles looked up from staring at the floor, his black-spectacled face old and sad. "At The Marlimee."

"That's a motel."

"Uh-huh." The Sheriff kept staring at poor Miles. Finally, Miles cleared his throat, looking at me, at the walls, at the Sheriff. "I'm divorced. I've been living there for three months now."

The Sheriff pursed his lips, nodding. "She divorce you or you divorce her?"

None of his business, but typical of a cop. Plus it was hard just sitting here with the girl silent under the tarp a few feet away.

"She divorced me." He looked down at his interlocking hands, the black hairs on the backs of the fingers, the big knuckles. "She found someone new."

"That's tough."

A new silence descended. After another five minutes, the Sheriff asked what it was like living in a motel.

"It's the pits." Miles nodded for a while, obviously trying to think of something to add. "It's weird." With his right index finger he pushed the center of his black-framed glasses further back on his face. "I come home-- home to the motel-- after work and sometimes something's changed, something subtle, and it may be half the evening before I notice it."

"Like what?"

"Like, I'll be sitting at the little round table that comes with the room, and I'll suddenly realize they changed the painting over the bed. Or realize the table itself has been replaced. Slightly lower than the one I was used to, or slightly wider."

In the front, larger room we heard the glass double doors open.

The three of us sat up in our chairs. Footsteps. "Hello?"

The Sheriff rose out of his chair, wiping his palms on the sides of his trousers. "Stay here." He went through the doorway into the front room.

We could hear the conversation through the doorway. It was the father. The Sheriff asked him to come in the back room. We heard the section of the counter creak up.

The father stopped at the doorway, seeing Miles and myself sitting quietly in our swimming trunks. A big, quiet man in a business suit, late forties, losing his hair in front. He looked back at the Sheriff, who slipped past him to stand between where Miles and I sat.

"Sir, we think we may have located your daughter."

The father looked around the room, not noticing, incredibly, the tarp covering something on the table.

"Where is she? Is she in Los Angeles?"

"No, sir." The Sheriff walked slowly sideways, over towards the tarp, leading the father's eyes there. "We're not sure if it's her or not." He stopped alongside the table, eyes holding the father's, then let

his eyes move mournfully towards the long shape covered by the tarp.

The father noticed the table for the first time, the tarp, the fact the tarp covered something.

Nobody said anything in the little room.

We all watched the father's face.

"I--" The father looked from the tarp to the Sheriff's face. "What?" The tears started flowing down his cheeks.

"Sir, we have reason to believe your daughter may have been found by these two men here." The Sheriff raised one of his hands from beside his hip, let it rest on the tarp.

The father grinned, bright-eyed, looking at Miles and me, back at the Sheriff. His voice came out much too high for such a big man. "What?" He started crying, standing by himself in his business suit, hand going up to his face. "What are you saying?"

"Sir, would you come over here please? For the identification?"

The father, frightened, started a step-by-step shuffle towards the table. He reached in his front pants pocket for a handkerchief, blew noisily into it. "This is a mistake."

"We hope it is."

When the father was at the table the Sheriff lifted the top of the tarp, exposing just the head and bare shoulders.

Absolutely no reaction at all at first, just a frozen moment, the father's bloodshot eyes traveling over and over the young face, then he let out a high sound of pain, clutching his chest, clutching the edge of the table, and collapsed to his knees at the side of the table.

He bent further forward, shrinking in his suit, until his face was on the floor. His sobbing filled the little room.

"Sir. Sir?"

It took about five minutes for the father to get up on his feet again. His suit looked too big on him now. Wiping his face with his fingers, he apologized to the Sheriff.

The Sheriff nodded. "So, am I right in thinking this person here..."

"She's my daughter. Yes." He looked down sadly at the face again, then bent forward, looking more carefully. His head jerked up towards the Sheriff. He looked confused. "This is...my daughter-- this is my daughter, but my daughter had brown eyes." He gestured at the face. "Now she has blue eyes."

"What?" The Sheriff looked at the girl's face. Her staring eyes were blue.

"My daughter..." The father was excited now, blinking. "My daughter had-- has-- brown eyes. It was a very unusual color combination, brown eyes with blonde hair. But now she has blue eyes." He made a theatrical gesture at the corpse, then looked at the Sheriff for an explanation.

The Sheriff backed up, shrugging his shoulders.

The father looked at his daughter's dead face again. "Her eye color is wrong. Definitely."

"Are you sure?"

The father snorted. "Of course I'm...what happened?"

"I don't...we'll have a forensic man take a look at her. I don't know what else to tell you. Are you saying maybe it isn't your daughter?"

"No. No. But her eyes are the wrong color. It doesn't make sense."

The mother phoned a few minutes later, while the father was still talking about the switch in his daughter's eye color. She agreed to come right over. The Sheriff didn't mention anything to her on the phone about eye color.

While we all waited in the small room, the Sheriff explained that Miles and I had found the body out in the kelp beds.

The father nodded. "I've been hearing they've been finding a lot of bodies out there lately." He looked at Miles and me. Realizing it would be inappropriate to thank us, he clearly struggled to think of something else to say, then finally settled on asking if we were brothers.

Miles looked startled. "No." He looked over at me, looked over again.

We heard the front doors open. The Sheriff and the father went out into the front room.

They escorted the mother into the back room, where Miles and I still sat in our swimming trunks.

She was a blonde, probably close to her husband's age, but much younger-looking. Someone who exercised at a health club, watched her weight, dressed carefully. Her hair was frosted. She looked like she had come from a party.

The girl's head had been covered up again.

The father stood with his wife in the middle of the back room. He put a hand on her shoulder, looked into her eyes. "Finn, they found our daughter."

"Where is she?"

The father's face crumpled, some tears welled up again, but he kept his voice pretty much in control this time. "Over there."

She tapped slowly on her high heels to the table, to the tarp. Looked back at her husband, at the Sheriff standing at the head of the table. "Here?"

The Sheriff lifted the tarp, showing the head, the frozen expression.

She stared down at the face. We all waited for her to notice the eye color.

She shut her eyes a moment. Opened them. Widened them in disbelief. "That's her."

"Are you sure, Ma'am?"

"I'd know my own daughter."

"Sorry." The Sheriff lowered the tarp.

"Finn? Did you...did you see her eyes?"

She was running her right palm over her frosted hair, perhaps checking to see if it were in place, maybe thinking it would have to be out of place after what she'd just seen.

"Did you see her eyes, Finn?"

"What?"

"Did you see her eyes? Sheriff, would you raise the tarp again, please?"

The Sheriff obliged, looking apologetically at the mother.

She took a step closer, leaned over to look at the staring eyes.

The father hovered alongside her. "They're blue."

"Of course they're blue."

"But..." The father laughed, confused. "She had brown eyes."

She shook her head, walking away from the table. "She had blue eyes. I'd know what color her eyes were."

The father stared at her back, more confused than ever. He finally said, weakly, "They were brown."

The Sheriff waited another moment, then stepped forward. "There's a report that has to be completed."

The father glanced at the Sheriff, still mixed-up. "Of course. I'll--"

"I'll stay." The mother faced the father. "You need to go home. The babysitter's waiting for you."

"I can...I'm perfectly--"

"You go. I'll stay here. The babysitter's waiting.."

The father swung his big arms by his side, face flushed. I saw that Miles was trying to figure out the dynamics of the relationship.

"Sir, your wife can complete the report. Why don't you go home?"

"I...I'm perfectly..."

"Of course. Of course, sir."

The wife looked at her husband. "She's in Heaven now. There's no emotion in Heaven."

We all trooped out to the larger front room. The father gave his wife an awkward hug in front of us, which she didn't really return. Head down, he looked around at all of us. "Well, I'll see you at home, then. Sheriff, thank you." He turned towards me. "Thank you for driving her here, Miles." To Miles he said, "Thank you."

Once the double glass doors were open, we could hear a woman down the block screaming for help, then, desperately, yelling "Fire! Fire!", other voices catching up, silencing her.

The father turned on his way down the three cement steps. "Is that something that should be investigated?"

The Sheriff shook his head.

The father looked back up the steps at the Sheriff. He seemed liked he was going to be angry on the drive home.

"Really? You don't investigate that?"

"I know what it is. It's being taken care of."

After the father drove off, the four of us went back inside and, at the Sheriff's request, into the small back room.

The Sheriff glanced around at us. "Sometimes it gets a detail wrong."

Miles, who had been staring at me from behind the tarp-covered table, looked at the others, then back at me, and, frightened, breathing heavily, said, "Why are you looking more and more like me? Why do you look so much like me now? What's going on?"

I said nothing, stared back.

The mother puffed on an unlit cigarette by the wall, blowing out air into the small room. Stared back.

The Sheriff, standing by the door connecting both rooms, swung the door shut, slid the bolt into place. Stared back.

Miles looked down at the dead girl, her fish eyes, their blue sheen.

Love can be bigger than the world, but sometimes it isn't.

A lot of families don't make it.

Sometimes all that's left, after so much, is that snake stare that says now you're alone, unloved. Like the snake stare rising from the pretty, dead face.

The snake stare that slowly, cell by cell, stared back up with big, brown eyes.