

MICHAEL PHILLIPPS

Audrey

HER HAIR FRAMES HER FACE as a single silken sheet. Her hands, pressed tightly together, redden with the pleasure of being photographed, and her dress shoes, ruby strapped, buckles glinting, dangle in the air. As she wriggles on the stool I can almost hear the rustle of taffeta. I nearly lift the scent of home from those puffy sleeves. When this photo was taken Audrey was crying, "Peaches!" her chin thrust forward, her teeth reflecting the radiant glow of the flashbulb, her entire exuberant form seized with the childish pleasure of living. To judge from her angelic appearance one might expect that, following the shutter's fall, my girl unfolded divine wings and rose into the air. Yet the photo fails to reveal Audrey's other, less saintly, side: her tendency, for example, to fidget, to twist her finger in her ear, and to kick her dog, Bugle, in order to hear his howl. I love Audrey for her attempts to contain herself within accepted social limits, to whisper her nightly prayers, to carry herself as straight and floatingly as a figurine that might emerge once an hour from behind the face of a German clock. Though somehow I am endeared to her more by the fact that these attempts so frequently fail. And now, as I study the picture for what might be the hundredth time, I notice what I hadn't before. As my little girl lifts the corners of her mouth for the camera, her eyes slip to one side. It is subtle and at two-by-three nearly impossible to detect. But with the aid of my new eyeglass prescription (I was long overdue), and in the glow of the powerful streetlight just now flickering on overhead, I see it. Audrey's head tilts a few degrees in distraction as well, towards the man who had refused to remove his coat upon entering the premises, had refused to stand on ceremony for the inflated, effete photographer in his cherished domain. For I, Audrey's father, with the flourish of theatre, had

sidled up to the charlatan and withdrawn, at the critical instant, three lengths of handkerchief, pink, chartreuse, and fluorescent violet, from the man's ruddy, elephantine ear. In the next moment Audrey did not rise towards the ceiling. No. Her apotheosis was a belly laugh. She flung down delirious from where she sat and leapt to hug me at the knees.

I return the outdated photo to my wallet. I'm crouching with lumbar discomfort behind a rhododendron. I push up the sleeve of my coat to check my watch. Something small bites the tender side of my arm and flits away. From across the street I hear the click of a door. There is a vertical line of light—I resist the urge to stand—and then a girl, tall and yet delicate, appears outside. She hums a tune. She is dressed in blue. Yesterday Audrey turned fourteen. Her height and the grace with which she turns her head confirm this, but nonetheless as she takes a seat on the stoop her knees jitter. She is waiting, quiet now, the humming gone. Her mother, so naive as to allow Audrey outdoors alone at twilight, is no doubt engaged in a project. Loretta is always engaged in a project, her head lowered in concentration. She might at this moment be cutting out the old linoleum to refinish the kitchen floor; she might be crouching, leaning forward into her work, cursing beneath her breath. The knife slips, perhaps, in her enthusiasm, to cut her thumb. A spot of blood soils her work. She sucks the wound and becomes even more focused on herself. Self-absorption is the essence of my ex-wife. Just the same, in case she is not her usual self this evening, I scan the windows, glimpsing the living room chandelier, the back of a chair, the edge of a hanging picture. As I'd thought, she is nowhere to be seen.

On the porch, Audrey's gaze sweeps the street like a lighthouse from east to west, pauses, and sweeps back again. I emerge from behind the bush. Audrey places her hand beside her eyes to block the porch light and see more clearly into the darkening landscape. I approach and the house grows to fill my view. As my daughter rises to her feet, her shadow ripples down the stairs. Have you ever visited a place that you hadn't been to for a long while and found that the familiar sight of it, even the odour of the skunk cabbage growing wildly along the fringe of the yard, gave you the sense that you'd be greeted any second by a friendly cry from indoors reminding you in a familiar tone to close the garage

door before coming inside? And when that happened did all resentments briefly fade and longing fill their place?

My daughter has grown so that I hesitate, concerned that despite the skunk cabbage and the peeling paint on the banister, I must be lost, that this is someone else. Her voice, however, reassures me.

“Daddy?” she whispers.

Softly, conscious of the risk of bringing Loretta to the window, I walk up the steps. I give Audrey a hug in which I compress six months’ time. The texture of her sweater, the angle of her back, and the hint of pink scalp I see at the part in her hair as she leans her cheek into the buttons of my coat, these things make me realize that my photo is but a worthless slip of paper.

“Happy birthday,” I say.

“You’re so skinny!” she replies.

As we release our embrace I notice a strange opacity about the colouring of her face. Her freckles have gone. The image of her mother twenty years past flutters through my mind and I realize that Audrey is wearing makeup and lipstick. I suppose she might have received a cosmetics kit for her birthday.

“You have a moustache,” she says and reaches out to dab it with a finger.

“Like it?”

“I guess so.”

“Shall I walk you to piano practice?”

She slings her arm through mine. We descend the porch steps and, as I do not know the precise location of the music academy, it is Audrey who escorts me.

“It’s good to see you,” I say as we start down the street.

“Mom would kill me if she knew about this,” Audrey says.

“I would have brought you a present,” I say, “but”

“That’s okay,” says Audrey.

“She’d spot the tiniest bracelet,” I say, “even a pin.”

And if she did then what? Last summer, on one of my weekly visitation days, I showed up at this house only to learn that Audrey was canoeing and playing softball two states distant at summer camp. Loretta and I began to argue and then to shout, and before we knew it a creamer of bone China had flown against the wall and broken into shards. She forbade me to visit ever again—over that one silly dish—even though I had the legal right and could

have gone to court to enforce it. But court, win or lose, has a way of draining a person, of humiliating him. My clothes seem too big when a lawyer is looking at them. I find myself repeatedly straightening my collar and tucking in my shirttails. My shoes, abruptly overlarge, become floppy on marble courthouse floors. And then there were the letters from Loretta's lawyer threatening me in incomprehensible Latin. Over one stupid dish. An accident. Just the same this is why I let the matter drop. My consolation, my revenge, my extra-legal victory, is that now, months later, without the knowledge of anyone but Audrey herself, I have managed this meeting. No lawyers, no forms, no legal lingo or insinuations. Just the truth: father and daughter, and this street, which leads everywhere.

"I'm playing in a concert at school next week," Audrey says.

"I'd love to hear you," I say, but that would be impossible, of course, so I change the subject. "Why does the academy let you use its practice rooms? Isn't it a kind of college?"

I try but fail to keep the cynicism from my voice. I didn't come from a family that valued universities. My immigrant parents viewed them, and I view them, as scams. All one needs to educate oneself is a public library.

"I'm in the talented youth program," she says.

"I know you're talented. You take after me." I did play a little jazz piano once.

"We are alike," Audrey tells me. "That's what mom says ..."

"Even she cannot deny that we are soulmates," I say.

"... when I've done something wrong," she says.

Her voice is free of irony, as if she has simply come to accept as fact that I'm a bad influence. Her mother has used the past six months to good advantage. Perhaps Audrey has even agreed to this visit only to be minimally decent, polite. She is practising at grown-up cordiality and I am the guest greeted with a limp handshake and a frozen smile.

Then, apropos of nothing, Audrey blurts, "You should try talking to her."

The notion of Loretta and me even standing in the same room together is simply impossible. Audrey has no idea. My eyes fall to the moon, which sits low to the horizon, two hundred and forty thousand miles off. Then I shift my gaze to the smaller, nearer lights coming on in the houses lining the street. Neighbours are returning from work. There is the sound everywhere of opening, a

car door, a sliding door that lets out onto a neighbour's patio, the mechanical sound of a garage door rolling up. Couples pull into driveways one shortly after the other. Husbands and wives for blocks in all directions stand in greeting. A cat dashes across the road, knowing that, in a house nearby, food will shortly be set down.

Audrey looks to me waiting for a response to her suggestion, but there's no point trying to explain. Instead, I say without thinking, "I've missed you." As soon as the words leave my mouth I feel foolish.

"Six months is a long time," Audrey says.

"It wasn't easy for me, either."

"But you wanted to leave," she says. "I was born and then one day you left, just like that."

"It wasn't that way at all," I tell her.

The last time we spoke of this Audrey was eleven and I made myself very clear, but apparently Loretta has replaced the memory with her own propaganda.

"I left when you were four," I say. "But I tried to take you with me."

"What?"

"I went to court so that I could keep you. You were there."

"When did you go to court?"

"Ten years ago."

"I don't remember." Audrey says this as if it proves the event never took place.

"Hardly seems like a month ago," I say.

I search the pockets of my coat. This early in September it's too mild to wear it but I purposefully do so out of season to enjoy the over-warmth. The pockets hide coins and perhaps somewhere the forgotten promise of a fortune cookie eaten before my divorce. I rub between my fingers an old movie stub that has been there for years. I will never despair utterly, I think, so long as I can wear this reminder of easier days. I locate my cigarettes, gently wrapped fragments of tobacco. They are so delicate I must be careful not to pinch them in half. I position one between my fingers.

"What was I doing there?" she says.

"You testified, sort of." Having found matches, I strike one.

"Testified?" Her mouth hangs open. In her surprise she is forgetting herself. "Like a witness? Like on TV?"

"Just like TV. They asked you which parent you wanted to live with." I exhale a cone of smoke.

"What did I say?"

"You said you wanted to live with me."

"So why am I living with mom?"

"You told the judge you wanted to live with me because I took you on a train and we walked up and down the aisles the whole time so we wouldn't have to pay the conductor."

"I did not," she says flatly.

"You told the judge you wanted to live with me because in the toy store I gave you the exact toy you wanted and let you carry it out under your hat."

Audrey looks in my direction, but she's gazing over my shoulder, her eyes focused nowhere in particular. Then an expression crosses Audrey's features as if she's realizing that an old recurring dream of hers is in fact no dream at all. Soberly, she encircles my arm and we continue walking, silent now, but for the metronomic click of her heels on the pavement.

"That's the school," she says as we round a corner.

We stop at the school gate.

"Did I really say those things?" she asks.

"You did," I say.

She casts her eyes aimlessly, like a compass needle in a world suddenly without a magnetic pole.

"How could I?" she says.

"Go on in," I say.

"I don't want to practise now."

"It was a long time ago," I say. "You weren't much more than a baby. Go on. You've got a concert to play in next week."

She shakes her head until an earring tangles in her hair. She wrinkles her brow. Her eyelids flush like rose petals. "I'm sorry," she says and lays her cheek against my coat. "I'm sorry I said those things. It was stupid of me." I feel the gentle compression of her hand around my arm.

This is not mere cordiality. She has been crushed; no, she has been folded into the most precious paper flower. A mellow pang threatens to overwhelm me, so I straighten my daughter up.

"If you don't want to practise, how about we go on an adventure instead?"

"Adventure?"

"An ice cream adventure," I say. Loretta doesn't permit Audrey to eat ice cream. Some nonsense about diabetes on Loretta's side of the family.

Audrey wriggles her jaw, as she does whenever she's thinking hard, and shoots her pupils upward to consider her bangs. Then she wraps her arms around my waist. I hug her shoulder and, with her body leaning into mine like some flying buttress, we proceed down the road.

"I haven't had one of these for so long," Audrey says when the waiter sets a banana split in front of her and a small sundae in front of me. Something about the vulgar optimism of this place, the bright colours and music, has cheered her. She's regained her posture and the quaver has gone from her voice.

"Your mother is strict," I say.

"Makes me do my homework as soon as I get home from school," says Audrey as she curls a shaving of ice cream onto her spoon, "even on Fridays."

"Fridays?"

"And I have to clean my room even when it's clean already."

"I could tell you some stories," I say.

"And her boyfriend, you know, Brian?" She regards me warily for having mentioned his name, testing the waters of my jealousy. I give an indifferent nod.

"He smells," she says.

"Like what?" I ask.

"Mouldy cheese." Audrey wrinkles her nose and smiles up at me. "I hate him," she says.

She takes another bite of her ice cream.

"I'm getting cold," she says, so I stand, remove my coat, and drape it around her shoulders. She practically disappears into it, the collar hiding her ears. She gazes up at me much as she used to when she was small. I study her face and her freckles become faintly visible beneath her makeup.

I sit again. Her fingertips glide over my knuckles, over the wedding ring I have worn for almost two decades. I am filled abruptly with such tender feeling that I must speak my mind.

"Would you still rather live with me?" I say.

"I could never leave mom," she says in a way that sounds as if she's trying to convince herself, "but it would be nice to stay with you for awhile."

"Let's go then," I say, "tonight."

"Where?" she asks.

"Atlantic City."

"You're joking."

"I'm serious."

"Mom would worry."

"We'll call her when we get there."

"That's so irresponsible," she says. "That's awful."

"A father doesn't get to see his own daughter for six months. That's what's awful," I say.

Audrey takes my waving hands in hers, gently, as if plucking butterflies from the air, and brings them back to the table. She fixes her eyes on mine and says again, in a mature tone, "You two really should talk."

"You don't understand," I say.

"I can't go with you," she says.

"Do you think it's right for her to keep us apart?"

"No," Audrey says. "Of course it can't be. You're my father. You're my dad."

"Do you think people should go along with things that aren't right?"

This sets her to thinking. Her jaw works.

I can see she needs a little coaxing, so I appeal to her vanity.

"You're fourteen now," I say. "Not a kid anymore. Not a child. You're old enough to make your own decisions."

"It's so complicated," she says.

Though I should let her alone while she considers the matter, my anxiety won't let me. I can't help but prod her further. After only a few seconds I add, "How about it?"

"It's as if," she says, and it appears she is about to come through. But then she shifts her weight, crosses her legs, and looks off in another direction, "as if there is no right thing to do ..." and her voice peters out again. She sinks once more into contemplation.

I tap my spoon, glance around the restaurant, then back at my daughter. I think again that she is about to answer but she only sighs. Maybe time has simply slowed down for me at this most

important juncture, but Audrey's silence seems to go on forever and I can't bear it. I only intend to give her another nudge but what comes out next betrays my impatience.

"Are you up for this or not?"

My voice is louder than I intended. A patron at another table turns his head. I sounded mean-spirited, hostile. I must have motioned with my hand too, though I wasn't aware of doing so, because my spoon flies off the table and skitters to the floor. Audrey pushes herself back in her seat. I've bungled. She scrunches her eyes. I've lost her.

I imagine she sees as confirmed all her mother has told her about me. I'm irresponsible and impatient, made up of endless schemes, pathologically suspicious of society, without the patience to follow the straight and narrow path that leads to happiness, a reckless unrestrained rogue, nothing but trouble. And she's probably added too, as icing on the cake, that I am prone to violence.

I strain for a way to correct my error. At first, I simply smirk and toss in a wink to boot, to suggest my anger was a joke. But my daughter averts her eyes. To think this stone face, this angry little woman's face, suddenly narrow and tight and unyielding, might be the last I see of her, makes me desperate. So I reach deep into my memory for something, anything, to remind her of how we used to be. And from the depths I pull out an expression, a funny face I used to make back when Audrey was barely out of the crib. I haven't thought of it in years. I ruffle up my hair. I fill my cheeks with air to bursting and cross my eyes painfully. This used to throw her into convulsions of infant laughter. It had something to do with a character on one of her favourite television shows. And it triggers something inside her now, for it draws her eyes to me. Her expression takes on an air of surprise, then wonder, as if I've jolted loose a memory that's been dormant for a decade. I can only hope she's reliving that time when I, not her mother, was her most trusted companion, and that silly clown on that local children's program held her in rapt attention for a half hour every afternoon. The wonderment remains on her face but I'm afraid it might recede just as quickly. I need to push further, to clinch it, but I don't know how. And then abruptly, from nowhere, there is an itch in my nostril and I heave a tremendous sneeze. When I raise my head again my vision is obstructed by a dark shadow beside my nose.

My little girl takes one look and releases a burst of air in a tremendous feminine guffaw. She reaches out and lifts a dollop of whipped cream from my nose. Realizing my luck I am careful to hold the clown's expression on my face. Indeed, I drive my eyes even further inward.

"Oh daddy, stop. Stop your eyes," she says. "You're going to go blind. Your eyes!" Her words are nearly lost in her laughter, and at this victorious instant she becomes as beautiful to me as she has ever been, for a bubble of pink ice cream, like an expansion of her very soul, distends and dilates unladylike from her left nostril. When she notices it, she collapses in convulsions of embarrassment and tearful, undisciplined joy, her pleasure and her release from her mother's bondage complete. Flopped on the booth seat, limp, weeping and shaking with hilarity, she is once again fully my daughter.

It's half a minute before she gains any semblance of self-control. When she does she sits up and, with a ruddy face and slick wet cheeks, declares, "Okay. Let's go. Let's do it! You play the slot machines," she says, "and I'll pick old ladies' pockets."

Young minds move so quickly, it's a second or two before I realize what she's talking about.

"No. Not slot machines," I say, wiping my face with a napkin. "I'm going to count cards at blackjack."

"Count cards?" She shoves aside her ice cream. "What does that mean?" She's on her knees in the booth, leaning forward, her elbows on the table.

"I'm going to keep track of which cards have been dealt," I say as she smooths down my hair, "all in my head. That way I know which cards are more likely to come up as the game goes on."

"Why?" she says.

"Because you can win thousands that way."

"Thousands?"

"Thousands, hundreds. The point is to have fun."

"I'll do it too," she says.

"You're not old enough," I say. "But I'll take you to the shows. They have big shows better than Broadway. I'll play blackjack after you go to bed and win enough money for us to see shows all the next day."

"I can disguise myself," she says. "I can look eighteen and then they'll let me play. I can look thirty. I was a grandmother in a school play once."

It occurs to me that her abrupt enthusiasm might mean she's taking the entire conversation as a joke, a continuation of my clown face, a lark. When she was little, each night after she would watch that clown on television, I would tuck her into bed and we would conjure stories together of great shared adventures. She'd fall asleep in the middle of a tale of father and daughter as pirates at sea, as seekers of lost cities hidden beneath great volcanic islands, or as astronauts fighting dragons on Mars.

Studying her now, for the life of me I can't tell whether she realizes I'm serious or not.

But when she speaks again—"Teach me how to count cards. Please. Right now!"—something in her voice is urgent, and I read that as sincerity.

"I can't teach you here," I say. "It takes time. But I'll teach you just as soon as we get there."

"Teach me on the way," she says.

"Okay," I say. "I'll teach you on the way."

"On the way," how I love those words. I have a tremendous sensation of gravity kicking in and setting things right. As we leave the ice cream parlour Audrey wraps my coat around her and hugs it.

"Let's win every penny they've got," she says.

As Audrey walks down the street she spins so that my coat fans out around her and she yells, "Let's win a million dollars!"

We have to pass Loretta's house in order to reach my car, so I am almost tiptoeing. It would be tragic to come this far only to pass the house loudly and draw her attention. My daughter, noticing my odd walk, stifles a snort. Finally, as if she hadn't really recovered from her laughing fit in the ice cream parlour, but had only put the most tenuous of lids on her delirium, she bursts out laughing again. I signal for her to remain quiet, but that only makes things worse. She leans against an oak tree screeching with delight until she's exhausted.

"Make-believe is fun, Daddy," she says finally, touching her fingers to her wheezing chest, "but I've had enough for one night."

The sky seems to move, the constellations to shift from their fall to their winter positions, and I recognize that I haven't been persuading her of anything, but only myself. Like a reluctant shadow, I trail Audrey the rest of the way to the house in disbelief, in dread that she is really going to vanish once again behind those doors. And this time, for how long? Another six months? A year?

When we stand again in the ambit of the porch light she says, "I had such a lovely time. You've just got to come back home."

"You don't understand," I tell her.

She tugs at my fingers. Her long neck reddens. "Please," she urges.

I hold on, as I tend to do, to people, to notions, that I just can't bare to part with, which I suppose on this occasion gives my daughter the impression that I am hopelessly obtuse when I say, "Aren't you coming? Aren't we going?"

"Right!" she says. "I'm running away with you to Atlantic City and we're going to get rich!"

I take a step backward. I look towards the bush I'd been hiding behind earlier. Then I feel Audrey's hands on my shoulders.

"Sorry," she says. "Call Mom." She stands two steps above me. "Please!" Her eyes wander my face as if she's trying to memorize it. "Goodnight." She pecks me on the forehead and rushes into the house.

For the past six months Audrey has been there, in my thoughts, as my partner. I imagined her delight at every plan, every scheme, every strategy for easy money I've dreamed up. But all the while, the real Audrey, back here with Loretta was, day by day and hour by hour, being turned against me. Audrey, my Audrey, the daughter who used to sit on my shoulders and see the world as I viewed it, exists today only as a thought and a swath of blurred emulsion. I wonder what I was doing, when she so definitively crossed the divide from my world to her mother's. When I reach my car a violent chill tosses my hair and encircles my neck. I reach to turn up my coat collar. But it isn't there. I reflect for a moment. I recall Audrey spinning as my coat whipped out around her; I recall her dash up the steps.

I hurry back down the road towards the house. I cross the street. I stumble over the curb. I stand straight again, but it's too

black to see, the moon has clouded over, so I decide to wait until my eyes become accustomed to the dark. Then, slowly growing in the distance there is a small sound. It could be a cat. It could be someone's television. Shadows emerge and I distinguish the house a short distance away. I approach. The sound becomes louder. It's coming from the house, like a beacon, the sound of someone crying. But when I reach the porch the sound is gone. I detect only the faraway white noise of highway traffic.

I wonder if Audrey wore my coat indoors to demonstrate allegiance to me and to defy her mother, if I'd had her all wrong. Or had she merely forgotten that she had it on? Regardless, there must have been a scene between them. I crane my neck at Audrey's upstairs bedroom window. Her window is open. I sit on the porch steps. I look up at the window again. Then it comes to me. Audrey still wears my too-warm coat. She is draped in it, even now, as in a blanket. With the window closed she would no doubt swelter, so she's left the window open.

But I'm too hopeful. I merely want this to be so. I long for her to feel each button of my coat between her fingers, to smell the tobacco and Chinese food, to sense the reminders that my coat keeps of the thousand days and nights that her mother and I were in love. It might bring Audrey solace as it does me. Then I hear a snuffle, or I think I do. This darkness might be bringing my imagination to the fore. I'd like to call out to Audrey, to soothe her. I want to support her entirely in my arms as I once did—it is almost unimaginable now but I once did—and kiss her forehead and stroke her hair. I want to let her know that it is all right, that I love her, that her mother loves her, and that this is near perfection. But of course it's a lie. Everything is in shambles. She is a girl with no father who doesn't know why, and I am a free-floating, purgatorial soul. Yet I have been waiting for a tearful cry of devotion from Audrey's lips all night and now, with a simple call to her window, I might have it.

And then again I hear a sound. But not from above. I look to my left through the darkened bay window. It is only when she moves her arm that I'm positive it's a person and not a piece of furniture. Is Audrey wandering the house? She shifts her position and her outline becomes distinct. And now it's clear that Audrey is still a girl, for this form is unmistakably that of a mature woman. I take in a short breath.

When she turns I catch her in profile and feel a twinge of sorrow. She's no doubt still recovering from the sight of that coat slung around her daughter's shoulders. I recall the Christmas morning I opened the box that contained the coat. Loretta had been standing in the front parlour just as she is now. It wasn't only the coat itself that makes this such a pleasant memory; it was also that this undemonstrative woman had communicated to me by such a gift something she could never have communicated in any other way. She'd remembered an offhand remark I'd made the summer before as we'd passed an Army Navy store displaying an old World War II coat in the window, like the one my father used to wear. After my father died when I was twelve, my mother found his old army coat hidden away in my closet. In a fit she'd thrown it out attempting, I suppose, to put her grief behind her. But my wife, years later, finally restored his memory to me by her gift and with that gesture my love for Loretta had deepened.

The shadow paces. I edge closer. Loretta wipes her eyes. For the first time I feel sorry for her, trapped in her stoicism. And I wonder, is this what our lives are for, these solitary demonstrations alone to ourselves in the dark where even we cannot witness them? I thought I had rid myself of the emotion years ago, but I am all at once snared by the old turmoil.

The form moves out of sight. Has she seen me? No. She returns a few seconds later, a glass in hand. If I were to speak to Loretta now would we fight like the last time? Would we throw plates taken down from the shelves and silver snatched up from the dinner table? Would a shard of china cut Loretta again, but more deeply? Would there be another rush to the hospital and, this time perhaps, the police? Or maybe tonight I would be the one to bleed. There is no way to predict what would follow if I were to knock, which is why it's unthinkable. So much becomes unthinkable as we grow older and, heaping decision upon decision, narrow the ambit of our lives.

The screen door. It has always closed improperly on its own and I see it's askew now, revealing the knob of the wooden door behind it, the mail slot, the doorknocker. It's only a few feet away. So I shift across the porch, sidestepping until my foot grazes the edge of the doormat. But now that I'm there for some reason I don't close the screen door as I'd intended. Something prevents me. I don't know what. I'm baffled by my hesitation. Just then, the

moon skitters out from behind the clouds and, blinking, I look up. Its pale glow dances and wriggles along the street. The leaves on the nearby trees fling spoonfuls of reflection back upward as if in playful response, and the doorknocker beside my head, that large swirl, that curlicued, looping ampersand of brass, glints with light that has travelled in an instant all those thousands of miles.