

Distant Greetings : A Screen Story

A faint din of glasses chiming, being filled with ice and liquor; distant chatter echoing across a lounge. A man's voice, nearby, asks:

Have you been writing anything?

There is a long moment of hesitation until another man's voice, marked by an innate distance, a tinny wavering, replies:

Some. Small things. Well, they don't feel small, but- I've gone back to some old ideas, tried to pick up the thread. But it's tough knowing where to start.

Fade in, with these words, to:

I – Interior – Bar – Evening

A dim lounge, distantly reminiscent of an old Hollywood joint, as in a film such as *In a Lonely Place*; unlike, perhaps, any spot that ever in fact existed. Two friends sit at the bar, half-facing each other, half-watching the bartender, a blonde girl in a tanktop, serve other patrons a half-dozen seats down. Soft jazz piano floats out of muffled speakers in the far corners of the room. One man nurses a whiskey, the other casually drinks his beer.

The man with the whiskey – SCOTT, 34 and thin, ill-shaven and a little pale – tugs self-consciously at his sleeve, rolled up his forearm. He clearly put a lot of care into his dress, seeking the perfect balance between casual and crisp; and just as clearly, he feels in his whole body that he failed to achieve that balance, perched tensely on the leather-top stool. His friend, by contrast, is tan and loose, dressed in a crumpled tee-shirt, baggy shorts, and flip-flops; this is JAY, a little older, carrying his larger frame with ease, silvering hair shorn neatly to his head as to be almost invisible.

Scott takes up the glass to drink again, then thinks twice and returns it to the bar; his fingers remain with it. He reveals himself, when he speaks, to be the one with the distant voice – certain words spoken with assurance, others nearly dropping out altogether, as though it cannot decide moment-by-moment whether it should be there or not.

Scott: There have been some moments of inspiration. I guess you'd call it that. Always in the mornings, before I remember where I am. I jot something down quickly- (*here his hand, inadvertently, mimes the action*) - and for a moment it feels like being reborn. Then the other feeling comes on – a dog returning to its vomit.

Jay is uncertain whether to laugh or give sympathy.

Jay: And being back? That doesn't stoke the creative fires a little?

Scott (with a laugh): Driving the 405 never stoked the creative fires.

Jay: Sure, but- I don't know, remembering?

Scott: Let me be here for at least a day before I start worrying about that.

Jay: Sure, sure.

He takes a long drink from his beer. Scott follows, finishing his whiskey. He sets the glass down with immediate regret, turning it around a little on the bar-top.

Jay: You want another?

Scott: No... I'm good.

Jay tries to flag the bartender. He listens distractedly as Scott, still looking at the glass, speaks.

Scott: I am a little worried about feeling the old mania again. Not the creative urge, the other side of it. The fear about not working. The feeling that someone else is always doing the work you want.

Jay: That's just a sign you're back home.

Scott: Yeah... Which I guess is not exactly what I want.

These last words are lost amidst the approach of the bartender, Jay ordering another beer, asking Scott:

Jay: You're sure you don't want anything?

Scott: Yeah, I'm sure.

Jay (to the bartender): Just that, then.

He watches, not bothering to conceal his admiration, as she strolls to the taps and fills him another glass. Scott turns his gaze around the place, calling things back to mind. The space, cramped and dark, expands with the murmur of comfortable, confidential conversation. His eyes alight on a couple, a middle-aged man and a young woman, who could be either an agent and an actress or a pair of tourists enacting their Hollywood fantasy. He remembers that it in this place it had invariably turned out to be the latter; he remembers the disappointment at that as something characteristic of his entire life here.

The bartender returns with Jay's beer. She takes away Scott's empty glass.

Jay (as he drinks): First time I've ever seen you turn down a second drink.

Scott, called back, hesitates a moment, considering an excuse; then decides on the truth.

Scott: It's true. I've been trying to drink less.

Jay: Since...?

Scott: Yeah. One drink a night.

Jay: Whiskey?

Scott: It keeps my head clear.

Jay laughs, drinking. Scott's finger traces a circle in the dewdrops on the bar.

Scott: Maybe it's excessive. Maybe everything would've happened anyway. But it felt like I had to change something. This seemed practical. Financial as much as moral.

His eyes wander as he speaks toward the liquor bottles lined against the mirror opposite them. Seeing his face there, he realizes how serious he has gotten; something he did not intend. He turns back to his friend, with a short laugh.

Scott: Anyway... It was fun trying to be Faulkner or Fitzgerald for awhile. Or Nick Ray. But it's kind of pointless when the only part you can manage is the being-a-drunk part.

Jay: I don't know, you're setting yourself an awfully high bar there. On the second count maybe even more than the first.

Scott (laughing again): It's true. Dissolution as a spiritual experience – I wasn't cut out for that either.

Jay: Few are.

But Scott thought once, perhaps, that he was; when any genuine belief had dried up, anything that had once given him the sense of being healthy and full. He thought, perhaps, that restoration would come through embracing the truth, admitting his sickness, his emptiness, and seeing it through to the end. But when even the idea of being empty had emptied itself, then- Then he found himself where he is now, a realm where health and sickness have little meaning, and everything is clear and hard and painfully sober.

Again Jay's voice sounds near at his shoulder, calling him out of himself:

Jay: Will you see anyone else?

Scott: Well, Sarah. Sorry – Helena's sister.

Jay: Ah. Right, of course. I was more meaning, any one from the old crew?

Scott (with a sarcastic edge): Is that what we were? A crew?

Jay: Maybe it's just how I want to remember it. Makes those days seem innocent compared to this dirty business now.

Scott (happy for the opportunity to dodge the question): You don't see anyone anymore, then?

Jay: Well, I see lots of people, but old friends, no, not really, not unless there's a specific reason. You know, work to get out of it or whatever. Though I did see Charlie Wales the other week.

Scott: Oh yeah? How is he?

Jay: Good, I guess. He had a script optioned by somebody or other.

Scott: See, that's exactly the sort of thing I wanted to avoid hearing while I was here.

Jay (laughing): Guess you should've avoided me too, then. He doesn't think it'll actually get made, if that makes you feel any better.

Scott (feeling a pang of regret that he turned down that second drink): This conversation is just reminding me what a terrible person I am. Constitutionally incapable of being happy for anyone else's success.

Jay: None of us are capable of that. We just act it.

Scott: I guess that's why I couldn't last.

Jay: You played the game for awhile. Pretty well, in fact.

Scott (with a single laugh, clipped and bitter): Is that supposed to be a compliment?

Jay: Whatever it is. It's true, anyway.

Scott: Just another reason it's good for me I'm gone. That's something else I'm trying to give up, the performing. Drink less and tell the truth more. When for the longest time it was only when I was drinking that I *could* tell the truth.

Jay's deep laugh carries across the bar. Still with his finger tracing shapes on the wood, Scott gives him a sideways glance, constrained smile. Glass and canned piano continue to provide a soundtrack, as the life of the old place goes on oblivious around them.

II – Hollywood Street – A Short Time Later

Evening approaches, the Hollywood Hills looming in the distance as the two friends exit the bar, pausing beneath its lurid, outsized neon sign for Jay to light a cigarette. As Scott waits, he looks up at the sign; then up the block.

Scott: Hasn't changed.

Jay: Course not. That's why we came here in the first place.

They fall into step alongside one another, Jay exhaling.

Scott: Who had you heard was a regular here?

Jay: I can't remember, doesn't matter. Howard Hawks or somebody like that. I think we thought we'd walk in and suddenly find ourselves living *The Bad and the Beautiful*.

Scott: It was good to dream. Hope against hope.

Jay: Only thing that kept us from turning around and running back home.

They turn off the busy avenue, suddenly on a quiet, tree-lined street; bungalows hidden discreetly behind gates. Jay smokes thoughtfully; then turns to Scott.

Jay: You okay to drive?

Scott: Yeah, I'll be- (*Only now catching the humor-*) Oh, go to hell...

Jay (laughing heartily): You'll have to forgive me if I can't quite buy you as a drunk. I think I can count on one hand the number of times...

Scott: Like I said, something else I failed at. (*Growing more serious-*) You forget how little we saw each other after Helena arrived on the scene.

Jay: There were a lot of factors to that.

Scott: Mostly me living in a haze.

Jay: Is that what it was? I always got the impression you loved her more than any guy I knew had ever loved a girl.

Scott: That's just the impression I wanted to give.

Jay: Well, you did a damned good job of it.

Scott: Maybe you could have convinced her of that.

Jay: She knew...

Jay drags on his cigarette, slyly refusing to meet Scott's glance, leaving him to ponder the words. Then, with a canny sense that the moment has had its effect:

Jay: So what can we do to convince you to come back here? You can't tell me you don't miss it.

Scott: I *don't* miss it. But much more at issue is the fact that I don't have any business being here any more. (*As Jay moves to interject-*) I mean that quite literally.

Jay: Okay, sure. But that can be remedied by a few meetings.

Scott: Right... Who do you imagine I'd meet with? Anybody dumb enough to have met with me must have been run out of town by now. You forget what a bad impression I made the first time around.

Jay: You give yourself too much credit. This town has a short memory.

Scott: As do I. I've forgotten how to even go about anything like taking a meeting.

There is a poorly concealed pride in his voice, a pride made all the more pungent by the bitter hostility that cloaks it – as though it's all he can do to spit out the words without vomiting. The pride would be offensive to anyone other than Jay, who, unflappable, recognizes in it the dimly flickering return of the friend he knew before – prone to turn on others, it is true, particularly those most capable of helping him get ahead; indeed finding strange solace in this, as though the occasional act of self-sabotage were the necessary corrective to the deep compromise he rightly or wrongly felt the rest of his professional life to be. Jay recalls that the practical approach was often the best way to puncture this pride:

Jay: How long are you here? I'm sure I could call a few folks, get you a chance to make a fresh impression.

Scott: No, I'm here only until Sunday.

Jay: Two days? Was that really enough?

Scott: Probably not. But I thought it would be all I could handle. It doesn't matter, I wouldn't have anything to talk about anyway. I'm really just here to see about Philip. That's what I'm focused on right now. That's everything.

Jay: You sound like you're trying to convince yourself.

Scott, it appears, is not pleased to be caught out in this way; or not pleased that the truth is such and, as such, remains so painfully evident.

Scott: Maybe. But it doesn't make it any less valid.

Jay hears in these words the first hint of an emotion strong enough to escape his friend's cold bitterness; and so, recognizing that he has pushed Scott to an edge, decides to relent; nodding slowly, allowing his hitherto-withheld sympathy to be felt in this gesture.

Jay: How long has it been?

Scott: A year, give or take. Which feels like a lifetime. It is, actually – most of his lifetime.

Jay: And your plan is-?

Scott: No, there's no plan. I only want to see how he is. Remind him I exist, if need be. Restore some sort of- memory with him, though I don't really know if that's the right word. Show Sarah and John – Helena's sister and her husband – show them that I'll be ready to take him back when the time is right. Whenever that is.

Jay: Not now?

Scott: God, no. I'm not working, and without that- I'm not taking him back to my parents' place, that would be a disaster. Plus I'm still just- sick. There's a lot I need to work out.

Jay: I don't know, you give me the impression of having things pulled together.

Scott (allowing a gentle deprecation to carry the words from the back of his throat): We've discussed this...

He takes from his pocket a set of keys, clicking open a car in the shadows across the street. Jay punctuates this abrupt end to their reunion:

Jay: So there we are, then.

Scott: There we are.

Jay: Where is their place?

Scott: Somewhere south. Further south than I've ever gone in my life. Where LA means something other than Hollywood.

Jay: You were always looking for that place.

Scott: Yeah, well- hard to imagine it's gonna fulfill my dreams.

Jay: Could anywhere?

Scott: *On verra*, as they say.

Scott is already backing, with shuffling impatient steps, into the street. Jay raises his hand in farewell, recognizing that Scott is not so much leaving as making himself slip from sight; avoiding the question of when, if ever, they will see one another again.

Jay: Call me if you get bored.

Scott: Sure. I will.

Scott turns with quick acceleration toward his car, faintly – if resolutely – relieved to leave behind his friend's questions and privileged sympathy. He ducks into the vehicle and pulls the door shut. He finds his phone and studies directions, a route taking him by freeway straight through the heart of the city, cutting down toward the coast. After a

moment's hesitation, key trembling just shy of the ignition, he starts the engine and pulls off without a glance aside or back.

III – John and Sarah's House – South Bay – An Hour or Two Later

Scott parks his car across the street from a single-level home presiding unostentatiously over a humbly groomed yard, bare save for a thin lemon tree lingering near the front step. The sun, just in the process of hiding itself behind the house, is almost hallucinatory in its intensity, less illuminating the evening than shrouding everything in a uniform brightness – flat stretches of street lined by houses more or less like this one, not a single inhabitant manifest as far as he can see. He has the impression as he crosses the street, bearing a small wrapped gift, of time halting, stirred only now and then by a breeze coming from the sea, not many miles off.

He rings the front bell. After a moment JOHN – late 30s, clean-cut, still dressed from his day's work as an engineer – answers, assessing him with a quick glance.

John: Scott. Come in.

Their voices precede them into the living room, an open, quiet space, large window giving way to a view of the street, giving it an even stronger sense of expanse.

Scott: I'm sorry I'm late. I poorly estimated the time getting down here.

John: It's not a problem.

Scott: Did I miss Philip?

John: No- normally he'd be going to bed now, but staying up a little late won't hurt. Not on a special night.

Scott: Well, I appreciate it. I've already forgotten how bad it gets, cutting through downtown.

They enter, John following Scott. Scott's eyes alight, immediately, on a collection of toys near the window, half-organized on a square of rubber floormat. He turns back at John's voice:

John: You're not coming from the airport, then.

Scott: No... (*With the feeling of having broken an unspoken agreement-*) My flight got in this afternoon. But from what Sarah told me, it sounded like you wouldn't be around until later. So I got a drink with a friend near Hollywood.

John: Sarah said you'd given that up.

Scott: No, I have. One a day. I stick to that.

John (with skepticism): I see.

Scott: It was my one trip up there. Otherwise, everything is about Philip.

With this last trying – and not entirely succeeding – to make it better. John nods; just as awkward with Scott as Scott is with him.

John: Can you I get you anything? Water?

Scott: I'm fine, thanks.

John (already heading out of the room as he speaks): I'll let Sarah know you're here.

Scott turns around, sizing the room. It is a comfortable house; modest in every detail, but something he knows he could never have afforded, and likely never will afford.

Dismissing everything else from mind thus, he allows his gaze to return to the toys and books – and stray pages of books and pieces of toys, indistinguishable from caps and bottles turned into toys – beneath the window. None of this is familiar to him; when last he saw his son, the boy could barely roll over, much less play or crawl or – now, he assumes – walk. Still only a creature then, not a person – this is how Scott remembers him through the fog of recovery. Defenseless in the midst of the chaos of that dirty one-bedroom apartment, home even before he arrived to two desperately unhappy adults, deep into the process of erasing their own precarious personhood.

He hears steps and murmur behind him, and turns to meet them, sucking in air to fill his empty chest. SARAH – mid-30s, dressed down after a day at the office - enters first; looking back, coaxing.

Sarah: C'mon... C'mon, sweetie... Didn't you want to see Daddy?

She turns and smiles at Scott, as though this is far from the first time they have encountered one another under these circumstances. Though a couple of years older, she has always borne a remarkable resemblance to her sister; or vice-versa, anyone else would say. It is the first he has seen her since Helena's death, and yet the intervening time has done nothing to diminish the physical resonance. The effect is disarming; it makes him forget everything – everything, that is, until John enters, leading PHILIP by the hand.

The boy looks at him without expression, much less recognition. He has the same eyes – Sarah's eyes, Helena's eyes, gray-blue, from Helena promising storms, from Sarah exuding calm, and from Philip, his son, expressing something yet undefined, but no less solid. Drawn almost unconsciously, Scott takes a step or two toward him, suspending himself awkwardly in the center of the room, aware of three gazes fixed unblinkingly upon him. As though a gravitational force holds them this very specific distance apart – here and no closer – the boy shuffles backward, half-tucking himself behind John's leg. Sarah narrates:

Sarah: He's still a little wary around new people. But he warms up quickly.

Saying this, she crosses to the mat, grabbing a ball. Calling his name, she offers it toward the boy. His eyes show awareness of her game, turning quickly from the ball to her face to Scott's, where they rest with interrogation.

Sarah (standing, with mock exasperation): There's no fooling you, is there?

The boy holds his gaze knowingly on her face; adoringly, Scott thinks, himself fixed there.

John: That's for him?

Scott realizes that John indicates the wrapped box, forgotten in his hand.

Scott: Oh. Yeah...

Bending down and holding it vaguely in the direction of the boy.

Sarah: Philip, do you see what Daddy brought for you?

The boy's eyes follow Sarah's finger to the gift. His hand still holds to a thin fold of John's pants. He appears slowly – without yet a step – to slip away from his shelter there.

Scott's gaze remains fixed on the face of his son – perhaps trying to discern there any trace of himself, half-shrouded in the shadows as it still is. He barely registers Sarah's words:

Sarah: There you are...

With flat, emphatic steps the boy totters into the center of the room. Rather than coming to Scott, however, he cuts a line straight to the window, finding there a toy piano, banging on it with a single finger. Scott's gaze follows him, then turns with embarrassment to Sarah.

Sarah (still trying to reassure): It means he's comfortable. He ignores us half the time, too. It's a stage he's in.

Philip chatters to himself, repeating the same happy syllable: 'Da-da-da...' Beyond him the evening hangs without change, framed in the window as though the digitized emanation of an alternate world, one in which he lives here, and Helena is still there, standing in her sister's place, and the two of them share this joyful evidence of their son beginning to speak...

Never having been more the image of her sister, Sarah crosses into his vision, joining the boy. Still kneeling toward the floor, suspended tensely there, Scott watches the scene: Sarah whispering confidentially in the boy's ear, the boy smiling as though what she says goes beyond words, turning a momentary pensive gaze to the window, which to his vantage must yield only a cloudless sky.

John: So do you have your plan for tomorrow?

The couch groans behind him, John sitting as he speaks.

Scott: Not really, no... *(Reluctant to wrench himself from the moment-)* I was going to ask you two.

Sarah: He loves the beach. *(Then to Philip-)* You just love it, don't you? It's your second home.

Scott (trying to remember the names of the nearest beaches): Okay, maybe we'll do that, then. Manhattan Beach, that's nearby?

John: Hermosa's closer. And less crowded.

Scott: Obviously I never spent much time down here before.

Sarah (continuing to engage through the boy): Do you hear that? Daddy's going to take you to the beach. What do you say to that?

The boy slips away from her, taking the ball in the palm of his hand. He stares at it a moment, then, balancing awkwardly, stumbling once or twice, he walks to Scott. Reaching the ball toward his father, he tips forward, falling flat onto his palms.

Scott: Are you okay?

The concern in his voice barely registers before the boy has pushed himself up, chasing down the ball as it rolls toward the next room. He grabs it and pivots back on his free hand, extending his offering to Scott, now with an explanatory, 'Dat!' Scott reaches for the ball as Philip drops it between them, as he takes it up a certain assurance entering his voice.

Scott: Oh, thank-you.

The boy sits and smiles, running his heels together in delight. Uncertain what else to do, Scott offers the ball back; then remembers his gift.

Scott: Can I trade you?

He reaches it out, but – again with a 'Dat!' – Philip points to the ball. Scott sets aside the gift and pulls cross-legged in front of his son. He rolls the ball softly across the floor separating them, and the boy grabs it between his legs, with a squint of his entire face and a sharp squeal wrapping his body around it. He palms it again and holds it again toward Scott, rather than throwing it simply dropping it between them once more.

They repeat the game a few times, until Philip, with no forewarning, loses interest. Using Scott's knee as a prop, he pushes himself up to walk, with quickly mounting momentum, back to the playmat, where he falls loudly again on his palms. With a groan audible only to himself, joints hinting at future aches, Scott follows. The boy gives him only a glance of acknowledgment as he approaches, already occupied with another task, fitting shaped blocks through holes in a wooden wheel. Scott sits as closely as feels safe – leaving the boy to initiate any touch, yet straining to see as much as he can the working of the tiny fingers, and somehow through them that of his mind, this spirit emerging day-by-day into the world.

As he finishes with each toy, Philip – again with hardly a glance - reaches back and drops it into Scott’s lap. Scott’s hands will grasp each of the objects dumbly, turning them absently a moment before reaching around the boy to return them to their place in the plastic box. This sequence likewise repeats itself a few times, Scott holding himself still when not cleaning up after his son, surrendering even the impulse to move to the child’s need to interrogate once more, in anticipation of another once more, and another once more, each of these objects miraculously at hand. He is content – and this word means much more than it would upon first glance – to have forgotten all other need than that simply to sit, attentive less to the deceptive delicacy of this tiny body than the perfect presence of something not yet deformed by all he could no longer – and perhaps never could – name. He feels the slow approach of night through the window not with anxiety, not as the slipping away of a moment never to be known again; rather, as a cloak over this moment privileged by a promise of happiness, hiding him with it in its embrace.

John’s voice comes as a shock:

John: About time for him to go to bed, I guess? If not, he’ll be up early again.

Sarah, having at some point retreated to allow Scott and Philip their space, now stands from the couch with a sigh, echoing an agreement. She approaches with soft steps and soft voice.

Sarah: Philip – are you ready to go with Papa? Are you ready to take a bath and get comfy for night-night?

Sarah, continuing with tender nonsense, picks him into her arms, kissing his cheek. Scott – again with an inner groan, feeling himself in slow motion – stands to follow.

Sarah: Can you say, “Goodnight, Daddy”? “See you tomorrow, Daddy”?

Whispering ‘Goodnight,’ Scott reaches his hand to the boy, not quite daring to touch him; gaze drifting from the boy’s – pulled still by his toy abandoned on the mat – to Sarah’s, which finds his timidity a little absurd.

Sarah: You could give him a kiss...

Scott’s eyes betray a certain amused trepidation at the suggestion; but he follows, leaning close to kiss the boy’s cheek. Philip’s only response is to squirrel gently against the restraint of Sarah’s arms.

Sarah: Okay-

She carries the boy to John, who stands from the couch.

John: I’ll put him to bed?

Sarah: If you could, yes.

Philip makes a small murmur, reaching back in the direction of his toy, as John carries him out of the room. Sarah watches, lingering, after them; even when they have disappeared from sight, she is still watching in that direction.

Scott feels a heavy silence take hold of the room; he wonders if now is the moment to make his exit. Out of this silence, Sarah speaks, beginning before she turns.

Sarah: He was bitter at first. He hated Helena, you know.

She turns back to Scott with a frank gaze, curiously devoid of emotion. Caught by this gaze, he feels suddenly like a spectator called out of anonymity and onto stage.

Scott: She alluded to that, once or twice. I had never really met him before tonight. Maybe once or twice...

Sarah: No, of course...

Scott follows with his eyes as she crosses the room and bends to put away Philip's last toy, dropping it carelessly into the bin with the others.

Sarah: I think he took it as her last insult. To both of us. (*She starts back toward the couch-*) But he got over it quickly. He's good to Philip, he really is. He loves him. He said that, and I can see it. He's just a little uptight around you.

Scott's clipped laugh caroms across the room, returning to him hollow.

Scott: No one needs to apologize to me about being uptight. I'm the intruder here.

Sarah: You're not intruding...

She sits on the couch, eyes fixed clearly on him now. A step or two floats him toward her.

Scott: It feels that way. I expected- well, not this. You all seem so comfortable together.

Sarah (with a laugh): You sound disappointed.

Scott: No, it just changes how I understand it all. Sorry, that must have come across really badly.

Sarah: No, no, not at all. Philip's fine here, is that what you mean?

Scott: Yeah- I mean, I knew he would be fine, but I imagined this- absence of love, whatever that looks like. And that's not what this is, not from what I can see.

Sarah: No, it's not. We care very deeply for Philip. He's a sweet boy.

He murmurs an agreement, uncertain what else to say; finally, almost to fill the silence:

Scott: You must still hate me, though.

Sarah (shocked to hear this): No... (*She repeats it, before continuing-*) I don't blame you.

Scott's eyes betray his doubt; he doesn't want to have this conversation, and yet something within him demands it. Sarah perceives something of this in the raw, expectant stillness with which he faces her.

Sarah: She had problems. One way or another, it was going to reach a breaking point. I was as blind to it as you were.

Scott: Except that I wasn't blind to it. I saw it coming, I was just too messed up myself to realize how close it was. Or to care. I've tried telling myself I was convinced there was still time. But I have no idea anymore.

Sarah's gaze upon him turns, at this rush of words, troubled and skeptical; a fact to which he is immediately sensitive.

Scott: Anyway, intruding- My whole life with her was based on that. I thought I loved her, and I wanted to be a part of her life, and I did everything I could to make that happen, and what happened after that, I didn't care.

Sarah: You don't have to convince me, Scott. None of that would have mattered if she didn't love you too. You have to let those thoughts go.

Scott: Yeah... I'm sorry, I don't mean to stir all this up, I just haven't shaken the feeling- That's a lot of what the therapy has been about, but it's been-

His gesture suggests, 'Useless.' He stands still – he is perversely aware – framed against the window, where night still descends bluntly on the peaceful and the troubled alike. He can see himself turning here, watching the scene as the moment passes; but finally allows only the quickest of glances aside, as something carries him another step toward Sarah.

Scott: I've been trying to write about her, actually.

Sarah: Oh, Scott...

Scott: I know... I can't help it, I guess. I've done it for so long. In a way, I've never really written about anything else.

Sarah: You have to let her go. We all do.

He doesn't know whom else she could mean – him, her, and then-? She had no other siblings, and her parents had, over the years, done everything possible to cut her off without directly telling her that she had been cut off.

Scott: I know. And the writing, if that means always coming back to her. But then I start to wonder what else I would have left.

Sarah: Your son?

Scott: I'm not sure even of that. I mean, I have to prove-

He gestures uselessly, as though that again will fill in for the words.

Sarah: You don't have to prove anything to us. That's not what this is about.

Scott: No. But to all of us...

Philip's chatter floats distant into the room. Sarah listens to a moment, then stands slowly from the couch.

Sarah: Sounds like he's out of the bath. I'll be right back.

She exits, and now Scott does turn to the window, feeling the house expand behind him; Sarah's quick steps into the kitchen, a bottle percussively coming to rest on countertop, the thick, self-muffling flow of milk there... Sarah's steps further open unknown corners to his ears, his son's bath, his bedroom. From the distant edge of this space, the heart of this unknown world, the boy lets out a short cry or two. He holds his head poised, listening, even closing his eyes after a moment; but all that follows is silence, those realms - the rituals that make up the daily life of a particular child, the stages on which they play out - settling again into a void. When finally he opens his eyes again to the window, they allow the briefest of shames, the fleetest of recognitions, at the futility of all he had to say those moments earlier.

When she returns, Sarah finds Scott on the couch, composed, his gaze fixed on the unchanging scene outside the window. He turns to meet her entrance, with a passivity that she finds unsettling.

Sarah: You must be tired.

Scott: I had forgotten how much the time change takes out of you, coming west. It starts to feel like the sun will never set.

Sarah: Do you want anything to eat? I didn't really have anything planned, but we could order something.

Scott (declining with a terse headshake): I'll grab something at the hotel. It's alright.

With these last words, he is standing, the strange stiffness in his legs making itself evident again.

Sarah follows him to the door. He lets himself out. At the edge of the step, he turns; she gives him a soft hug - intending tenderness, but his posture, unthinkingly eager to depart, leaves the moment hanging ajar. He slips sideways to the yard.

Scott: Tomorrow, then?

Sarah: Yes. What time should we come?

Scott: When does he wake up?

Sarah: 6:30, 7....

Scott: Same as me. Say 8, then? Down in the restaurant?

Sarah: We'll see you then.

He nods, offering another half-aborted gesture of farewell as he turns toward his car. Sarah watches as he drives off down the unvarying, empty street.

IV – Hotel – Night

As Scott crosses the lobby toward the elevator bank, he casts a longing glance at the bar, populated by more television screens looping football highlights than living patrons. He slows, but only for the interval of a desperately smothered desire.

In his room, seated at the corner of the bed, he turns through a room service menu; all two pages of it, back and forth two or three times with equal dissatisfaction. He sets it aside and grabs the television remote, flipping compulsively through channels; finally alighting, mid-scene, on a film with Joseph Cotten and Leslie Caron; a film with which he is unfamiliar, set in the 1800s, if he can judge by the scant sets and simple costumes. Cotton comforts Caron at the bedside – it seems – of her dying father. It lacks promise, the film, but held by the faces, the traces they bear of a dozen other, greater films – films he would have died to have made – he watches for a time; ignoring the dialogue, when not in thrall to these faces – not immortal, rather more mortal than mortal – rummaging the dusty recesses of his memory in search of anything that might tell him more about what he sees.

At hand is a battered leather-bound notebook, a pen clipped to its cover; clearly a companion of many months, if not years, a holdover of the days when he did have a discipline for writing, when he thought of it as both profession and passion. Upon entering the room tonight, before remembering that he should be hungry, he felt that to write was the solace he most needed; the only solace. But to write exhausted, without another drink to light you up with its artificial inspiration, is something he has yet to learn; and so he is happy to submit to the nostalgic flow of images, finding in them a semblance of the release that might once have come with the whiskey-fueled filling of a blank page.

V - Helena

They met outside a bar on a cool evening, the lights of the Hollywood Hills glowing in the distance. He no longer remembers from where he was coming, nor where he was going. Likely it was nowhere specific. But something had fired his confidence – in those days it didn't take much, it could have been a meeting, an encounter, or just a drink – and when his gaze lighted on her face, he didn't question approaching, he just did. He was walking up the street, talking with a forgotten friend; she was standing just aside the front door of the place, shadowed by a couple of guys, cigarette giving image to her laughter. Where these guys went, and where his friend went, these are details lost to his memory; she is simply there, as she always has been, responding to his first questions with insincere diffidence, eyes failing – comically – to mask her flattered amusement.

It is her lightness that he remembers most vividly, as it contrasts with the rooted presence of her sister - whom, her roommate at the time, he was to meet not long after; her

lightness that somehow allowed her to be fully there without committing her presence to anyone. In their early days together, there was the sense, intoxicating, that she would commit her presence to him; but only according to her own conception of the ripeness of time, for whenever he sought himself to grasp her, to possess even a small part of her, she would slip away, vanishing for a time – it might be hours, it might be days – into that part of her life that she kept obviously secret from him, as though she both knew and did not how quickly and utterly he had come to depend on her, how quickly everything that had become sacred to him – above all, his desire to make his name something more than a name – had retreated into those aspects of her past and present from which she excluded him.

Before he had ever made love to her he had written something for her – a film, though in his memory it does not merit that name; a small, absurdly romantic piece, one that at the time he imagined would be the first step in building not only a love, but a partnership; the fulfillment of a dream that preceded coming to California and all the dreams that implied; exceeded the desire for success, projecting an image into posterity of a romance that would not die with them, but would live forever, transformed by the camera into an undeniable fact. Even were it to mean burn-out, failure, or worse, even were they never to know the true glory of their fate: this was a cost he felt himself willing to pay, provided something – he imagined it would be the miraculous arrival of a hitherto unknown self-certainty – gave him the assurance it would be so.

With each step – proposing the idea to her, directing her through a quick rehearsal, picking up the camera for some test shoots – he tasted such a certainty before it fled, guiding him trembling onwards. After the first awkward moments of shooting, he held it, seeing that something – an actual work, a palpable testament to his adoration of her – was cohering before his eyes. The feeling carried him throughout the three or four days of the shoot, swelling to the sense of having penetrated to the very center of life. And when things wrapped that tranquil afternoon – a full handful of hours earlier than needed – , the two of them said farewell to the others and ran off to savor the sensation of having discovered something unknown to anyone else, of having seen life spring forth between them. She had been stunning, he assured her in her playful moments of doubt, and somehow that fact meant that he had been stunning too, that they were a spectacular match and would soon reveal that to the entire world, to those who had never known them and above all those who had ever questioned them coming to this city in the first place. Together they had melted away the anonymity imposed by the place, turning the whole town into their stage.

The afternoon melted into evening, and they made love, and things never ceased to accelerate from there. But this piece, as he began to assemble the footage afterward, proved to be nothing; and each of their subsequent, more serious attempts at shaping a work proved to be nothing; and the mistakes piled up, none ever making right the last. In his memory, it is these first days that remain; but only because of their blindness to what would follow. And what did follow – he feels that still in every part of his body, but can neither see nor speak it.

VI – Hotel Restaurant – The Next Morning

Clean-shaven – it has the effect of making him more pale, even ghostly - , dress just as carefully chosen as yesterday, Scott sits to a quiet breakfast of toast, fruit, and coffee, the food as yet untouched. The same notebook sits closed at hand, uncapped pen resting beside it. Between bites he may take up this pen, as though the simple act of holding it will dislodge something within him; but he remains distracted by those around him, mostly businessmen and –women traveling singly or in small packs. An old contempt swells up in him as he watches them; quickly turning back against himself for neither having been able to abandon this adolescent pride nor accomplish anything to justify it.

He glances constantly, expectantly at the front entrance to the place, and so soon sees John enter, followed after a few steps by Sarah and, holding her index finger, delighted by the novel and chaotic setting, Philip. Scott stands and waves to them. As though it is required by the surroundings, he shakes John’s hand; realizing only a half-moment too late that he has no clear greeting for either Sarah or his son.

They all sit, the boy in Sarah’s lap for the moment. Scott slips his notebook from the table into his lap. Sarah sees it, giving him a questioning look. Scott meets it with tacit confession.

Sarah: You’ve already eaten?

Scott: Just coffee. I wake up early these days.

John (joking sharply): You’re ready for a parent’s life, then.

Scott gives him an obligatory smile, distracted as a waiter brings over a seat for Philip, placing it at the end of the table, between he and Sarah. Sarah stands and slips him down into it.

Scott: He slept alright?

John: Yeah, just fine.

Sarah slips back into her own seat, immediately finding in her bag a plastic container full of dry cereal and a squeeze-pouch of apple sauce, followed by a bib and a plastic spoon. She slips the bib around the boy’s neck, but he is distracted by the surroundings, both people and screens. Allowing a hint of frustration, she only manages to have him take a bite or two of the food, at least half of it ending up on his cheeks.

Sarah: Maybe you want Daddy to feed you?

She looks to Scott as she says this, wiping Philip’s cheeks.

Scott (caught off-guard): I can try. Can’t promise it won’t be a disaster.

Sarah: We brought a change of cloths.

Scott: For me, too?

John lets out a chuckle at this. Sarah, with a bemused look, slides the spoon and apple sauce across the table to Scott. He handles them awkwardly, squeezing some sauce onto the spoon, some onto the tabletop. He reaches the utensil with trembling hand toward Philip, who ignores him, face turned away as he watches a distant television. Scott tries to reach the spoon around to his mouth, but fails; apple sauce ends up on the floor. Scott looks down at it:

Scott: Well, that's lovely. *(Then to Philip, still oblivious-)* Sorry, buddy.

Sarah coaxes, as he works to prepare another spoonful:

Sarah: Philip- Philip, can you look at Daddy?

He looks back to her with a smile.

Sarah: No, not me. *(With a point at Scott-)* Daddy.

His gaze follows her hand and Scott, ready, pushes the spoon into the boy's mouth. He hardly parts his lips, however, so that the food again misses the mark, now landing somewhere in his lap. Scott looks up to them, as though ready to give it up. John offers commentary:

John: This isn't so bad. Just imagine it when you're trying to get out of the house in the morning. All ready to go, and then-

Scott: I'd probably just get up and go anyway.

John: Always an option. Your standards do tend to drop when you're running behind.

Sarah (again wiping the boy's face clean): It's true, you don't care so much about looking like a bad parent when it's between that and hitting rush hour.

Scott laughs a little, preparing another spoonful. As though in on the joke, Philip meets his father's eyes and laughs.

Scott: That's right-

He takes the opportunity to slip the spoonful into the boy's mouth. He grimaces, then laughs again as Scott mimics him.

Scott: Am I being funny? I'm just following your cue.

He gives the boy another bite, to which the boy responds by shaking his head, exaggerating the grimace. Scott mirrors him, and the boy's laugh seizes him anew, infectious. Sarah and John watch, both with aloof amusement.

Sarah: I think you're getting it.

This calls Scott out of the moment, if only enough to make him self-aware; quick to self-efface:

Scott: But this is the easy part, right? Being silly? I'm just the clowning uncle right now.

Sarah: It's a step.

He gives a sideways glance, sobriety settling again as he feeds the boy another bite. The waiter comes with food for John and Sarah, both of whom begin. Scott still does not eat; he keeps his eyes trained on the boy's face, his task centering him there. John and Sarah still chat softly, but now largely to each other, recognizing Scott's withdrawing to the business at hand, if not the contemplation that slowly settles over him with it.

Philip again looks around as he accepts the spoon, but now without the initial mania; his wide, unblinking eyes appear to drink up the entire setting. He turns slowly one way, then the other, eyes panning to follow a couple entering, intercepting a group of business people exiting, panning back with them. Scott sees the movement out of the corner of his eye, and glimpses translucent reflections in the deep blue of the boy's eyes, but otherwise only hears the distant voices accompanying these figures. Were he interested, he could follow the words without much effort; but he prefers this, the indistinct murmur, sunken indiscriminately into the background music of footsteps, television commentaries, and utensils clattering against plates – just as he imagines the boy must hear it, miraculous patterns arising from the chaos.

Into this universe circling him, Philip now and then offers a small sound; a foreshortened exclamation, as though sounding out the unknown, awaiting any response that might return. It appears that none does, or at least none that satisfies him. He sighs deeply and looks to Scott, eyes fixing directly on his for the first time; only a moment, but enough to break the illusion underpinning these last fathomless moments, make him realize that he does not stand outside of this swirling universe, but is a part of it, and likely to the boy at its center just as strange a part as the flashing screens or the faceless figures. But the illusion does not vanish, as when someone accidentally looks at the camera; rather this is one of those few privileged instances, where the hold becomes stronger for being revealed to you; illusion no longer passes at a safe distance, for your disinterested benefit, but instead pulls you into its orbit, fixes your entire being there until it has run its course, unspooling and leaving you changed, without anchor, in the dark.

VII – Beach – Later

A brightness of an intensity he scarce remembers having ever known sets their first steps onto the sand, the image of the sea emerging ahead through a flat succession of dusted planes. Their feet sink into the hot ground, its depth somehow unexpected. Philip twists his hand free and charges ahead. He stumbles, hands propping him up. Mesmerized by the sand, he forgets his destination, instead feeling his hands completely buried, burrowing them further.

It seems a very long instant before Scott catches up and scoops the boy into his arms. Philip does not struggle, but keeps all four limbs extended grasping toward the sand, the entire weight of his body drawing them both down. Scott manages to take them closer to the water, finding a solitary spot just safely behind the reach of the waves. They sit, Scott facing Philip with a toy he bought at the hotel gift shop, an inflatable ball. He blows it up while the boy watches, confused; then delighted, as he receives it. Scott pulls off his shoes and socks and brushes sand from his pant thighs.

Scott: You know, your father didn't really plan for the beach. He didn't remember that in this place you can still go to the beach at this time of year. Do you know that in other places right now, it's cold, and there are trees, and their leaves are turning colors, and soon they'll all fall off? You shouldn't forget that; there are places where the sun doesn't shine all the damn time. Will you promise me that you won't forget that?

Throughout this monologue, Philip does not look at him, rather testing the permanence of the ball with a jabbing forefinger. As his father concludes, he drops the ball as an afterthought and starts to crawl away, cutting a diagonal toward the sea. Scott moves quickly to grab him, to do so becoming the same scuttling creature, though immediately recognizing himself as absurdly overgrown. The boy laughs and, kicking, flips as Scott grabs him by the ankle. He collapses back down, kicking his bare feet in the sand, sending inadvertent grains into Scott's face. Spitting these out with exaggerated disgust, he pulls himself up to the boy, looming over him, shading him a moment. The boy has not ceased laughing, and does not cease as he turns himself over again, seeking an escape. Scott tackles him softly, scooping him off the ground and flipping himself back down, clutching the boy to his chest, tickling him. Philip kicks and kicks with delight, his squeals rising and falling in counterpoint to the waves. The two of them might, from a distance, give the appearance of a capsized crab, struggling for all its life to right itself; and the sound might, from the same distance, be that of desperation. But this thought – and the more prosaic one, that they might disturb the peace of other beachgoers nearby – slips as quickly from his mind as it entered; for once he finds it easy to forget, covered in sand as he is, absurdly dressed and, even more absurdly, a father.

Philip rolls off of him, back to the sand. He digs with frenzy, laughing and squinting in that way that Scott already recognizes as entirely his, with his entire face; all limbs flailing, animated by a wildness that exceeds his tiny frame; blurring it, making the boundary with its surroundings even less distinct than the movement. With a familiar 'Dat!', Philip holds out a fistful of sand to his father, dropping it between them.

Scott (pretending to find it in the sand): Oh, thank-you.

They dig together with their bare hands, the ball caught by a soft breeze, rolling forgotten away down the beach. Scott jokingly buries the boy's feet; it seems their only moment of stillness, as the boy waits, and it lasts only the interval it takes Scott to finish, as he laughs immediately, kicking up the sand. Scott repeats it once or twice, then reaches out

his own feet, for the boy to try. He does, but has only the patience to add a handful or two before laughing and blindly brushing the sand away.

Here as in so many other instances, there is an innocent violence to the child's way of being, a self-forgetfulness that Scott knows is not unique, yet at the sight of which he cannot but feel awe. He remembers, of course, that awe has not always been his response to this boy; remembers the many days and nights that long year ago – only a year; it is not a matter of time, it is more that he has simply lost a conception of the continuity between that life and this – remembers nights and days when he did not experience this self-forgetfulness, this violence, as innocent, but rather as something pointed directly at him, a threat to his own way of being, if not his life itself. Balancing this awe and these memories, he mistrusts himself; yet what he feels now feels as though it must outweigh the things felt and said then; feels as though it must be more than the simple intoxication of the moment, must be a sign that he is indeed someone other than the man drowning then in failure.

After the heat of the sand, the coolness of the water subdues them both, strolling along at the edge of the waves, pants rolled mid-calf, Philip leading Scott by a half-step, pulling him along by the finger. Dictating the pace and even a shared waddling gait, the boy watches only his feet, now and then kicking at the receding waves, while the man's gaze drifts from his son to the bay south, where the hills emerge from the sea. Both are silent, the sound of the waves enough for both of them. People pass, but neither turns to watch them, too absorbed in the slow sinking of their steps, carried outward.

Out of the waves, a familiar voice comes to his ear:

Oh my God, Scott?

He turns up to see a woman approaching. He wishes that it took him more than a moment to recall her name, but of course it does not, and he utters it immediately with surprise:

Scott: Jen...

She is a little younger; still as attractive to him as she was when they first met, when she was still an aspiring actress. She, unlike he and unlike Helena, is the one who abandoned her aspirations; judging from a quick glance, Scott has the sense that she knew what she was doing: tan and fit, she clearly has spent much time on the beach, and much time being active.

Jen: I can't believe you're back and didn't let us know.

Scott: Well, not really back, actually. Just a quick visit. To see my son.

Jen: This is him? He looks just like you.

Scott: More like Helena, I think.

Jen: He does have her eyes.

She has bent close to Philip, and her proximity appears to make him a little uneasy. He looks up with wide, doubtful eyes at his father, body pulling itself unconsciously against Scott's leg. Scott looks down at him and sees this.

Scott: It's okay.

Whether or not Jen also perceives her effect on the child, she stands again.

Jen: It's funny running into you here of all places.

Scott: Yeah, well- He's been staying with Helena's sister and her husband. They live not too far from here.

Half of him wants to escape as quickly as possible; the other half tells him to stay and chat with her a little while; for the moment, this second half is the stronger.

Scott: I could have said the same to you, actually.

Jen: Well, Charlie and I-

She indicates vaguely behind her, and he realizes with a shudder that she is not alone-

Jen: We've actually been house-sitting down here. Pretty much for the whole summer. Another writer friend. It's good, though. Gives Charlie a chance to get away from industry things and just write.

Scott: That's great.

He is, now, prepared to escape as quickly as possible; but she is already calling across the sand, gesturing:

Jen: Charlie!

Mid-30s, slim and equally tan, eyes hidden by dark sunglasses, CHARLIE WALES approaches across the sand. He lets out a sharp, assured chuckle as he sees them.

Charlie: My God, Scott...

Scott: How are you, Charlie?

They shake hands.

Jen: He's here visiting his son. (*Indicating the boy, still hovering at his father's leg-*) Isn't he cute?

Charlie: Absolutely. How have you been?

Scott: Alright...

Charlie: I can't remember the last time I saw you.

Scott: Yeah, it's been awhile. I've been out of LA for a year already.

Charlie: A year, really?

Scott: Yeah... Crazy, isn't it?

Charlie: Indeed. Do you miss it?

Scott: Oh, parts maybe.

Charlie nods, still peering at him from behind the dark glasses:

Charlie: Working on anything?

Scott: Not really, no. Some things here and there, but nothing really to speak of. *(An awkward beat, which he fills with the first thing that pops to mind-)* I saw Jay, though. He mentioned you'd had something picked up. Congrats.

He immediately regrets saying anything.

Charlie: Oh, that- *(He laughs-)* Absolutely nothing's happening with that.

Scott: You got paid, though.

Charlie: Yeah, sure. And it'll lead to some other things.

Jen: It already has.

Charlie: Right, already has. Still chasing that solid credit, though.

Scott: You're a lot closer than I ever got.

Charlie: Oh, maybe. But that wasn't ever really your thing, right? I mean, you had a lot of other ideas.

Scott: Maybe that was my problem.

The whole conversation brings on a creeping nausea, all too familiar; the attempt to self-justify and self-deprecate in equal measure, often with the same gesture... He remembered the self-hatred it provokes, but forgot the actual feeling until this moment. He is thinking of his next move when a new wave breaks around his cuffs; and, he realizes at the boy's surprised exclamation, around Philip's chest.

Scott: Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry-

He bends down to pick him up. The boy is fine, but Scott is embarrassed at his negligence; or, more likely, that this negligence had this audience, making perfectly clear the extent to which he is still in thrall to the idea of making the right impression, often at the most pointless moment. But Jen blithely carries the moment away:

Jen: Where are you off to now? Want to grab some lunch?

Scott: I should get him home. Apparently he naps around lunch.

Charlie: Something else, then? You can't just come and go without telling us how you've been. Not after you disappeared like that.

Jen: What about tonight? *(She asks the question of Charlie, then turns to Scott-)*

We're having some folks over tonight, want to join? You could see our place.

Scott: Tonight... Sure, I don't think I have anything planned.

Charlie: Great. Your number's still the same?

Scott: Yes.

Charlie: Perfect. I'll text you. *(He turns to Jen-)* Shall we?

Jen: We're leaving?

Charlie: You mentioned lunch.

Jen (turning her smile to Scott): Ah. Right.

Watching him take her hand and lead her away, Scott feels an envy for Charlie that surpasses any that could be provoked by professional success. Philip squirms a little, and he bends with him down to the water again, Philip propping himself on Scott's crouching legs, water still swirling around their ankles. He watches after the couple even as they fade into the desaturated distance of the cloudless noon; then turns to his son. Philip also watches, his wide eyes now appearing skeptical. Scott knows, though, that this is only what he reads there; skepticism, suspicion, particularly toward those who have managed to be happy: he knows nothing of these. As this gaze turns south, toward the hills, Scott tries to penetrate it; but what it sees there, he cannot conceive.

VIII – John and Sarah's House – That Afternoon

Scott leads Philip from his car toward the house. As they approach up the walkway, the front door opens and Sarah appears, crouching just inside the frame. With renewed eagerness, Philip twists his hand free and hastens toward her, his walk like a succession of still frames, snapshot previews of a few years from now, when he will dash up this same walkway after a day at school. Scott lowers himself to mirror Sarah, watching from the boy's level as he gives her a clumsy hug.

Sarah: My goodness... (*Pulling back, seeing how he is wet and sand-covered-*) Did you have fun? Did Daddy show you a good time?

She stands and takes his hand, turning him toward the house. Scott moves to follow, then remembers something, turning back.

He opens the back door of the car, to the booster seat still strapped there. He struggles with it, finally managing to detach it and wrench it free.

He carries it up the walkway; heavy, now and then coming to rest on his thigh, giving him the appearance of a limp; the appearance, as he climbs the front step and enters the house, of dragging his body along with it. He sets it just inside the foyer, as though intending to make a quick exit. He looks up, however, to meet Sarah's gaze – Philip's eyes, Helena's eyes – as she returns from the back of the house. Perhaps it is simply what he reads there; but he perceives a recognition on her part, as though she still knows him. He stands straight.

Scott: I'm sorry he's such a mess.

Sarah: Please... It means he enjoyed himself.

Scott: He seemed to, anyway.

Sarah: Did you want to come in?

Scott: No, I should- (*Pointing back, perhaps buying time for an excuse-*) Maybe I should clean myself up, rest a little. Still on East Coast time.

Sarah: What about dinner?

Scott: I told some friends I'd go to their place.

Sarah (nodding, assuring him that she won't prod further): Okay.

She accompanies him back to the car:

Sarah: It will take time. I know you want to do this the right way. Right for Philip, I mean.

Scott: You all are attached now.

The distant wavering has returned to Scott's voice; it is clear that he measures each word.

Sarah: We are. But when the time comes, you shouldn't worry about that. You shouldn't worry about us, I mean.

Scott: No- but he hasn't known anything else. Not really.

Sarah: He knows you.

This is not necessarily what he wants to hear; not that he really does know what he wants to hear at this moment. They reach the car, and, opening the driver's door, he faces her; then suddenly turns:

Scott: Oh, before I forget...

He ducks into the car and returns a moment later with his wallet, pulling from it a check. Handing this to her:

Scott: Thought I might as well bring it along.

Sarah: Okay, thanks. (*She takes it, slipping it into her pocket without a glance-*) You'll come by in the morning, then? On your way?

Scott (nods): Though I'm not sure it will matter to him.

Sarah: Not now, maybe. But later? And to you?

Scott: To be honest, I've tried not to think about it.

Sarah: It's why you came, though.

Scott: What, to say goodbye?

Sarah: No- to start something new with him.

He nods again, more resolutely this time but not meeting her eyes; clearly weighing her words as much as his; and weighing his response, though he either does not find one, or chooses to repress it.

IX – Hotel – That Evening

In the bar, carrying his nightly whiskey, he seeks a table away from the television screens and the other patrons making small talk; but there is only so far he can withdraw. He sits; he sips slowly, but with an immediate satisfaction, the taste bringing memories of moments of inspiration, or moments that arrived as inspiration, even if they quickly departed – bearing him along with them – as something else entirely.

He looks at his phone, re-reading a text from Charlie with details for the evening, promptly deleting it. He has with him his notebook, and now opens it to reveal detailed notes – the writing he has tried, and failed, to abandon. He reviews the jottings, with a demeanor of being unable to recall that it was even he who wrote them. They are obsessive in appearance, varied in size and legibility; some re-written with minor variations and microscopic emendations, many others crossed out, whether painstakingly or with evident speed and panic.

His whiskey finished, he sits over these words reading for a long time, absorbed as much in their troubled appearance as in their meanings. Finally he looks up, staring stunned at the television, having no comprehension of what passes there but mesmerized by the images. When his eyes return to his own inscribed words, their spell has been broken; he closes the notebook, caps his pen, and simply watches the dance of silhouettes passing in and out of the bar.

- Later -

Once more Helena comes to him out of the dark. Not her face – her body, bringing with it the sensation of dozens other nights, he collapsed atop the sheets warmed by drinking, she returning – trying to return – from her mad insomnia. Waking him, needing him, but much more than he was able to give her. She murmurs to him now, as she did then:

This taste on your lips...

And he to her:

This gleam in your eyes...

Later, she would have been returning from soothing a screaming infant to sleep. But long before then there was nothing left, and he would barely wake, and they had stopped telling each other anything.

X – Morning

He appears a blank slate as he dresses. He packs his simple bag, carrying this in one hand, his journal in the other, as he exits the room.

The journal sits in the passenger seat as he drives up the interstate, at this time on a Sunday morning still eerily deserted.

The beach also – the exact same spot where he came with Philip yesterday, though it feels much longer ago – is deserted. He walks out into the sand, leaving on his shoes. In one hand he again carries the journal.

He pauses to bend down to the sand; he puts his free hand there, allowing a handful of grain to slip through his fingers.

He steps to the edge of the water, listening to the waves, watching them caress his shoes, imagining the sensation were his feet bare. He throws the notebook with all the force he can manage into the sea. He watches after it for a time, to make certain that it does not wash straight back to him. Then he turns and looks south, with a searching gaze toward the hills there.

- Later -

The street outside of John and Sarah's house, noiseless. After a long moment, Sarah emerges from the front door, pushing Philip in a stroller. They continue down the street.

Seated in his car, Scott watches this, betraying a quick impulse to jump out and run after them. But he suppresses this; everything draining from his face, an immense exhaustion becoming evident there.

Sarah speaks quietly to the boy as she pushes him. His eyes stare quietly at the passing landscape, seen countless times before, to be seen countless times again.

Back in the car, Scott remains immobile, affectless. Then, with a certain latent violence, he starts the car. He pulls away. He passes Sarah and Philip, watching in the rearview mirror as he leaves them behind, too quickly to see whether either glimpses him as he passes.

Cut to black over the fading sound of the departing car, stillness again settling over the street.