

Jeff P. Jones

Another Cop Story

The policeman has I think an extraordinarily tortured psyche.

He is perhaps more tortured than the criminal.

—Norman Mailer

As they pulled out of the station at 1800 hours, Max glanced over at his latest trainee. The rookie reminded him of his younger self: flattop, mirrored sunglasses, biceps garroted by short-sleeve cuffs, the whole of him going into the world Kevlar-first, taut and ready for action—like a sun-warmed can of beer that'd been shaken and was ready to blow. Max took stock two decades on: a semicircular crown of hair remained, wiry, gray, and in need of a trim; he sported coke-bottle prescription glasses in heavy black frames; a triple roll rode the back of his neck like a package of hot dogs; and he had a belly boat for a gut. All that he'd once considered valuable the twilight tour had taken.

They turned northwest on Third, and the sun's light, reflected brightly off the sound, flashed between buildings in a slow strobe. It was Friday, and the city was humming with weekend anticipation. Max knew that the kid would be focusing on all the wrong details: the hooker in the purple mini-skirt and not the nod of recognition she received from the briefcase-toting suit; at Marion, the puffy jacket on the kid laughing into his cell phone and not the color of his shoelaces; the guy in the wheelchair with the sign that read "Spaceship Needs Fuel—Please Help" resting on his knee stumps and not the man behind him in the Hawaiian shirt, known as Mad Dog, who pimped all the panhandlers in this area. Max knew what the kid was feeling, could sense it in the way he held himself rigid and breathed through his nose. He saw himself as the citizens' newest protector, a bristling crime-fighting machine who was rolling through downtown at fifteen em-pee-ach with a shield on the door panel that said "Service-Pride-Dedication," believing that all of it

fell on their blinked eyelids like a kiss.

Max imagined bursting the kid's bubble, how he might even pull it off in a single shift. Usually he didn't meddle, instead letting trainees find their own way. But why couldn't this time be different? Why couldn't he try to discourage a recruit—and this one, in particular—from wanting to be a cop? He'd be doing him a big favor.

They clattered across the cobbles at First and Pike, tourist central. A building extinguished the light.

"This city's full of ghosts," Max said.

The sky over the public market was such a brilliant blue that it looked like a painting. Exhaust fumes tanged the air and steam rose from manhole covers. A cyclist bearing southeast on First ran a red light.

"Hey, check that out," the rookie said.

Max didn't bother with a glance. "Chief Seattle said this city would always be haunted. The longer I'm out here, the more I understand what he meant."

Then came their first call, at 1830, a jumper in Belltown.

"You taking point on this?" the rookie asked.

Max shook his head, not in answer but in disregard.

The call was at one of the last remaining low-income buildings in that neighborhood, a three-story brick affair. When they pulled up, several people waved them over to the curb. A man with a cane stuck his head in the rookie's window and spoke to Max. "He's around back. But you can talk to him through my apartment."

"How high is he?"

"Second floor."

Max snorted then hobbled out, favoring his bum leg, the old football injury that had killed his scholarship and set him on this path, in a way. He rounded, stamping the pavement. From the corner of his eye, he noticed the rookie desperately trying to keep his hand off his piece while surveying the crowd.

The rookie's tone suggested that he'd invented a Hollywood set of extras who were supposed to be milling about a crime scene. He addressed them as if speaking from a balcony. "You people just go on

about your business. We'll take care of this."

If anything, the crowd grew more interested. An old woman in polyester pants clutched a gray poodle to her chest tight enough to suffocate it. A few passers-by stopped to ask what was happening.

As they rode the elevator, Max offered some advice, spoken to the row of plastic pushbuttons. "Go in mellow and stupid. The more you play Mr. Cop, the more you'll have to perform, bracelets and all." A crestfallen look passed over the rookie's face.

Upstairs they leaned out a window. The jumper was a kid with crimson zits on his face in various states of eruption. He was squatting on the fire escape in a jean jacket and camouflage cutoffs. When he spotted them, he grabbed the lowest rung and swung out from his fingertips. One of his Vans somersaulted to the pavement.

"Hey asshole," Max called. "Go ahead and let go, I dare you."

"Are you crazy?" the rookie whispered.

Max made for the door and, loud enough for the jumper to hear, said, "Son of a bitch can break both his legs for all I care. He's wasting my time."

The jumper climbed up and offered his wrists.

As they drove him in, he sobbed a story about getting dumped by his girlfriend. His beery breath infiltrated the cruiser. Max cursed himself for being so brazen; if he'd known the jumper had been drinking, he would've played it differently. He felt sorry for the guy even though he was just a punk.

Max thought about his ex-wife, Rue. Back in his twenties, she had saved him from full-throttle dissipation. They met at the College Inn pub, which was the place where, when he wasn't tending bar, he preferred to get drunk. She came once a week with a group of girlfriends, a tiny tomboy from Connecticut who'd moved out west because she liked cowboy movies and ended up in Seattle because she had cousins there. Never wore jewelry. Eyes the color of coffee with coffee's quickening effects on him. Thick, streaky blonde hair and devil-may-care, chopped-off bangs. Tawny skin with lots of freckles. A full chest and a beautiful ass in jeans, which is all she ever wore. She spoke with a half-smile that

was suggestive and deliberate. The week that she didn't show, he drank until he blacked out. The next week, when she reappeared, he asked her on a date. She worked with horses at a stable in Snohomish County. The first time he held her, that smell, sharp and animalistic, invaded him.

"What the hell?" the rookie said.

Max was imbibing a "shift-starter" as they angled up Cherry. He tipped the flask in the kid's direction. "Better than cigarettes. Those things'll kill you."

They dropped the jumper off at the station and filed the paperwork.

Their next call, at 1945, was for a stalled vehicle on Denny. They were losing the light in fractions; it was halved once, then halved again, reducing the quality of everything. When they pulled up, the car was running just fine, but it was parked in the middle of the street, blocking traffic. Hunkered behind the wheel, crying her eyes out, was a bombshell blonde.

"Let me handle this one," the rookie said.

The kid climbed out, chest rooster-puffed and shoulders locked in tandem as if connected by a rod. Max knew what the kid was thinking—that just the sight of a cop could have a sobering effect on people. There he was, 6'4" and a ripped 220, bigger than life. Rue had made him feel that way, had made him believe in himself again, believe that he could do something worthwhile like become a cop. He got back in shape, graduated from the academy, and landed a position with the Seattle P.D. His short but glorious stint as an inside linebacker for his college team greased the appropriate wheels. After a brief engagement, they were married and moved into a milkbox of a house forty-five minutes north of downtown in a neighborhood with no parks or sidewalks. The best thing about the place was the backyard—it had a plum tree and a small garden. Mornings, she would wake him and they would make love on the mattress that served as their bed. They couldn't afford box springs or a frame. Afterward, they would stare at patterns in the ceiling texture and talk, sometimes about his upcoming shift. Once, she cupped her hand over him. "Make sure you bring this back," she said and his stomach went airy. Afternoons, he napped or laid out his gear. If it was one of her

days off from the stable, she tended the garden.

The rookie lingered outside the woman's window, checking his watch. She hadn't noticed him. Up the street horns blared. "Bang on her window," Max advised.

The woman's eyes were blue puddles. She lowered the window a smidge, and Sonny and Cher's voices came wailing out, "I got you babe," over and over. The speakers fizzled with overload. When it finished, she said, "It was my father's favorite song," and broke into a new fit. Then, before the rookie could squeeze in a word, it started up again, on repeat. Max ordered a tow truck that hauled the car away with her still inside, bawling like a baby.

Heading up Queen Anne Hill, the air grew cooler, so they rolled up the windows. The sky over the Olympic Mountains surrendered to darkness. Max's years working the twilight tour had taught him that the transition between day and night was when people who'd lost something felt its absence most acutely. Those who weren't ready to relinquish what they'd lost or had failed to come to terms with its passage were the worst, like the suicidal dude and the orphaned woman. The rookie, his eyes hooded with shadow, looked like Max felt, which was gloomy. Good. Maybe he was getting through.

"Is there anything at all worthwhile about this shift?" the rookie asked.

Max said that he liked the twilight tour's rhythm, how it usually started with a bang, car wreck, lover's spat, buffet patron needing the Heimlich, and eased up after dinner. Then came the late rush of car thefts and drunken revelry before things fizzled out in early morning and the city finally slept.

He edged the cruiser against the curb on Seventh West, aiming them at the Alki lighthouse across the water. Its single eye winked white-green, white-green. They had hit whiskey-thirty. "Seattle began there." He pulled from the flask then offered it. The rookie seemed to figure that a swallow couldn't hurt; his eyes sparked as it went down.

"The Denny Party landed at Alki," Max said. "A couple dozen people hunkering in a cold rain, staring at David Denny, this nineteen-year-old

imbecile. He'd sent a note that said, *Come as soon as you can, I've found an empty valley.* But you know what?" Max regained the flask, splashed drops across the bench seat as he took in the waterfront piers with a flourish. "There were Salish people all through here."

"What're you, a history professor?"

Max took a swallow then sleeved his mouth. "That eager little dipshit didn't know what he was getting into. What he was getting all of us into."

The rookie shook his head. "Can't see what difference it makes now."

Max ignored the resistance, kept prattling about David Denny and how he'd chopped his foot with an axe while waiting for his relatives to arrive from Portland. He gave an exasperated sigh. "When he crawled out of that lean-to, he was pale and sick. Nights, he'd finally noticed all the firelights peppering the bay. When the landing party arrived, he said only one thing. You know what it was?"

"Welcome to the Emerald City?"

"He told them, under his breath, *You shouldn't have come.* Guess that kid had done some growing up." He chuffed a laugh and raised the flask in a toast, but the rookie's hands were empty.

At 2050, they got a report of a hit-and-run in lower Queen Anne. The rookie seemed reinvigorated, was sitting alert and eager. On Roy they discovered a crowd around a little boy who had an explosive femur fracture. There was a *Thrifty Nickel* spread over the bone. When the rookie peeled it off, somebody screamed. "He'll never walk again," another joker said. The bone stuck out from the boy's thigh like a white knife. Frantic puffs of vapor escaped his mouth and he was fish-eyed with terror, lying in the middle of the street with all those people gawking at him like he was a zoo animal. Where his parents were nobody could say. While Max cinched plastic around the bleeding, the rookie kneeled.

The boy looked up. "You're a police officer," he whispered.

A wave of what looked like relief broke over the rookie's face. Finally, someone had recognized him.

"That's right," he said, curling up around the boy, cradling him face-to-face. "Now you and I are going to forget about those people. We're just going to talk."

Max couldn't help but overhear their conversation and flashed on a memory of Emily, his daughter with Rue. The first time they took her riding, when she was four, Max had hooked his arm over the corral fence (already retreating, he realized now), and watched the pair in the saddle together. Rue held Emily in front of her, an arm bandoliered across the little girl's torso, and led them in lazy circles. When the horse broke into a trot, Emily had squealed with joy.

Midway through one of the rookie's sentences, the boy went catatonic, his gaze becoming as flat and empty as a pane of glass. The rookie couldn't bring him out of it. By the time they put him on the stretcher, gusts of chilled air were knifing through the streets. Back at the cruiser, Max was sitting shotgun, refilling his flask with a bottle from the glove box and a paper funnel. His face was puffy and crimson, his eyes glassy. He nodded to the keys, already in the ignition.

It began to rain as they cruised across the Ship Canal Bridge. The drops fell in silver streaks. The rookie had taken over the driving, and though he didn't know it, Max was watching his reflection. What Max was trying to picture, in the window's murk, was Emily's face, her dimpled cheeks, her tow-head of curls and meltingly sweet smile, but the image wouldn't resolve. What floated into view instead was the rookie's face sidelit by the instrument screens, blue and glowing, with a creased brow and all that it betrayed.

Max recognized the look. Indecision, in his early years as a cop, had been a close companion. How much to share with Rue about his work, how much to keep inside. The more he shared—of his anger and sense of futility—the closer he felt to her but the more she looked at him as a stranger. The less he shared, the harder it became to share anything and the more he *felt* like a stranger. It was no trouble to read the indecision worming its way around the rookie's eyes, suggesting that he was wishing to return to that moment when they were pulling out of the station, the sunlight glimmering on the water, when confidence flowed so powerfully through his veins that it felt like his blood was carbonated. Max's mission was working. Already the fizz had seeped out of the rookie, his blood had gone flat, and the heroic images in his mind had been replaced with

the desperate faces of people he couldn't help.

As they turned east onto 45th and entered the U-District, the drops spattered against the windshield. They rolled past Thai Thom's, where Max had taken Rue on that first date, sharing a plate heaped with greasy chicken phad thai. They passed the College Inn and so many places with memories: Perkengrügen Café, where, over countless cups of coffee, she'd convinced him to apply to the academy; Bulldog News, where they met between her classes when she decided to go back to school; Cellophane Square, Iggy's Gyros, the IHOP. What he wouldn't give to be in the rookie's shoes again, able to slough off this job that had spoiled everything.

Max tapped the glass. "You know, Ted Bundy used to troll this area. He'd put a fake cast on his leg and play the sympathy card on some unsuspecting co-ed. Her body would turn up a few weeks later."

The kid was clinging to his words, and such focused attention inspired Max to reveal something of himself. He'd been through many partners and there always came a point, often early in the relationship, when you decided whether or not to confide in each other. Maybe it was fatigue or familiarity or just because there was no one else, but at some point you would start telling stories with real meaning. Max looked out the window, his gaze not registering a thing, and started talking about how his marriage had failed, how his wife had come home early one day and found him asleep, their little girl unsupervised for who-knows-how-long in the backyard, how he had failed to react sufficiently to this lapse. How, just before his daughter started kindergarten, his wife took her and moved back east. Since then he'd only seen her once each summer. She grew up and became a stranger, hadn't called in years. "It's like she was kidnapped. How can you come back from something like that?" Max wasn't sure that he'd said that out loud, but all the same the sentiment hung in the air.

Then his thoughts cycled back to Bundy. "His girlfriend at the time thought the bits of plaster in their closet were odd, but she never did call the cops. On nights like this, I see his ghost out there. No one else notices. They just walk right past without a glance. I've stopped several

times to arrest him, but he always vanishes.”

The rookie hesitated before saying what he finally did. “Maybe you’ve been at this for too long.”

So there it was. All his efforts had earned not regret but pity. Max lowered the window. The frigid air was so cold that it cut the lungs. He had been at it too long, had tethered himself too powerfully to this job. “Comes with the territory, I guess.”

“You know what you need?”

“What?”

“A pastime.”

At 2230, Max and his rookie partner took a domestic disturbance call at the Hing Hay Apartments on South Jackson in Chinatown. Iron-gated shops choked the street-level story, and the buildings piled atop each other like haphazardly stacked books, the blocks shot through with narrow alleys reeking of fish and rotten garbage. You wouldn’t have seen or even heard them driving past because a fog had rolled in, so heavy and thick that it concealed the cruiser and dampened the tires’ hiss. Locating an address became nearly impossible. Streets twisted, brick and concrete lost their distinctness, signs blurred. The few streetlamps glowed weakly, little ponds of haloed light.

Max hadn’t given up. He’d been talking for what seemed to him like hours, delving too far into the personal in his quest to discourage the kid. The rookie no doubt thought him strange for being so open, but they’d both taken a few snorts already. Besides, training partners were often switched without notice, so if Max was going to plant even a seed of doubt, it would have to happen before shift’s end. This stop held promise. House calls were the worst. Mostly it was the squalor, the piles of dirty dishes, the hollow-faced kids on the floor, the dark rings under everyone’s eyes, the inability to help miserable people who would never escape their miserable lives. The rookie interrupted his thoughts.

“We going to respond or just sit in the car and think about what we might’ve done?”

“All in good time.” Max climbed out and drubbed his leg with his

fists, got the blood pumping through the scar tissue and around the steel and plastic in the reconstructed joint. He'd lived with the artificial knee for fifteen years, but it never came to feel like his real one. Seven corrective surgeries had added seven layers of stiffness.

Inside, the hallway smelled ancient, a mixture of mold and cat litter wafting off the orange carpet.

An Asian man in a turquoise jogging suit was tugging on his ponytail. "This is the third time I've had to call you guys. He's going to kill her if you don't do something."

"Does he have weapons?" Max asked.

"I don't think so. Who knows?"

The kid's hand rested on his piece while his thumb worried the release snap.

"Don't forget, tyro," Max said, "you're the sidekick."

The rookie slid his piece from its leather in a manner that looked too smooth not to have been practiced in front of a mirror. "I got your back."

Max rubbed his eyes with both palms. "Lucky me."

The apartment was at the bottom of a narrow staircase ripe with cellar smells. The heavy shag carpet on the stairs was so thick and reaching it seemed as if it might start growing. The only light bulb was out, so it was a descent into darkness. Max moved slow, lowering himself sideways and one-footed, each step sinking deeper than the last. Had he always been so broken down? Not long ago he was chasing perps down alleys and across playgrounds. Now he moved like a man afraid of losing his balance. A thundering beat hammered away behind the door and he paused, considering a call for backup. But that would mean turning around and climbing back up. He pounded on the door, heard the familiar voice croaking its familiar refrain.

"Seattle Police. Open up."

The music cut off, followed by scurrying inside and some sharp words.

A man's voice boomed out. "Hang on, I've got to lock up my dog."

"Great," Max said. The kid stood two stairs above, strangling his pistol with bloodless hands. How many more calls like this would the

rookie have to go on if he spent the next twenty years as a cop?

When the door cracked open the length of the security chain, it revealed a purple glow interrupted by an eyeball and the hint of a beard. Max shoved a foot into the space. "We'd like to talk with you, sir."

"You got a warrant?"

Leaning against the doorframe was a pump-action shotgun, and the sight of it caused something inside Max to come unconnected. It felt like a string snapping somewhere along his spine, in the region below his neck and above his shoulder blades. Until it gave way he hadn't realized that he'd been holding it taut all along. Once it broke, though, his whole body sagged. He considered asking for a truce. The stairs were the picture of comfort. Maybe he could sit down or even lie there, elbows notched on a step, hands interlaced across his stomach, head resting against the soft edge of a higher step, dozing off, dreaming about the sensation of entering water. He thought of his first dive, not long ago, how the water lifted away all his weight, how the ocean, which he'd always thought of as an empty abyss, was actually teeming with life.

"Fuck this," the man said and slammed the door shut on Max's foot.

A decision had to be made. Max looked deep inside himself for some resolve, but he might as well have been scraping a tin can against dry stone. Something in him that he'd always relied on was no longer working. A blond spider, like a spattering of light, raced up the jamb. Then he felt his sagging muscles regrouping of their own accord. His quadriceps were bunching, his fists clenching. Where some internal motor had stalled, his body was taking over: the security chain shattered as muscle memory heaved him shoulder-first through the door. He snatched the shotgun and passed it back to the rookie before trundling, knee ablaze, into the purple murk. Phosphorescent skeletons, goggle-eyed dwarves, and specters with top hats leered at him. The bearded man was holding his arms out in a protective X. Max landed a forearm across his face that knocked him flat. He pinned the man to the floor with a knee to the neck.

Shells bounced into the room as the rookie ratcheted the shotgun's fore-end. His voice wavered with excited fear. "It was loaded."

The pressure from Max's knee was inflating the man's eyeballs to the size of walnuts. Their sclera glowed fiercely.

The rookie flipped a switch, coating the room with white light. "You going to kill that guy?"

Max eased up and rolled the man over, connected his wrists with cuffs. The living room was the size of a closet, its walls leaning at odd angles. Standing required hunching. The psychedelic spirits had been replaced by felt-covered posters. The place stank of spilled beer, dirty laundry, and dog food, all of it steeped in a sweaty funk.

The man wheezed into the carpet. "Why'd you have to choke me?"

Max still couldn't locate his voice.

"Who else is here with you?" the rookie said.

"Just my wife. In the bathroom."

"Tell her to come out."

"I can't. Our pit bull might get loose."

The rookie glanced at Max, who nodded.

"Get her out here."

Max palmed his pepper spray but knew that it wouldn't do much good, so he readied his forearm to feed to the dog first. What was one more canine tattoo?

The man yelled to his wife and she came out, backing toward them, a tiny thing in jeans and a rumpled hoodie. The dog clawed at the door she'd closed. She turned around.

"Holy shit," the rookie said.

A razor streak of red angled from one temple to the jaw on the other side of her face. The eye it crossed was swollen shut. The man groaned.

"You're under arrest," Max said, the words and routine rushing back.

The woman brandished the backs of her hands to the air, pleading. "He didn't do nothing. I tripped and fell down the stairs, that's why he was so mad. The manager of this dump's an asshole."

"Ma'am, please, we'll call you an ambulance."

"But you can't arrest him. Arrest me. It's *my* fault." Her voice juddered with injustice. Her lone working eye combed Max's face.

"Do yourself a favor and go get some ice."

She glared at him then wandered toward the kitchen.

The rookie holstered his pistol. He rooted around in a camera bag on the floor. “Some serious shit here.” He held up a silver pipe.

“Like I said, you got a warrant?” the man said.

Max was reaching for the pipe when a screeching figure swooped into the room. He turned just in time for the woman to bury a pair of scissors in his chest. He felt their blades slicing through his Kevlar, piercing his skin, gliding between his ribs, and his heart seized into a quivering fist around their point. He saw his life organized around this moment, felt like he’d found, finally, what it had all been leading up to. He fell like a rock into a black abyss, the passage, he figured, to death. What amazed him wasn’t the silence but the roar, like rushing water, all around. He was picked up as if by a giant wave and hurled into darkness. Then he surfaced, gasping for breath, and realized that he was still standing in the sardine-can apartment with this woman, all sinew and teeth, in his face. She was trying to extract the scissors so that she could stab him again.

The black pupil of the rookie’s outreached pistol bobbed, searching for its shot. Max grabbed her wrist, pirouetted her, and pulled her close. Her hair was pungent, sweet and grimy, a smell from lack of washing that he misinterpreted as that of a horse’s mane. He inhaled deep. The smell was everywhere.

The rookie took a bead on her midsection. “That was a felony, lady.”

She was close and the smell was saving Max. Her ass bones ground into his thighs as she wriggled. She reached over her shoulder and grabbed the scissors. Their point fishtailed in his chest. He leaned into her ear, clinched her tight, inhaled her horse smell. “Let it go,” he said and kept repeating. “Let it go, let it go.” The room spiraled. Nothing else in the world mattered but the two of them, locked in a slow dance of force and resistance.

Finally, begrudgingly, the tension seeped from her and she began sobbing. Max cinched her wrists, which were too small for cuffs, with plastic ties then tugged the scissors from his chest. They had penetrated his vest but only sunk half an inch below the skin.

After piling her into an ambulance and calling the animal people,

they drove the man to the station, where they spent the next hour filling out forms. Max doctored the wound himself and warned the kid not to report it.

“All I need’s more paperwork,” he said. His eyelids felt grainy, his face like two slabs of meat hanging off his skull. They were sitting at a cluttered desk. Max pictured the flash of the scissors, their blades homing in on his heart. Police work was ninety-nine percent doldrums and the rest stroke-inducing madness, but he hadn’t had a scare like that for some time.

With a somber look, the rookie shook his head and said meaningfully, “If I’d seen her coming sooner, I would’ve capped her.”

That humored Max and he laughed. The rookie simpered and laughed, too. At that, Max relinquished his desire to flush the cop out of the kid. Let him find his own way, he decided. Maybe he would have better luck. He recalled a dive from a few days ago when he’d gone into fifteen feet of water off Alki Beach. The water was cold and opaque, but it brought a swaddling calm. He was hunting a creature that he’d been reading about. It was rare now, but at one time it had been the king of the ocean. He wanted to tell the rookie about the creature, but he felt hollow and was craving something hot to drink. “I need some coffee,” Max said.

“Coming up.”

At 0045, they were back out for one last stretch. Max was talking about the Permian extinction.

“Most people have never even heard about it. The comet that wiped out the dinosaurs? Nothing compared to this. Land animals, fish, plant life—it killed everything. ‘The Great Dying,’ it’s called. They still don’t know what caused it. But there was one survivor.” He aimed his index finger at the roof. His voice was soft, insistent. “Brachiopods.”

Then their last call came, a one-car collision with an overpass abutment on I-5 by the convention center. They found a Jeep Cherokee plastered against the concrete wall, only its hindquarters intact, the rest a compressed jumble laced with blood. There was nothing to be done but divert the sparse traffic and wait for the rescue team. When they

arrived, they pried open the vehicle, found little left of the two teenage girls inside except bone splinters and a suicide note explaining how the driver suspected her best friend of trying to steal her boyfriend. The rookie stood on the shoulder with a velvet string of vomit hanging from his mouth.

As they eased through downtown, Max clicked off the dispatch radio. The rookie rooted around in the glove box then just sat there, silent. The streets were empty. Steam columns stood like floating sentries along the blocks, their tops merging with the fog ceiling. Businesses and shops drifted past, not a soul in sight. They drove along the waterfront, then Max turned onto one of the cargo piers. He keyed in a code to open the gate, and the cruiser disappeared into a maze of container boxes stacked thirty feet high. On the water side it eased to a stop, front tires perched on the dock's edge. A container crane's legs, laddery and red, rose into the fog.

Max killed the engine. When he rolled down the window, the smell of coffee was replaced by that of saltwater. He held his palms open. "My coop."

Who was he talking to? Inside the cruiser something had changed. The rookie wasn't entirely there, having willed himself absent; or perhaps the projection in Max's mind of his younger self had become weak and fuzzy. He had aimed the cruiser to look out over Puget Sound, which was a black void topped by a violet haze. It was just possible to make out the bulb-strung outline of a ferry, a skeleton of light crawling across the dark. Max began explaining all about brachiopods: the builders of ancient reefs; the hardiest shellfish ever; the makers of a glue stronger than anything synthetic. The Great Dying had decimated them and new creatures took over. But a few anchored in hidden pockets. They were staring at the darkness, which was the water, Max and his youthful ghost. He tilted a finger at the sound, picturing a seam opening in it. "There's one species still out there."

Max was reliving his most recent dive, when he'd finally found the creature. A night full of talk, yet he should've known from the start that he would never discourage the rookie from becoming a cop. This, then,

was what he could pass along. All around was evidence of survival, and knowing that survival was at least possible could make things easier. You just had to know where to look.

A solo venture off Vashon Island in 45° water. Row boat, dry suit, air tank, fins, the whole bit. He dropped over the gunwale and went hand-over-hand down the anchor chain to the sandy bottom, relishing the underwater serenity he had come to crave, the sense of unburdening and the falling away of time. Most days Puget Sound was so cloudy that you couldn't see your glove in front of your face, but on this day visibility was almost ten feet. He walked down the slope, past barnacle-encrusted rocks, starfish, anemones. A rock crab scampered away. He passed through a patch of knee-high sea pens. The stalks weren't bending because he'd chosen the slack-water window between tides. As he descended it grew colder and darker. He equalized his ear pressure every few feet. He fiddled with the valve, admitting more warm air into the suit. A cliff's edge approached. This is why he was here, access to an exposed shelf dropping hundreds of feet into pure darkness. He'd planned to explore down to sixty feet. The water was still. A glance at his watch and he floated over.

He felt as if he was drifting over a bottomless void. He switched on the underwater torch. At sixty feet he moved in close to the wall, a cemented cobble of boulders washed and eroded by the tides. Lining it were countless creatures that looked like mussels, their shells the color of weak coffee, each one flared open slightly, exposing lacy orange innards. *Lingula reevii*.

Brachiopods.

Max released air from his suit and drifted to below eighty feet, then below a hundred. It was dark and freezing. The air gauge showed low. His body ached then went numb. But the deeper he went the more brachiopods there were, rows and rows, numberless crops. He lingered there, touched one with a trembling glove. Then the outgoing tide tugged him away from the wall. His watch was flashing. The air tank read empty. Max kicked against the tide's pull, fought his way back to the wall, and unsheathed his knife. Holding the blade to a brachiopod's

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tether, he had felt a deep sense of vitality. He planned to take this one with him and maybe a few more.

Back in the cruiser, Max opened his fist, revealing one of the brachiopods he'd kept. It rested in his palm as light as a child's toy. The glove box was full of them, little artifacts of survival.