

TESS WHEELWRIGHT

Max Donaldson and His Son

Max Donaldson was a waxy, whiskey-logged financier who knew his son not to be stupid, and knew himself to be less stupid than his son. He blamed the mother. Like him, she was a corporate triumph in the Windy City, but unlike him, she was a churchgoer and a baker of puddings, a saver of dinner leftovers in labeled yogurt tubs; she kept in close cooing touch with the half dozen siblings she'd grown up tending in the woods of Minnesota, and the only albums she owned were musicals. She volunteered; she drank only moderately and then became pink and gullible; she'd betrayed never a wince of resentment of their children's squalling dependence. Unlike him she'd *rewarded* their small son for stunts like giving up a goal to a pitied opponent or half his Halloween candy to a kid claiming to have lost his to a hole in the bag—for later rounding up his motley middle school friends for an unsponsored no-to-drugs campaign at the mouth of the lunchroom: one hand-drawn poster per susceptible peer, each library-researched and on recycled paper. These acts, this boy, embarrassed Max. So did his ex-wife's license, to this day, to pull the boy onto her yielding lap, after a gluey Midwestern dinner, folding in his gangly limbs, clucking, both beaming. Their daughter Max understood better. She'd always squirmed off

that lap. Now off in London, trying to model— attractive, unforeseeably attractive, though probably not attractive enough—*she* was proving the unsure bet, but still hers was a power—the power to leave lovers, to make the *other* party strive to impress—of the kind Max recognized.

It was Max who informed his son that his son possessed an especially large penis. They were at Max's club, in the steam-room; his son had just given him a decent game of racquetball—more than decent: wiped his ass, in fact, finally, after enough permission. Max had his towel doubled up behind his neck and was leaning back comfortably, enjoying the sensation of the first run-away droplets of sweat down the sides of his heavily resting stomach, wondering, Why hadn't they done this more often?

Well for one, his son preferred outdoor sports; he had a soccer game with some Bolivian guys in Washington Park; did it ever bug Max that it was black guys handing out the towels and only white guys using the club?

Oh Jesus, right. Max had forgotten. Sorry he'd asked. Max leaned back again. A sweat droplet rerouted by a tuft of silvering curls stayed a high course to pool in his navel. Another headed south from his lower back So was Tommy still seeing a lot of that girl from Indianapolis? She

was cute enough, could have been cuter, seemed a little sober. Meanwhile, they only saw each other every couple of weeks, wasn't it? While there was a city of talent right here. Tommy *was* aware that, well, oh, that he had nothing to be ashamed of. In the way of what he had to offer. A woman. If he knew what Max meant.

"What? Really?"

"Sure, Son. For sure. I mean, your old dad always felt himself to be decently-enough endowed, but now to take a look at you—"

"God, *that?* Jesus, Dad."

Well, sorry. They changed the subject. But it was. It really was. Even wilted there onto the towel. Max felt a certain pride in it.

"Dad? Did you ever think you'd stay together with Mom?"

Jesus. Okay sure, sure he had, that's why people get married, Son, plus your mom was a—a is a great woman. Oh but then, well ah, things got complicated. Well for starters, for one thing, when they're pregnant, you know, they're less *available* to us, if you know what I mean. Should Max have said this to his son? Probably not. But was the kid nearly grown, and what the hell? Still, he left off the details. That the first time had been with the divorcee from two houses down their same block, whose kids Tommy had grown up playing with. That after that had seen him out the door it had been ever after eastward and shoreward, moving in with first one and then another junior lawyer doing in-house for the firm, then finally their boss up in Lake Shore Drive. It was never the same for Max with Tommy's mother after the

pregnancies. He'd had the impression of her being powdery; she never smelled as good.

Max was writing a novel. His habit had been to send chunks of it to his son's young steady, after learning of a certain literary interest on the girl's part—until his son had asked him not to. It concerned a woman lawyer not very much like the one he was now married to—big-boned, Danish, competent and indifferent—but more like the one Max imagined he himself might have been: leggy, lipsticked, merciless. The various chapters mapped her rise to the summit of wealth and power—not, needless to say, on her talents as a litigator. Sometimes she got bored with the climbing and took home the bartender. Her preferred was a senior corporate banker based closely on Max but better looking, without the gut, happier and less of a boozier, more deserving, fairer to his ex-wives, beloved by his children. Oh Jesus! Max went through an easy handle of Hennessy a week when he was writing nights.

He'd expected more, Max had. It had been awhile, but he'd worked hard in those early years for what he now tried to enjoy. Had there been anyone to clear the mocking way for him? There hadn't. Now his own son wouldn't even take the leg up. Yes, Max had flattered. He'd covered for his boss, let other guys take his credit, logged more than one 400-hour work-month, guffawed at more than one truly, truly shitty joke. He'd felt but rarest need to voice his sense of these prep school boys taking the escalator while he Max took the stairs. He made it his simple aim in those early years to take no more shit on a given

day than he dealt, and as he climbed the ladder, it was sweet to see the balance tip to his advantage. It wasn't a work without its pleasures. He liked getting his ass licked as much as the next guy. Did he really believe the summer interns liked his ties? No. Or maybe sure they did. Whichever. But why shouldn't the one who never told him so make other plans the day of the White Sox game?

"The rest of you guys, bring your dates. Don't worry, they'll be safe with me: I'm married. Nothing but lookin' for the old boy now," he'd winked. "Saturday. You too, Tulayev. All work and no play'll make you an even duller boy ha ha."

At the last minute he'd thought to buy a seventh ticket for his son, but either he forgot to call him or his son had had other plans. In any case the seat stayed empty. Nor did Max as in the past he might've give it the old pregnant pat till one of the boys' dates' young rears landed dutifully therein. To tell the truth he hadn't enjoyed the game much. Anyway they'd lost it in the end to a bad call. Fucking douchebag ump. Max himself might have dozed off a little around the top of the seventh, but his boys had told him what time it was. You kidding me? The little shit! "Get some glasses, asshole! Yeah you, you ASS-hole." Fucking chump ump. Bonehead. Blind fucker.

Soon Max really would be old. Already he swayed, he toddled. Hatefully he recognized his face puffed out tight at the mirror, Karin more often than not didn't want him and a recurring sense of a weight like a bag of stones at his liver

made him avoid the doctor. And for instance when he could get his son to meet him for lunch he had to listen to himself huff along like a rhino just to keep pace out of the restaurant.

"Dad, get yourself checked up on, hey?" said Max's son, on a recent of these occasions.

Why? thought Max. So I don't miss the next cast of jackasses making a further mess of it, me meanwhile growing rank and grey and too fat to see my you-know-what up on top of a fortune god knows *you* won't appreciate? Not to mention witness *your* burnout, *Son*. You up in flames with your adorable *decency*. Max worked his handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow and jowls. It had not, needless to say, been the most gratifying of lunches.

"Son, I'll tell you now what my old man told me—not that he did too gorgeously at it," Max had begun, padding butter onto a roll: "Look out for Number One. Above all, look out for Number One. Christ knows the other guy is ha ha." Max wasn't worrying too particularly about his words. He was buttering the underside of his roll. He was acting on a general sense of a need to reprogram his son, now that the kid was his same height and getting laid and everything and would soon carry Max's own name into the snake pit; this was just more in a strategy of broad bombardment on the chance any piece of it connected before Tommy learned it the hard way. At least you wouldn't be able to say Max didn't warn him.

His son didn't say anything.

"Let me ask you this: Is it any better a world than it ever was? Are people happier? If I die of a

heart attack tomorrow, will I have lost anything more than any poor jerk back in the plague?”

Max looked up to see his son somewhat startled. He tore bread and switched tacks.

“Put it this way: Who has the power, Son? Starting with here in this city, who’s holding the reins of power? Hm? And you think they’re planning to give it up any time soon to the guys with the better intentions?” Max took a great swallow of Chablis. He refilled his glass, tipped the bottle out to his son, who shook his head. Would Max have preferred not to be having this conversation with his son? Sure he would have. But the boy, he felt, brought it on.

The boy said something to the effect of not believing the father. Not believing him *anymore*. That his position on the irredeemability of the world was no more than his personal justification for staying home inactive. *Complicit*. Drinking scotch.

Max smiled. “Improve *your* world, Son. That’s what I’m telling you. Improve your world, and let those who can improve theirs, and meanwhile *the* world will keep on the beast that it is. Yessir,” said Max, swilling Chablis. “*The* world always did have an ugly reaction to being told what to do.”

Tommy shook his head. He claimed not to be impressed and indeed didn’t look it. He would direct Max’s attention to the changes forced in this country alone through self-sacrifice and collective action—but wearily; he would no longer be ruffled by excuses like irredeemability; Max guessed he would be happy if he never saw Max again.

Changes? Max challenged, with his fleshy face alone. These glorious *changes* of yours? Tommy looked away. He bore up. Again he called his the Movement and again he forecast Change.

Max put down his glass. “Tom. Say you get a thousand kids thinking you’ve got the right idea on this environment stuff. Say you get ten thousand. Hell, say in a couple of years you’re seeing the best case scenario, these places realize they’re losing money and talent because kids are choosing the ‘greener’ places: They get a little smarter about the energy they use, do a run of sexy marketing around it, get some politicians talking it up—hell, even get some laws passed. So what? Unfortunately, Son, ‘so what’ is the question. So what so what so what. These oil guys are gonna line up to file away from trillions of dollars? Become Mother Theresa, so long as they’re over there in Timbuktoo? Stop me if I’m telling you something you don’t already know.” Max mini-belched.

“Dad, I don’t see—”

“—Hey, and since when does not being Mother Theresa make you a mother you-know-what ha, either?” He groped for his glass. “—What?— In short, we can talk and talk about clean energy, Son, run the alternative scenarios—but is the guy with his needle deep in the ground in the Congo going to pull it out one second before the oil runs out? Ha ha or will he just swear to her he meant to when it’s too late. Or find somewhere else to stick it ha ha. Aren’t they poking around up in Alaska even as we speak? Sure seems to me, from experience, you know, a guy’s going to poke

around for more just as long as he's got something to poke with, ahem ha ha."

"I've got to go, Dad," Tommy said.

Back outside on the street, Tommy buttoned his coat quickly. "Go on get out of here, Son," said Max, moving to—oh, he didn't know—give the kid a fatherly chuck on the old arm or something, but Tom was a step out of reach and Max's hammy fist fell back weakly by his side. "Tell the little lady the old man sends regards!" Max called to his son's retreating back. His son didn't turn around. Max dropped his wave after him. He rooted for his hanky. He looked around for a bench on which to wait out his heartburn.

It's true Max Donaldson hadn't been too good—but then had reality been all that good to him? It hadn't. He'd come home from school to find the bathroom door locked, his sorrowful mother nowhere to be found and you can guess the end when he was only nine years old—and this wasn't his only story like this. Did he need you to go and cry for him over it? No. But did he have any illusions of life's being anything but a cold tit long clotted dry? Sorry. But he didn't.

"My son hates me," Max said to Karin after dinner that night, wiping the greasy corners of his mouth. She didn't look up from a design magazine. She was only sort of his wife, Max had long often thought. He guessed you took what you could get by now. She was in the planning stages of a remodeling project, she'd informed him. Of the—of *her* bathroom. He pushed up from the table and went to his study. He turned on his Mac and got down a highball and poured

a finger, oh fine two fingers, two and a half, of cognac into it as the Mac booted up. He took a large swallow, added a splash more, turned off his Mac. He sat back. He sat up. He sat back. You know what he had an appetite for? A sardine. Max liked sardines. Was he not in ways a simple man? He took pleasure from a bloody mary and from the late-night shows with maybe a bowl of nuts, and from his little car, and also his big car and his other car, and from a wiener at the Sox game and maybe a blow job on Sunday morning and even that less than he once had. What did they want from him? Once he'd had the idea to go down and pay a visit to his son at the old alma mater, so long as the kid was still there. He'd tagged along to a dorm-room party and got loose on cheap vodka ("Tell the truth now, Ladies: my son, him there: he can't really be so nice a guy as his mother thinks he is ha, now can he?") and even did a line of coke with the pimply supplier for the hall, and took a walk around the corner and bought a girl a drink at the sorry little bar there. Tommy and the brunette he was seeing had found him there and steered him the blocks to his hotel around three a.m. in silence. Max was offering them the old college thumbs-up when the sliding doors closed on him, which he laughed off as the kids leapt forward. "If it ain't one thing . . ." he'd slurred theatrically, giving the mechanism the old finger. All in all he felt he'd been a very good sport.

It's when his son asked him to come hear him give a speech in South Dakota that Max didn't want to go. Desperately, he didn't want to go. If

it had been another party, or ten years ago and a baseball game, if his son were graduating something, sitting the bar, taking his first account (Max always got the new guys at the firm a little flask of something when their turn was up); if it were some other thing, a new business, if Tom were opening a restaurant, say—yes, if Max were for instance being called to sample the trial menu, play the part of reviewer (he'd always had a feeling it'd have been a job for him; once off his own bat he'd written up a little French place that opened on their corner—decent steaks, great crème brûlée, portions could have been bigger all the way around—though in the end they didn't run it . . .)—right, but it wasn't any of these things. It was South Dakota, for starters. It was the Yankton Recreation and Family Center; it was an activists' conference of the kind Max had never in his life found reason to visit, but where his son, he'd been told, had found footing and flourished. Where they were calling him a leader. Where they were calling pollution etcetera the Cause, and the racket against it the Movement. Already, in anticipation, Max felt very tired. He felt poorly slept, poorly fed, unprepared. There would be correctness; there would be idiocy; there would almost surely be no bar. Max would be ashamed.

On the whole Max considered that he didn't have much left to fear. Not retirement; he'd been effectively retired for years. When it came to the future, he had certain plans, certain ideas—and if that's a lie, did he have any better ideas for the present? He sat on a hotel bed in a Midwestern

state that had rarely in all his years crossed his mind; he wore nothing and marveled with satisfaction and its opposite at the grotesqueness of his body in the large mirror. He felt no desire to touch himself—and if that's a lie, he felt no desire to be touched or acknowledged by anyone else. It was a relief not to be near his wife, who resented him in many incontrovertible ways; if he'd said "My wife hates me" aloud it would have been largely true. He considered ordering a drink up to his room, though already on the plane he'd had his share and also the share of the young square next to him in first class who'd tried to decline his when the girl went by. Coursing thickly through his thickened veins was the notion that for only so much longer—and then what?—could he bear this awful tautness at his temples. He tested and found he pictured himself old alone. Three wives had not been the charm. His friends were pretty awful guys, and they thought the same of him. He felt he'd lost his son. Again he blamed the mother for the softness of the son. One so rarely considers one's aspect from other than the front. Max torqued somewhat sideways. Little better. He ordered up a whiskey and water. That night when he finally slept he dreamed that some really good, proud thing had happened to him, and even he didn't seem to care.

"Can you get a cup of coffee around here or what?" Max was following his son onto the stained carpet of the Yankton Rec. Center Conference Room the next day, with the sense that he had to stoop down slightly. Tommy pointed to a pyramid of seasoned plastic mugs beyond the crush

of oily youths. Tommy left him heading there. Max could be a good sport. He trundled up to the table, gained access between one overripe and distinctly human-scented young woman and her double, took up a paper cup, perceived himself scowled at, found there was only tea. The coffee cake for non-vegans was apparently all gone. At noon his son would give a little speech. At noon his only son would give the littlest of speeches to a little room of the dear concerned youth of Yankton, South Dakota. Max eyed the makeshift stage. Christ, though: when had this happened?! Max accepted—Max understood, now, that if he'd cornered Tom, taken his elbow, leaned in conspiratorially with a whisper of "Let's get outta here!," winking, thinking to grab whatever might be free upon exit; that if he'd gotten out the Jaguar and a few days off to take it around, up into Canada, even, just the two of them, take in the sights, throw a little money around, or, hell, why not down to Vegas; if he were now to un-pocket the keys, dangle them, eyebrows wagging, from across the awful room—his son would not have followed. This, now, Max understood. His son *liked* it here. It could be said that his son *belonged* here.

Sunday through Tuesday of each waking week as his kids grew slowly up they'd been Max's; it'd become his habit to spend that first dinner developing their palettes at better Chicago restaurants and unraveling the lessons they'd been fed at Sunday School. Could he simply have told his ex-wife that he suspected the minister was one of these weirdos, and thought the whole story-

circle-on-a-basement-rug thing creepy, that it threatened to make his kids mealymouthed and guilty, and besides had no place, that Max could see, in the world that awaited them? You know, yes, probably, in fewer words. She was relieved when they talked about parenting. There's a chance she'd simply have called church off. But he'd never thought to mention it. He'd help his children order, wonder if he should do a bottle of wine on his own, most often go for it. "Noah's flood, huh? Well I've got a question: How is it the good Noahs let everyone but themselves drown? You get an answer on that one? Some neighbor that guy, huh? Your napkin, Tom." He'd listen, distractedly, unhappily, to his pretty son. "Fine—Tom, fine. Okay. But why else *might* it have been? Is there any sneaking ulterior reason it also partly *might* have been? You know what, forget it. But just think about it. *Think*. Thinketh, my child ha ha. On the other hand, say you're Noah, for that matter. Are you really going to bring two, what is it, goats and two apes and all the rest instead of, say, Nicky, Jessie, *and* Javier?" His son considered.

"Dad, can I get ice-cream?" asked Lucy.

"Sure, Baby."

"Can I?" asked Tommy.

"That depends."

The way Max figured it, the world had ended infinite times already. The folding chair beneath him felt of wobbly manufacture and the same could be said for the South Dakota Students for Climate Consciousness; Max's son was soon to take the stage. Max sat at his unease, none too

pleased. He could have used some fresh air. As sure as the day was long he could have used some fresh Chicago air. He turned over his program. Co-sponsors: the *South Dakota Anti-Poverty Coalition*. Anti-poverty! It struck Max as rich. Who *wasn't* anti-poverty?! Some were just better at it than others ha ha—Max looked around him. He filed it for a later crowd. On the stand Max would've had to confess that for a long time now he'd had right and wrong on a sliding scale. For which he found little daily use. Even if there were such a place as heaven, Max couldn't see himself there. Forgive me father for I have sinned, twelve bloody marys etcetera ahem . . . ha. Seriously, though, Max was unwell. His ears hummed; he was swallowing sand; the weight of the world was suddenly at his temples. He loosened his collar but he might as well have tightened it. A sweating redhead was finishing up about global warming. The narrowest of windows, she threatened. And the reason they couldn't meanwhile open a window in here? Max was expiring. He panted. The redhead gave them thirty years. Ha, me too? thought Max, and: *Can I get something else?*

Infinite times already, he figured, this reckoning of theirs. Don't get him started. Already and infinite times again, the worst has been over. You think Max was fully free from thinking about it? He'd been young once, too, believe. For the Somalian who has to watch his body starve away from fucking under him, for the latest gang kid on the South Side to cross over onto the wrong block at the wrong time some night, the goddamn apocalypse has come and gone. The re-

tiree out in Lake County who collapses behind his fucking lawn mower, with no one to hear his cries. Who's to feel the difference when it's all of us burning together? Fear no more the heat o' the sun, Fear no more the frown o' the great, etcetera. Max didn't. All like chimney sweepers must come to dust. The one thing about Max is he had very few illusions. To be honest if Max had been the Almighty he'd have probably gotten it over with already. Not without gentleness, then, Max let the people in his life know there was not to be any wretchedness. Not that he judged it, even—jesus, he understood it—but because he had no idea what to do with it. He remembered telling his son to go to his room the time he sobbed over the victims of a shelled school in Croatia, which is what he told him to do when he'd been bad. Once in the three years as a young man when Max had been madly, soaringly in love, the lover had called him from far away in the terror of despair—her first—and Max had hung up on her.

“We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now. Over the bleached bones and jumbled residues of numerous civilizations are written the pathetic words, *Too late.* . . . Or maybe, just maybe, it isn't. We stand together today with a final chance to say *Not Yet.* Will our children, will our children's children, look back and say that was a generation of *cowards*? We who let this one earth die? Or will they say, those were the ones who turned it around?” Tommy paused purposefully. His audience was duly rapt. Really, the thing was, the kid was going pretty good. He

dropped from the just-swallowable threshold of grandiosity to very fair and measured, with a list of indisputable threats around close corners and discreet little gains made in combating their like when people believed they could win. He had some stats on Dakota itself; he made an almost-joke. He reminded that the destitute, again, would be the first victims. He told a simple story about the glacial water source for most of Southeast Asia he'd had a chance to consider with scientists in Northern India—had Max maybe helped pay for that trip?—and waved his hands describing its fatal yearly recession, in the way of Max, thought Max, when giving a toast. He asked who in the room might share some of what it took for David Richmond and Jibreel Khazan, Joseph McNeil and Franklin McCain to stay seated at an all-white lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960, through torment and beating, to begin the sit-in movement that transformed this country. Stand up. Stand up if it won't be on your watch. Stand up if you're ready to fight for your future. And one by honest one the lumpy youth of Yankton, South Dakota, got to their feet—some more slowly, some promptly and with shining eyes—and all for shorter and longer strings of seconds felt not just the relief of moral clarity but the wash of nobleness, not just the thrill of personal purpose but humility before a greater cause, and here a pair embraced and there erect believers upped their quivering chins, some with their ratty backpacks still upon them and none in baggy costume too unlike the rest, but never-minding, now, applauding, now,

aloft and true and for the moment unafraid, and from no view slavishly, not tragically, or worse, but rather as unsinning as un-sinned against. For if truth be known, the very Max who might have scorned them so was instead himself experiencing the fleeting conviction, for the first time in his life, that it would have been after all very uncomplicated to contribute small, good things, to have been contributing them all along; and all the while this conviction lasted he felt simultaneously a terrified hatred and a love of a crescendoing sort he'd never known and both of them aimed at his only son,—and it isn't a lie to say he sensed the universe in which since late boyhood he'd imagined himself to exist warp slightly and stretch, swell as if porous, suddenly, to a new current whose essence he could not class and whose clear air it nearly pained Max to breathe,—and for the first time in a decade in his waking life he thought of his mother, heating milk, achieving a fleeting smile at the stove if Max would spin on a certain stool and sing as his brother pounded a certain pot,—and of this brother hardly after seen, rushing toward him on a crowded sidewalk, waving a red hat, with nothing but he'd give the better half to Max; and of all the others Max had lost and deceived and by whose injury he had profited and from fear on whom he'd turned his back—and the times he would not sing! And the father he had not been—and had there ever been a moment since his ninth year that Max Donaldson had dropped his beastly face into his hands and wept, this would have been it.

What happened next was fuzzy. But then a voice gathered behind and cut through the fuzz:

“I’d like . . .” it said, from beneath a deep ocean.

“. . . to take just one more minute . . .” it continued, from just within some boarded-up house now.

“. . . to recognize someone important.” The voice now came distinctly from the stage. Max opened his eyes. He’d let his head roll back, it seemed; with effort he hoisted it back up and forward now, and his golden son, at the mic, panned onto the horizon.

“He came a long way to be with us today. What’s more, without his leadership and example . . .”

But this was a joke, right? Some vengeful, long-incubating little joke, of which Max the butt? But the boy never’d been much of a joker. Less so a punisher, to be fair. Max in spite of himself gathered his weight together to rise—what else, right? One rose? Christ—but it was, near perfectly, in spite of himself. For in himself, again—just like that—rose spite. He tried to keep it down—but then, did the boy *have* to cast his eyes downward like that, long-lashed, like a milkmaid? How had Max forgiven it the moment before? Did he have to let his voice trail off—dribble dribble—down to that thready little whisper? Panderer! It was irritating! See Max annoyed! No sympathy gained could be worth this sorry stooping. Straighten up, Son! Yes, if just moments before Max had been thinking, *I’m sorry, Tom! Shit! I’m sorry. But forgive me, my boy! If I could come live where you live, I would, believe me I would—but I wasn’t invited,*

see? You’re sweating about future realities—and I can’t even work up a sweat for this one! Couldn’t if I tried. When they made my world, son, they forgot to blow on the magic dust, that coat of meaning. It’s all dull to me. It has no weight. Are these people even real? Is this room even fucking real?! Go on, leave me—now he was thinking: You’re starting to stoop just like your mother, you know; you’re getting tortoise-neck; there’s a way to get a point across without this simpering, Tortoise-neck! And those big deer eyes; you beg the wolves to devour you; why do you do it? Blink! You’re not shaming me, shammer. You’re not Gandhi, you little shitter. You’re not even Cesar Chavez. Or whoever you were on about just now. If even Cesar Chavez was Cesar Chavez—don’t you get it? If your “hero” wouldn’t have after all turned out to be a drag at the bar, or whatever it be; he’d have bad breath, he’d hit on a woman who didn’t want him, he wouldn’t know when they were talking about him. He was short, wasn’t he? You get my point. He’d be of, what do we say, sinning flesh like you and me; he’d be sad. It’s myths, kid, myths!

Max wasn’t trying to! He didn’t want to. It was very bad timing. He tried to think—he tried at least his very best to look like he was thinking, *Attaboy, Son—Shucks.*

“. . . I would have never have imagined I could organize people.” Tommy continued. Ahem: *Attaboy, Son.*

“Without pretending words can sum up . . .” *Shucks.*

“. . . his contribution to the campaign, and to me . . .” *Attaboy, shucks, attaboy, shucks.* Max gave

a last look around and hefted himself up, practicing his public grin at the floor

“. . . I'll stop there and thank . . .” Here went nothing. Max threw his big red taxed face up to the stage, the smile tight across it, and stepped off his sorry row.

“Shuc—” Max started, for measure.

“Professor Ron Rousseau!” announced Tommy.

Professor Ron Rousseau.

Professoronrousseau.

Profess.

Oron.

Ruse.

So.

Max's son's sure applause set off the room, and a tall, kind of prophet-looking black guy stepped in from the wings and embraced Max's son. Max's son embraced the stranger. Max's son all but buried his lit-up face in the stranger's tweed and seemed to love him. The stranger gripped Max's son's elbow insidiously. Only upon release of the prof did Tommy's look land on Max—unmistakably separated from chair and row. No backsies. The prof's clear gaze also quickly marked him. Humiliation so total can be almost spicy, in its heat; its burn part tickle; if caught masturbating, near climax, someplace ridiculous, do you finish? If you're Max you do. And so there was something zesty now about the way he burned, arrested in the conspicuity into which he'd tripped the moment before; more stripped by each young head that turned; in just his socks and farty underwear, might as well've been; ogled, loathed,

with a sense of some animal danger. It was almost delicious. But not really.

One thing the Donaldson men didn't know about each other is that when bitterer things happened—when the lies of leaders came to light; when to light the clips of lying leaders hooting along with the worst—the adopted strategy of each was to go to bed early, the senior with a spinning head from the whiskey with which he'd dampened the hilarity, the junior stone sober and in flannel pajamas and pulling the covers up to his dispirited chin to await the return of optimism. To be awake without it was to be without air. He—and the South Dakota Climate Coalition, and the Movement, and, shit, who's to say for sure not the climate?—had exactly this glitch to thank: he had no coping bone. This was the whole thing about him. If he hadn't been such a good sleeper, something long would've had to give.

When Max was commander of his lardy limbs again, he got the hell out of there. Cut left with a vague little nod at nothing, like he was excusing himself for the john. Like it had been his plan all along. All god's children need to take leaks. He felt the heat of his son's eyes upon him. He found his wheels spinning of themselves for points on which he wasn't and couldn't be called a bad guy, the pure pockets—there!, some sympathy, with nothing else mixed in; here, a little sadness, simply; it was a damn shame! So much of it, a damn shame! His son wasn't wrong—and from each Max drew a little gust of relief. But then, cutting the other way, the day's other feeling, vague and

nightmarish: for the distinct threat it carried that it could well dog him all the days of his life; for its pairing with the equally vague image of a big, bushed, familiar man, turning away. Max D. had not looked himself in the face, that is straight in the face, really looked, for fifteen years. If he'd had to identify one thought as governor of his others, it would have been: "It's not *my* fault"—and had been for a very long time. *Well it wasn't! Screw!* It's unsettling not knowing whom one is mentally addressing. Max reached the side exit and passed through to safety. Phewf. Like hell he wasn't going to keep right on going; he'd made the decision en route. Send an excuse or other. "I had to split, son—but *'attaboy,*" from the blackberry. 'Twill serve. "My congrats to brother Rousseau." Ha. Get himself back to Chicago, catch the end of the game, or not; shut a door behind him, was the point. Let the goddamn world wait outside a while.

"Which way's out?" he asked a custodian. She pointed with her squeegee the way he'd come. Christ. Back through the grisly hall. Not in this lifetime. With no other choice, Max found the cafeteria. Bought a V8, took a bucket seat. Felt alternatively antsy as hell and way worse. When the latter, he'd cast somewhat around for an es-

cape the janitor might have forgotten. Emergency exit? He swigged V8. He breathed in, he breathed out; he steadied the rudder. In time his weariful gaze wandered out the streaky window, beyond the curb, and upon two conference minions rapping away in the parking lot. As if the goddamn world rode on it. Waving their nail-bitten hands. Pink in the face. One kind of chewing on his chewed-on sweatshirt. "If we could just—!" Max thought he could make out the scrawnier one insisting. *Well, you can't!* A couple times Max lip-read his son's name.

And then suddenly, again, and just like that, through the half-washed window, outside this half-baked town, the pair looked pitiable, and inoffensive, and even sweet. Everything kind of did. And when Max could again think, "*You know, good for him, poor kid. Our Tommy. Ha. Someone's gotta do it, maybe. You can't say I didn't warn him,*" he knew he was again in the clear. Shit, better than that: He felt suddenly really pretty terrific. Richly relieved. Like a shiny new penny. Top dollar. Like he'd won the lottery. Like a million bucks. Good as gold. He felt like a king. He felt like he could change the world ha. 