

ASHES

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After silently counting to three, Banks throws his naked body out of bed. He's already on his feet when he feels the cold bite his prick. He doesn't bother looking down but stands rooted to the freezing floor, his muscles bunched into a knot, his breath misting the air in front of his face.

Fifteen minutes later, he's showered and dressed. He leaves Janice sleeping and walks outside to his car. Along the roadside in Somerville, snow is piled a yard high, though only the top few inches are fresh and white; these he cleans off his windshield with a gloved hand.

While the engine warms, he sits behind the wheel staring at a photograph in a clear plastic frame bolted to the dashboard: his father standing in a driveway, grinning beside a red and white '58 Corvette, lug wrench in hand, sleeves rolled up and grease smudged on his muscled forearms. A man about the same age Banks is now. A married man with a job and a pretty wife and a five-year-old boy, who are not in the picture. The car, recently waxed, gleams under intense sunlight. His father looks proud, happy. The grin on his handsome face says there's nothing that can't be fixed; anything can happen, the grin says.

It was Banks, aged five and a half, who discovered his father's body hanging from a beam when he wandered into the garage looking for his Whiffle bat one morning. That's what his mother – understandably perplexed that he could ever forget such a thing – continues to insist. But Banks himself has no memory of that day; in fact hardly any memory of his father at all. If not for the photograph on his dashboard he might almost believe that he'd never had a father, had never seen a red and white '58 Corvette with his own two eyes. Sometimes it feels to Banks as if the photograph on his dashboard is what

he has instead of his father. He never grows tired of looking at it as he drives from job to job through the streets of Boston and the outlying suburbs. He finds the picture of his dad reassuring company but also somehow suspenseful, expectant, as if one day it might just start to talk to him.

When the engine's warmed up, he's on his way.

He checks his clipboard. Two installations in the morning and three in the afternoon. At Dunkin' Donuts, he fills his commuter mug with hot black coffee, then catches the traffic report on the radio. There's an accident on the expressway, so he decides to go through Harvard Square, take Mass. Ave. to Storrow Drive, and Atlantic into the North End.

The curving, narrow sidestreets are still unplowed from yesterday's snowfall, and the slush is inches deep. His tires hiss through the muck like sizzling fat. He slows down, the speedometer dropping to twenty, then to ten. Small islands of dark tar scattered with road salt appear through the grime-streaked windshield. And Banks remembers the night, twenty-five years ago, when he stood with his mother on the roof of their house in the North End, releasing handfuls of his father's ashes into a stiff breeze. Hearing the salt crunching under the tires, he imagines that it's his father's ashes he's driving over, that this was where they'd landed, whitened and crystallized in the cold.

The second appointment of the morning is an apartment complex on Boylston. Banks knows the building. He figures the job should take twenty minutes, thirty at most, then he'll get a sandwich and a coffee refill before starting the afternoon.

In the lobby, the doorman phones up to the apartment. He turns away from Banks as if conducting top-secret business. When there's no answer, he stretches his dark upper lip over his teeth and sighs. "You sure you got an appointment with Mr. Martin?" he asks skeptically, still holding the phone to his ear. The nickel buttons on his gray uniform jacket are pressed flat against the bulbous stomach underneath.

Banks, staring at that stomach, annoyed by it for some reason, is slow to respond.

"*Martin*," snaps the doorman. "Twenty-seven-oh-two. That the apartment you asked for, or am I wrong?"

Banks checks his clipboard and nods. He's suddenly conscious of the weight and contents of the toolbelt on his hips: what he'd like to do now is pull his Rowalt cordless drill out of its holster and scare the fat man shitless.

The doorman slams down the phone. "I'm gonna have to take you up myself."

"It won't take long," Banks assures him.

"Better not." The doorman pulls a belt-loop key ring from his front pocket and walking toward the elevators at the back of the lobby. "I'm the only one on duty. Rodriguez called in sick."

"Ten minutes, tops," Banks says, following him into the elevator.

"Rodriguez is sick like I'm a prima fucking ballerina."

On the twenty-ninth floor, there are no sounds in the long corridor of numbered doors. The doorman tries several keys before finding the right one. Then the door opens and Banks is looking across a livingroom through a wall of windows, beyond which is Boston, huddled and rising, in light so achingly clear it's blue.

"Bet you twenty bucks the TV's in there." The doorman points to a wood veneer cabinet against the wall. He pulls up a handful of each pantleg and sits down on the leather sofa. "You said ten minutes, right? Think I'll wait."

Banks folds back the doors of the media cabinet and squats down. The TV is a twenty-seven inch Trinitron. A plane of sunlight cuts diagonally across the screen, which suddenly isn't a window into anything but his own hollowed-out face. He turns on the set with the universal remote. It takes him two seconds to recognize "Divorce Court," hazed by static. He switches it off and there's his own face again like a death mask.

"Hey," complains the doorman. "Leave it."

Banks doesn't turn around. "Where's the back door?"

"In the back. Where the hell else would it be?"

In the small gray screen, past his own reflection, Banks watches the grinning doorman remove his cap and run a meaty hand over his balding head.

"I need to find the junction box," Banks says quietly. "I can spend all day looking for it, or you can show me where it is."

"What you need, buddy, is a sense of humor," the doorman replies almost sadly, putting both palms on his thighs and pushing himself to his feet.

Banks rises and follows him down a long uncarpeted hallway. The apartment is larger than he'd thought, with rooms leading off of other rooms. The air feels too humid for winter, semi-tropical, he has no idea why. The doorman, his heels scuffing the parquet floor, starts to whistle tunelessly, and Banks follows him without thinking.

They pass a bedroom on the left, the door open to show drawn blinds, a bare desk, an unmade bed. It makes Banks uncomfortable to look into another person's private space, but still he looks. He can't help himself. On one wall there's a framed poster of a light bulb; on another, a shelf supporting a glass jar filled with shiny black stones.

And then, as they near the end of the hallway, it's as if they have stepped into shadow, the blue light of day trapped somewhere far behind. Ahead, over the doorman's shoulder, Banks glimpses the back door with its heavy security lock. He's thinking that he'll drill the hole above the door and run the cable straight into the livingroom; he'll have to staple-gun it to the wall because there aren't any moldings.

He almost runs into the other man, who has stopped abruptly.

"You hear that?" whispers the doorman.

"What?"

"That. Listen."

Banks listens. And above the doorman's strained breathing he finally hears it: the sound of water trickling into water, coming from a bathroom to the right of the back door, a few feet ahead of where they're standing.

"Bathroom," he says. He puts a hand on the doorman's wide back, feeling the warm sweat soaking through the jacket, and lightly pushes him forward.

"Hey, watchit—"

Banks brushes past him. The bathroom door is open. Next to the sink a nightlight is shining – Banks can see the tiny glowing filament. At first, standing in the doorway, it's all he sees: on one side, the illuminated plastic shade pleasantly reminding him of a PEZ dispenser; on the other, the mirror above the sink drawing and diffusing the meager light, like a pale sun trembling underwater.

He goes in. The bathtub is against the back wall, a white opaque shower curtain drawn halfway across it. Visible now are the thin stream of water trickling out of the brass faucet, and two bare feet that appear to float to either side.

“Oh, Jesus Christ,” says the doorman.

Screened against the shower curtain Banks sees the doorman’s gross, flickering shadow slump down on the toilet seat and put its head in its hands. Then for a moment there’s nothing but the sounds of water trickling into water, like small glass beads falling into a pond, and, every few seconds, the drain sucking for breath.

“Jesus Mother of Christ,” moans the doorman.

“Shut up,” Banks says.

He can barely hear himself through the pounding in his ears. He pulls aside the shower curtain as if ripping off a Band-Aid.

The man’s body is like his feet: it would float if there was room. The torso sits up on the water as if a hand was gently pushing it from below. But Banks stares at the head. It’s inside a white garbage bag tied at the throat, the knot poking up like a fist. He thinks he recognizes the brand of bag he and Janice buy at Star Market. The blue and yellow face is visible where it touches plastic – side of nose, tumescent cheekbone, lips dark as plums.

The doorman is whimpering now. Banks falls to his knees. After a while he begins to shake, his eyes squeezed shut, his forehead pressed against the side of the tub as if he’s bowing to the dead.

“Nobody’s fault, something like this,” the policeman tells Banks. “Guy wants to check out, he checks out.”

The cops keep their hats on. The paramedics arrive and fish out the body, put it on a stretcher and cover it with a sheet. They leave the head tied in the garbage bag. Banks sees one of them slip a pill to the doorman, who is sitting on the leather sofa in the livingroom. The doorman washes down the pill with some Scotch from the dead man’s liquor cabinet and goes on complaining to no one in particular about Rodriguez, how it’s all his fault, the lying stinking sonofabitch, and if he ever sees Rodriguez again he’s going to kill him. He’s still sitting and complaining when Banks leaves.

Outside, the day is warmer, the air blue as a dream. Walking to his car, Banks hears the snow melting, the streets washed clean by the runoff.

He sits with his hands on the steering wheel, the keys in his lap. He is already an hour late for his next job but he makes no move to start the engine. He stays where he is, staring at the photograph on the dashboard.

He is home again, before it all ended: standing beside his father's '58 Corvette, his head no higher than the door handle. The red and white beauty in the driveway, the sun on its hood.

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