

Whiskey Jacks

Rolf Yngve

The young woman with heavy calves, short black hair and the pale-pink scrubs tried to ignore him again—third time she'd walked by reading her goddamn clipboard. Michael stood up. "Miss? Excuse me. Miss?" She stopped. Turned. Looked. Not unfriendly. Bored. A name tag said she was Scarlet.

"Excuse me, but when can I see my mother?"

"Are you seeing someone here?"

"I said, my mother. You people are doing something with her. They told me to wait. I've come a long way to see my mother."

The woman managed a little smile at her clipboard. "Your mother." A yellow button on her collar told him, Smile, Silly. Why Not? She looked tired.

"They said she's in that room at the end. But I guess she can't see me?"

"Oh." The woman looked him up and down, stiffened. "That room." She took a breath. "Sure. Go ahead if you want."

Before he could say anything more, she thumped away on her heavy white shoes.

Scarlet obviously knew his mother; his mother made people act like that. Just the same, it was no excuse. And what could they be doing that would be so awful? There was no real waiting room. He had found this seat in a wide hall with a nurses' station on one end and on the other, a floor-to-ceiling window to the outdoors, big enough to give the illusion he could walk right out. Not that he would. At least it was warm inside. He was grateful for that.

Michael had forgotten that shocking cold, the air brittle even with the bright sun. Waiting for

the rental car, his warmest coat as worthless as a paper bag, he hadn't been able to calm himself. Finally, the defroster and heater had caught up and he'd settled. The roads, at least, had seemed to lead the same way to the same places, and he'd remembered how to glide the car over the icy spots, pick the dry pavement to turn, accelerate and brake. He found the hospice without trouble. But that cold.

At least they'd told him the right room. A scrap of paper crammed in a holder said Irene. He knocked, cracked open the door to smell the moist air, a faint hint of urine and something else, clean but weak like warm milk.

"Mom?" He pushed on the door. "Can I come in?"

"Michael." Her voice sounded tired and a little slurred, a weathered version of herself. "I didn't think you'd come."

His mother sat propped against her pillows, the bed linens taut over her legs and up her abdomen. She had a good light next to her. Her hair was brushed, greyer than he remembered, but still thick. She'd been lovely when he was a boy. She'd put on some weight. Not fat, but more than he remembered. She had a newspaper creased neatly on the small table floating over her bed, pencil in her hand. The crossword puzzle. She'd always done crosswords. An empty bed lay waiting between hers and a bare window beyond. A mute TV flickered. He wondered what they had been doing to her that he had to wait. He wondered if she had told them to say she was busy. Now that he'd come, she could do anything she wanted.

He said, "You look great. Really." He leaned over, and she let him give her a peck on the cheek. She wore a scent he remembered. She'd always said she only had the second-best cologne. One of her stories was about the time he'd gotten into

the good cologne she'd brought from Europe and drank it. They'd pumped his stomach. He didn't remember any of that. He'd been too young.

"You still look like a skinny boy. But you're not a boy, are you Michael?" His eyes watered. Maybe the scent, the voice. Something. "Pour some coffee for yourself." she pointed to a table with a fancy thermos. "They brought it earlier. I guess I'd like some too."

He'd forgotten about this. He didn't drink coffee much anymore, but coffee had always been something people kept on the stove when he was growing up. People drank it with meals, had a cup with dinner, especially in winter. His mother always had it going in a big copper pot. As it poured, it flooded the room, hot and rich the way it was nowhere else.

"I don't think we have any sugar. You always liked the sugar." She sipped, holding the cup firmly with both hands.

"This is..." He took the chair, looked up out the window, gathered himself. "...nice. Alone. With a nice view."

She hawked out a torn canvas laugh, then choked. She set the cup down on her floating table, waved his hand away when he tried to take it from her. She coughed. She swallowed, took a breath.

"There. Jesus." She croaked it out. "Nice. You say this is nice. Look. I'd go nuts having someone else in here. It's hard enough to sleep without some horrid—" She waved her hand, looked up to the TV. "God. I hate Whoopee. What a name. Whoopee." She waved her hand in the air, "Whoopeeeeee! Look at meeeee! I'm as black as I can beeee! And that Huntsman girl. A Mormon for Christ's sake. Mormon."

The women on the show huddled over their coffee. His mother jabbed the clicker forward like a switchblade. Brian Kilmeade was talking, no

sound, the Fox logo in the upper corner. "And these morons. They should be Mormons, for Christ sake. Not a Lutheran in the whole pandering, stupid trash heap. Not a one worth spit."

Glide, he told himself, like driving on ice, glide along and change direction when you can. "At least you have a nice view. Good window. You'll be able to watch it turn to spring. You'll be able to see everything bloom."

That's what she liked. She liked to talk about plants. The seasons. Gardens.

"Christ, I hope I'm out of here by then." She looked at him directly. She didn't expect spring. She was more than tired.

"I guess no pain?" Michael wondered what sort of pain one got from leukemia. He'd get to the doctor soon enough. "They were doing something to you? I had to wait outside?"

She turned back to watching the TV.

"No pain?"

She changed the channel. "Don't be dense. They give you things." She hit a shopping program, gemstones on a velvet pad, hands moved them around, specifications on the side and a phone number at the bottom. She looked away, sagged into her pillow, and he could see her face losing color. "Are you still married?"

"Yes. Sally and I, we're fine. Martha is still at school, doing fine." He looked back at her staring at the TV. "Your granddaughter."

"I'm not senile. I have no problem with my memory." She shifted away, spoke with her cutting voice to the window. "Your brother was here this morning. You need to call him

"Yes, I guess so. I tried, no answer. Wrong number," he lied. He hadn't called anyone. He wasn't planning on dealing with Alan or his wife.

His mother tore a corner off the paper, wrote as she said, "I want you to get my house keys from

him tonight. I need you to go scare those birds out of my garage." She thrust out the paper scrap. The hand was a scrawl, wobbled figures of the phone number, barely readable. And birds? What was this about? They used to call it quirky.

His mother stared at him. "I don't know what's the matter with Alan. He takes care of everything else for me. But for some reason he will not take care of those goddamn birds. They're whiskey jacks. You remember whiskey jacks. They shit all over everything. Pick at the wall until they get inside. They steal, those birds. Anything shiny."

Then he did remember, it came to him, one of those childhood memories like a dream. "The wedding ring." He tried to smile.

His mother's eyes widened. Her face opened, relaxed, something bloomed for a moment. This was the mother he remembered as a boy, the woman whose face loosened from its pinched unhappiness and smiled. A genuine, beautiful, heartfelt beam of remembrance and happiness. "You do remember." Her voice. Music. Michael almost wept.

"I remember you and Dad having some sort of fight. I remember that bird, with the long tail, it swooped in. Took it, that little glint of gold in its beak."

She chuckled, a thready sound, deep in her chest. She coughed. "Filled gold. God. Your father was cheap even then." She coughed again, "God Damn." She took a breath. "I put that ring up there for just a second, just to wash the dishes and that damn bird came down to take it. And you, sitting there on the floor, what six years old? Pointing your finger going, 'birdy, birdy.'"

Then the smile vanished and her lips thinned and hardened. "Damn birds. Robbers. Thieves. Damn Alan. And that wife of his. Elaine." She snorted.

His mother closed her eyes, opened them, blank or angry, he couldn't tell. He said, "I could go right now and check if you want. Don't you have keys? Just loan me the keys and I'll go over to your place, come back, an hour, tops."

"What if you don't come back? What would I do without any keys? I haven't seen you in fifteen years, Michael. Just do what I say, will you?"

He held up his hands, "Don't worry, Mom. Really. I'll take care of it."

"You're, what, sixty-two years old? I don't need to tell you how to talk to your brother." She closed her eyes, pushed the floating table away. "I'm going to sleep for a while. You can go if you want."

"Tired?"

"You need to go and get some rest yourself. But I need to tell you something." She popped her eyes open, narrowed them at him. Her voice had picked up some firmness, some of its old bite. "There's something about Alan I want to tell you. But I want you to promise me you'll never say anything about it."

Michael let himself relax into the chair. He looked up to the window. There was frost high on the storm window and the last of the sun caught it, sparkled. He thought about the sun on the water of the bay where he lived. He thought of Sally.

"Alan has nothing. Nothing. Dumb. No skills. Can't keep a job. No kids, nothing. Bloodsuckers, that Elaine. He's got—Elaine." She snorted, waved her hand. She turned her face to him, locked in place, determined. "You've got yourself fixed. You've got that wife and I guess that works out for you, doesn't it? You're fine, aren't you?"

"That's right. I'm fine. We're good."

"I've decided to give Alan the estate. I'm going to give you some silverware. I had it all polished for you, asked him to box it up for you and send it. You can use it for entertaining. Elaine will only sell

it if Alan gets it. It was the silver your father and I got when we were first married. You make sure you get that silver. It's the real thing."

"I think that's wise, that's good. We're set. I agree. Alan needs the house. It makes sense." He would always consider that one of his best moments, when he let it all slide by. The silver was a nice gesture. They'd used it for every holiday when he grew up. Heavy, initialed, bought piece-by-piece when his father and mother were young and poor. Bought when she was the mother he tried now to remember. "Thanks. Sally and I would love the silver. And you're right, we'll use it. Thanks." He smiled and nodded.

His mother stared at him a moment. He would always remember that look as disappointment. He stared back, calm as a winter moon.

"Michael, I want you to promise me you won't let that lawyer wife of yours take the estate away from Alan."

"Why would we? Never mind." He held up his hand as if about to stop traffic. "That's what you want, that promise? Okay, I promise."

She reached out her hand. "Take my hand." He didn't want to take anything she offered right now. He wanted to get up, walk out without saying a word, leave her as barren as she wished, every branch shorn of every leaf.

He took her hand in both his. It was ever cold.

"Thank you, Michael. You were always a good boy."

He stayed for a while so she would think he was fine. He started to tell her about Sally, Martha, their house in California, to let her know things were well with them. But she wasn't interested. She dozed. She slept calmly.

He spoke to her in case she could hear. He told her he would be back in the morning.

Michael met Alan and Elaine at the lodge where

his family had dined for three generations. It had gotten a facelift since his boyhood. Gone was the knotty pine, replaced by stone veneers and indirect lighting. Before they finished the meal, he ran out of things to ask them. Alan had done pretty well with the collection of snowmobile and boat shops he owned. He'd decided to retire, and Elaine said she'd gotten laid off. She'd worked as an office assistant for years, one construction firm after another. Now it was a building bust and winter. No work. Elaine didn't like the president, but he was the best they could expect. Elaine hated immigrants who were going to come north to kill her.

"Now, Elaine. Don't get carried away," Alan said.

Elaine said, "Well it's a good thing we live up north is all I can say. They don't like it up here."

"Ice fishing," said Michael. "Done any ice fishing lately?" He grinned at Elaine and said, "We don't have ice in California, you know." Alan stared at him as if he was about to fight, then his face loosened and he said, "You should get some then. Walleye. That old walleye hole is still producing. Not like this crap." He pointed at the fillet Michael had ordered. "Eat it still moving on the plate."

They talked pan fried fish. They talked about watching the Vikings lose the Super Bowl on broadcast TV sitting in their dad's icehouse while he drank whiskey. Elaine told a story about icehouses going through the lake the last year because it had thawed so quickly. Some people drowned, she said, because they drank too much beer. "That's all an icehouse is, an excuse to drink," she said. Alan told a story about a mutual friend who had hit a barbed wire fence driving a snowmobile. They knew about a high school classmate of Michael's who'd gotten drunk and skidded his car into another lane, killing himself

and a family. They talked about how Britney Spears had gone downhill so fast after she'd been such a nice girl. What ever happened to Britney, they wondered, and Elaine looked something up on her phone but didn't tell them what she found while Michael and Alan talked about the President bombing a terrorist.

Neither Elaine nor his brother wanted to know about Sally, or Martha or California. They didn't ask, but he told them about his daughter and her university as they looked blankly on, ordered desert and coffee. Alan said, "So what's this charity thing you do, vice director or something it said on your Christmas card, right?"

"That's right."

Elaine pushed away her plate slicked clean of its chicken-fried steak. "So how do you get a job like that, vice director of what is it? In California? You direct the vice or something? They pay you for that, or do you just skim a little for yourself off the top?" She wolfed a little laugh.

Michael said as cheerfully as he could, "It's a tough job. But – somebody's got to do it." He grinned to make it feel like they were just goofing around.

"Somebody's got to do it! That's perfect! I like you. He's likable isn't he, Alan?" Alan laughed, put his arm around Elaine.

Alan said, "I guess it's all right you're here."

"I tried to phone. But I didn't have your number. It's not in the book."

The two of them stared across the table, then looked up like two birds on a wire to greet the young woman waitstaff perking up with a full plate. "Here we go! Mudslide to share. Three spoons?"

"Two," said Michael.

"I guess you don't eat desert in California," said Elaine.

"Coffee?" said the young woman.

They all wanted coffee. No decaff. No cream. Black. Alan said, "Why did you come, anyway? I haven't seen you since Dad died. What, you expecting another funeral?"

"She called. I came. Nothing more."

"She did? When was that?"

"Last week."

"I didn't know she called you."

"I'm here. I'm sorry I didn't give you any heads up. But I couldn't reach you."

"Why did she call you?"

"I don't know. She's pretty sick. I mean, it looks like she'll die. I'm still her son. I'm still your brother."

Alan snorted. "She's just sick, Michael. Leukemia isn't always fatal, anymore."

"Right." he tried to think of something to defuse all this. "Look, today she said something about wanting me to get birds or something out of her garage. Whiskey jacks? Not that I believe it. You know how she is."

Alan's lips parted to breathe heavily. Elaine glanced at her husband, his brother and said, "Right. Her and her birds." The bolts holding the table pedestal to the floor were a little loose. It wobbled. Michael tried to hold it so it wouldn't slop the coffee.

He would never understand this. Sally had told him he'd needed to go. So what if he'd last seen his mother at his dad's funeral? Why his mother had gone to the funeral, Michael had no clue. Probably to gloat, Michael had told Sally. Only to gloat. So what if he hadn't even friended his brother on Facebook? Sally had said. It was his family, she'd told him. He'd regret it if he didn't go when his mother had asked.

Michael had given in. Sally had a warm streak in her, but she had been wrong; he should have stayed home.

Alan said, "I told Mom there's nothing in the garage except her garden tools and that car of hers."

"Irene is a little off," Elaine tapped her head. "You know how it goes."

Michael looked away. He leaned back, spread open his arms across the top of the booth, tried to look relaxed. "I figured it was something like that. She told me to get the keys from you. She said she wanted to make sure the birds were out of the garage."

Alan had stopped moving, frozen like some creature caught in the headlights. "She didn't say anything to me about giving you keys."

"I'm sure not. Let's pretend it never happened. I don't care. You decide. I'll just tell her something if she asks."

"Like what?"

"I don't know. Something. Look, she probably won't ask."

"What if she does?" said Elaine.

"I don't know. What do you want me to tell her? You're the one who has to live with it, Alan. Whatever you want."

Alan looked down, pouched the folds in his neck. "I was thinking I could go over to the house with you. But I won't have time tomorrow. I went by there today." He shook his head. "You're leaving. When?"

"Day after tomorrow. But I don't have to do anything." In that moment Michael believed himself.

"Then it's settled — do me a favor, if Mom asks, we've decided — tell her you looked and everything was fine."

"No problem. You've got enough on your mind." Michael picked up the check.

For a while after they were married, Sally would

ask him why he didn't get along with his family. Michael suspected she didn't believe him, but the truth was, he didn't know. His father had been a drunk. His mother had gotten mean. His brother, ten years younger, had never been close. All he knew was that after he'd served his hitch in the Navy, no one had wanted him at home. Or maybe, he'd said to Sally, maybe they were angry at him because he hadn't returned home. Maybe they were angry because he was happy. Safe. Content.

It would have been so much better if he'd simply ignored his mother's phone call, and now, he'd gotten lost in the dark.

The road up to the house had overgrown into a vast deciduous tangle. He prowled his car under branches stretched above him, the trees matured and reaching in the moonlight. There were streetlights. All the homes were set well back. Many were new, unfamiliar, most well-lit. Each was different, but all hard to see in the woods. He was about to give up when the small bridge he'd crossed over so many times finally rang a bell and he drove to the house as if electronically guided. It had a new gate. He looked for a name on the mailbox. Only a number, but it held his mother's mail.

He tried to open the gate. A bicycle chain locked it, there was barely enough room for him to squeeze through. It would be just his luck to have some cop catch him. He could imagine the phone call to Alan to bail him out. He smiled thinking about it. He thought about it again and almost turned back thinking about it.

He walked around the place. The garage looked intact and the house fine. Someone had shoveled the walk out front and plowed the driveway or it had melted down enough to seem black and dry under the moonlight. The moon made it easy enough to walk around outside, see it. Someone

had left a light on inside. It looked like the kitchen. That would be his mother trying to make it look occupied. Classic stupidity. Light on with a chain through the gate. Who did she think she was fooling?

Behind the garage, Michael pushed on the windowpanes looking for one loose enough. It was an old, double-hung window. All the panes moved so he picked the one nearest the latch, pressed, and wriggled it. He was thinking he was in luck when it gave way, fell in, bounced on something then politely broke, a little slap. He'd leave it. When they executed the estate, they would think it had fallen out on its own.

From there, it was easy to reach inside, undo the catch, push up the lower sash. He took off the useless coat, dropped it inside so it wouldn't catch and pulled himself up and in reaching out into the dark to find something to steady himself. He wished he'd thought to buy a stocking cap as he got his hand on a bench or something and he smelled coffee just before he heard Elaine say from somewhere inside, "Christ, Alan, Shoot him. Shoot!"

When Michael was growing up, visitors to his parents' house were always offered coffee, saying "How do you take your coffee?" not even wondering if anyone wanted it.

"Maybe I'll have a little cream this time if you've got it. Some sweet?" Michael said.

Alan poured from the old pot, same as it ever had been. Weathered deep brown, scorched on the edges. Elaine got milk from the refrigerator. He stirred in sugar using the spoon his mother had kept in the glass sugar bowl all the years he was growing up, set it on the saucer, a twin of all the saucers he remembered. Elaine sat across the table and watched Michael, her cigarette uncoiling in the cramped old kitchen. She wore an old nightgown.

Probably his mother's.

"Good thing I turned on the light," said Alan.

"Was it loaded?"

"Bird shot. Might not have killed you. But I was pretty close. I turned on the light to shoot, saw it was you." Alan looked down, his chin quivered a bit.

This wasn't the wary Alan he'd seen at the lodge. This was an old Alan, worn down already. Tired. Michael thought, this was what I escaped. This is what they expected me to be.

"What the hell is the matter with you?" Elaine said, "What the hell — you think you can break into someone's house? We could have shot you, and no one would blame us. No one. I think you better go. I could call the police."

It was his mother's table, his mother's kitchen, the same kitchen he remembered right down to the pot, the sugar bowl and the silver plate spoon.

Michael shook his head, "It was the birds. She was talking about the whiskey jacks wrecking everything in the garage, and I promised her. It seemed like I ought to try to keep a promise."

"All right. Let's go. Let's look for them," said Elaine.

Michael said, "No. It's all right, I feel terrible about it. I never should have doubted you." His brother was living in his mother's house. He thought about asking him how long it had been since he and Elaine had moved in. But why bother?

Elaine crossed her arms, held herself. "You're here. You came to make sure the garage didn't have any birds. I want you to look."

Alan looked emptied. The shotgun was put away.

Michael stood up. "I'm sorry. I'll leave. I'll look on my way out."

"I don't know. I think I ought to call the police, Alan. We ought to document this. Your brother is

some kind of criminal or something. This proves it.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll go back home tomorrow. Nothing will happen.”

Elaine pursed her mouth shut. She took the pot off the stove, started to pour steaming coffee into the sink. Alan nodded toward the garage. Elaine said to their backs, “I’m calling the police. You were breaking in. You came here to steal. We should have shot you.”

Alan flipped on the lights. He pointed up to the corner of the garage. “They were up there. Damnedest thing. I should knock it down, but I haven’t.”

The nest had slumped on one side in the corner of a rafter. In the light of a single bulb he could see it still held glints of shiny material, gum wrappers, wire. Maybe there would be wedding rings stolen from kitchen windows.

“We’ll have to replace that windowpane you busted out, or they’ll be back.”

Alan punched the button on the garage door. They watched it open to the street and trees etched black against the snow. “I’ll walk down, unlock the gate for you.”

At the gate, Alan offered his hand. Michael’s right arm ached. It was going to really hurt tomorrow after falling through the window, twisting it under him. Alan pulled Michael toward him with his doughy paw. “I almost shot you. Michael. I almost did.” Alan wouldn’t let go of his hand. Michael was bigger by a shoulder, the older brother, he could have broken his grip. He didn’t try to pull away. Finally Alan said, “She doesn’t know we’re in the house.”

“I’m not going to say anything.” Alan was wrong. Their mother knew. Michael wanted to say, you married our mother. You live in the house she made. He wanted to say, how could you do this to

yourself? But he didn’t say anything. He had never said anything. Somewhere inside he felt as though he should have come home to keep his brother safe. Somehow, he could have changed all this. Instead, he’d run away.

“Elaine is having a hell of a time,” said Alan. “About shooting you. She didn’t mean it.”

“No. I’m out of here tomorrow.” Michael was sure Elaine meant it. But he didn’t know why. What had they done, Alan and him? What had they done wrong? “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Alan let him loose, shook his head. “What can anyone do?”

Michael put his hands in his pants pockets as Alan unlocked the gate, swung it open. The spoon Michael had picked up off the table was still warm from the coffee. He wondered if it would still taste sweet in the car. His mother would have missed it right away. Elaine would most certainly and very soon. Michael walked with the air brittle on his cheeks, his coat worthless as paper. It wasn’t until the heater caught up in the car that he felt calm. Then, driving, it seemed fine.

The way Michael tells the end of the story to his wife and daughter, it goes like this:

The next morning the sun was up and the sky clear, but the winter had broken open and it was warm. He stopped at a Byerly’s on the way to get some flowers, and they had some beautiful red and white variegated tulips, just beginning to plump out of their buds in baskets woven with rough straw. He bought one to bring his mother a little springtime.

When he got to the hospice, he knocked and went into the room to find his mother on her side, curled up and dozing under a flood of morning sun and warmth. She smelled like warm milk. He sat next to her, put the tulips on the table where the

sunshine through her window sprayed to awaken the blooms. She breathed in their scent as she woke up.

She stirred, said hello, and asked if he could get her some water. Michael poured some in a glass. She drank it through a straw without sitting up. She asked for her glasses so she could see him. When she put them on, he told her he thought she might like some tulips, and he'd been lucky to find some. She took a deep breath, her eyes closed. She said they were lovely – isn't it wonderful how beautiful and fragrant tulips have become? They were never like that years ago. Now they are so robust, so hearty, they will even push up through the snow.

He held his mother's hand and told her he would be going home that day.

To your wife, she said to him, back to your wife, your daughter and you are happy, aren't you? She was glad he had somewhere to go.

He asked his mother then, if she was afraid.

She closed her eyes, sighed, and said no she wasn't. It was just as she hoped. She was more and more tired. Now she just wanted to sleep.

He told her the birds were out of the garage. He told her that the Whiskey Jacks had already left when he checked, Alan had already taken care of it, as he would.

Michael told the spouse and daughter he loved that his mother had told him, good. He said that she told him he'd always been brave and a good son.

None of it was true.

Instead, he wait-listed and caught the early plane to San Diego, picked up the car and was home midday with warm sun cooled by the California current. He floated back into his life with Sally, his work, his life, the place he'd made for himself. He told Martha and Sally about whiskey jacks,

showed them the pictures of the old house, told them all about a mother he'd imagined was a good mother – a mother like Sally. One of the stories he told was the time he'd gotten into the cologne his mother brought home from Europe and drank it. They all laughed. For years after they could get a rise out him saying "too much cologne" when he did something silly or dumb. He told about falling in the window and it was hilarious. He knew Martha would tell her children about whiskey jacks, cologne and the time Elaine almost had him shot.

One afternoon, Scarlet with the happy yellow button on her uniform called to tell him his mother was dead. He called Alan at the house and got no answer. His brother never called back. He thought about going to what had once been his home, but decided he would only make things worse. He was foreign, now. A Californian who worked in vice or something.

Instead, Michael imagined the snowmelt at home around the shoots of delicate flowers and early green grass. When the cold lets go, summer spreads north to thaw the landscape and loosens everything stilled underneath, the days longer and longer until night seems like a punctuation mark.

He told the Minneapolis lawyer he'd hired to sell the silver. The lawyer sent checks in series. Those he kept to himself – half an inheritance of nothing.

Instead, he put the spoon he'd taken from his mother's kitchen in his family's sugar jar. In the end, everyone believed the spoon had been a gift from someone who forgave slivers of gold caught up by thieves and flown away – that small gleam he'd taken and kept for himself, that glint of rage.