

Backfill

The plan for the development was straightforward enough. A hundred and thirty-seven houses on two parallel streets ending in cul-de-sacs, with two cross-streets connecting them. But nothing was ever as straightforward as it should have been. The site had been a rock quarry in the '50s, filled in as most quarries were with whatever happened to be on hand: tree trunks, chunks of concrete, old tires. A nightmare for excavation, and no better for new construction. Half-a-million-dollar homes, and in three, four years, Robert had no doubt, they'd start to sink. Without foundations ten feet thick they weren't worth a dime.

He'd been on worse jobsites in seven years with Boonton Excavation, or at least worse on a first glance. The rim of a ridge below Pyramid Mountain, with two yards of leeway before a thirty-foot drop-off, and rock that crumbled to bits after blasting. A floodplain in Denville, with the Rockaway River swelling, and mud so saturated you couldn't dig six inches without water seeping through. And his all-time favorite, the grounds of an abandoned chemical warehouse in Troy Hills, where the track hoe turned up barrels of chlorine buried illegally and nearly poisoned the entire crew.

He'd still been down in the ditch then, laying pipe in driving rain or choking heat, doing whatever he was told. When he started he wasn't much older than Walsh, but he never complained about the weather the way Walsh did,

just kept his head down and fit one end of pipe to the next. It was a summer job at first, just after he graduated from Rutgers, a few months after he'd met Lisa. A friend's father did business with the owners of Boonton Ex, who needed bodies for a big sewer project in Parsippany. June through August, and then, if he listened to his parents, he was supposed to find a job vaguely related to his major—anthropology—or start applying to graduate programs.

The classes he'd taken over the past four years — Language of Social Diversity, Prehistoric Archaeology, Gender and Power in Asia — seemed frivolous next to steady wages and a clear purpose to his days.

But he was tired of school by then, and happy to have money in his wallet, and when his superintendent offered to keep him on, he hardly hesitated. The classes he'd taken over the past four years — Language of Social Diversity, Prehistoric Archaeology, Gender and Power in Asia — seemed frivolous next to steady wages and a clear purpose to his days. The simplicity of the job appealed to him. Nothing but numbers: how many hours logged, how many feet of pipe, how much profit for the company. Lisa joked that he was already working in his field, digging in the dirt, studying primitive cultures. She encouraged him to keep the job. It was more real than some

bullshit academic or corporate life, she said, more honest. She was a political science major, writing an honors thesis on Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*. When she graduated she wanted to find a job as a labor organizer. It was sexy to go out with a working man, she said. When he drove down to New Brunswick straight from the job site on Friday afternoons, still in his Carhartts and dusty shirt, pockets full of dirt and pebbles, she'd pull him into the bedroom before he could get in the shower. Sweat turned her on, she told him.

He stayed with the job through the fall and in winter helped with maintenance in the company shop. He never talked back to the foreman or tried to make jokes or ragged on any of the crew. He worked hard to prove he was one of them, never talking about college friends or classes, never mentioning his parents, both teachers, or the house he'd grown up in, a four-bedroom Colonial in Randolph. Even when the mainline digger punched through a gas line and tried to blame it on him, even when his foreman docked him two days for staying out with the flu, even when someone dropped a spool of wire on him and knocked out three of his teeth, even when he hated the job so much he wanted to lie down in the ditch and let the backfill man pour gravel over him, he kept his mouth shut and worked. And if nothing else, he earned a measure of self-respect, something Walsh had probably never heard of.

Now he spent his days above ground, handing down pipe, ordering gravel and sand, mapping out grade, calling in progress reports. Two years ago he'd made foreman, and since then he'd driven the one-ton truck with the Boonton Ex logo to the job site every morning and doled out the day's gear. He ran safety checks and made sure every inch of pipe was up to code. He called for breaks and kept the crew from slacking when they were behind schedule. He took pleasure in telling them when they'd done a good job and whenever possible let them off an hour early on Friday. He was younger than two of his three crew members, but at times he felt fatherly toward them, the responsible head of a family—a little stern, maybe, but always compassionate and always fair. And for two years they'd been the most efficient in the company, hands down, with a profit margin over ten percent. Even these past two months—distracted as he was since Lisa,

without warning, had asked him to move out—they'd always come in under budget and hadn't once finished a job late.

But some things you couldn't anticipate or control or even try to understand. How the developer suckered the county planning commission into letting him build on a former quarry, for example, or why Robert's super, Gordon Millbrook, bid so low, or what made people so stupid as to want houses where they didn't belong. No one else could have made the job pay, and Gordon knew it. Robert bitched him out when he saw the site, but only to himself. "Anybody can handle it, you can," Gordon said. Robert knew false flattery when he heard it, but he thought anyway: Damn right. "We need fifty yards a day," Gordon said.

Lately, when a job was running smoothly, Robert would end up sifting through memories, searching for the moment when his marriage took its recent turn. If he could find it, he could fix it, he thought, the same as a faulty engine belt or a section of broken pipe. But the memories that most often sprang to mind were ones that didn't do him any good—all of them ending with Lisa taking off his clothes and then her own—and after a while he'd think of them less as memory than speculation, imagining how things would be different in a week or a month or a year, after he'd made all necessary repairs, after Lisa asked him to come back.

But now it was a relief not to think about the past or future. The present required all his attention. In good dirt, fifty yards was nothing, but the first day in this pit they made fewer than twenty. Not more than an hour into the job, the shovel hit metal—twisted-up rusted siding that screeched and groaned and, to Robert's delight, sent Walsh ducking for cover. Al eased it out of the ground with the bucket and dropped it at Walsh's feet. "Jesus fucking Christ," Walsh said. "What are we, garbage men?"

"Archeologists," Al shouted over the noise of his track hoe, giving Robert a wink as he swung the bucket back into the ditch. "Another couple feet and we find T. Rex."

"And Bluebeard's treasure," Robert said.

"Yeah," Walsh said. "And Jimmy fucking What's-His-Name."

"You end up in here too, you're not careful," Al said. "Don't you know Rob's connected? The Syndicate, you know?"

"The what?"

"Meyer Lansky. That's his great-uncle."

"Who?"

"Guy that owned Vegas. Didn't you ever see *Bugsy*?"

"If his uncle owns Vegas, what the fuck's he doing running a sewer crew?"

"Careful you don't piss him off," Al said.

"Too late for that," Robert said.

"Wake up one morning in one of these pipes," Al said.

"Drowning in rich people's shit," Robert said.

Al was the best mainline digger in the company. He had a feel for the shovel's teeth, as if his own nerves extended out of the cab and down the length of the boom. He could cut a straight line without any markings, and if he hit a boulder he wouldn't scrape at it, just skimmed the top so Walsh could drill and set the charge. Once he came within inches of taking out cable TV for all of Union Hill, but instead of cutting through he lifted the line—stuck between two of the bucket's teeth like dental floss—moved it aside, and went back to clearing the trench.

He should have made foreman long before Robert had, but he said he preferred it up in the cab of the track hoe, behind the controls. He didn't want to be in charge, didn't want to deal with management and progress reports. He didn't want to park that ugly-ass one-ton in front of his house every night.

But Robert knew better. He understood how Boonton Ex worked. He'd heard the jokes the supers made and knew how the owners voted. Al's full name was Alfonso Colon Cordera, and he lived in Dover, just off Blackwell, with most of the Puerto Ricans in the county. He had five kids and his house needed a new roof, and he could have used the extra pay that came with being foreman. But he was short and dark and had an accent and a silver cap on a front tooth, and not once in ten years had he been offered a promotion.

And still he didn't gripe and whine the way Walsh did, pacing above the ditch, saying, "I'm not getting back in there. It's fucking treacherous."

What did he have to complain about? He was tall and sandy-haired and square-jawed, and he didn't have a name that would hold him back at Boonton Ex or anywhere else. He'd be a superintendent himself while Al's roof sagged over his five kids. Nineteen, and already he drove a pickup that cost twenty-grand and lived alone in a duplex his father had built and paid for, but still he couldn't put in a day's work without moaning about how hard the world treated him, how life was so unfair.

"I'm not getting back in this fucking hole," he said, already climbing down. "I'm no garbage man."

"What are you then?" Robert asked. "Because you sure as hell don't look like a pipe-layer."

"Dude, I lay my pipe all over town. Getting so I can hardly even walk."

The truth was, Walsh did know how to work, even when he was mouthing off. He kept up with Al, something Teo hadn't been able to do at all, something even Robert had struggled with when he was still down in the ditch. Walsh's father was a contractor, and the kid had grown up framing and laying foundation. And it was his father who'd gotten him the job, so he could learn new skills and maybe expand the business. He wouldn't be a foreman or super. He'd be a contractor himself, with a house six times the size of Al's.

Walsh's back bobbed above the surface and then disappeared below, his spine cutting a ridge down the middle of his safety-orange vest, his face lost in clouds of dust, his voice setting Robert on edge. "How many kids you planning to have anyway?" he shouted, loud enough for Al to hear over the rumble of the track hoe's engine and through foam rubber earplugs. "Fifteen? Twenty? No wonder you're always broke. Kids are fucking expensive. My truck's cheaper than a kid. Why do Ricans have so many goddamn kids anyway? You got something against rubbers? Mortal sin or something? I'm a big fan of rubbers. I'll wear two with a girl I don't know. I don't care if I can't

feel as much. I feel plenty. You're not against rubbers, are you, T.? Oh, wait a minute, you gotta get laid once in a while to worry about rubbers. What about you, boss? You cover the stick or go freewheeling? I mean, before your woman kicked you out the house?"

Teo ignored him, and Robert did his best. It was easier for Teo, since he was a dozen yards away, fetching gravel from the dump truck, then pouring and compacting it over freshly laid pipe. The man on backfill was always separated from the rest of the crew, and with Walsh yapping all day, maybe it was a blessing, though usually it led to trouble. It took a certain kind of personality to be off on your own all day, without much contact or oversight, and each of the previous backfill men—Teo was Robert's fourth since making foreman—would start to slip, taking extra smoke breaks, showing up an hour late, spacing out in the middle of a job.

Teo was the oldest on crew, almost forty-four, with a two handed gut and sore joints, but he was solid and steady and never questioned Robert's direction. He'd worked underground construction once before, he said, in his late twenties, up near Albany. What he'd done between then and now he never mentioned, and no one ever asked. But from his tattoos and haggard face, his smoke-roughened voice, a tic in one cheek Robert had seen before in alcoholics, you could guess the kind of life he'd been living. Now he was trying to turn it around, showing up on site before anyone else, occasionally bringing coffee and donuts for the whole crew, always deferring to Robert's authority. He was quiet and solitary, but he had a look he'd sometimes give Robert, a little nod and half-smile partly hidden by his shaggy mustache, reassuring and complimentary, and when he was around Robert felt supported. If anyone was promising backfill material, Teo was, and as soon as the last backfill melted down, Robert was only too happy to shift Teo out of the ditch.

But nothing was ever easy. He'd heard Teo talk about his father maybe a dozen times in two years, mostly offhand, passing mention. "Need to take an afternoon next week, if that's all right. Bring my pop to the doctor." Or, "Didn't sleep for shit last night. Pop was up coughing till two."

On Monday, their second to last day on a storm sewer in Montville—a cakewalk compared to the new job—it had been, “Pop passed last night.”

It was early morning, and Robert was groggy, and the word passed made him think of tests and college and, oddly, of the taste of day-old pizza—and then, no surprise, of Lisa climbing out of bed in that way she had, one foot reaching for the floor, the other resisting, waiting until the last moment to slip out from beneath the sheets. “Passed what?” he asked.

“Long time coming,” Teo said. “But still.” Only then did Robert hear the catch in his raspy voice, the tic in his cheek making one side of his mustache jump. “Funeral’s Saturday. Don’t need no time off. But, you know. Might be rattled some. Not my best. Thought you oughtta know.”

“Want to take a few days?”

“Used up all my vacation already. Can’t afford to lose the pay.”

Just like that, and Robert had something to worry about. He would have liked to put Teo back in the ditch, where he could keep an eye on him, where he might feel taken care of. But Walsh hadn’t trained on backfill, and Robert needed the kid’s speed on the job if they’d have any chance of coming in close to budget. Instead he spent more time than he wanted glancing down the mainline to gauge Teo’s mood, to catch him if he started to slide, as the others had. He found himself watching how Teo pulled his gears, how he wiped sweat from his brow, wondering if he did it differently today than he had before, if there were signs of an impending break. He must have been staring hard enough to tune out Walsh’s banter, and long enough that he lost track of what he was doing.

“Boss! Hey, boss! You forget about me?” Down in the ditch, Walsh was waving both arms over his head. Robert lowered the next length of pipe, and Walsh pretended to hump the end of it. “Falling in love, boss? Need those rubbers after all? Get yourself a little backfill?”

Before he could say anything, or bonk the kid on the head with a wrench, there was a terrible cracking a few yards ahead. The bucket

had hooked an old stump, its roots thicker than Robert's chest. They bent unnaturally and then gave way, small explosions of splinters where they split. Walsh bolted to the surface and paced on the far side of Al's machine. "I'm no fucking garbage man, man," he said. "No way I'm getting back in that hole. No fucking way."

The second day they struggled to make fifteen yards. They spent most of their time pulling shredded tires and reinforced concrete out of their way, and then re-grading the ditch with sand Robert called in and waited three hours for. Walsh bragged about the girl he'd been with the night before, some chick he'd met at a party, he said, no one special. He did her in the bathroom while someone was waiting to use it. "Not much of a face, you know, but dude! Smokin' body. She was wet before I even touched her. Put my pipe right in that mainline."

The day was bright and bleak, and after an hour the insides of Robert's nose had caked with dust. Through it filtered the smell of singed rubber and flinty smoke from sparks. Teo had shown up on site early, as always, and as always he was solid and steady, helping clear the trash when he didn't have gravel to compact. His eyes were glazed but focused, mustache drooping over his mouth, arms working the levers of his backhoe mechanically.

Too solid, Robert thought. Too steady for someone grieving. He'd rather have had him show some sign that this wasn't a normal week, that it was only seventy-two hours until his father's funeral. He tried to imagine the pain Teo was in, or the relief he felt, or the guilt that kept him awake at night. It was part Robert's job to empathize, to anticipate problems, and at lunch he took Teo aside and asked again if he wouldn't be better off taking a day or two away. Teo squinted, pulled up his hard hat, ran a hand through the matted hair beneath. "Don't need me here?" His hoarse voice was choked and uneven. Creases went straight back from the corners of his eyes. His nose was crooked from at least one break. Robert found it disconcerting not to be able to see his lips through the dark bristles covering them. "Doing something wrong?"

"That's not it," Robert said. "It's just ... I'm sure it's a rough week."

Teo nodded and gave that half-smile, which Robert took again to mean that Teo approved of the job he was doing, that he was glad to work for him. Today it seemed to be telling him not to worry about how far behind they were, how much they'd have to do to catch up. "Rather work," Teo said. "Better than sitting around thinking. Pop and me—"

Before he could say more, Walsh was calling, "Shit. Look who's coming."

Gordon Millbrook walked the length of the mainline, shaking his head, wearing khakis and an ironed blue denim shirt, his fresh hard hat spotless and gleaming in the midday sun. "I'm surprised," he said. "I thought you guys could handle it."

"Hey, man," Walsh said, through a mouthful of sandwich. "Why don't you get down in that fucking hole—"

"We'll catch up," Robert said, shooting Walsh a look.

"I don't know," Gordon said. He'd grown tubby in his four years as super, cheeks red and bloated beside his slip of a nose. His frown had a hint of grin in it. "I thought you'd do at least forty a day. This," he said, scratching an ear, squinting up into the sky, "this is just disappointing."

Robert could have argued, could have said it was Gordon's own damn fault for taking the job and bidding too low. He could have made excuses about the crap in the ground and the sand that took forever to show up. But he guessed Gordon might have had other reasons for putting him on this job—to take him down a peg, to level the playing field. It didn't suit the front office to have one crew always show up the rest, especially one run by the only college graduate in the company not already a super. "I've got the sand here now," he said. "We'll make up ground this afternoon."

Gordon lifted his hard hat, ran a hand through hair not matted at all. "I won't hold my breath," he said.

When he was gone, Robert called a quick end to lunch. Walsh groaned and lay back on the ground, pulling his own hat down over his face. "I gotta digest, man," he said, filthy poly muffling his voice.

"You can digest and lay pipe at the same time."

"It's bad for you to start moving right after you eat. Gives you cramps."

"You'll have worse cramps when I jam a pipe in your kidney."

Walsh pulled himself from the ground, mashed his hat on his head, kicked a clod of dirt. "This is an uncivilized profession. No wonder all you guys are total fuck-ups."

At the end of the day, after Robert had loaded the one-ton, after he'd called in his progress report and noted the receptionist's surprise at his low numbers, Al came up to him looking embarrassed, hands behind his back, face lowered. "Not feeling so hot, Rob."

"We'll have a better day tomorrow," Robert said.

"I mean I'm getting sick."

"Chills?"

"Throat," he said. "Head full of mud."

"Just a cold," Robert said.

"I know it's a bad time."

"We need you up there."

"Don't know how good I am like this."

"Better than some on-call guy with his head up his ass."

"You know I care about the crew. Our record."

"Your call," Robert said, with an insistence he was sure Al would understand, and wondered, not for the first time, how often Al imagined running the crew himself, how often he questioned the way Robert went about the job. "See how things look in the morning." Al swallowed, winced. Robert looked out over the clearing, trying to picture a thriving development on top of all this rubble, sprawling houses with hardly any lawn, garages as big as his new apartment. But he saw only graded dirt where streets would go and the beginning of a sewer trench. Anything beyond the present now seemed impossible. He reminded himself he'd made foreman for a reason, that a few setbacks weren't enough to throw him—the same way he reminded himself that nothing was final between him and Lisa, that the future was still open. Only his vision of the future always looked like the past: Lisa greeting him in her New Brunswick apartment, her clothes on the floor before they made it to the bedroom. "We'll catch

up tomorrow," he said. "We've handled worse than this. Remember that job on Vreeland?"

"Trying to forget."

"Or South Beverwyck?" Al shrugged. "We'll catch up."

"If you say so."

"Get some sleep. And if it turns into the flu—"

"I'll see you tomorrow," Al said. He massaged his neck and tried to clear his throat, wincing again. "I leave it to you, you'll fuck up my trench."

Robert showered and put on fresh clothes, but made sure to keep it casual. Clean T-shirt, jeans that had less than three months' wear, new motorcycle boots with only a scuff or two on the heel. He'd sold his bike three weeks ago, but Lisa didn't know that yet. She didn't know he'd quit drinking beer after work, either, or that he'd started reading before bed, first picking up the anthropology texts that had held his interest in college and now put him to sleep, and then moving on to thrillers that kept his eyes open a few minutes longer. He was waiting for the right moment to tell her these things, when it wouldn't sound like pleading, when he wouldn't seem pathetic. Best to let her find out for herself, after he'd moved back in. Best to have her take him as he was, without expectations.

Once a week they had dinner at Marco's on Route 46. He'd agreed to give her space, to meet in a neutral setting. He'd been back in the house only twice in the last two months, most recently on the pretext of searching for a toolbox. Already there were changes. In the living room was a movable rice-paper screen, and on both end tables, floral ceramic vases. At each place setting on the dining room table were a pair of painted chopsticks propped on wooden platforms. From the stereo came piano notes without any melody. Three nights a week Lisa drove to Montclair State to take classes in Japanese language and culture—for work, originally, though now the culture had followed her home. After graduation she had tried to find a job in labor organizing, but no union would hire her without experience or a master's degree. Instead she got a job in the personnel department of a fiber optics firm, most of whose employees were

imported from Japan. After Robert finished digging around in the garage—plenty of tools, but no box—she invited him in for tea, and for a moment he was encouraged. Then she made him take off his boots. The tea was bitter. The music was by Takemitsu, she said. Did he like it? She was thinking about a trip to Tokyo in the fall. She knew he hated to fly.

Marco's was noisy with business dinners and high school kids on their way to the prom, the boys looking somber in tuxes, the girls hysterical in brightly colored satin gowns and carnations pinned to their wrists. He was stuck waiting fifteen minutes in the entryway. On the wall beside him were photos of Marco, the grizzled owner, posing with celebrities he'd served—Robert DeNiro, Ed Koch, Quincy Jones, all looking uncomfortable with Marco's hairy arm draped around their necks.

Lisa was late. She'd made the reservation for seven, but already it was pushing seven-twenty. Nobody eats dinner at six, she'd told him recently, one of the many things she'd decided in the past year. One night a month before he'd moved out she'd insisted they go to Il Capriccio, a price-fixed place with valet parking, where they'd paid an outrageous amount for two bottles of Tuscan wine, which, Lisa said after the third or fourth glass, was better than sex. They hadn't sat down until eight, and she was still sipping at eleven. He had to get up at five. Lately she'd been suggesting they meet for sushi in Morristown, an extra twenty-minute drive, but he stood his ground, claiming a special fondness for Marco's.

The prom kids passed a flask under the table, pouring shots into their cokes. One girl was tanked already, elbow on her bread plate, pink satin drooping off her shoulder. Her napkin fell to the floor. Robert picked it up and handed it to her as the host led him to his two-top, right in the middle of the noisy front room. The girl's dark hair was curled and pinned above her long neck. Her skin was tan even where the strap had fallen away. She had a tiny diamond stud in her nose and a bigger silver one in her tongue. She thanked him when he handed her the napkin, then balled the cloth in her fist and threw it back on the floor. She laughed, loud, and her pasty-faced date tried to shush her. When Robert sat, she waved to him. He raised

a finger, and she laughed harder. Her date shushed her again, and she turned on him, face suddenly pinched and ugly. "I'm not being loud," Robert heard over all the other voices in the room. Then they argued, and he was forgotten.

Lisa showed up at seven thirty-five. He'd already finished half a Peroni and a basket of bread. He'd read the menu four times. "I just can't do seven anymore," she said, slinging her purse over the back of her chair. "The expansion, and classes. I'm lucky some nights if I get out of there by nine."

"You work too hard," Robert said. It was true that some nights she wasn't home at nine, or even nine-thirty. He drove by occasionally, twice a week at most, just to get a glimpse of the place and make sure no strange cars were in the driveway, no Japanese men knocking on the front door. Once he waited until after ten, behind some trees at the end of the block, and then drove home nauseated and shaking. Back in his apartment, surrounded by heaps of laundry, stacks of dirty dishes, a wall of empty Pepsi cans, he dialed their number, ready to leave a long, angry message, calling her out on her lies. He rehearsed as the phone rang. Don't want to hurt me more than necessary? Not going to see anyone until we resolved things? Going to be honest with me no matter what? But then she picked up. "Oh, hey," he said, instead of what he'd planned. "Sorry to call so late. I was just wondering ... Did you maybe see my weight belt around? Maybe in the basement? I'm thinking about taking up lifting again."

"I'm tired, Robbie. Why don't you make a list and bring it Wednesday."

Now she said, "So either we make it later, or make it every other week. Or once a month. Or just figure out something else."

"Later's fine," he said. "I'm flexible."

"I know you've got to get up early."

"I don't need as much sleep as I used to."

"Once a week might be too much for me," she said. "It's hard for me to plan around."

"That's what we agreed on."

“I know what we agreed. I’m saying we might need to make some new arrangement.”

“I’m flexible,” he said again, and picked up the menu, scrutinizing it as if he didn’t know what language it was written in or what purpose it served. “So. The expansion. It’s going okay?”

She told him about all the problems, the offices that weren’t yet ready for the new engineers, departments wrangling over talent, executives trying to micromanage everything. She sounded like the businesspeople at surrounding tables, and looked like them, too, in a gray suit and blue blouse, collar open to expose a wedge of neck and chest. She was professionally harried, hair up in a loose knot, jacket sleeves wrinkled, lipstick perfect. She’d just turned twenty-seven, but she was put together, self-possessed, at once more beautiful and harder looking than when he’d first glimpsed her at nineteen. That was when she’d gone everywhere barefoot and rarely wore a bra, when she twisted her hair into a hundred braids and painted her hands with henna. “I have to remind them they’re just making telephone wires,” she said. “It’s not like they’re changing the world or anything.”

He’d been to her office a dozen times but still couldn’t picture what she did there all day, surrounded by cubicles, oppressed by buzzing fluorescent lights. It made sense that she’d feel stifled, though why she took it out on him rather than her job he couldn’t understand.

The waitress told them about specials, and Robert ordered what he’d known he’d order before he even showed up tonight—chicken in mushroom sauce, a side of fettuccini. Lisa asked about wine and made the waitress stand uncomfortably while she decided on food, finally settling on mussels, something Robert had never seen her eat before. When the wine came he asked if it was better than sex, and when she didn’t answer, said, “Probably been too long to remember.” She smiled, impatiently, and he knew how phony his own laugh sounded.

He asked about the house and the yard and if the bamboo she’d had him plant last spring was getting out of control. He talked about work, reporting all his own problems—Al’s cold, Teo’s dead father,

the super's scolding, the awful ground—and how, starting tomorrow, he was going to attack the job with all his resources, not let anything stand in his way. She pried apart the mussel shells, seeming disappointed to find so little meat in each. He told her about Walsh's stories, most of which he doubted—screwing a girl in the bed of a pickup going ninety down the Turnpike; walking in on a threesome at a party, and without asking, joining in as a fourth; bedding a married bank teller in order to avoid an overdraft charge on his checking account—and soon he had Lisa laughing, shaking her head in disbelief. Her laughter was the one thing he could count on, the thing that had changed the least in the three years since they'd gotten married. It had a ringing quality to it, low notes rising to high, a surprised, delighted sound he'd always felt belonged to him alone, even when he heard it around other people. It left her a little breathless and flushed. He filled her wine glass. She took a sip and said, "It might all be true. Some women can't resist guys in work clothes."

"If I remember right," he said, leaning in, "you used to be one of those."

"Who says I'm not still?"

"You resist me pretty well these days."

"That doesn't mean it's been easy. And if you really want to know," she said, smiling a bashful, mischievous smile, holding up her glass, "no, this isn't better than sex. Not even close."

He waited until she'd drained most of it and then said, "I've been thinking."

"That's new," she said, and laughed again.

"I've been thinking it's time for me to move back in." This time her laughter was forced, and she covered it by lifting the glass to her lips. "I've been thinking we should talk about it."

"Did you come up with that yourself?" she said, in a teasing voice he knew well, slyly defiant, meant to undermine him. "Or did your whole crew have to help you?"

"It's been two months. I don't see how any more time's going to make a difference. To clarify things, I mean."

"Oh, Robbie. Do we have to be so serious? Can't we just enjoy ourselves? It's been a long day."

"Fine," he said. "Forget I said it."

"It's not like it's been easy on me, either," she said. "Two months in a big empty bed."

"Remember when we first got together? We could hardly go two hours."

"Don't remind me."

"And when you were still in New Brunswick, and I'd drive down after work. You wouldn't even let me wash my hands."

"That smell," she said. "It did something to me."

"I still smell the same."

"I'm sure you do."

"Maybe even worse."

The laughter burst from her again, rocking her forward. He would have done anything to hear that sound every day. But he didn't want to show it. He leaned back in his chair, dabbed at his mouth with his napkin. He had to stay focused, determined, unrelenting. She caught her breath and said, "If that's all there was to it—"

"Who says it doesn't have to be?"

He heard the ruckus before he saw its source. Lisa turned around in her chair. The prom kids were getting up from their table, staggering on their way to the limo waiting in front. The girl in pink satin broke away from her date and weaved across the dining room, a shaky line ending at Robert. Her shoes, strappy white sandals with four-inch heels, dangled from one hand. "He," she said, and poked a finger into Robert's shoulder. "He picked up my napkin. He's a gentleman." Then her hand was flat against him, the only thing, he guessed, keeping her from falling into his lap. Her date came to collect her, but she pushed him away. "I'm not gonna fuck him," she said. "No matter what he thinks." She dropped the shoes, clapped a hand over her mouth, and made a run for the bathroom. Her date hurried after her. Lisa watched them all the way to the door. When she turned back, her smile was gone. In its place was the harried, hardened look she'd had when she'd first come in, and she set her wine glass, still a quarter full, on the far side of her plate. "Jesus," she said. "I'm glad I'm not in high school anymore."

"So," Robert said. "What do you think?"

His chance had passed, and he should have let it go. There was no humor left in her voice when she answered. "About what?"

"About me maybe moving back in."

"Oh, Robbie."

"Or maybe I could just stop by some day after work. Before I shower."

"There's more to it than that. You know there is."

"If you met someone else," he said, and felt a rush of blood to his chest and neck, a constriction of some kind, a terrifying ache.

"We've been through this already. It's not about someone else. I've told you that all along."

"I've been taking better care of myself," he said. "I started doing push-ups again."

"Do you think this is easy for me? Do you think I wanted it to happen? It's awful," she said, and her face changed again, red blotches appearing now on her cheeks and chin and below her ears, tears springing to her eyes. She snapped a mussel shell in half and made an odd sound through her nose. For a second he thought she was going to start talking to him in Japanese. "Can you imagine how terrible it is, suddenly realizing you've—and you're going to go completely crazy if you don't—"

"I sold my bike," he said quickly, that ache in his chest solidifying, a longing for the old Black Shadow Lisa had tried to talk him out of buying, for the barefoot girl with braids who would have ridden happily on back, her breath warming his neck.

"It's not about the bike, either. You know it isn't."

"I started reading again," he said. "I might make super next year."

"Look, Robbie," she said, and the expression she turned on him now was so much worse than the cold, distant one he'd come to know over the last year. Her hands folded on the table, her smile sad and sincere, full of pity, her cheeks soaked. "You're right. More time isn't going to make any difference."

In the morning, back on the job site, the sun was too bright. The dust stung his eyes and made his nose itch. The noise of the machines rattled his skull. Lisa had kept him out too late, and he hadn't been able to fall asleep. All night he kept thinking of the way she'd snatched the bill as soon as the waitress dropped it, in-

sisting on paying. Then the brief hug she'd given him in the parking lot before clicking off to her car, in those dress shoes that seemed so foreign to her feet, or else feet that were entirely foreign to him, part of a foreign body—the body of a harried professional he knew only casually, in passing. After her car pulled away, he stood on the blacktop, watching the rumbling limo packed with high school kids, and thought he was on the verge of putting his finger on it, the moment of rupture, the place he could return to and restart. But before it came to him, the girl in pink satin stormed out of the restaurant and pitched headlong into the limo's open door, her pasty-faced date still chasing her down. At home he abandoned his anthropology books and thrillers for the TV, watching until late night shows gave way to infomercials, drinking the beer he'd avoided for weeks. Finally he jerked off, first trying to picture Lisa as she'd been in college, a slim, cheerful, trust-fund hippie with dirty feet; and then, with a measure of shame, the tan high school girl from the restaurant, with the studs in her nose and tongue.

Teo was on site when Robert showed up, and so was Walsh. Al was five minutes late, looking puffy-eyed, with bits of tissue stuck to his upper lip. Robert gathered them together and laid out the plan for the day. If they didn't pick up the pace, he said, Gordon would make them work through the weekend. It was an empty threat, meant to prod them, but right away Walsh started griping. "Bullshit, man. Why don't they bring in a goddamn garbage crew? How the fuck they expect us to go any faster with all this shit in our way?"

"Go home if you don't want to do it," Robert said, the edge in his voice surprising him as much as it did Walsh, whose mouth opened and closed without a sound. "Cry to someone else."

"I'm just saying—"

"You heard me," Robert said. "Go home."

"I know it's not your fault—"

"Ask Daddy for a new job."

"Hey, man—"

"Or shut up and get in the hole."

He did shut up then, for the first time in as long as Robert could remember. Teo shuffled his feet. Al coughed into his hands and wiped them on his pants. Walsh didn't say another word until he was in the ditch. Then he muttered, loud enough for all of them to hear, "Fuckin'

A, man. What's his problem? Just saying it's bullshit we gotta clean up all this garbage. I'm no fucking garbage man. What an asshole. No wonder his woman sent him packing."

Al climbed into the cab of his machine without glancing at Robert. No doubt he was thinking again of how things would be different if he were foreman—that they wouldn't be behind at all, that he'd know how to keep Walsh in line. But he wasn't foreman, and never would be, and Robert was tired of feeling sorry for him and his five kids. Walsh was right. Why have so many if you couldn't afford to put a roof over their heads? Al started to cough again but this time held back, head flinging forward, hand over his mouth, no sound. He straightened, gasped, said, "I'm fine," and started the engine. The track hoe's boom jerked up and then stretched out, the bucket easing down.

Teo hung back until the other two started working. His tic was going like crazy, his beaten face spastic on one side, the other weirdly still, as if it were made out of wood. His raspy voice was hardly more than a whisper. "This weekend," he said. "Pop's funeral."

"And?" Robert said.

"Saturday," Teo said. "I can't work."

"What am I? Fucking babysitter? Work if you want. Take a hike if you don't." Teo blinked and ran a hand over his mustache, down his chin. Sour spit filled Robert's mouth, and he turned aside to hock it in the dirt. "Look, T.," he said, but Teo had already turned away, heading for his machine. "We'll catch up," Robert called after him.

And they did start to catch up. By lunchtime they'd made twenty-two yards. In the early afternoon Al was tearing through the mess of dirt, filling a dump truck with concrete and rock and rusted metal, the clanking rhythmic now, the smell of damp earth stronger than that of dust or smoke or rubber. Walsh was laying pipe and talking nonstop, telling them about another girl, or maybe the same girl he'd told them about the day before. "I don't know, man, some dudes like a big ass. Better the cushion and whatever. Not me. I like a tiny little ass. I'd fuck a skeleton if I could. I bet you're a big ass type, huh boss? I know Al is, all them Ricans are. What about you, T.? You like a big can?"

But there was no way Teo could hear. He was working the plate compactor, pounding gravel down into the trench, covering up their

work so no one in the half-million-dollar homes would ever know they'd been here. And now Robert could see it. The gaudy development, tasteless houses with white brick facades, imported luxury cars pulling into enormous garages, overpaid professionals—like Lisa, like her parents—walking beneath vaulted ceilings, all of it slowly sinking into the rubble. He found himself arguing silently with Lisa as he lowered pipe to Walsh, thinking how unfair it was for her to have wanted one thing all those years ago, and then to suddenly want something else. Why couldn't she have changed her mind after that first summer, when he'd still had the chance to do something different? Where would he be now if she hadn't liked the smell of his sweat so much?

An hour before quitting time, Gordon Millbrook stopped by to check on them. The smug satisfaction disappeared from his pudgy face when he saw how far they'd come. Robert walked him down the length of the mainline and back, more than forty yards. "We're getting there," Robert said. "Longer I talk to you, the less I get done."

He decided that from now on he was going to recognize his mistakes as soon as he'd made them, and when Gordon's truck pulled away, he left the ditch and went back to talk to Teo, to give him a supportive word or two. But Teo had his sunglasses on, earplugs in, head down, guiding the plate back and forth over the mainline. He didn't hear Robert call or see his waving arms. This wasn't a place for grief, Robert thought. Not a place for feelings of any kind. He'd send Teo home and do the backfill himself, punch his time card for him so he wouldn't lose the pay. He could feel the vibration of the plate from ten yards away, up through his feet, all the way into his jaw. Fifty years after all the gravel had been dug out of this hole, and now they were putting it back in. It struck him as stupid and sad, the endlessness of it, digging holes and filling them, digging and filling. His whole adult life so far, surrounded by foul-mouthed kids and hopeless drunks and illiterate drifters. He was one of them now, though why he'd ever wanted to be, he now had no idea.

Robert called out again, and this time Teo switched off the machine. He took out an earplug, pulled off his sunglasses, shaded his eyes with a hand. His face seemed different, something about the wrinkles around his mouth or the set of his jaw. The tic was still. The tattoos on his arms were so faded they looked like ground-in

dirt. Before Robert could apologize, he said, "About Saturday. I been thinking."

"Yeah, man, about that. I didn't mean—"

"Thinking I'll work if we need to."

"No way we're working Saturday," Robert said. "Fuck Gordon, okay?"

"Don't need to see the asshole into the ground. Said goodbye enough already."

It was a strange thing for him to say, and stranger still was how uneasy it made Robert that he'd choose to say it to him, as if he'd mistaken him for someone else. The ground still trembled, even though the compactor was silent. The trees at the edge of the clearing seemed to wilt under the late afternoon sun. "Maybe you need a few days," Robert said. "I'll make sure you get paid. Gordon doesn't need to know anything about it."

"I tried," Teo said, and gave that half-smile, only now it didn't seem to have anything to do with Robert or the job he was doing, and he wasn't sure it ever had. "Thought I could make up for all that old shit. Come back here and take care of him, but he doesn't thank me once. Just lays there and dies."

There was something incongruous about what Robert was hearing—not just the words but the raspy sound of Teo's voice, which seemed to scratch and burn its way out of his throat. He was still waiting for something that made sense, a simple break like he'd seen with those who'd come before. "Look man," he said. "I know I've been hard on you guys. It's not about your work. You know, Gordon ... And this shit with Lisa..." He wanted to stop himself. It was all so out of place with these big ugly machines, with the deep gouge in the yellow-brown dirt. "How are you supposed to come to work and do what you've got to do when something like that ... like your father ... A few days would do you good."

Teo put his sunglasses back on. He replaced the earplug and kept his hand there, cupped against his head. "Clocked me once so hard my ear rang three days," he said, and came out with a scratchy little laugh. It was the first time Robert had heard him laugh, and it was so unexpected it sent a shudder through him. "Nearly burst the drum. Motherfucker. Can't tell you how many times I wished he'd croak."

Here it was, Robert thought, the breakdown he'd been waiting for, that always came, no matter how solid someone seemed. But Teo only gave him that odd smile again, and now Robert had the feeling that it was a condescending smile, that meant Teo thought Robert had no idea what he was doing. The backhoe's engine started up, and the compactor pounded down. The vibration made his ears hum, but along with that sound was another, unfamiliar, like tires screeching, only higher pitched. At the end of the mainline, something was wrong. A tooth of the track hoe's bucket had hooked an old cable, three inches thick, rusted and caked with dirt. This time Walsh didn't jump at the sound. Al didn't seem to hear it either. Robert wondered if his own ears were tuned to a different frequency, like a dog's. And then the sound was lost to him, too, as the drumming of the compactor came closer.

Both ends of the cable disappeared into earth, and as the bucket rose, it tented over the ditch and stretched like the band of a slingshot. Walsh's head was a few feet from it, bobbing above ground and then below, lips moving. His vest was bright and useless, the utility board's slogan on its back—*Dig Smart New Jersey!*—a stupid joke. Safety-orange, Robert thought, picturing all those dark suits Lisa had on both sides of her closet now, spreading across the space where his own clothes had been. What made a color safe?

He waited for Al to set the cable aside, gently, as he did everything. But Al's face was puffy and red, his eyes slits, and the boom and bucket kept rising, turning toward the dump truck, the cable straining against it, lifting from the dirt but not releasing. Robert couldn't help feeling sorry for him again, having to watch a white college kid get promoted into the job that should have been his, for the five children who would grow up poor and brown and without much chance in the world. Compassion had no more place here than grief, and neither did pity, but now he felt sorry for Walsh, too, this kid who had everything he wanted, sex and money and cars, who never worried about anybody but himself, talking on and on about women who lusted after him, who saw nothing in him but his tan neck, his muscled arms, his sweaty chest—and him thinking that was all he needed.

The boom stretched against the taut cable, the ground shook beneath Robert's feet, and his knees felt sore and fragile. He'd seen

so much trouble in seven years. Guys falling into ditches, breaking arms and legs. Eyes taken out by zinging rocks. One pipe-layer, who electrified himself on live power, singed off all his hair but lived. His own hard hat had a dozen dents and dings, any one of which could have meant his skull if it hadn't been covered. In his lower jaw were three crowns where those teeth had been knocked loose by the falling spool of wire. He'd never found out who dropped it, but he'd carry the mark of it for the rest of his life, while Lisa would walk away unscathed.

He could picture her, asleep in his college bed, naked under a damp, twisted sheet, one dirty foot dangling over the edge of the mattress. His memories were full of pictures like these, but he wouldn't find the moment that would give him answers—or else he'd find it in such abundance that the answers wouldn't matter. Part of him had known this all along. He'd tried to build something stable on the flimsiest of foundations, taking for granted that his hopes for it would be enough to keep it standing—though as Walsh's head rose once more, as Teo shut off the compactor and shouted, as Al checked the movement of the boom and eased it away from the dump truck, it seemed to him that all ground was shaky, that nothing in the world was solid. And this comforted him enough that by the time Al set the cable safely on the ground he already forgave himself for the way his feet were planted, his mouth shut, his mind clear and eager, waiting for the snap.

Scott Nadelson is the author of two story collections, The Cantor's Daughter, recipient of the Reform Judaism Fiction Prize and the Samuel Goldberg & Sons Fiction Prize for Emerging Jewish Writers, and Saving Stanley: The Brickman Stories, winner of the Oregon Book Award for short fiction and the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writers Award. His work has appeared in Ploughshares, Glimmer Train, Alaska Quarterly Review, Post Road, Arts & Letters, American Literary Review, Puerto del Sol, and elsewhere.