The Pear Orchard

By Cary Holladay

Twenty-eight years had passed since Elvis Presley died, but people could still point to his room at Baptist Memorial Hospital. The now-dilapidated building was scheduled for demolition on Sunday, November 6, 2005. Vince Johnson, interim director of Memphis's personnel department, doubted it was truly empty. Surely a gurney was rattling down one of its hundreds of corridors. From his top-floor downtown office, Vince had a clear view of BMH and its weedy lot. His house was two miles away, in midtown, close enough he might feel the vibrations or even hear the implosion. If he wanted to, he could watch the whole thing from his office.

Now it was summertime, but he felt the clock ticking toward November.

He was forty-four, single, and childless, a city employee for nineteen years. Memphis's government had been fully integrated for a long time, but his mother remembered when the entire administration was white; in fact, well into her adulthood, Blacks were allowed to go to Memphis's parks, zoo, and swimming pools only on certain days. As a child, she had stood in the street to observe May Day celebrations in Overton Park, where young white girls wearing long gowns danced around a lake.

Never mind all that now, she said, with a lift of her eyebrows that indicated the dance was silly. Every time you look back, make sure you look ahead.

She and Mr. Allen, Vince's recently deceased boss, who was one of the first Blacks to hold a top position in Memphis government, had encouraged Vince in his career.

Vince loved the vista from his office—the clotted traffic, the ballpark. He'd been born at Baptist; was that why his heart ached? He took to favoring the window that faced the Mississippi River. Barges loaded with coal and freight crawled south to New Orleans and north to Minnesota, where the headlands were said to be a trickle. He imagined ships beached in snowy fields. From a distance, a barge was a slow-moving stick of gum pulled by a toy tugboat, yet when he grew busy with his work and looked again later, they'd be gone. He was overcome by the fear that barge and tug had sunk and the crews were drowning in floating debris—trees, buoys ripped from moorings. This grief was new, taking him unawares. His forty-fifth birthday would coincide with the hospital's demolition.

One August evening, he found himself aboard a riverboat, its sidewheel spinning, its deck full of merrymakers. His secretary, June Bradshaw, had chartered it for her wedding reception. Late sun scorched his head, his voice felt wild and hoarse, and his brain spun from the sticky drinks.

“Cash bar, June?” he said, annoyed.

She shrugged. A band called Break Up Dan—her kind of humor—played dance music. A starry-eyed mermaid shimmied into his arms, and, startled, he felt his spirits soar. He introduced himself and asked for her name.

“Ronnie,” she said.

“Where’d you come from? My dreams?”

After a few turns around the dance floor, she slipped away. He sought out June.

“Who was that woman?”

“Veronica Sapelo,” June said. “Ronnie Sapelo, a dispatcher at Fire. I didn’t think she could make it. She works nights.”
“She looks like the Ronnie in the Ronettes. Ronnie Specter.”

“I know. The hairstyle, the eyeliner, but without the sass. Sweet, though.”

June cocked a hip and bobbed a knee.

“Be my…” she belted out, “be my baby,” motioning him to join in.

Until now, Sapelo, Veronica had been only a name on the employee rosters in Vince’s office: eight thousand names. Veronica Sapelo, of Fire. Vince mopped his brow.

June grinned in a way she had.

“More than a mote, Chief?” She’d seen him infatuated before, seen him suffer and recover as if the feeling were no more than a speck in his eye. “Go talk to her,” she said. “Meek is weak.”

“Is she married?” he said, recalling a Sapelo, Joseph E. on the rosters, in Engineering.

“Separated. She kicked ol’ Joe to the curb.”

A commotion arose at starboard. The bridegroom, a hotshot in Legal, was making a show of trying to jump off the boat. His buddies grabbed his arms and held him back. June ignored them. Generosity moved Vince to write a large check to the new husband and wife, but the groom’s antics irked him. He tore it up and made out another check for the same amount, but only to June, and handed it to her. Yawning, she slipped it into a beaded purse.

“Thank you. Now it’s your turn to give a party,” she said. “You’ve got your pool.”

“I never have time.”

“You have time.”

Vince’s mother, Marie Morton Johnson, was sitting on deckchairs with other women her age. June had sent a limo to her retirement home. Marie waved June over. They were great friends. Vince sought out Ronnie Sapelo and danced with her again. This was one of the things he loved about Memphis, that you could slow-dance with somebody you’d just met. Ronnie’s hair smelled like incense. They dipped and swayed, and she closed her eyes and tipped her chin. Was this really happening? Head whirling, he leaned down for a kiss. Her mouth tasted of sugar and limes.

“May I see you again? May I take you home?” he said when he caught his breath.

“Oh, that’s all right. I have my car.”

A smile, and she was gone. By the time the boat returned to the dock and he stumbled ashore, he was a lost man, the evening breeze burning his cheeks. He’d bitten his lip while chewing shrimp on a skewer. His heart felt skewered: that was the major symptom of his new and urgent condition, Ronnie Sapelo beating through his veins. A couple hours on fresh water was hardly a voyage, yet he swayed on sea legs, treading waves.

While June honeymooned in the Virgin Islands, Vince was caught in the brooding that had gripped him since the wedding. He looked up Veronica Sapelo’s address and tried to forget it. He pored over her social media. She’d been with the city for three years. Ronnie Sapelo, night shift. If they got together, how often would he see her? Could the sun abide with the moon?

He met with labor union reps and breakfasted with the mayor and division directors, never mind the pounding heart that felt like part of a permanent hangover. Always, there were complaints from employees, mostly women reporting misconduct by men. If they were distraught, he recommended professional counseling. He informed them of the procedures they would need to follow, and he explained the rights that would be extended to those they accused. The offenders weren’t always coworkers or

bosses. They could be subordinates or third-party vendors.
He came up behind me and...

Backed me up against the wall and...

Vince held an MBA and a master's degree in psychology. For nineteen years, he had worked under the former director, Mr. Louis Allen.

Sometimes people lie, mm-hmm, Mr. Allen had said.

He had only an associate's degree from a community college, but he possessed the accumulated wisdom of fifty years' service to the city. When a police secretary had accused a high-ranking detective of raping her, Mr. Allen insisted on an investigation. Mr. Allen suffered the mayor's skepticism and a personal lawsuit filed by the detective, but he prevailed.

I take no pleasure in it, Mr. Allen said when the detective was convicted in court and sent to prison.

Mr. Johnson, Mr. Allen had said, can you tell when a person is lying?

And Vince said, No, I believe everything people tell me, and Mr. Allen laughed till he cough-choked. Always, cigarettes in his pocket. He'd smoked outside, but even now, six months after he'd left, his office still smelled of his Newports.

If a gal says a guy done something, Mr. Allen said, I generally believe he done it.

Vince had not automatically become director when Mr. Allen retired. That post was currently open. Another year might pass before the mayor would decide whether or not to promote Vince; change at the top came slowly, and there was no seeking out Mr. Allen for advice: lung cancer had killed him mere weeks into retirement. He was survived by his beautiful white wife, Charlotte, and their fragile, disabled son, Charley, who was a year or two older than Vince. Charlotte's famous blonde hair had silvered. When she and Mr. Allen had wed, long ago, interracial marriages were rare.

They can't stand each other, June had whispered when Mr. Allen was alive, and Vince understood that a once-great passion had cooled to ice.

He rang the bell of Charlotte's townhouse, and when she answered, he handed her a bouquet of carnations.

"Just checking on you," he said. "I miss him."

She accepted the flowers.

"Louis was proud of you."

Yet her tone was frosty-like. Maybe she thought he'd had it too easy. Mr. Allen had had to battle so hard, whereas Vince must seem like one spoiled, lucky pup.

Behind her, Charley was coming toward him.

"Vince, hi! Want to watch TV? There's lions on TV."

"Sure," he said over Charlotte's shoulder.

"We're busy, Vince," she said and closed the door.

One of the least congenial aspects of Vince's job was informing victims of intimidation that bullying per se was not illegal. A pattern of bullying and harassment was a different story, and was prohibited if the recipient were in a protected category.

Document the incidents, Vince advised.

He emphasized he was not a lawyer. He had to protect the city, although he never said so to the unhappy employees who sought his help. He had to keep the city out of lawsuits; the city signed his paycheck.

Poker face, Mr. Allen had advised.

Sometimes there were no consequences.

Know when to let sleeping dogs lie, Mr. Allen said.

"You have to write something down," Vince told complainants, but often they didn't want to, and instead simply left, their names disappearing from the employment rosters.

A hurricane struck the Virgin Islands, and he worried that June would be blown out to sea. On Sunday, he picked up his mother at her re-

tirement community and took her to church, and afterwards, to lunch at a cafeteria she liked. As they carried their trays to a table, she spoke to other diners. She knew hundreds of people, having clerked at the Park Commission for over thirty years, from the time he was in kindergarten, which was when his father had died of a heart attack, until she'd retired at sixty-five. Vince remembered his father, an insurance salesman, as a coppery, heavy-cheeked man, quiet as a shadow. His parents had separated when he very young, but they'd stayed married; he didn't know why. They were of another generation. Old courtesies were observed at town hall meetings, where the head of Public Works would begin a report on rats and mosquitoes with an apology for the unpleasantness of the subject. There were prayers at town hall meetings, led by a minister of one or another denomination, and a blessing before the breaking of bread that followed. While citizens feasted on ribs and spaghetti, paid for by a council member's budget, that official would circulate among the tables, finding out what was going on in homes and schools and streets, asking for support and granting favors. Vince's mother had urged Vince to run for city council.
He demurred, but he was aware of himself as part of a century-old bureaucracy, going back to the days when the city's architects drew maps on linen.

Now, at the cafeteria, he followed his mother to her favorite table.

"Any news?" she said, meaning his promotion. "I'll call Eddie." The mayor.

"Mama, no."

She pressed a napkin to her lips and made a characteristic trill, a faint hum that prefaced her remarks.

"You need to be out there shaking hands and making friends. And?"

She waited until he looked up from his steak.

"They'd rather have a married person. Shows stability."

"Mama..." When he was younger, finding girlfriends was easy. Now there was nobody, hadn't been for a long time, and he couldn't exactly count Ronnie Sapelo.

"June would have been perfect."

She stabbed her fork into her banana cream pie.

A clerk named Gina Traylor seated herself gingerly beside his desk, glanced around the glass walls of his office, and rolled up her sleeves to reveal bruises so distinct, it was as if ghostly hands still gripped her arms.

“He said come to a meeting,” she said, “but when I got there, it was just him.”

She named her director, a silver-haired dandy from Chicago whose major concern at the time of his hiring, Vince recalled, was his clothing allowance, much to Mr. Allen’s private scorn.

“Now what?” Gina Traylor said, her eyes as wide as if she hadn’t blinked since the incident.

“I’m sorry this happened to you. I can’t do anything unless you write it down.”

Vince handed her a form.

“I advise you to file a police report.”

Her eyes implored him.

“I’ll talk to him,” he said.

But he didn’t. His brief connection with Ronnie Sapelo had left him overwrought and feeling wronged. The feeling was wrong in itself, but it had taken up residence in his heart, like the New Madrid Fault crouching in west Tennessee’s seismic earth.

Let a little time go by had been another of Mr. Allen’s maxims.

Yet Mr. Allen always pursued a meanwhile. It might seem that he was doing nothing, yet he was only waiting for the right moment to lower the boom on an errant employee. Day after day, Mr. Allen might stand on the back steps, smoking with a custo-

dian who was his friend, and then, when he was ready, he'd come inside and pick up the phone. When the wrongdoer appeared, Mr. Allen delivered a blistering reprimand. Afterwards, when the person had departed, having accepted Mr. Allen's terms, or had quit or been fired, Mr. Allen would turn to Vince and say:
Temporize, temporize. That is my role.

Half a century earlier, at age eighteen, Mr. Allen had been valedictorian at Booker T. Washington High School.

But Memphis State didn't let me in, he said.

The color barrier at MSU wasn't broken until 1959. By then, Mr. Allen had landed a job with the city's recreation services. He won the much-bigger position, in Personnel, in the 1970s. Years later, he'd shown Vince a newspaper article announcing his appointment. In the picture, he had a big 'fro. He laughed and said:

Being light probably helped.

Back from her honeymoon, June said, "You call Ronnie yet, Chief? Here, I brought you something."

A coconut packed with whiskey-filled chocolates: he gobbled the candies, the liquor spurting into his mouth. Two weeks and a day had passed since he'd met Ronnie Sapelo, yet her kiss still burned his lips. She seemed a creature of river and ocean; surely her sweat would turn to pearls, she'd wear a crown of coral.

June clapped the coconut halves over her breasts.

"They sell coconut bras to tourists."

She laughed and clunked them into the trash can.

The city's old linen maps hung in the office of the silver-haired dandy—director of one of the largest divisions—who had allegedly bruised Gina Traylor's arms.

"Can you find your house on the map, Vince?" he said.

Vince pointed to a mass of trees on one of the drawings.

"Aha. Midtown," the director said. "Back in 1900, it was a distant suburb."

Big-boned and suntanned, a former athlete, he exuded a costly aftershave that made Vince think of yachts and tuxedos.

“Your neighborhood used to be…”

“A pear orchard.”

“You read the caption.”

PEAR ORCHARD was neatly lettered below the trees, but Vince had already known.

“Mr. Allen told me.”

“That old know-it-all. He thought he was Wile E. Coyote.”

“I need to talk with you about a serious matter. Let’s sit down.”

“I’d rather stand. My knee is acting up. Basketball, thirty years ago.”

“All right.”

Vince summed up the accusation without identifying Gina Traylor. She still hadn’t written a complaint, but he couldn’t forget her bruises.

“Totally false. I have no interest in harming my staff,” the director said. “No romantic interest in them, either. I have all the girlfriends I need. Women show up at my house.”

“This could mean criminal charges.”

“Is there a written statement?”

Vince hesitated.

“No.”

“Well. Thanks for the heads up.”

The director bounced on his good leg.

“I didn’t say I’m on your side.”

“You better be. I haven’t done anything wrong.”

Mr. Allen would have known how to read that flat hazel gaze, would have punctured this perfumed pomposity. But Mr. Allen wouldn’t have been there with nothing written down.

PEAR ORCHARD, the caption said. The mapmaker must have been a god, skimming above the alluvial plains. It was 1900—as Vince imagined it—and warblers sang among flowering branches. When the fruit was ripe, birds pierced the skin with their beaks, and wasps crawled into the sticky holes and ate their fill. At dusk, deer moved in from the shadows and turned fallen pears over with their hooves. Pickers climbed ladders and harvested all day, and at night, when they closed their eyes, they saw their own hands reaching for ripe fruit. The middle of the orchard had eventually become Vincent's street, and the orchard's distant edge, Ronnie Sapelo's. Vince pictured Ronnie as an orchardist's wife—his wife, making pear sauce, her apron heavy with splatter, their kitchen a broiling September.

He pictured all of this with pleasure, though it didn't wipe out the meeting. On his way out of the director's office, he glimpsed Gina Traylor at her desk, gripping her arms. Was it merely an idle pose? Was she feeling the tender places, reliving the attack, or had she herself caused those bruises? Vince could almost hear Mr. Allen's cough-choking laugh.

Nothing is too strange to have happened, Mr. Allen would say, quoting Mark Twain, but much is too strange to be believed.

Gina's eyes found Vince's, and he nodded, but she looked away.

That evening, he visited his mother and said, "Tell me about the old times."

She laughed.

"Born in 1927 is not that old."

She was seventy-eight and knew a lot. During the early nineteen-teens, the pear trees in his neighborhood had been cut down and these houses were constructed, not mansions like those on Belvedere and Central where the city fathers lived, but solid dwellings all, airy and cool even on summer nights. By the end of 1918, the war was over, and Memphians found themselves in a modern world. They'd enjoyed fine municipal water since 1887, when an ice company drilled a well and discovered an underground river, supremely clean and pure. People covered their backyard wells and forgot about the muddy foulness that had clogged their throats. Even then, Memphis was barely past the yellow fever epidemics, when sickness caught people so fast, their knees buckled as they crossed a street.

"My grandfather picked up the bodies," his mother said. "He was a wagon driver. When I was a little girl, he was about eighty, telling his stories."

Her grandfather was Samuel Morton, born in the 1850s. As a child, he had seen massive flocks of passenger pigeons migrating from Texas and Louisiana to the great forests of Illinois and Canada,

had felt the wind created by millions of beating wings. For hours and days, the swift, elegant birds passed overhead.

“They made the sky so dark, his mama lit the lanterns,” Vince’s mother said.

As a young man, Samuel Morton had worked as a stevedore, unloading barges at the docks along the river. He saved enough money to buy a wagon and horses and open a livery stable, an impressive rise for a man born into slavery.

Although Samuel Morton had died long before Vince was born, Vince thought about him whenever he saw horses, the mounted police taming rowdy Beale Street, their tall steeds nudging through the crowds and calming them into respect without the officers having to say a word. He thought about Samuel whenever he passed the Cinderella-style coaches that vied for tourists, the carriages draped with twinkle lights, the horses wearing collars of plastic flowers. The young drivers sported vests and top hats, and little dogs dozed beside them. Not so long ago, draymen had clattered through downtown streets, their world a place of shouts, burlap, and

heavy loads.
Now and then, when Vince weeded his yard, he found a green sprig and wondered if it was a pear seedling. Every January, incredibly, the pale pink petals of his camellia bush unfurled, luring insects from God knew where.

“This is very old,” his mother would say, touching the blossoms.

He sensed the ancient seeds of fruit trees just beneath his feet. In crazy late-summer heat, digging at crabgrass, he unearthed a big wide horseshoe like a draft horse would wear. He set it atop his front door, the ends pointing upward for luck.

Weekends felt long.

Ronnie, Ronnie.

What if he called her? Sent an email? No, he’d wait, be patient. June would no doubt tell him when Ronnie was free. He swam in his pool and stretched out in a lounge chair, but the burning sun made his heart pound. He felt puny in comparison with Great-Grandfather Morton, who had never known air conditioning, who’d sat atop a jolting wagon, gripping the reins in callused palms.

Baptist Hospital’s implosion was growing closer. In the dim chill of his den, Vince turned on his laptop and watched demolition videos from all over the world. Skyscrapers and parking garages collapsed in Seattle and Tokyo. A Richmond office tower looked almost new, but you couldn’t see inside, where the concrete was surely stained and foul, with roaches scuttling through tangled wires.

A voice came on:

Three, two, one.

And ka-lamm, ka-lamm, ka-lamm went the explosions—rhythmic, percussive, almost leisurely—ka-lamm, with brilliant bursts of light, lower floors first. The building shuddered, slumped as if struck on the shoulder, and fell so fast the top floors hung in the air while the rest plummeted. Dust and dirt and gases spewed up from the ground and boiled sky-high. In the corner of Vince’s screen, onlookers watched from a safe distance, shrieking and cheering. By the end, Vince believed, they had changed, somehow. It wasn’t just the few seconds of drama, it was a sense of indefinable loss that drove each spectator into some shaken-hearted place. The person who posted the video had included a reverse that was even better. Amid blasts and sparks, the building reassembled itself. With a final leap, it shook off the haze, and every piece flew back into place.

The more Vince watched, the more he noticed about the events. Sobs were mixed in with spectators’ cheers.

Destruction and regeneration: people needed both.

Just after Labor Day, his mother announced that her retirement community was boring and restrictive. She wanted to move in with him.

“Let’s think about it for a while,” Vince said, panicked.

“I’m too big a fish for that poky old place,” she said. “Nothing but card games and exercises where people sit in their chairs. You’ve got a pool. A daily swim would feel so good. Besides, I can help you.”

“You can come over and swim whenever you want. And you don’t have to help me, Mama.”

“You mean you want to keep living on your own.”

“I’m used to it.”

“Mm-hmm.”

For a moment, he thought it was settled, but she said, “Let’s give it three months. If it doesn’t work out, I’ll get an apartment.”

Next thing he knew, a van arrived with her furniture and boxes of antique china. She brought her cat, Lightfoot. Soon it seemed as if her King James Bible had always been on the coffee table, and Lightfoot’s litter box in the laundry room.

Every morning, in bathing suit, cap, and

goggles, she jumped into the pool and swam laps. As a finale, she held her breath and jetted underwater, trying to reach the far end, but surfaced midway, panting, and paddled to the side. “It scares me when you do that,” Vince said.

“One day it’ll be easy,” she said.

He’d thought she would cook, and he’d looked forward to the meals he’d enjoyed in childhood, but she ordered delivery and takeout. She hired a cleaning service, and suddenly there were people vacuuming the carpets and scrubbing baseboard while she cradled Lightfoot in her arms and pointed out spots they’d missed.

“The way I intend to help you, Vince,” she said, “is with your social life.”

She gave a pool party, a big bash. She hosted luncheons, dinners, cocktail hours. On his staircase, he bumped into women in flip-flops, trailing the fumes of nail enamel: a mani-pedi party. He hadn’t wanted this. Didn’t want to be a man who lived with his mother. Reading his mind, she emitted her soft verbal trill.

“Yes, you live with me,” she said, “and I live with you.”

She pointed to the horseshoe over the front door.

“Your luck has changed.”

If the women at her parties were too old, or already married, doesn’t matter, you’re gonna be nice, because they had friends or nieces, and you don’t want to be a single old goat forever. The house and patio overflowed with guests, musicians, and bartenders.

“We can afford it,” she said, when he balked at the bills from caterers and florists. “Isn’t there somebody you’d like to invite?”

Had June spilled the beans about Ronnie? Resolutely, he shook his head.

“You could be married to some nice young lady in time for Mardi Gras,” his mother said. “A honeymoon in New Orleans, how about that?”

“Mama...”

“You could have kids, a family. Don’t wait!”

He felt lonely and awkward at the parties, even with people he knew. At June’s wedding, he’d danced and mingled, but now his mother cast him in a new role—a fuddy-duddy—and he was dismayed by how well it fit.

At a poolside barbecue, he overheard a woman say, “He’s not very friendly.”

“Leave him to me,” his mother said. “He’s a barge, and I’m a tugboat,” and they laughed.

June winked at him over her glass of wine; she was his mother’s guest, not his.

His mother made a show of crossing a room to greet snowy-haired dignitaries, shaky on their pronged canes. She knew educators, business leaders, artists. They brought their families, and she remembered their children’s names. And yet, search as he might, Vince never saw Mr. Allen’s widow.

“Have you invited Charlotte?” he asked.

“She’s a very private person.”

His mother stood at the sink, polishing a silver tray.

“She may see you as a bit too much the heir apparent.”

“But do you invite her? And Charley?”

He had the strangest feeling as she turned toward him. The tension in her hands and in the corners of her mouth—

“No,” she said.

“But Louis Allen was my friend and mentor.”

She turned back to the sink.

“Some people expect their life to have a certain kind of shape. And when they lose the one they love or have some—disappointment...”

She stopped, and he waited, but she didn’t say any more.

“Is that how you felt when Daddy died?”

He searched his mind for some recollection of the sorrow she must have felt, but it was long ago; he’d been five and they’d been separated.

“Well,” was all she said.

“Mama, what are we talking about? What do you mean?”

“I mean Charlotte is waiting for something she’ll never get.”

Heavy autumn rains came. The river leaped up the cobblestones and poured into a grassy park. Picnickers and dog-walkers fled. Floodwaters made a shining swath, gunmetal beneath the clouds. He stood at his window when he should have been working.

“Don’t you want me to organize your desk?” June said.

“No, I know where everything is.”

Let sleeping dogs lie.

Not until now had he seen the doubleness. Was that what Mr. Allen meant? Gina Traylor would never file a complaint. She would leave, or eke out the years to claim the humble pension of a city clerk. Vince gazed at the thick body of the river, its banks shaggy with weeds, and at the green Arkansas forests a mile across the water. If things got to be too much, he could wait for a storm, open the windows, and let the wind lift the documents from his desk and carry them away in the high, spinning currents of air. The papers would transform into grit from cottonseed factories and glitter from the horse-carriages lined up at The Peabody. Ronnie Sapelo would be part of the great wind; she would be there in his office weeping and telling him of hardships. He would sweep her up in his arms, and the gusts would ring the bells in downtown spires.

When his mother wasn’t entertaining, she scooped up Lightfoot, holed up in the den, and watched old Westerns, *Rawhide, Gunsmoke, Wagon Train*. She loved fights—the uppercuts, fisticuffs, flying tackles—and cowboys, sheriffs, and bushwhackers. Lightfoot nibbled morsels from the snack tray on her lap.

Laramie’s theme music was loud, but the song in Vince’s heart was louder.

Ronnie Sapelo, Ronnie Sapelo, Ronnie Sapelo.

It was October, two months since he’d kissed her on the boat. She was a dazzling memory that didn’t fade.

May I take you home?

No, I have my car.

Early one morning, when he knew the night shift was ending, he parked outside her office. Finally she came out. The fact that she was wearing big new glasses seemed significant. She didn’t seem to notice him, just went to her car and wheeled away. He replayed her stride in his mind, the way

her purse strap slid off her shoulder. He vowed not to be that kind of man. Yet after a few minutes' wait, he drove to her street and idled within view of her house, a brick four-square with a modest yard.

He required all employees to complete anti-harassment tutorials. He wanted to believe the training worked. The heavy-handed acting in the videos amused him—the villains' gall. But that weekend, he cruised by Ronnie's house a dozen times.

November 6th was coming, unstoppably. He would turn forty-five, and the hospital would fall. He was balanced on time's hinge.

"Forty-five, a milestone," his mother said.

"No party, Mama."

She held up her palm.

"I've already ordered the cake. Be gracious."

Today, an October Saturday, eight days before the birthday and implosion, she was hosting a beauty club. Her friends were arriving at the house. Hairstylists set up a special shampoo chair in the bathroom. In the kitchen, caterers unpacked sandwiches, fruit salad, Halloween cupcakes, sparkling water.

“Vamoose, son,” his mother said. “Girls only.”
As he backed his car out of the garage, he fought the urge to drive by Ronnie’s house, but moments later, he reached her now-familiar street. A Jeep was parked behind her car, and a man Vince didn’t recognize was mowing the grass. Sweat darkened the man’s T-shirt. Vince drove slowly around the block. When he returned, the man was finished. The front door opened, Ronnie stepped out and looked at the lawn, and she and the man went inside. Vince waited, but the man didn’t come out. Most likely, he was Sapelo, Joseph E. He’d had the settled, Saturday look of a husband; now he might be showering or having a beer or embracing Ronnie, his thoughts far from Engineering and hers far from Fire, man and wife, reconciled, and whatever had riven them didn’t matter anymore.

Through inexplicable tears—Vince’s eyes were just watering, it was the sun—he checked his watch. His mother’s event would be in full swing. He wanted to visit someone, but he’d forgotten his phone, and he couldn’t think of anybody to drop in on, a buddy or an old girlfriend whose kitchen chair he could plop into. Eventually he found himself at the hospital site. He parked and joined the people milling around. The sun was gone, the day edgy, clouds streaming overhead, and he felt like a ghost. The empty building loomed.

“That’s where Elvis died,” people said, pointing out which floor, which window.

The oldest part of the hospital dated to 1912. Vince calculated: it was ninety-three, closed for five years now. Hardhat crews had been prepping it for weeks. A strident man in a Redbirds ballcap was explaining this, and people were paying attention. Holes had been drilled into the support columns, the man said, and three thousand pounds of explosives loaded inside.

“A million square feet, collapsing inward.”

The man squinted over his glasses, surveying his audience. Vince felt a surge of irritation.

“At 6:45 a.m.,” the man said, “part of the skyline will disappear. The sound will be colossal. You’ll smell gunpowder. It’ll take about twenty seconds.”

“Like a firing squad, but with TNT,” said a woman with green-tipped hair.

The man rounded on her with a delighted frown.

“The dynamite just weakens the building. It’s gravity that does the work.”

“My friend is giving a party,” the woman said. “We’re going to stay up all night.”

She and the man began an exclusive conversation. Vince wondered if years from now, they would say, *That was how we met.*

He felt washed-out, slain. He went to a meat-and-three and ate lunch, but the food didn’t help.

Mardi Gras, his mother had said, *married in time for Mardi Gras.*

Parades, jazz, bright strands of beads raining down on his shoulders. Instead, he’d been wired, his knees packed with dynamite, and the Sapelos had pushed the button.

When he turned his car onto his street, he saw emergency vehicles parked in front of his house, an ambulance peeling away, neighbors clustered on their porches. Alarm flashed through his stomach like a cold knife. Women stood in his driveway, weeping. He jumped out of his car, and they ran to him, saying something about a shampoo:

“Her head, she couldn’t lift her head.”

One of the women ran past him into the house, yelling, “He’s back, here he is,” and he followed her, his legs gone to jelly.

The beauticians were packing up, the caterers were gone. The living room smelled of tea tree oil. Two police officers came up and asked to speak with him, and he led them to the den. The TV was off, and the carpet made the room very

quiet. He brushed cat fur from the sofa, wanting to say it was time for his mother's shows and they should let her have the room.
She had been seated in the shampoo chair, the officers said, with her head bent backward into the wash basin, and something had happened. Possibly because of the weight of her wet hair and the unnatural position of her neck, something had happened.

Vince's head was roaring, his brain on fire. Maybe he hadn't really heard *deceased*, or *unfortunately*, or the first thing they'd said, as soon as he sat down, which was:

"Mr. Johnson, there's no easy way to say this."

They said they were sorry.

"Beauty parlor syndrome," June said. "There oughta be warning signs in every salon."

She'd brought lasagna, and they ate at his kitchen table. He'd taken the week off to make arrangements. She snapped off a length of plastic wrap and covered the rest of the lasagna.

"There's no room," she said, peering into the refrigerator.

People had brought hams, casseroles, and pies.

"Take some home," he said.

"There'll be a million people at the funeral. You'll need it."

She wedged the dish into the fridge, cleared the table, refilled their glasses of iced tea, and sat down again. The roots of her hair were gray, the faintest rim at her scalp. He'd never realized she colored it.

"My niece was having a baby shower that day," she said. "Otherwise, I'd have been here, and maybe I could have saved her."

They looked at each other. It was so easy to be with her.

"This is how it would've been if we were married," she said. "Like she wanted."

"She told you that?"

"We talked about all kinds of things."

June's eyes welled.

“She was my best friend. I might not have been hers, but she was mine.”

She laid her head on the table and cried.

He reached over to pat her arm and knocked over the salt shaker. Bad luck, his mother used to say. She would throw the spilled salt over her shoulder, to blind the devil.

“I was lucky to have her so long,” he said, a consolation the preacher had offered.

June sat up and wiped her cheeks.

“Now you’ve lost them both.”

“My father died when I was little. I hardly remember him.”

“Oh, Vince.”

She held his gaze, and he had the same odd feeling he’d had when his mother had stood at the sink and talked about the shape of a life. June was waiting, pushing him in some direction where he didn’t want to go. Her words were what people said when you lost the second parent.

Now you’ve lost them both, but it was something about her tone.

“My father,” he said, “died so long ago.”

June swept salt into her palm.

“She told me about her and Mr. Allen, but I’d already figured it out.”

He’d intended to go to the implosion. He’d wanted to be able to say, *I was there.* But the overflowing church—three hundred, five hundred mourners?—the solos and tributes and prayers, his mother’s body in the satin-lined casket, her face with its sealed expression, the white bouquet in her motionless fingers, and afterward, the repast that went on and on, people eating and grieving—it all created an exhaustion so deep that when the house was finally empty, when at last he could go to his room and lie down, he fell into a drowse that only made him wearier, as if he were marching and wasn’t allowed to stop. He reached for one of the glasses of stale dusty water

on his night table, took a sip, and sank back.
Something jumped up on the bed—the cat, Lightfoot. It turned around in a circle and curled into a hot ball against his stomach.

He opened his eyes. He must have slept. A realization swam up from his fatigue:

It's my birthday. Forty-five.

He blinked, letting it sink in. A sound registered on his ears or in his brain, faint but commanding. Puzzled and alert, he lay very still, his head on the pillow. The air felt electric, even prickly. The sound he detected was softer than a whisper, but it stood out from the stuffy quiet of the house, and as his ears became attuned, he recognized his mother's timbre, her charming, evasive cadences. He felt her energy in the room. Whether or not he was dreaming, and he didn't think he was, the voice invited his response. This was his chance, and he'd thought he would never have it. He need only shape his words in his mind, and listen.

—So the whole city knew, Mama, everybody but me? And they are knowing now. The people at the parties. At your funeral. At my office, at meetings—

There came a soft, trilling hum, her light vocal preface, and her reply took form.

As long as Charlotte was alive, there was nothing Louis and I could do. Their son, handicapped. He couldn't just leave them, and I never asked him to. Finally we gave each other up. But you, well, you rankled her. You're mine and his too. Happy birthday, son.

—But sometimes he called me Mr. Johnson! Like I was just anybody. I can't believe this.

She laughed, a little tendril of sound in a corner of the ceiling.

He was so much younger than I was, ten years. We couldn't believe how we felt. But we were married to other people, and he had just become a father. Charley was a newborn when we met.

—Why didn't you tell me, Mama?

You were the flower of our love. That was enough. And we were too proud for scandal. Let sleeping dogs lie.

—But you had a secret life. You should have told me while he was alive. He could've told me. Did people think I knew? That it was old hat? Me and my father working together, formal-like all those years, an open secret? My name-father, did he know? When I say my father, who do I even mean?

Vince, listen to me. You won't get the promotion. It's nothing against you. They want a woman in your job. It's time. They'll hire from within, transfer a woman from another department. One day,

it’ll be that girl in Fire.

—You mean Ronnie Sapelo? Will have my job?

Eventually, yes. You’ll come to think it’s kind of funny.

—All right. Fair enough. But Mama, we were talking about the other thing.

There will always be a place for you, maybe in another division, like Public Works or General Services.

—Mama, enough about work. Tell me—

Shh. Hear me now.

The tumblers of water on his nightstand started tinkling, a light, glassy, insistent zing. Every fragile thing throughout the house hummed and trembled. Lightfoot growled and sprang off the bed. The floor, the windows, the whole house shook, and far away, something rumbled. The rumbling went on and on, and then it stopped, and there was silence.

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