

The Deposition

His arms shield his face as he folds into himself behind the passenger seat. Then he drags himself across the back seat and to her. He leans sideways into her stomach and at first she looks down attentively, concerned, caring but distant as if he is her child who having just stubbed his toe is crawling to her now, crying in frustration. But with the second shot the blood sprays up from his head—a wet misty cloud in the light.

She feels a light spattering on her cheeks, and when she looks down she sees it across the front of her jacket and the skirt of her suit, thin and filmy and red. Her gloved hands, now speckled, remain perfectly pressed into his upper arms, supporting him despite the impact. The crown of his skull now presses against the almost-flat part of her lower stomach, and as the back of his head dampens her skirt he looks up to her and his wide shoulders settle across her thighs. She looks down into his eyes and sees his fear. She knows and wants to tell him that his fear is so contrary to what he is, to how it was supposed to end. This really is a deposition. It is a crumpling of a God, for he is a God. But he is also a husband, and this is how she sees him now, and her love for him stabs inside her chest. She feels a violent deflation of her heart, and she feels very cold despite the sun. Her hands rest on his chest now. She had wanted to die with him and the children. She still wants it.

Just moments before Nellie had twisted her head around the headrest and said loudly, with a big bright smile, “Mr. President, you can’t say Dallas doesn’t love you.”

He had laughed politely, chin up, sun in his hair and on his eyebrows. She looked over at him knowingly. She felt connected to him more than anyone else, and cherished that. To her the waving crowds, the other people in the car, and even the nature of the event, were a distant, insignificant blur beyond his face. His face was sculptural in its weight and shape. His jaw was clearly of thick, smooth bone, and formed a strong foundation. His broad, square chin had a slight curve of indentation below the mouth, which was not too thick but distinctive and memorable. He had a ridged, heavy, real masculine brow line. This face had greatly assisted him in charming many people through its natural expressions of confidence and ease.

She remembers when they were first dating. The time had gone by very fast since then. She was in her twenties, and lived at home with her mother. She worked as a photographer. Even though she would dispel her mother's probing questions, her mother's doubts about the courtship did become lodged in her mind. But all of those uncertainties disappeared when she saw his face. That polite laugh in the sunlight reminds her of when he first took her to the beach on a spring weekend. He came and picked her up in his car. He opened the door for her and she sat with her hands in her lap, nervous but excited, watching through the window. The landscape changed as they left the city and approached the coast. When they arrived it had been mid-afternoon, with the sun still high. She remembers walking up a ramp from the parking lot and at the top seeing the stretching sand and the small waves breaking perfectly. She looked back at him and saw him hanging back and smiling, like it was a present he was excited to give. They walked slowly, barefoot, feet in the wet sand by the water along the beach and then back again. Their heads were bent down, intent on hearing what the other person was

saying over the wind. *What did they say?* She can't remember, but remembers he suddenly looked up after something she had said, and he was laughing at her joke, and she felt so doubtless and connected and filled with the naively unquestioning and loving confidence of youth. Although it was spring, she had been very cold from the wind. When they returned to the car she had felt the winter-time feeling of slowly being warmed up from the outside when returning indoors from the cold.

You can't say Dallas doesn't love you. He held her hand across the warm black leather of the seat, and to her it seemed that at the instant of his wink the vast, domed sky had well complemented the blueness of the convertible limousine. It was a bright and beautiful place, Dallas.

She sees a white piece on the back of the car. She can tell it is a piece of his head and she pulls herself up and over the back of the seat, carefully and slowly, but still the blood smears down the front of her skirt as his head lolls to one side. She reaches for it before it flies off the back of the car. The piece is smooth, like a shell, but also sharp and attenuated, like the shards of a broken china plate, like those at the dinner party where they met. When he was young, and loved. She clings to the bone and slides down into the car.

She cradles his head in her lap but when she scoops her hand beneath to stop the bleeding some of his brains come out into one of her hands. In her gloved hand are sharp pieces of bone, like shrapnel, but really she notices the weight and color and warm, inconsistent texture of this, whatever is in her hand. She feels all the pain of his thoughts. She wants to push him away and to hold him and fix him at the same time. His thoughts leak out through the sticky blood, out of the unnatural hole, out of the pieces of brain and

out of his last longing look up to her. The crowd is just the same, smiling and waving, and for a moment the car continues to glide across the pavement but the sky has already begun to press in on her and spin around her. As she looks into them his eyes become blank, and she watches, paralyzed.

She always went back to him. In a childish way she always felt that with him she didn't have to be afraid when she went to sleep at night, but now she is afraid and desperately alone with his body still warm laying in her lap, her hands bloodied with brains and her eyes closed in the early afternoon sun. She remembers a day not very long ago when he had lain in her lap. It was a day of failure and regret: The Bay of Pigs. He had come back to their bedroom that night. She was reading when he entered. "Hi," he said without looking at her. He came to the side of the bed, lay flat on his back and rested his head in her lap with his eyes closed. His eyebrows furrowed and his eyelids twitched. His shoulders cupped his jaw. The back of his head dug into her ankle bones. His arms were crossed across his chest and his tie was slung over his shoulder. His legs twisted his hips and torso as they reached down to the floor off the side of their bed. She placed her palms over his ears and after waiting for him to speak she had asked a question, one attempt to make him feel he could broach the subject with her when he had snapped and said "Not that...I've had to talk about that all day. Not that." Her anger was like a hot brick, repelling and burning for one instant, until she dropped it. Instead she began a gentle, persistent stroking, stroking, stroking of his hair back from his face. My lap is a cradle, she thinks. He has come to her now in the most terrible way. She cannot save him.

Nellie's blond head twists around the headrest. She had forgotten that anyone else was in the car. *Go away*, she thinks, trying to shield him from view with her arms, *Don't look*.

Then the governor cries, "Oh no, no, no, no. They are going to kill us all!"

Us all, she thinks, *what does that matter*. At first she says it quietly, with her eyes downturned, she whispers, "Dead." And then upon realizing, "Nononono," she starts to cry, and then louder says to everyone in the car, avers it just like she must do for speeches and greetings: "I have his brains in my hand."

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And after that it is a dark blur. There is a rush of protection, of men in suits stepping up and down, moving her from here to there, and all the while she is in a shock that feels like dry, silent cotton. Still dressed in her bloodied suit she is taken to the airport. The car pulls up close to the plane, but still when she emerges she feels the pulse of the hot dirty Dallas air, pushed into a resisting wind by the rapidly rotating propellers. The plane's agitation to take off, to fly back to Washington, is pushing her back, and she must fight through to board the plane, clinging to her hat with one hand, and crossing the lapels of her jacket with the other to try to keep it in place. She boards, and she sits with the security, the doctor, and the advisors. Short red velvet curtains separate the other section of the plane, where the body is. Once the plane makes its steep ascent the sun shines through the window and into her lap. As she turns to look out the window she feels extreme drowsiness, and loses all sense of time. She is heavily floating, and the sky

appears to be of a different universe altogether with its light, its lack of dirty natural colors or weight. She sees it in green and purple splotches in its over-extended illumination. Then she looks down and sees the cigarette between two of her gloved fingers smeared with blood now brown like chocolate, and the cigarette ash falls into her lap. After some indefinite hours the plane lands in Washington.

The next day she wakes alone in Lincoln's bedroom. She feels the weight of the loss in her stomach and on her chest before she even opens her eyes because she cannot feel him there with her. She gets up and dresses in dark clothes. She decides she will visit St. Matthew's Cathedral, where his funeral will be held in a few days.

Her security guards accompany her to the Cathedral. She walks to the nave. The cathedral is dark and cool. At the center of the transept a dome rises up. There is a scattering of people but she manages to create a moment of privacy. She looks to the altar, made for the body of Christ in all of its whiteness and perfection. She sees the dust floating aimlessly in the light. A judicious mosaic of St. Matthew fills the rear wall. He is an angel in eternal paradise surrounded by flocks of peacocks with feathers spread and deep purple marble. She realizes she does not know how he imagined heaven. She begins to lose her balance and sways a little. *How do you imagine heaven?* She calls out to him.

As she sits in a pew, she thinks back to the Inauguration Ball. Perhaps that night was his heaven, and she hopes she had helped to make it so. She remembers the overwhelming exhaustion she had felt when she was lying in bed for a rest that evening. She had been unable to get out of bed. She didn't want him to know though; she didn't want to ruin it for him. Their doctor brought her medicine that gave her energy. They had

gotten dressed together many times before, and as she prepared herself this time it didn't immediately feel much different than any of the previous times. They began on opposite sides of the room. She had laid her gown out on the bed. It was a long white silvery material, made especially for the evening. On top of the gown were her gloves, and two different coats from which she still had to decide. On their respective sides they had each faced their own bureaus, putting on their undergarments and then their clothes.

Once her gown was on she had sat at her vanity, and applied her makeup in steady, familiar strokes. Once her makeup was done she turned in her chair to see if he was ready, and she saw him looking in the mirror over his bureau. His chin was slightly raised and his collar up just to his jaw line. He had his hands on the limp flaps of his bowtie that stood out starkly against the back of the collar of his white shirt. It was then, seeing him prepare himself with intent focus for how everyone would see him and remember him that night, that she felt a soft, encompassing sense of caring and love for him. She watched him silently, smiling, wanting it to be a perfect, untainted entrance. She stood, and, completely dressed except her gloves and shoes, she nearly bounded up behind him and pressed one hand into his shoulder and one around his waist. She closed her eyes for a second and then looked over his shoulder and into the mirror, where her eyes were just visible in the reflection. They looked at themselves and made eye contact in the mirror. He smiled and reached back to rub her back. He then turned and hugged her to his chest. He had helped her choose a jacket.

Once they arrived she could barely get through the first dance or stand long enough to make the required rounds, but she was happy. He was happy, and proud. As they danced his handsomeness seemed to be glittering before her, and against the

magnificent, dark room with its elegant arrangement and guests. She felt she could not fully conceive what she was taking part in exactly, yet at the same time felt infinitely lucky to be a part of it.

After an hour or so of socializing she had found a seat at the edge of the room. From afar she watched him moving from group to group, always the center of the conversation, always laughing. Old friends, beautiful women, new friends, their eyes were all fixed on him. His path across the room appeared so effortless, but calculated, she knew. His energy amazed her, how he approached each person like he was most excited to see them. They laughed at his jokes and many treated his presence carefully—she saw it in their meditated expressions and motions. Yet he made them comfortable with a touch of the hand here, a nod of the head there, a wink, a handshake, a laugh at their comment, and quickly they forgot just who he was and how they should be acting.

Suddenly watching she had the sense for one moment that she did not even know him. Without emotional attachment she considered that perhaps there were two Jacks, this one, and the one she knows. *Maybe there are two Jackie's too*, she had thought. *Aren't there two of everyone. Does anyone here behave this way at home?*

She left at midnight, and that morning Jack came home as the sun was rising, trying to quietly come into the bedroom and crawl into the starched bed sheets without waking her. But of course she had woken as he walked in clumsily, knocking the furniture. He crawled into bed beside her. She had turned her face towards his on the pillow, and whispered in the darkness, “Was it wonderful?” and he had said that it was, and held her. When she woke he was still holding her in the same position. She tried to be

very still so he wouldn't wake, and closed her eyes, slowly letting out her breath and smiling as she clung to the feeling.

That day was one of the only times she had seen him sleep past noon. She can remember other days where she had wanted him to just stay in bed with her. She can think of other nights he had come home too late and she had held very still to pretend that she was asleep. Thinking about it now she realizes, there were nights spent asleep next to one another, afternoons with his head in her lap, mornings she watched him getting ready with a book propped open on his bureau or on a table, and in between work and meals there were walks and long conversations about many things they would later forget. Each day together fueled her understanding of the next, of him, of them, but an itching regret that she has pushed aside her whole life hits her now. It is a regret for always fearfully clinging to everything they did together, trying to make it last and always trying to make it more than it was.

After St. Matthew's she goes to a meeting to plan the details of his funeral. She sits at a large oval table with six other people. She looks out the window onto the wide, green lawn that slopes gently. For a few moments the voices in the room are distant, but her thoughts come back. They are discussing the procession where his casket will be carried to the Capitol building. Slowly as she catches up to the conversation, she realizes she has no part in the procession. She asks to walk in the front. They deny at first going on and on about security and risk. *Who are these little people?* She thinks. She feels that they are trying to protect her, to keep her from this moment. *What greater duty could I have? And they want to see me,* she thinks. *I have to.*

So she walks in the procession up to the Capitol. The road ahead is one long, black tarmac strip swimming with bobbing heads on either side. The sky appears again like a dome above him. She sees the sky, streaked with clouds, and thinks of an upside down rib cage, scooped out like a bowl and trapping her inside. Just as she gets into the thick of the procession, the very center, she feels infinitely tired and again gets the sensation of slowly floating and that time is slowing down with her and carrying her away, gently. Each step on the ground is a concentrated effort. The muscles in her legs feel sore and like they are made of lead. Her ears ring. She closes her eyes, and almost stops but the motion of the people behind her pushes her on. She cannot stop.

As she arrives at the building the way is cleared, but she is not aware nor will she remember arriving at the building. She makes her way up the steps. In a daze the motion of the people around her leads her to the rotunda room. She breaks away though, in the room, or everyone else slows. As if drawn by magnet she goes to the casket placed in the center of the room.

Standing over it her head is downturned and her veil casts a steady blackness over her view. Her vision begins to swim with tears, from exhaustion, and from confusion. She closes her eyes and sees him. She is watching him from across the room. His hair is parted to one side, his tongue is over his teeth, and his rich mouth opened slightly. She approaches him and when she gets closer she sees his hands, the beautiful strong, thick-skinned hands she had never completely noticed until now. The slightly elongated fingers are twisting and transforming those stark black flaps into a lively bow. She feels the flat sharpness of his upper back beneath the palm of her hand, then she sees his eyes in the mirror and they see each other in the reflection, together.

The wind blows her hair back from her face. She turns her gaze up and sees his eyes searching for hers, laughing at the beach, feels important and forgetful and naively loves him.

Her thoughts are racing thinking about him crawling back to her in the dark of the morning, his arm around her waist, the imprint of his body in the sheets in the morning, and other things like hand-painted china plates, dressing tables, beach dunes crawling with sods of windblown grass, an open book held by his one finger as he ties his tie with the other hand. She is walking with him across the lawn of their first house in the settling dusk of a weekday evening. She is in the passenger seat and he is driving home late at night in Virginia, up and over the hills and he is alternating the bright headlights. She hears the click of his finger on the headlight button, *clickity click*. She feels the jerking forward of her body when he presses the breaks. She reaches her arms out to the glove box to brace herself. She feels his anger. She knows his sounds. It is a tense silence now. It is dark but she knows his mouth is one straight line as he drives. His eyebrows are furrowed.

It is summer at dusk and they sit together having a drink in their screened porch. She squeezes his thigh above the knee. There is the distant shriek of their children on the play set. Their daughter runs in, the screened door slams behind her, and climbs on her lap. The little girl has smeared chocolate around the edges of her lips. She smiles and wipes it away. When she leans back into her chair she feels the ticklish buzz of the rum drink he has made for her, its smell of vanilla, mint and lemon. The sun is setting. She feels his steady rocking in the chair next to her. He is looking upwards at the wood-beamed ceiling, deep in thought. She turns to watch him, her back rounds and her cheek

presses against the un-brushed hair of their daughter in her lap. She is trying to get him to look over at her; her eyes search for his. He looks from the corner of his eye and smiles softly at her.

She knows that there exists an affinity for drawing sadness about oneself like wrapped bed sheets, like death clothes, but she cannot help it. *Goddamnit*, she thinks *Goddamnit. Where are you?* She sees him wink and his hand reaches for hers across the warm black leather seat. There is an illuminated bowl of perfect blue sky above him. He knows her thoughts in her one look. Her heart is crying out for him, bitterly and splitting. He is in her lap. His eyes look up to her but they are desperately searching this time. He is uncontrollably falling down into himself. She knows he cannot stop. *I am sorry I love you come with me I cannot be without you.* He is looking for her. She watches him, paralyzed.