

# THE SCALPEL

H E S T O O D B Y the bed while the phone kept ringing. The machine picked up and he waited through his outgoing message, and when he heard the caller he walked over.

“Linda, how are you,” he interrupted after picking up the receiver.

“Oh, *hi*.” She was startled. “And here I am giving this whole speech.”

“I just got out of the shower.”

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“Uh huh.”

“So you’re *not* calling for Catherine. I mean you *know* she’s not here.”

“Look—are you all right? I was thinking I should be worried or something but you don’t need all that crap.”

“No, no, no,” he soothed her. “I’m fine.”

“Oh really?”

“Well, killing yourself is so *drastic*—and I can’t really think of an intermediate step.”

“Would you just come out tonight? I mean it,” Linda said. “Diana and James are having this thing—you know, she finally got her license or whatever, so we get to have one of his big dinners.” Outside the window a man was unloading dry cleaning from the trunk of a car, while a woman waited—the man had very short hair and it could have been the distant past except for the Italian suit. “Bentley?”

“I don’t know *why* I said I’m fine,” Bentley told her. “It’s so strange—you just reminded me of someone, that’s all.”

“Stop it, Bentley.”

“No, not Catherine—somebody else, from a long time ago.”

S I X Y E A R S B E F O R E , in a different city, he had seen her for the first time at five in the afternoon. It was late summer and he remembered the refrigerated coffee grounds, the no shoes—in a bathrobe, he had stared out the kitchen window, an hour before going to work, his hair still wet. He could see the tops of the shrubs

in the courtyard and the clean bricks of the next house, and a band of fading sky, and then the door to one of the vacant apartments opened and she walked out onto the fire deck.

She had short black hair and dark eyes and she leaned against the wooden railing with her fingers jammed in her pockets, her sweatshirt catching the last of the sun. She stood without moving for minutes, staring at the surrounding walls, and when she turned around she caught a glitter of movement and realized she was holding something in her hand—it looked like a magic wand in a children’s story—before she went back inside.

L A T E R H E H A D sat in the coffee shop facing Danny, who always wore a faded blue windbreaker. Students had carved the edges of the tables with lines and circles, but no names—the carpet was worn out and badly tacked down and the shop had a Gothic gloom that everyone endured. “I’m getting this *vibe* that nobody likes me any more,” Danny said, staring at the Xeroxed document he’d brought. “Five years with these people and every time I pass this thing around they’re ready to kill me. Don’t you have to go?”

“In a couple minutes,” Bentley said, suppressing a yawn. “Keep talking.”

“Nothing—I’m just increasingly getting tired of these, you know, *constraints* governing what direction I’m supposed to take it,” Danny said, tapping a mechanical pencil against his knee. “I mean, deferring to all these political agendas”—he had made quotation marks with his fingers—“when we know its just these goddamn *mood*

*swings* they get.”

“Everyone has that with the doctorate,” Bentley said, not really listening. He had seen the woman from the back porch sitting down with a man in a blue baseball cap, over where the windows were brightest. “When *you* start teaching, it’s—you’ll do the same thing; it’ll be *you* having the bad night and then making them read *Theaetetus* or whatever.” Her hair was longer than he’d thought, brushing her eyes, and her teeth shone in the sun like broken glass.

“Well, how do you know?” Danny squinted across his paper cup, shaking a sugar packet. “Maybe I’m the guy who does everything differently.”

“Maybe you are.”

“What the hell are you looking at?” said Danny, twisting to follow Bentley’s gaze.

“Is that, um, what’s-his-name—”

“What—you mean Winter?” Danny pointed at an overweight, red-headed man in a shirt the color of barley. “He just got the grant for—”

“No, behind all those guys. Put your arm down—”

“Sitting cross-legged? With the cap? That’s, you know, Todd something.”

“Right—” Bentley brushed his hair back before standing. “I’ll be back in a second.”

“Who’s *she*?” Danny said, peering at the other table.

I R E M E M B E R W H E N you came over,” Amy said, her hair brushing his ear

as she spoke. “Wanting a cigarette.” Her hand was clenched against her leg, out of his view.

“Not even that—wanting a *light*. Did I give everything away?” Bentley moved his head to gaze past her at the rusted bicycle wheels and chrome chains hanging from kitchen windows in the other building, across the paved lot. They sat pressed together on her leather bench that had once been the back seat of a Volkswagen and the afternoon breeze made the chains knock together.

“Well, I knew you didn’t want to talk to *Todd*,” she said. “I mean *I* didn’t even want to talk to him, and there you are crossing the room—”

“I did a pretty good job.” He moved his arm so his thumb could stroke her neck, and her shoulder tightened—her outside thigh rolled to cover her clutching hand as she pressed her head to his chin. “I only had a minute—my shift was about to start. I still had that damn library gig. I was faking everything, talking but looking at you.”

“I don’t remember.”

“You were polite. You said hello.”

“What did *you* say?”

“Something about Are you a student,” Bentley said. “I did *not* go for the obvious and ask why you were carrying that thing around.” He squeezed her shoulder, pointing down at her hand.

“*Yeah*, ’cause you would have looked like an idiot.” She leaned back against

him, putting her ankles on the wooden rail. “And you *really* went and asked Todd about me.”

“I thought you were so pretty.”

Amy leaned her head on Bentley’s arm and looked past the rafters into the fading sky. “But you never said you’d seen me before.”

“No. Out *here*, you mean? No.”

“I don’t know,” she said suddenly, knocking his leg with her wrist. “I don’t *know*—I mean, do you always have a whole plan? Like, *stalking* the girl and then this fake surprised reaction?” She smiled. “Tell me—I could *hurt* you with this thing.”

“What do you mean? It was spontaneous—I just couldn’t believe that *smile*. You came out here smiling.”

“I didn’t know anyone could *see* me,” said Amy, stretching her legs out straight. “I was happy.”

“Just for no reason?”

“Yeah,” Amy said, nodding. “I told you—I’m the happiest person I know.”

A L L T H E G O D D A M N time I’ve lost,” Bentley told Linda across the back of the taxicab. He was still finishing the can of beer he’d bought in front of her house.

“I understand.”

“No you don’t.” He watched the numbers of the buildings. “All right, maybe you do. Listen—”

“I haven’t heard from Catherine.” Linda was fiddling with the cellophane wrapping on the flowers. “If she’s there, then you’re with me—and don’t tell me it’s so implausible.”

“Okay.”

They passed a delivery truck parked beside a brightly-lit newsstand and Bentley saw stacks of tomorrow’s sections being unloaded onto the sidewalk. “Are we, like, *anywhere near* where we’re going?” Linda asked—Bentley watched her peer forwards at the meter.

“I think so,” he said.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” said Linda, reaching for the beer can. “*Never* surround yourself with artists.”

“Why not?”

“Cause they get *pissed off* when things work out right,” Linda explained. “Cause they don’t care. They’re not artists—it’s just a big cocktail party.”

“You ever think of people you could call?” he asked. “From long ago? From school?”

“What’s *with* you, anyway?” Linda said, leaning her head comically on his shoulder. “Your mind’s a million miles away someplace.”

“The next corner’s fine,” Bentley called out to the driver.

T H E S T A C K S G O T locked at three in the morning and Bentley waited for the research materials to get returned and then closed the reserve desk, arguing with

an undergraduate who wanted to take a sheet of slides home. He punched out while holding all the magazines under his arm, dropping them, and the bus he took had no lights on the inside. The sky was amber, like daylight on another planet, and the floodlights on passing gas stations pushed shadows across the passengers' eyes.

In the kitchen, making eggs, he stared at the black window towards her balcony, seeing nothing, and while the water boiled he wrenched the back door open and stood barefoot on the wooden deck, watching the drawn curtains in her kitchen, the single overhead bulb over her door shining in the humidity. She had a back seat from a car under the window, and he wondered when she'd put it there, and if anyone had helped.

Bentley set his clock radio for five P.M., knowing he had committed himself to a life of strategy and mistrust and wondering how it had happened. The bedroom window was braced open by old phone books and the early morning wind was silent as he slept, but a dream bothered him and he woke up late in the morning, making oatmeal as the last of the schoolchildren raced across the park.

At six that evening she came out onto the balcony with a purple ceramic coffee mug and a magazine under her arm, smiling lightly, like remembering a joke. She turned around to close the door and Bentley watched her from his darkened kitchen and saw that she still had the thing in her hand—he went to brush his teeth and changed into another shirt before going back, turning on the kitchen lights and pulling the door open.

“Hi,” he called out, lifting his chin. She was on the car seat, in the middle of turning a page. The air was warmer than before but rain was coming.

“Amy,” he called louder. She looked up from the newspaper, staring straight ahead and finding him when he waved.

“Hi,” she said, shading her eyes with one hand. “Oh, it’s *you*. Todd’s friend.”

“Do you live here?”

“I’m subletting.” She closed the paper, pulling her bare feet up onto the bench and reaching for the purple mug. “Your name is—”

“Bentley, like the beautiful car.”

“Ha ha.”

“Did I ask if you were a student?”

“I think you probably did.”

His kitchen door slid shut behind him, making him feel for his keys. Looking back at her across the courtyard, he saw that she hadn’t opened the paper again. “You know”—he hadn’t expected to walk forward and lean on the balcony, squinting in the overcast sun, watching her shield her eyes—“It’s *nice* out here. I’m glad there’s someone I know in the—in the same place.”

“It’s all right,” she said, squinting. “I mean for the time being.”

“I have to go.” He had faked a look at his watch. “Listen, I work at the library—maybe I’ll see you.”

“Maybe you will.”

It had to look like he'd left, so he got into bed, finally falling into the heavy sleep he'd missed, but at five in the morning the clock radio went off—he'd set it backward—and he lay in the darkness clutching the sheets as the songs played, looking high up through the window at the early morning rain.

B E N T L E Y ! C O M E O N in," Diana said, leaning to kiss his cheek as he handed her the flowers. She had pulled her hair back to flatter the collarless linen jacket she wore. "Don't worry about Catherine—she's not coming."

"Thanks," he said, taking off his raincoat and pointing over his shoulder at Linda. "I *told* her we didn't have to do this."

"Well, *Doctor* Griffith!" Linda marveled, hugging Diana. "Congratulations—does it make you feel powerful?"

"I have to admit," said Diana. She was leading them towards the other guests. "This was *your* idea, arriving together, right?"

"Well, you've got to *plan* these things. Hi, James!"

"Look who's here," James announced, putting his drink down. He wore a corduroy jacket and the track lights reflected from his forehead. "I'm explaining what the problem is."

"He's so pissed off all the time," said the unidentified woman standing beside him.

"No, I'm trying to tell you—there's a *finite amount* of fame," James insisted, after kissing Linda's cheek. "They're going to *run out* before they get to us—we're all

screwed.”

“Oh, *God*, yeah,” Diana was telling Bentley, while several other people entered the room. “It’s just like anything else, you know—you start out so *earnestly*. I spent *hours* practicing sutures, tying them on the end of a clipboard. I can’t get rid of any of that stuff.”

“If I hear one more sentence with the word ‘gender’ in it I’m going to hit someone,” said the unidentified woman.

“So you’ve got one,” Bentley said.

“Sure—hang on and I’ll go get it.”

I T ’ S A S C A L P E L , ” Amy told him. “A surgical scalpel.”

“I thought so.” They lay side by side on her bedroom floor while snow filled the skylight and she had stopped crying—he had complimented her eyes and found out she wore colored contacts.

“I’m not very good at this,” she said, rolling against him. “Explaining, I mean.”

“I don’t think anybody is.”

“But I want to be an *actor*,” she said.

“What—that’s faking things, not, you know, *exposing* yourself.”

“It’s both.”

They had their shirts off and he took her shoulders and pulled her toward him so her face knocked softly against his neck. “I don’t talk about it—but it’s just this dumb thing. My brother wanted to go to medical school,” she said, her voice muffled

by his shoulder.

“Oh,” he said. “You don’t mean—”

“*Yes*, I mean him.” She was squeezing his shoulders toward him very hard and he felt her arm move as she touched her face. “My parents thought it was the greatest possible thing.”

“Because it’s the best job?”

“Because he *knew*. I mean, *exactly* where he was going—he was only fourteen but he suddenly decided to be this particular kind of surgeon that he always had to look up ’cause he forgot the word.”

“I’m sorry,” he said honestly. “So it happened after he—”

“*Right* after—he’d started buying the stuff. I mean he was completely determined about the whole thing.” He let her go and she rolled away from him and stared up at the smoke detector, reaching for the scalpel without looking. “So everything was on his desk the night of the—during the—right after it happened, you know, and I ended up bringing this to the service. I mean, it’s not even *missing* him, it’s—”

“Can I see it?”

She handed him the scalpel and he turned it over in his hands, a thin rod of surgical steel with a plastic guard clipped over the disposable blade.

“I *know* it’s somebody else’s thing, but he— I guess it’s just this dumb idea I had about *going* somewhere,” she said. “Moving forward, something about moving

forward.”

“To some destination.” He handed back the the scalpel.

“Like I said.”

BENTLEY AND TODD were standing at Diana’s dining room window with their drinks. The other guests were in the kitchen, and Bentley could hear Linda and James laughing at somebody’s joke.

“I remember her,” Todd said. “The girl who carried the knife around.”

“That’s right.” Bentley was peering downwards, watching the ferry cross the river.

“My God—you *did* have a thing with her.”

“Briefly, yeah.”

Bentley could see Todd’s shirt reflected in the glass.

“You know, I never actually *asked* her why she had that thing,” Todd said. “I guess it was pretty obvious.”

“You think so?”

“Look, I lived out there *too*—I remember what it felt like, walking around at night,” Todd said. “I hope she never had to use it.”

Diana was emerging from the bedroom hallway, her heels clicking on the floor. Bentley finished his drink and turned around as she came over.

“I can’t seem to find it,” Diana said, frowning as she buttoned her sleeve. “It’s the funniest thing—I could have sworn I had one.”

“Thanks for looking,” Bentley said. “It wasn’t important.”

When he got to bed he found himself gripping the sheets—the night is short;  
the destination waits.