

OPIUM*PAGE*EIGHTY

THE WINNER

A GREEN STORY BY



AARON GARRETSON

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week before Christmas, my daughter Jenny and I were hurrying over a dark footpath at the southern end of Central Park. We could already hear the music from Wollman Rink, and Jenny raised her voice at me.

"I told you we were going to be late."

"It's not even seven o'clock yet," I told her.

"It was supposed to start at six!" she yelled. She carried a gift box under her right arm, and she shifted it to her left.

"I'm sure things."

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Missy Silver was, at the time trading, tax ev naively, though before she'd e for free becau I had gone to s time. And tho once at his par only afforded mates with a g my date broke

"I'm sure you haven't missed anything. No one ever shows up on time to these things."

We came out of the trees and stopped suddenly once we topped the hill above the skating rink. I had expected something lavish, even ostentatious, but the scene before us was beyond anything I would have dared imagine. Beneath thousands of pink balloons and flashing lights, a hundred or so twelve-year-old girls skated *en masse* over cotton-candy-colored ice. They shared the rink with eight gigantic, elaborately carved ice sculptures, and weaving in between them all—at break-neck speed—were half a dozen hired professionals leaping and spinning around each other, wearing feathery costumes and African masks, throwing fiery batons high into the air and catching them again.

From where we stood, it didn't look like a birthday party, or even a circus—it looked like a Matthew Barney film. It had the feel of ritual pageantry, with everyone bent to the performance of their own dramatic and well rehearsed roles. Even Jenny and I had our parts to play: as the *ingénue* and the gape-mouthed yokel, we crossed the rest of the distance in silence.

At the entrance to the rink, two hulking bouncers in goose-down jackets asked for Jenny's invitation. After she handed it to them, they held it under a blue light to establish authenticity, then waved us inside, beneath a cavernous arch of balloons and a large banner advertising Missy Silver's 13th Birthday Party.

Just inside on the right was the single ice sculpture not standing on the rink: a statue of Missy's father sitting high on a horse. Directly next to it was a stand of bleachers, and I started for them. "I'll be over here," I told Jenny. "Just come and get me when you're ready to go."

"You're not going to say hi to Mr. Silver?"

"No."

"Want me to tell him you're here?"

"Please don't," I said. "Have fun."

And with that she sprinted to add her present to a precarious mountain of gifts, and joined the rest of the girls tying on ice skates and stuffing their mouths with the cakes and candies being carried around by a team of waiters in dinner jackets.

Missy Silver's father was Charles Silver, the businessman and billionaire who was, at the time, three weeks from standing before a grand jury for fraud, insider trading, tax evasion, and being an all-around son of a bitch. And if Jenny, however naively, thought I might want to rub elbows with the guy, it was only because, long before she'd ever met Missy (at Juilliard's junior theater camp, which Jenny got into for free because I occasionally work there), I used to joke about how Mr. Silver and I had gone to school together. I even claimed to have been friends with him at one time. And though this wasn't remotely true, I did spend a long weekend with him once at his parents' ski lodge in Vail. It was my first real taste of privilege, and I was only afforded the opportunity because a girl I was dating happened to be roommates with a girl Charles Silver was dating. He and I got along pretty well, but when my date broke up with me, I never saw him again—except on TV, of course, and in

the newspapers, and now standing thirty yards from me with a drink in one hand and the meaty shoulder of an unfortunate young aide in the other.

From a distance he was an easy man to hate. At forty-five, he still had all his hair, he looked to be in the best shape of his life, and at a time when he finally had cause to show some humility, and a little repentance (at least concerning the excess wealth he'd made cheating his employees, his investors, and several thousand ill-armored soldiers in Iraq), he was out here in the open, for all the public to see, flaunting his largesse.

The gift Jenny brought cost all of seventeen dollars; she'd knitted a pink and blue scarf, and gone down to Virgin records to buy Missy a CD she no doubt already had. However, just for showing up, as a party favor, Jenny—and all the rest of the girls—were given the latest video iPods, which were not only several hundred dollars each but weren't even on the market yet. They were also given the pair of white leather skates they tied on. Only Chuck Silver would think to solve the problem of rich girls not wanting to dirty their socks in rentals by buying out a figure-skating supply store.

The man was a genius. And I sat on the bleachers feeling not only superior and self-righteous but also feeling the urge to walk up to him, push his handlers aside, and punch him square in the nose. Maybe even kick him in the teeth while he was down. After all, the guy was still the principal investor in ConFab, a subsidiary of Silver Enterprises and purveyor of overpriced, substandard body armor that failed to prevent the deaths of at least two dozen servicemen. He was a festering canker on the eyelid of America, and as far as I was concerned he deserved not only a decade behind bars but also all the venereal indignities that went with it.

Then he spotted me and waved.

At first I thought he was joking, that perhaps he assumed I was some sort of party crasher—or that he was waving to someone behind me. But then he started walking over with a huge smile on his face: "Geoff! How the hell are you?"

Naturally, he would have scrutinized the guest list. He'd probably even gone to the trouble of having someone look me up.

"I hoped you might come," he said, standing at the foot of the bleachers with his hands on his hips, smelling of expensive cologne and shoe polish.

"This is a hell of a spectacle you're putting on," I said, attempting to suppress the sudden alarm in my voice. "I'm Jenny's dad. I don't know if—"

But before I could finish, he was climbing the bleachers to the seat next to me. And every muscle in my body suddenly contracted in terror. You just don't expect a billionaire to give you the time of day, much less go out of his way to make you feel included on his kid's birthday. For good reason, too. I mean, people this wealthy aren't even real people anymore. They're Greek tragedies. You'd have about as much in common (and as much chance at conversation) with Medea were she to suddenly take a seat next to you and smile.

If anything at all helped restore my sense of superiority (and moral high ground), it was the fact that he still spoke the same way he did in college: incredibly fast and with an almost indecent amount of youthful enthusiasm.

He settled onto the bench next to me and shook my hand. "It's been a while, huh?"

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"I don't know if you remember or not," I said, "but we used to—"

"We both dated history majors," he said. "You were fortunate enough to get dumped by yours before you married her."

His frankness caught me off guard, and I think that was the primary source of his genius: his uncanny ability to keep a man perpetually off-balance.

"So what do you think?" he asked, lifting his chin at the ice, in case I hadn't noticed the orgy in front of us.

"I think it's wild," I said.

"Isn't it?"

"You must have hired a whole team of sculptors."

"I did! Did you notice the Venus at center ice? Missy modeled for that. She sat five hours yesterday. I had to take her out of school."

"I think I like the general the best," I said, gesturing to the massive equestrian beside us.

"Yeah...." He eyed it with a certain misgiving. "It doesn't really go with the rest of them. Missy really wanted it, though. What have you been up to? Are you still on the old...." He made a giddy sawing movement with his right hand.

"The cello," I said. "Yeah."

"Are you playing anywhere? Any orchestras?"

"I'm mainly giving lessons these days."

"Ah," he sighed wistfully. "To be your own boss.... Am I right?"

"Actually, I rotate at a few different conservatories, but—"

"God damn these seats are cold. Aren't you freezing your ass off up here?" He hailed a couple of waiters and asked them to move one of the patio heaters closer to us.

"You want a drink?" he asked me.

"I'm okay."

He waved to the waiters again. "Bring a couple of Scotches and two big slices of cake, too."

"Shouldn't you be over with the guests?" I asked him. "You don't think you'll be missed?"

"I know I won't. They've got everything I can give them right now, so I'm sure they're perfectly happy. Besides, my soon-to-be ex-wife is over there, and I'd just as soon be out of the strike zone."

The waiters, intensely focused on their work, promptly arranged a heater at Mr. Silver's feet.

"Do you know she's testifying against me?" Charles curled his lips in disgust. "Can you believe that? My own wife? I don't know who she thinks she's helping—in fact, I don't think she even cares. Anything to fuck me over once more before she goes. You know? It's like her parting gift to me for my years of having to sleep with her."

"You should have treated her better, Chuck," I said. I was being snide, but it almost seemed to perk him up.

"No shit, right? What about you? Still married?"

"We'll be divorced three years this May."

"Yeah? Did you sleep around?"

"No."

"No?"

"We grew apart," I said.

"Yeah." He nodded his head—and not at all skeptically, but as though he genuinely understood the situation. "Do you think she'd testify against you?"

"For what?"

"For anything."

I shook my head. "No, we still get along pretty well."

"Are you still in love with her?"

I shot him a look that, I'm sure, said more than I wanted it to, and he immediately pulled a ringing phone from his pocket.

"Jimmy. Are we fucked? Great. No, that's wonderful. I love you, Jimmy. I'm so glad I pay you so much more than you're worth.... No.... No, how about this.... No, tell Senator Chuckles he needs to get in touch with me. All right? And I want Junior Major Bitch on the phone, too. Tell them I'm gonna start spreading rumors about them and me.... No, I don't care what you tell him.... Tell him I got his kid over here and I'm taking her hostage.... Yes.... I know.... Yeah, I know.... Exactly." Chuck snapped his phone shut and, shoving it back into his pocket, growled somewhere deep in his throat.

A waitress with brown eyes and curly brown hair arrived with warm glasses of Scotch and two ridiculously large pieces of cake.

"Well, you're certainly very pretty, aren't you?" Chuck said. "What's your name?"

The waitress looked startled, even a little insulted, and for a moment I didn't think she was going to answer him. "Carrie," she said, finally.

I thanked her for the cake and tried to make eye contact. I wanted to commiserate with her somehow, to explain that I wasn't one of these people, that I didn't belong here. But she hurried away before I had the chance.

"Man, she's something, isn't she?" Chuck said.

"So you have a senator's daughter out there?" I asked, looking out at the swarm of pre-teens gliding over the ice.

"I have *two* senator's daughters," he said, sipping from his drink. "And one belonging to a governor. Want me to point them out? You could probably figure it out on your own. I'll give you a hint: they're the homely ones."

I asked him if he didn't think it was unhealthy to rate the attractiveness of twelve-year-olds, but he wasn't listening.

"Their fathers wouldn't come within a mile of me now," he said, "but they'll still send their daughters, won't they? To make sure I know that, even though they're not here, and even though they want to put me away, we're all still friends. You know? I think you might be the only father here," he said, elbowing me. "I guess you didn't get the memo."

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"I guess I'm the only one with nothing to lose," I said.

"Yeah, well, stick around awhile." He picked up his drink and downed the rest. "I feel like a fucking leper. You know?"

"I can only imagine," I said.

"Everyone's jumping on the *Fuck Chuck* bandwagon, and they all want a piece of me on my way down. I got guys calling me asking for the furniture in my living room. And if they can't have that, they want the shit hanging on my walls. And if they can't have that, they want my wife—or they want to put me in jail for the rest of my life."

"And if they can't have that," I said, "they want bulletproof vests that are actually bulletproof." I was appalled that he expected me to feel sorry for him.

"Oh, *come on*," he cried. "You, too? Everyone thinks they're fucking Paul Krugman these days. Do you.... Christ, do I *look* like I design bulletproof vests?" He held out his arms as if to prove it. "They *give* us the fucking design. They tell us what they want and we fucking make it. It's not like we go out of our way to screw these poor bastards. Of course, the government's not gonna point that out, are they? They just assume that that's what they're paying us for—to fall down and die so they don't have to."

"I think it's the troops who've been falling down and dying," I said.

"Yeah," he nodded his head and turned to look me in the eye. "So what do *you* want, Geoff?"

"Seriously? Jesus. I guess I'd take a hundred bucks if you were offering. Or that watch, I suppose. I could probably put a down payment on an apartment with that."

It was a simple, elegant watch with a platinum face and leather band, and Chuck immediately slipped it off his wrist and pushed it into my hand.

"I was kidding," I told him.

"I'm not."

I tried to give it back, but he wouldn't take it. "Chuck, I'm not taking your watch. I was joking."

"It's a handmade *Parmigiani*," he said. "I know a guy who'll give you a hundred and fifty grand for it."

I tried forcing it into his hand, and then into his pocket. "Will you just take the fucking thing?"

"Leave it on the bench if you don't want it," he said. "I never liked it anyway."

"Don't insult me," I said, and I set it down on the seat in front of us. "If you don't pick it up, I'll testify against you."

"Oh?" he scoffed. "And say what? You don't even know me."

"I'll say you posed for your own presidential ice statue."

He looked at me and his features softened into a grin. "That's pretty damning, isn't it?"

"It's extremely damning. They'll put you away for life with evidence like that."

Chuck reached for the watch and slipped it back on his wrist. "Victor!" He turned and called to the beefy aide he'd been manhandling earlier.

Victor couldn't have been more than twenty-four, but he already had the sallow, fleshy jowls of a veteran hedge-fund manager. He ran to the foot of the bleachers and looked as though he might get down on one knee and bow.

"I have a job for you," Chuck told him. "I want you to cut the head off this statue and have one of the waiters deliver it to my wife on a tray."

The kid didn't even blink an eye. In an instant he was turning on his heels and running for a cake knife. He threw a tablecloth over the horse's rump and, with Carrie's help, and that of another waiter, he mounted the horse behind the equestrian. Carrie handed the knife up to him.

Chuck leaned over to get her attention. "Hey. Did you want to sit up here with us? It's nice and warm next to this heater. I'm sure you won't be missed for a few minutes."

Carrie looked over her shoulder at the waiter she was with. I scooted over and she climbed the bleachers to sit between Chuck and I. She was in her early thirties, and I don't know if it was the dinner jacket she wore, or the cold bringing out the pink in her small ears and round cheeks, but she looked good enough to eat.

"That's much better, isn't it?" he said. "I'm Charles Silver—"

"I know who you are," she grinned.

"This is Geoffrey Bramble. He's an old friend of mine. That's Victor performing the surgery." Chuck leaned over to shout at him. "What's taking you so long?"

"It's like cutting through rock," Victor said. He had sawed about three-quarters of the way through when he finally snapped the head off with his hands and threw it down to the waiter.

"Should we garnish it with flowers?" Victor asked, sliding from the horse.

"Just deliver it like that," Chuck said. He looked at the man who held it on a serving tray. "Cover it with a napkin until you get over to her, then pull it off and tell her... I don't know. No, say this, stick your nose in the air and tell her, '*Madame, your wish has been granted.*' Got that?"

The waiter started for the group of women at the other end of the rink. Chuck nudged Carrie with his elbow. "This should be good, huh?"

"What's she gonna do?" Carrie asked.

"What's she gonna do?" Chuck repeated. "She's gonna throw a fit. And then she's gonna tell the court what a brute I am." He reached around Carrie and pulled on my sleeve. "Do you disapprove, Geoff?"

I just shook my head.

"You know, Carrie, my friend Geoff here has been divorced three years, but he's still having a hard time getting over it. You know what I mean?"

"I'm so sorry," she said.

"It's really not that bad," I told her. My cheeks stung from all the blood rushing into them.

"No, it's worse than bad," Chuck added. "I think he's still in love with her. And she's probably already remarried. Am I right, Geoff?"

I could have killed him.

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"Almost," I said.

The waiter was approaching Mrs. Silver, and Chuck suddenly stood on his seat to get a better view. "You guys gotta stand up here and see this."

I helped Carrie onto the seat first. "Chuck, why didn't you invite any boys to the party?" I asked.

"At this age? All they want to do is show off. Wait, wait, here he goes."

The waiter stopped in front of Mrs. Silver, who was surrounded by her closest friends, and with a baroque flourish he removed the napkin, revealing to her the severed head.

She didn't quite react in the manner Chuck had hoped for. Rather than becoming outraged, or even feigning disgust, she simply picked the head up in her hands, kissed it on the forehead, and passed it off to one of the professional ice skaters, a tall, muscular young man in some sort of West African tribal outfit. She did all of this without so much as glancing in Chuck's direction, and the skater raced off with it. He tore around the rink holding it high over his head. The other skaters spontaneously fell in behind him, after which the girls gleefully joined the procession—cheering and singing as they circled for a triumphant victory lap.

"Shit." Chuck grabbed hold of Carrie and me as though he might need the support. The three of us climbed down to the foot of the bleachers and leaned on the wall that cordoned the rink.

The skaters cheered even louder as they paraded past us, then delivered the head back into the arms of Mrs. Silver, who propped it on a table next to the half-eaten birthday cake.

"I hate that fucking bitch," Chuck said.

"That's your daughter's mother," I reminded him. "And you cut your own head off."

"I should have given her the horse's head. I always think of this shit too late." Chuck brought a fist down on the rink wall. "You know the problem with being a winner?" he asked, turning his eyes on me. "Everyone wants to see you lose."

"I'm sure she appreciated it in some way," said Carrie.

"Of course, she appreciated it. She fucking loved it. I just made her day."

Chuck's phone rang and he pulled it from his pocket, but he looked at me again before answering. "I'm giving you my house in Miami Beach, by the way."

He flipped the phone open. "Yeah. I told you I wouldn't be finished until ten. So eat without me. Did you forget how? It's my daughter's fucking birthday party! Who the hell's taking sides?! No shit. You think so? Well, I'm gonna be in jail for twenty years, so how do you think I feel?"

He shut his phone, but immediately opened it again and searched for a number.

Carrie smiled at me. "Did you come just to keep Mr. Silver company? Or do you have a daughter out there somewhere?"

"That's Jenny over there," I said, pointing. "In the black coat, with the balloons."

I'd taken Jenny out a few days earlier to buy her a wool overcoat with fancy buttons and a silk-lined hood. It was an early Christmas present and undoubtedly the most expensive article of clothing she'd ever owned. But it was downright pedestrian compared to the fur coats and hats worn by most of the other girls.

"She's very cute," said Carrie.

"Sometimes I worry she's a little *too* cute."

Chuck spun around and yelled. "Victor! Do you have the number for.... Fuck. Never mind! I've got it right here."

While Chuck dialed, Carrie leaned into my ear and whispered. "He's not really going to jail, is he?"

"I can't imagine."

Chuck had the phone at his ear. "This is Silver," he said. "Are you on your way? You're joking. How much more does she want? We just agreed on a hundred and fifty last week! Is this how you usually do business? I don't care how belittled—her reputation?! It's a fucking birthday party for a bunch of her fans! I'm not paying two hundred. No, I don't care. Well, that's just too bad then."

Chuck snapped his phone shut and shoved it back into his pocket.

"I hate celebrities," he said, then narrowed his eyes at me. "You have to treat them like children."

"Do you really think you'll do time?" I asked him. "I mean, you don't actually think you'll be convicted, do you?"

"I don't know. Probably. My lawyers tell me no, but what else are they going to say? If they said yes, I'd have to get new lawyers, wouldn't I?"

His phone rang again, but he waited a few rings before answering it. "Did she change your mind?" he asked into the mouthpiece. "Fine. No, that's fine. That's very charitable of her. Tell her that's.... Sure. Can you be here in ten minutes? And try to be discreet, will you? It's a surprise, and I don't want her.... Her name's Missy. Missy Silver. All right? I'm sure you will."

When he hung up he took us by the arms and led us around the perimeter of the rink. "So what about the house?" he asked me. "You like Miami Beach?"

"I don't, actually."

"You don't like Miami?" Carrie said, almost incredulous.

"You have to remember," Chuck said to her, "Geoff here is an artist. And artists always hate to be anywhere that might make them happy. You know? Where are you living now?" he asked me.

"I have a studio on the West Side."

"See!"

"An art studio?" Carrie asked.

"You know what?" Chuck said. "Let's go ice skating. Why should the kids have all the fun?"

"I don't know how," said Carrie.

"I don't either," I said.

"And I should probably get back to work."

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"You *are* at work!" Chuck said. "You're paid to keep the guests happy, aren't you? Sit down and put some skates on. I'll meet you out there. Hey!" He waved at one of the rink employees. "We need some skates here. How about a size-seven women's, and a ten-and-a-half in men's."

"How did he know that?" Carrie whispered to me.

Chuck ran off somewhere, and the rink employee came over with two boxes of new skates.

"Actually, I'm a size ten," I told the guy.

"My boss is going to kill me," Carrie said, tugging at her laces.

"I'm going to break my neck," I said.

"I'm serious. That's him over there by the—don't look, don't look—he's staring right at us. He's the one by the punch table glaring at us."

"Are you going to get in trouble?"

"I don't care. What's he gonna do?" She smiled. "I'm with Charles Silver. No one can touch me now."

Out on the ice, the girls had formed a long conga line and were drawing wormy shapes around the rink. They screamed and laughed, especially when the worm split apart and a few stranded girls had to scramble to reconnect. Carrie and I, despite our stiff-legged shuffling, caught the tail end of the line as it passed us. We'd only just latched on—and it's possible our joining in had something to do with it—but the line broke up after carrying us only a few yards. Suddenly we were swallowed up by a swarm of awkward, spindly-legged girls careering headlong in every direction.

Before I knew it, Jenny was skating circles around me. "Dad! What are you doing?" She seemed genuinely distressed. Missy Silver, in a sparkling tiara, was with her, along with several other girls.

"I'm trying not to kill myself," I told her.

"Hi, Jenny's dad!"

"Hi, Jenny's dad!"

I never knew Jenny had learned to skate, but apparently her mother had paid for lessons. "You're incredible. When did you get to be such a good skater?" I asked her, prompting Missy to do a quick spin and jump.

Missy did one more spin and a sort of half-jump, then they all raced off, chasing after a skater with a pair of torches in his hands.

"They're so adorable," Carrie said. "Your daughter seems very nice."

"I think I'm probably embarrassing her. Or was she just concerned for my health?"

I wasn't trying to be funny, but Carrie laughed. She had a wonderful, unburdened way of laughing, and we drifted together to the far end of the rink. She was familiar with some of the hip-hop songs that were playing, and she made small dancing movements with her hips and hands, as much as her fragile sense of balance would allow.

"So you're an artist?" she asked.

I told her I played the cello.

"Oh, my god, I love the cello," she said. "I love Yo-Yo Ma."

"Yeah."

"Have you ever met him? Have you played with him? That must be such an experience."

Chuck glided by us, and of course he was a terrific skater on top of everything else. "Geoff, I've been thinking!" he said. "I want you to have my apartment in Rome. You'll love it. You should take Carrie there for the New Year, if she's not too busy. Have you ever been to Italy?" he asked her.

"Never," she said, "I've always dreamed about it, though."

"See, Geoff? She's *dreamed* about it. You guys can have espresso every morning on the *Piazza della Rotonda*." Chuck did a little spin, similar to the one his daughter had done a minute earlier, then skated off again.

"Is he serious?" Carrie asked.

"Probably."

"Well, we should go! Is he really going to give you an apartment?"

"I can't actually take it," I told her.

"No? I'm sure he has plenty of others...?"

"I doubt I could even afford the tax on an apartment like that. Hell, I could hardly afford the ticket to fly there."

"So ask *him* to fly you."

"I don't know him very well," I said. "And I wouldn't ask anyway."

She gave me a little smile and took hold of my hand for a few precious moments. My mind raced for the right words to ask her out on a date—nothing too fancy, just dinner and maybe a movie afterward, or a concert, or a nightclub if that was more her kind of thing.

And then the limousine pulled up—a white stretch that honked several times before discharging a young celebrity and six of her friends. I didn't know her name, but knew her reputation from the tabloids: eating disorders, multiple stints in rehab, unflattering mug shots. But you wouldn't have guessed any of it tonight. Beneath the great arch of balloons, she and her entourage carried themselves with the pristine and glittery air of unapproachable goddesses—confident of everyone's envy, and fully aware that they were the only ones on Earth who knew what it meant to be desired.

"I don't believe it," Carrie said. And without another word, she immediately skated off to the other end of the rink.

When the girls caught on to what was happening, they started screaming again, and went into hysterics as they rushed to get out of their skates. The music was shut off, the lights were dimmed, and as the young starlet climbed onto the table next to the birthday cake, she was handed a microphone. She shouted, "Happy Birthday Missy Silver!" And accompanied by a gray-haired man with a synthesizer, she broke into the longest version of "Happy Birthday to You" I ever hope to hear. It was an eight-minute pop-inflected paean to Missy, and a narcotic to anyone under the age of thirty.

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Within minutes the rink was completely barren, except for the ice sculptures and a couple of professionals making lazy figure-eights. There's something disquieting about an empty skating rink—and while I don't want to make too much of it, I think I experienced one of the lonelier moments of my life out there, scraping around the ice, flanked by a mob of brainless, celebrity-worshipping rich girls with whom my daughter apparently identified, or wanted to, anyway.

And who was I to be so fucking judgmental? Nobody but an insecure, self-righteous single dad who looked ridiculous in ice skates, who couldn't bring himself to buy a plane ticket to Italy to get laid by the cutest, most available woman he'd met in ten years. I was the biggest dipshit in Manhattan. If there'd been an actual lake under that ice, I'd have dropped myself into it.

"What happened to Carrie?" Chuck asked. He almost knocked me down as he skidded to a stop next to me.

I pointed to the gyrating young starlet, said, "I think she's a fan."

"You guys hitting it off?"

"I think, maybe. She...."

"Oh, shit, did you see that?"

The young celebrity had found Chuck's frozen head and was rubbing it into the folds of her chinchilla coat. After watching her for a moment, he skated off and whispered to Victor, who was given the unfortunate job of trying to coax it away from her.

"So when are you guys leaving for Rome?" he yelled as he skated back to me.

"We're not."

"I thought she was into it?"

"She was."

"So what happened?"

"I told her I couldn't accept it," I said.

"What the hell'd you do that for?"

Chuck may have seriously believed he was being helpful, and even flattering me with his offers. And perhaps I secretly loved being able to feel stoic about my middling and unremarkable penury. But on some level I was pretty sure he was making fun of me at the same time. "I'm going to go find Jenny," I said. "Thanks for inviting us."

He let me go, but caught up to me as I was tying my shoes on.

"I wasn't trying to insult you," he said. "But if you're convinced it's all blood money...."

"I don't think it's blood money," I said. "One just spends a long time trying to be satisfied with what he has. You know what I mean?"

Judging by the look on his face, he seemed to be genuinely struggling to see it from my perspective. Then his wife came up from behind and wrapped her fingers around his neck.

"Thanks so much for the present," she whispered to him. "That was *almost* exactly what I wished for."

"Please don't touch me," he said. And she responded by leaning over to kiss him on the crown of his head.

We both watched her disappear into the crowd.

"Would you, for all the money in the world, want to be me?" he asked. "Even for five minutes? Because I wouldn't. I'd rather be living on a trash heap in Delhi."

"No, you wouldn't."

He stared out over the empty rink and nodded. "I think I would," he said. "I think I would have been good at that."

Out in front of the rink, thirty horse-drawn carriages were noisily lining up. They'd been hired to take the guests for a ride around the park before returning them to their places of residence (which, for many, consisted of apartments adjacent to, and abutting, Central Park). When the young celebrity finished singing, the girls followed her out beneath the arch of balloons, past the headless horseman and into the waiting coaches.

Chuck and I brought up the rear. On our way out we spotted Carrie loading plates and mugs into a bus tub.

He elbowed me. "Ask her to go for a carriage ride."

"It looks like she's really busy," I said.

"Carrie!" he yelled to her. "Geoff wants to invite you for a cruise around the park."

She looked at me and shook her head. "I have to work," she said, and turned back to her dishes.

"What about a phone number?" he asked.

She didn't say anything, and I had to push Chuck away to keep him from abusing her for it.

Under normal circumstances, I might have been a little upset by the rejection, but Chuck was pissed off enough for the both of us. "What a little bitch!" he cried. "What the hell did you say to her?"

As we approached the coaches, several paparazzi descended upon us. Apparently the starlet had been yelling curses at them, but Chuck, rather than getting upset, attempted to pacify them by handing out extra iPods. "State of the art, Boys. Who wants one? D'you get one? D'you get one? We're having a fire sale tonight." He slapped me on the back. "You're gonna be on Page Six, I hope you know. And with a robber baron, no less."

"I'll finally be infamous," I said.

"Did you want one?" he asked, holding up another video iPod.

"That's okay," I said.

But he threw it to me anyway, and I took it.

"Thanks," I said.

"Ha!" he cried. "I got you to take something!"

"Yeah, I'll actually use this."

I lifted Jenny into a carriage and climbed in beside her. We had a white-dappled mare in the harness and a cheerful man with wet, sparkling eyes behind the reins.

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On cue, the horse pulled us up to the loop, and soon we were trotting in caravan beneath the iron lampposts, the winking stars, the naked limbs of the trees.

I was grateful to be on our way home, and I rubbed the back of my hand over Jenny's cheek. "Did you have fun?" I asked her.

"Yes!"

"It looked like you were having a ball."

"It was the most fun ever!" She leaned over and wrapped her arms around me. It was then that I saw Chuck's watch dangling from her wrist.

"Where did you get this?" The words nearly caught in my throat.

"Mr. Silver said it was yours," she said.

I slipped it from her arm and into my pocket, then called to the driver and asked him his name.

"Hector," he said. "You enjoy your party?"

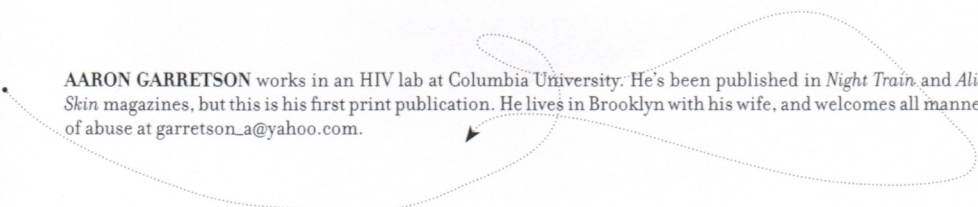
"We did," I told him. "Do you want this watch? It's a handmade *Parmigiani*."

"A watch?"

I held it out for him to see.

"No, thank you, Señor," he said.

So I gave him the iPod instead.



AARON GARRETSON works in an HIV lab at Columbia University. He's been published in *Night Train* and *Alien Skin* magazines, but this is his first print publication. He lives in Brooklyn with his wife, and welcomes all manners of abuse at garretson_a@yahoo.com.