

## Fifteen Minutes of Obscurity

Dickie Dirkheim finally hit on publishing his works under other people's names.

For one thing, he'd been running out of wall space. With three years' worth of rejection notices on proud display, the walls of his shoebox loft were nearing saturation. At a loss for further posting area, he was actually beginning to eye pragmatically what had long been his pride and joy: the phalanx of old factory-windows through which the setting sun poured in over the roof gardens of the onetime smelting district. Of course, Dickie could simply have started pasting over the older notices, but this approach struck him as deceitful. In any case, while trimming a letter from a classmate's literary agency informing him that his quirky novel lacked "the difference we seek," he had an intimation that his decorating phase must be ushered to a close.

The walls, after all, were a fair cornucopia of dark comedy. Everywhere along the perimeter of Dickie's glorified efficiency flat, the eye met assurances that an unprecedented volume of submissions had precluded publication of his worthy pieces. Here and there, an agent raised and dashed fond hopes along the margin of a dog-eared query letter: in blue ink, "10/25 - Rush me more, attach this letter"; in red ink, "12/5 - Sorry, can't represent." The liveliest missives were genteel, tacit blows to the solar plexus: judges buoyantly naming the winners of their fiction contests while pocketing all but \$500 of the lottery subsidized by Dickie and his ilk.

Amid this welter, Dickie had exercised his sense of visual pacing, tightening his collage in certain areas to clear extra space for prize documents. Mounted solo in a track-lit spot above the bed, the Senior Fiction Editor at Random House pronounced his novel "smart, inventive, sophisticated, publishable, but perhaps a bit *too* clever for my list" and made the avuncular suggestion that he seek a "smaller, edgier press." Also solo, dead-center on the outside of the bathroom door, hung his very favorite jab, the one he greeted whenever he followed his body's bidding: "Not for us. -J." Dickie had never known the source of this hand-scrawled shaft, which had winged its way to him in a SASE with no return address. The deposits he made in the toilet he dedicated to this muse. "That more like it, J-J?" he would query, zipping up his fly. Or, wiping: "Bet *that's* up your alley, J-bay."

But when he rose full-boweled at night, after an overdose of Chinese take-out, to find moonlight streaming through the wavy factory panes and emboldening this pithy scrawl, a frisson shook him as he opened the bathroom door. It seemed as if he staggered from a spacious realm into a coffin, shouldering this epitaph. The malodorousness of his outpouring was precisely heralded by those few, well-chosen words—"Not for us. -J"—and he became synonymous with his

eliminations. “Midway through the journey of our life,” he found himself somberly reciting, and began to ponder deeply the significance of “J.” He could as well have hung “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here” over the doorway to his little watercloset, but in that case the sprightly touch of allusive irony would have stayed the cudgel of dismay. The words he’d hung were infinitely cruder and more punitive, a swat on the rear end passing blamelessly in to spew its putrefaction. So many prepositions of banishment lurked in that relentless “Not for us”: not *with* us, nor ever *of* us, nor carried *in* us, nor gathered *to* us. Dickie was stalwart indeed to pass so frequently before the judgment of this J.

He may have quailed, at times, but he did not despond. For Dickie harbored the artist’s conviction that he was no less powerful a writer than many whom Oprah had personally gilded—redundantly, given his jaundiced eye—on weekdays at 4:00. His travails were becoming epic and he Odyssean in his narcissistic shrewdness. The world’s monstrosity was now his theater, its sustained hostility a perverse sort of validation. Indeed, Dickie, bilked of his just desserts, had learned to feast on the bilious substance of humiliation. In addition to the concrete mementos slathered on his walls, he possessed a mental trove of coprophagic moments: people calling, all aflutter, to tell him to hurry turn on Channel Five and see his college roommate or his younger cousin or Aunt Sadie’s dog’s psychiatrist being interviewed by Charlie Rose. And he ran his tongue over the cutting edge of a compliment from his closest friend: “I love your novel. As soon as it’s published, I’ll have you come and give a reading to my psychoanalytic book-club.”

Hell—or, that is to say, Dickie’s bathroom—seemed destined to freeze over before the mythic evening arrived on which the lights in a lecture room would dim, leaving the podium aglow, the water glass beaming for his lips only, as he cleared his throat, lifting his eyes from the page...

It was after just such a reading, by someone not himself, that lightning struck. The distinguished reader had been tired, not by virtue of a long flight or a “hectic touring week”; simply marrow-tired at finding himself again behind the podium that Dickie craved, reading his pearls to swine. “Yes,” he’d sighed during the Q & A, “that question always comes up.” And he’d proceeded to answer the inquiry, and all that followed, in an access of martyrdom unmitigated by the handsome fee that had presumably lured him to the limelight. Dickie, in a passion of ambivalence toward this delicious jadedness, did not know exactly how to feel when an elegant older woman raised her hand to ask, in mournful eastern-European cadence, whether the speaker shared her dismay at Pinsky’s having beat him out for Poet Laureate. At which point the author brought his literary manhood out of mothballs, rumbling in true Churchillian fashion, “Madam, it is honor enough to be mentioned in the same breath as Mr. Pinsky.” Above the audience’s guffaw of relief the woman’s pained contralto rose, “Oh, I didn’t meann...no, no, I luff your vork,” silver chignon bobbing with sincerity, fingers twisting the Hermès scarf. “Thank you, madam,” the speaker clinched with

inimitable sarcasm. Ah, it was even more richly gauche an episode than the one a year before, when a middle-aged man in a packed auditorium had demanded sneeringly of Derek Walcott whether he thought himself a genius since winning the Nobel Prize. In that instance, Mr. Walcott had employed a far more humble method of rebuke and emerged with dignity intact, unlike the Pinsky runner-up who, Dickie decided, had disgraced himself bristling at an innocent faux pas.

Dickie had much to savor strolling home that night, mentally drafting and revising his own response to the Pinsky question, balancing modesty with a discreet pride. In working to articulate his position in relation to the Poet Laureate, he made a false move that he hurriedly deleted from his public posture. He'd uttered the jocular parenthetical remark that even *blind* judging might not have operated in his favor. Although the audience had laughed lovingly, embracing the modesty topos within the riposte, he knew, the moment the words were out, that this was the one remark that would make tomorrow's papers. It was with a literal sigh of relief that Dickie returned to being Dickie, pulling open the door to his dim, unguarded lobby, fishing for his keys while peering cautiously into the even dimmer elevator.

And now, rising amid the clanking of the old freight lift, he wondered how much regret tonight's speaker was suffering. Was he sitting abstractedly over a nightcap with a few admirers, replaying the lost opportunity to show forbearance, to make that woman's accidentally pointed question into an occasion for displaying endearing modesty? "One takes far less satisfaction in the pronouncements of a committee," he might have said, "than in the generous attendance tonight." Ah, that would have been graceful, thought Dickie as the elevator doors scraped open. He could hardly have done better himself.

Whereupon, of course, he returned to being the author of the line, now turning his key in a door, switching on a light, and gaping into a chaos of mocking salutations. The walls fairly bristled with repudiation. He peered for a twinkle of complicity between them and himself, but all irony had suddenly vanished; he was no longer the cunning decorator of this room but that failure-ridden thing to which the walls attested. He had no come-back. Where was the honeyed self-deprecation of his fantasy persona, the comely modesty that could trounce contempt?

It was a fiction. All of it: the modesty affected by great and small alike. Each big-name entity who saw the bars of envy clanging down behind his listeners' eyes; each no-name upstart who swilled from the preliminary water glass, gawking over its rim at a five-person audience; each listener, tucked up tight in a perfect frenzy of loyalty to self, which entailed a perfect hatred and condemnation of the featured speaker—these were all beings incapable of tolerating their smallness for any length of time. Who was he to toy with his own egoism? What in hell was he doing, pasting up the world's obliviousness to him, when he could so easily have sublimated it in the trash? And, for that matter, what vicious arriviste had launched the cliché of living in a cemetery of one's hopes?

All that Dickie, now slogging toward his kitchenette, had to show for the past five years were the testimonials on his walls: Putnam advising him, “You are a very talented writer, but I found the dual narration in your novel to be very disorienting”; Norton sighing, “This is a very inventive and imaginative approach to novel writing, but it was too complex moving from the one narrative to the other. I used to pride myself on reading experimental works; I guess I’ve gotten too old.” And Holt loving everything but the narrators’ personalities: “It’s wonderfully imaginative and edgy. I was especially impressed by your ability to create entirely distinct voices, which do, in the end, play off each other. But I did feel that neither voice was entirely sympathetic as a character, the one because it is so completely rage-filled, and the other because it is so solidified in its station and time.”

“Yup-yup-yup,” Dickie found himself sputtering into the fridge, “but that’s what you *get* when you riff off something as *sick* as Frigga’s Folly. What do you *think’s* inside the skull of a sociopath who’s getting off on rampant polygamy? Frigga’s Folly, people: look it up under disinhibition syndromes or sexual predation. This is perversion of marriage and family, and okay, it ain’t pretty. There’s rage, you betcha—in all quarters. And this ain’t no pathology *du jour*, folks. Where d’ya think they got the name?: look up the old Norse gods, you bourgeois sticks. We’re talking Viking mentality; we’re talking pillage. Make the connection, bozos; take it chapter by chapter. Watch my players back-to-back, centuries apart: marauders and brutes; god-tall blonds and smooth, smooth operators. It’s a *novel*, people; and no, it ain’t homespun, and no, it ain’t gonna tell you how ‘Maryanne watched the sun set behind the fringe of icicles along the porch and wondered where the birds had gone.’”

To moisten his diatribe, Dickie up-ended an outdated juice carton into his mouth. Syrupy sludge ran onto his tongue. “Rage? You betcha. Our present-day brigands have rage. Who the hell doesn’t? Look into the tailgating windshield behind you: you see a sympathetic character in there? Does everybody have to tell their story like a dead guy or a little lady? Hell no. Does anyone bitch when Yossarian feels rage? Do they tell Sylvia Plath to stick it in the oven? Do they muzzle Eminem or do they market him to hell and back?”

On a swift inhalation, syrupy saliva hit his vocal cords, and Dickie began to cough. Hunching, body wrenched, he squealed, “Suddenly they can’t handle interwoven narratives? Do they scream at A.S. Byatt to stop alternating her narrators and shove them both into the same century? Do they make piss-ant Barth and fucking Faulkner wipe their asses in a straight line?”

Upright again, slamming the carton into the trash, Dickie wheeled around, wild-eyed, ready to yell something out a window. And then went weak with the blow of the epiphany. The problem was not with his novel, stories, and poems but simply with the “Dickie Dirkheim” attached to them. Martin Amis or Robert Coover or anyone else in the cool crowd would’ve had those pages snugly between covers by now.

Like a snaggle-toothed geezer winking around the elbow of his luscious daughter, Dickie Dirkheim was creating a drag on *Frigga's Folly*.

Or that was his hypothesis, and he set out to prove it.

With the dawning of a new regime, the first manuscript, a short story, went out under the name of the redoubtable Grace Carla Pease. Dickie had been to hear her read long ago, in the days when, despite pecuniary strictures, he would buy each speaker's latest book, reasoning, "who's going to support us writers if we don't support each other?" Even then, Ms. Pease had been well beyond needing Dickie's handout, what with her full professorship and multiple awards, her anthologies, and the "sixteen novels and innumerable short stories" noted in the introductory remarks; nevertheless, Dickie had held to principle and come away with a memento bearing the inscription: "Best wishes, G.C. Pease." This delicate sentiment, carefully traced, he now transferred to a piece of vellum, right beneath one casual, typewritten line: "If you guys can use this, go ahead. All honoraria to the SPCA."

Now, where to? Like a novice, Dickie flushed with blissful ambition and set his sights on the *New Yorker*; but just as he was beginning to address the envelope, his planning took a more mature turn. The high-profile journals, he realized, would either lose the story in the slush pile or, noting the letter's signature, contact Ms. Pease's agent to decry the foolishness of her submitting in that fashion. A flurry of communication would ensue, resulting in the discovery of literary fraud. No, something slightly less autocratic would have to do. He sent the story to *Mississippi Review*.

Over the next few days, following the same format, he sent two poems by Richard Stimsky to *Ploughshares*, three poems by Lisa Glick to *Antioch Review*, and two stories, by Carl Caxton and Trip Stiles, to *Glimmer Train* and *Kenyon Review*, respectively.

Then he sat back to wait. There would be no way to know of his pieces' acceptance but by watching future issues, which would take time. It was tempting to keep lobbing pieces out into the world, but he understood that a saturation-bombing of the journal landscape might alert people to a hoax. He prided himself on a tactical assault. He'd chosen his authors carefully: prolific factories of eclectic stuff, with a hint of devilishness to their personalities—wise guys who might very well break the rules of their agent-run existence.

Having thus reauthorized a few of his offspring and sent them to places that had seen fit to reject their siblings, Dickie thought he should get back to work. But his excitement precluded literary output. No longer was he waiting for the noontime mail, weathering the daily defeat, and setting himself to work thereafter; now he was lost in an unmapped territory of expectancy. On any day, at any time, someone might be setting his manuscript in type or, tragically, contacting the putative author with congratulations, only to discover the work's misattribution and yank it out of type. Had he been too hasty? Should he have risked getting a

P.O. box to use as a return address? Or varied his procedure, addressing some submissions to the journals' editors, rather than using that all-purpose, imperious "you guys"? He stood at his bank of tall windows, eyeing the cloud formations passing over the close-knit industrial rooflines. Was there a future for him, as had once seemed certain? And would this latest attempt to secure that future avail him anything? Or would success itself be a form of retribution, leaving him even more bereft as he saw his gifts ascribed to others?

This last question gnawed at Dickie. Within a day or so of sending off his fifth manuscript, he panicked at the thought that he might never, ever be able to prove his authorship once the pieces came out in print. As a hedge against that anguish, he rushed out the third morning, stories and poems clutched to his chest, and sprinted four sunlit blocks to a notary public, where he had numerous pages imprinted with the day and time, his signature and hers. "Guarding your rights?" she asked cannily enough, flashing him a smile. "Yes," he answered, sorrowful at being unable to confide in her. He had put himself on the wrong side of the social fabric. Even the simple act of claiming his intellectual property was of ambiguous merit.

Walking home along the feebly self-gentrifying blocks of storefronts, Dickie riffled smugly through his newly embossed pages. Here was proof positive. With a deep inhalation of the autumn air, he lifted his formerly harried eyes to the changing colors of the spindly trees planted at regular intervals along the sidewalk. Funny how even these striplings knew their purpose, proclaiming the ancestral red and orange. Within the tracery of scanty foliage were swatches of blue: a rich, stained-glass effect. But Dickie got a grip on himself; no one could just stand there gazing skyward through the branches of a sapling, however piercing the sight. One must stride forward, snatching refreshment tree by tree, coming ever closer to the dark maw of an old, converted factory building where one's supposed refuge lay in wait.

The restoration of his spirit proved short-lived. Reentering his home, with its relentless erasure of his prospects, Dickie tasted the ineluctability of disappointment. Dropping his newly authenticated pages onto desktop clutter and heading for the bathroom, he realized that he could never stake a claim to the published pieces once they came out. Sure, there were bold, fun-loving guys who could get away with it, seize their fifteen minutes of infamy and vault into the stratosphere, sharing a good laugh with a general public happy to see the literati scammed. But Dickie wasn't personable enough for the role, as his glance in the mirror confirmed. Ordinary viewers would sneer at his sallow cheeks and hollow eyes—the face of a cheat—while the duped editors and misappropriated authors would band together to pillory him. "Yes," the editors would say with an air of scrupulous word-selection, "he has a bit of talent, but, frankly, we were disappointed in the work, and we published it in hopes of getting more of Ms. Pease's better writing later on. We apologize for having lost faith in her consistent superiority."

Indeed, the harshest blow, coincident with Dickie's flushing of the toilet, was this belated realization that the publication of his writing could signify nothing but an editor's indulgence of a literary lion. Ah, how short-sighted he had been; he should have chosen less established authors. Although, come to think of it, those authors couldn't plausibly have submitted their work in that casual style, sans return address. The experiment had been ill designed because essentially impossible.

Dickie stood once more at his usual post by the window, watching a police car and an ambulance scream their way through clotted traffic. Someone was hurting... All right, then: he snapped out of self-pity. The die was cast. What would be would be, however meaninglessly. He turned, a hollow man, to stare at his computer, aware that there would be no text forthcoming until the jury returned. He had precipitated an unforeseen sabbatical.

As the sirens ebbed, Dickie's indomitable life-force resurged. Since the boss at his day job—actually, an episodic evening job—was begging him for a “commitment,” Dickie's bartending life could now expand unimpeded. No more cat-and-mouse about next week's shift, no holding out just in case he found himself in the throes of inspiration. McShane's was as good a dock as any for a man awaiting a verdict. He could continue to rationalize his evenings there as a source of “material,” despite having found that drunken revelations tended toward the formulaic. He would apply himself to closer observation of his surroundings, and maybe a Carver-esque cunning would suffuse his future writing.

So Dickie threw himself into a new routine: afternoons in the public library to scan the journals; evenings at the bar. Of course, the first six months of this regime could only be dress rehearsal: he knew there was no chance that one of his pieces would pop up so soon in one of the quarterlies. Nevertheless, he took the crosstown bus every day to look at *Mississippi Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Antioch Review*, *Glimmer Train*, and *Kenyon Review*. In addition to assuaging his suspense, this activity had the side benefit of acquainting him with the latest output of his fellow writers. Dickie spent many a peaceful hour savoring the pedestrian diction and syntax of the published and judging himself a worthy contestant in the world of contemporary letters. After all, he wielded the English language far more gracefully than some of these stolid, meat-and-potatoes scribblers. Head swimming with inchoate sensations of his own merit, Dickie generally chose to walk the twenty blocks home, enjoying his anonymous movement past legions of his future readers, gazing through the soon-denuded trees. Just so must Joyce have stridden through Dublin, James through Washington Square.

His euphoria often carried over into the hours at McShane's. He'd fill the beer steins with redoubled grace, raising them from beneath the spigot with a flourish, foam just cresting to the perfect height. He'd charm even the shyest female customer with a welcoming nod that told her not to feel out-of-place in this grudgingly refurbished saloon. The gleam of the seldom-ordered liqueurs on the

mirrored shelves behind the bar spoke to him personally: Midori Melon, Frangelico, Bristol Creme gave a holiday sparkle to his anticipation. In the midst of this good feeling, Dickie cultivated his perceptual powers, eavesdropping sedulously as he polished the bar, taking surreptitious notes on dialogue and clothes in the guise of doing inventory. He could feel his next pieces gestating within.

That is, until the January afternoon on which, sitting in the library and turning to the “Upcoming Issues” page of the new *Mississippi Review*, he learned that there was “a riveting new story from Grace Carla Pease” coming out in April. Could it be? He gasped, rocking back and forth in his chair, to the wincing dissatisfaction of an elderly man nearby.

“Excuse me!” Dickie exclaimed, “I just found out that a friend of mine may be getting published for the first time!”

The man gave a pinched nod and reapplied himself to his newspaper.

Dickie looked avidly around for someone else to tell. There was no obvious candidate. Moreover, there was nothing actually to tell; he couldn’t assume that the Pease story was his own. He leapt up and rushed out of the library, legs devouring the blocks home. There must be some way to find out. He would call the journal, declare a scholarly interest in Ms. Pease’s work, and beg for information about the latest piece. —No, he mustn’t do any such thing! What if they asked Ms. Pease for her permission to divulge this information?

He must wait three months. Okay, then, he would simply throw himself back into routine, continue to feed the growing texts within him. Or so he fantasized, until he stood slinging brew at McShane’s that evening, unable to take a particle of interest in his surroundings.

For with that tantalizing hint from *Mississippi Review*, Dickie’s strange, erratic muse withdrew into a more implacable seclusion. None of the embryonic texts could hold his inner eye, now that an extant one hung in such precarious balance. It was as if the mother of an Olympic competitor were asked to concentrate solely on the ultrasound of her next fetus. His mind recoiled from the task of new creation, fastened itself lovingly on the perfections of his completed work.

Externally, Dickie had metamorphosed into the classically bored, dogged bartender, a jaded observer of others’ illusory contentment. He saw his slightly cadaverous face, with its shock of lusterless black hair, moving back and forth in the mirror between the liqueur bottles, and he wondered at its impassivity. Internally, he was in a state of quivering unrest. He swung on a pendulum between excitement and dread, unable to make use of the actual moments ticking by. Desperate, he pointed out to himself that the real G.C. Pease was not letting herself go slack at the writerly reins. Regardless of who had written the piece now being set in proofs at *Mississippi Review*, one thing was certain: new characters, plots, and turns of phrase were populating Ms. Pease’s fertile brain. Her mental ovaries budded with fresh stock. Polishing a glass, Dickie glanced over the bar in her figurative direction with the woebegone eyes of a worthless adorer.

“You okay?” murmured an early-thirtysomething woman in a grey business suit, to whom he’d passed a whiskey sour some minutes earlier.

“What?” he grunted, too gruff even in his own ears.

“I’m sorry,” she said meekly; “you looked worried or something.”

Dickie collected himself. It was neither fair nor wise to antagonize this customer, one of the upscale happy-hour types. He smacked a palm to his temple and forcibly lit up his face in a genial smile. “Sorry, I get like that sometimes. You know, just...working on a story.”

He’d said too much in his effort to atone. She was smiling back. “You write?” she offered: a timorous attempt at intimacy.

He dimmed his features by careful degrees. “Yeah, well, I try. Just off and on. Anyway, sorry about *losing it* for minute.” A customer was signalling further down. ““Scuse me,” he said, beating his retreat.

After filling a few steins and adding several tabs, Dickie returned to the woman’s end of the bar and found her gone, six dollars tucked under the empty whiskey-sour glass. His relief was tainted by a vague guilt. But at least she’d finished her drink, had had her money’s worth. And what did he owe her, anyway, besides a well-mixed sour? It wasn’t as if she looked desperate—in which case, still, what would he have owed her?

She was roughly his age, with that slight pall of urban-single loneliness that sustains the sad tradition of happy-hour. She’d been coming in a couple of times a week for three, four months. Never ordered more than one, always a cocktail. Left at dinnertime, trim and steady with her briefcase in hand.

Dickie was pleased to find himself capable of these observations, of any mental wandering. He forced himself to consider the woman further: was she attractive? Aside from the clichéd cut of the suit, which made her calves look prudish, she was all right, he decided, pleasant enough but nothing to write home about—or write *at* home about, he needled himself. She was clearly an assistant-vice-president-for-something with a yen to escape her own abjection by humoring a bartender’s delusions of grandeur. A bartender waiting to read G.C. Pease’s latest, *riveting* story. Dickie had already lost the thread of speculation and plunged back into the pitched, vibratory twanging of his inner life.

In late February, *Kenyon Review* announced that its next issue would contain, among other “exciting” offerings, a story by Trip Stiles. This time, Dickie knew better than to rock back and forth upon his tailbone. He hunched forward, stifling his gasp in cupped palms.

There was no reasonable doubt. Either the one or the other (he would not say both) was his. Unless, of course, he was consigned to some unique torment, some infernal strategy beyond Dantesque imaginings... But even solipsism has its limits. In the sphere of human understanding, it was inconceivable that both G.C. Pease and Trip Stiles had submitted stories simultaneously to the very journals he had imagined for them.

In mid-March, the *Ploughshares* website mentioned Richard Stimsy as among its upcoming contributors. Dickie did not allow himself to turn a hair. It was eminently reasonable that Stimsy should have submitted something on his own behalf. This was the false lead, the sacrificial offering that would preserve the miraculous acceptance of his two stories. Time for the pretender to step gracefully aside, making obeisance to the anointed poet. He had a sudden, hilarious insight: *Will the real Dick please stand up?*

And then it was April, and the world went grim with income-tax preparation, mirroring Dickie's mounting tension. He found his own 1040 a welcome diversion as he struggled to figure out how much tip money to declare. He had no idea what he'd earned last year, beyond the sorry total on the W-2; cash had piddled itself out of his wallet while the rent ate up the monthly check from the bar and took an equal bite from the dregs of his grandfather's legacy. How much did he typically shove into his pocket over an eight-hour shift? The suits were pretty generous, especially at dinnertime when they couldn't be bothered waiting for change; the young beers were stingier, unless on a date. So he tallied his best guess, subtracted twenty percent, and made his manful declaration, haunted all the while by the upcoming deadline: not April 15 but the unknown day on which he would walk into the library and make his discovery, for good or ill.

When that day arrived, the long vigil collapsed to nothing. He had only just sent the story in, and now here he sat in the library, *Mississippi Review* held like a hot steering wheel in his reluctant fingers. For some minutes he couldn't open it; then a powerful anger supervened, a sneering certainty of disappointment, which caused his gut to clench, his hands to pluck open the offending journal. At first, the table of contents eluded him. And then, there it was: "Exculpation" by Grace Carla Pease.

The hairs rose on the back of Dickie's neck. A face peered abruptly from behind the magazine rack, and he realized he was moaning. He clamped the sound off, clutched the journal to his chest, and made for the farthest aisle of the fiction section. Here, standing, he scrabbled at the pages of the journal—forward, back—until he hit the opening paragraph. And savored the well-remembered words.

Now Dickie fell to reading like a bona fide author. What had they changed? Where had they presumed to delete or modify? He read like a snorting bull, eager to charge and gore those small, presumptuous, evasive entities who'd laid their mark on him. But there was nothing, nothing at all, revised. These were his words, set whole on the page, words he'd recited internally night after night while tending bar. Oh, and here was a spot where he ought to have edited out a minor redundancy—it snagged him, as never before—but this, too, they had left intact. Rounding the turn of the final page, he saw that they'd trusted every word—kept all, all of it, untouched!

At McShane's that evening, after tying the small, obligatory apron round his waist, Dickie took the uncharacteristic step of "tying one on" in another sense. He pulled out some rotgut whiskey (the stuff he used in mixed drinks) from below the bar and poured himself a double. *Cheers*, his glance said to itself in the mirror, over the carnival skyline of schnapps bottles. He looked less gaunt, suddenly, less constricted. When the first weary junior-exec of the evening sidled up for a beer, Dickie produced one "on the house" and received a crinkling smile of fellowship. Shortly, he had a whole lineup at the bar drinking gratis (at no loss to McShane's, he assured himself, vowing to take it out of tips). But around five-thirty, as a certain suit-clad woman was entering the bar, reason kicked in, advising him to desist from his largesse.

There were no empty stools, so she leaned between two TV-watching barflies to give her order. "A daiquiri, please," she told Dickie in her mild voice and stepped back to wait, briefcase tucked possessively—it seemed to him, pathetically—against her ribs.

"Sure," he said. "Whyn'tcha take a table, and I'll bring it out to you." With a pleased nod she complied, and sat down at a table near the CD jukebox in back.

He mixed her drink too large and magnanimously brought not only the cocktail but the tumbler of residual daiquiri to her table. "Your cup runneth over," he quipped.

She smiled ruefully. "Well, I can use it."

"Tough day?" He felt a warmth rising through his shoulders and neck.

"Kind of," she said. "But *you* look on top of the world."

"Yeah, well. It's been...an unusual day," he said, hearing the slur of excitement in his own voice.

"Oh?" It sounded offhand; she was keeping up her guard.

"Look," he said impulsively, his legs now warmly slack and fighting the urge to take a seat, "I've been wanting to apologize for my attitude that other time. I was having a bad writing day. You know?"

"Yeah," she said. "I didn't mean to get personal either. I just, I've always wanted to write; I really respect it."

He heard them calling for him at the bar. "Look, uh," he offered, "I have to get back, but when a seat opens up over there, I could hold it for you...?"

"Sure," she said on a casual note.

Within ten minutes he'd installed her at the deep end of the bar and confided to her that he'd just published his first story.

Her congratulations rang sincere. With a mischievous gesture at their surroundings, she insisted on buying him a drink. He demurred, then compromised by pouring some daiquiri from the tumbler into an extra glass.

"Cheers!" she saluted, and they clinked and drank before he turned to fill more orders. He bantered easily with the batch of freeloaders who were trying for an on-the-house refill. "Are you kidding?" he mocked, "that was a loss leader. You

think I want this place to fold?” Words poured easily through his lips, and he felt her watching him.

When he returned, she was sitting in front of an empty cocktail glass. Unasked, he mixed her a new drink with some to spare. She glowed a silent thanks, sipped, and inquired where his piece was coming out. Headily, he blurted out the name. *Mississippi Review*. Her eyes and mouth expanded with respect.

She actually knew the journal, had had a gift subscription one year. “Someone I knew in college put my name down for the complimentary subscription when he entered one of their contests,” she said drolly, swiping at her mouth with the back of her hand. “Didn’t have *your* luck, though—just got the old S-A-S-E for his trouble!” She dissolved into outright laughter.

Dickie spluttered, inarticulate with bittersweet empathy. It was an old boyfriend, probably, his literary failure once soothed away by her; then assimilated into a general sense of his inadequacy; now comically set off by her improbable discovery of a literary bartender. He chortled, painfully.

“When’s it coming out?” she wanted to know.

A warning sounded in his head, but he was blissfully adrift in other feelings. He wished to be candid with this bright-eyed stranger who understood his achievement. With exaggerated secrecy, he leaned across the bar.

“It’s out,” he whispered and stood back up, slightly wobbly, feeling the grin spread across his face.

“No kidding!” she answered, a bit mushily. “I must get myself a copy.”

The warning sounded again, but he couldn’t make out its directionality. He had a tangentially funny thought. “Y’know, I’d offer you one of my complimentary copies, only I’m not getting any!”

“Aww. That’s no way to treat an author,” she protested gaily.

“See...” He stalled, then saw her gazing open-mindedly over the rim of her glass and heroically finished his sentence. “They don’t know that I’m the author!”

She threw him a flirtatious inquiry from under puzzled brows. Terrified, he skittered away to fill some more orders. When he got back, she was sitting before her empty glass, arms folded on the bar, wearing a stuporous no-nonsense expression. “They don’t know that you’re the author,” she repeated.

While down the bar, he’d had a frantic, rudimentary thought. “I used a pseudonym,” he said.

“Okay,” she drawled, “then let your pseudonym give me a copy.”

This hit his funny bone. “Oh,” he exclaimed mock-tragically, “but my pseudonym doesn’t know you.”

“I’m Sarah,” she told him, reaching out to shake his hand, “Sarah Fielding.”

“Aha!” he pounced, subliminally noting the slenderness of the bones within his grasp. “See? You’re using somebody else’s published name, too. Fielding—Henry Fielding! Or...wait...was it Laurence? Scratch that, I think it’s Laurence. No, that’s Sterne.” By now she’d withdrawn her hand. “Though who the hell

cares,” he confided, “nobody reads that stuff any more.” She looked uncomfortable. “Sorry,” he blurted, “I’m over the top. Dickie. Dickie Dirkheim.”

It sank in slowly. “Oh. Well, Dickie,” she said blearily at last, “I better get a move on. Congratulations, again...I think. What’s my total?”

“Oh no, it’s on the house,” he blurted, and a neighboring lout, overhearing, gave an insinuating hoot. She smiled her thanks, but in a careful way, and Dickie felt an urgent need to penetrate the haze of miscommunication. “Look,” he said, raising an index finger to make his point, “I want to tell you something. Let me walk you to the door.” Keeping the finger aloft to arrest her departure, he came around from behind the bar.

As they reached the door, she repeated gently, “I have to get going.”

“Look,” he pleaded, “I know I got a little weird there. It’s been a strange day. I’ve been totally...*transmogrified*.” —How had he let such a horrid, pretentious word escape him? It was a death blow, surely. But no: she seemed newly interested in what he had to say. “Look, this thing came out today, this issue of *Mississippi Review*, and my story was in it. But I hadn’t known ahead of time because I didn’t submit it under my own name. I sent it under somebody else’s. Somebody famous.”

She was searching his face. “Why?” she asked on an alcohol-scented gust.

“Well,” he said, with a throb of pride, “because I’m like that guy you used to know. I’m the S-A-S-E king. But I knew the piece was good, so I did a little controlled experiment.”

She took a moment to digest this. “Wow...” she said uncertainly.

“You probably think I’m delusional or something,” he pursued, “but I have the notarized manuscript to prove it.”

“*Really*. So you’re going to tell the journal?”

“I might,” he improvised, “but not yet. I’m still waiting on some other pieces out there.”

Her eyes gleamed conspiratorially. “Under the pseudonym?”

“Various ones,” he said cockily.

“Whoa, you’re doing a real piece of social research!” she exclaimed. “Where’d you send them?”

The barflies were getting restless. “Look,” he said, “can you come back tomorrow, and I’ll fill you in?”

“Bring the manuscript?” she countered.

“Absolutely.”

So began the next phase of Dickie’s vigil. On Friday evening, Sarah Fielding read “Exculpation” at the far table by the jukebox, refusing all but a glass of water from the author, who watched her obliquely as he meted out Heinekens and Buds. Afterward, she wandered dazedly over to the bar, her somnambulation proof of the power of this story, even in the “Dickie Dirkheim” version. She drank her whiskey sour introspectively and left, promising to be back next week and asking

to read more. The following Monday, she pronounced “Sleight of Mind” equally a shoo-in. *Kenyon Review* obligingly brought it out by Trip Stiles a fortnight later. Again, this was an occasion for immoderate celebration on their parts, during which each ascertained that the other was “unattached.” Sarah, it developed, had been on her own for a year and a half, Dickie for substantially longer. (Even at his most woozily confidential, he withheld mention of having been celibate since his two lackluster trysts just out of college.)

On her next visit, Sarah read the poems Dickie had sent to *Ploughshares* and hazarded a guess, despite her minimal knowledge of contemporary poetry, that the “real Dick” in the next issue would be Dirkheim. By this point, Dickie was flush with news that *Glimmer Train* had a “fascinating” story by Carl Caxton in the works, and Sarah’s whoop had the perfect cackling, devious undertone. They agreed that the poems he’d sent to *Antioch* must still be languishing on the slushpile.

Dickie could see, of course, where things were tending; even a man without his particular skill at plot design would have recognized the beckoning opportunity. But his foresight stymied him: like a chessmaster, Dickie saw five moves ahead and knew that after a finite period of dating he would be obliged to bring Sarah up to see the loft. And therein lay a double danger. Even if physical compatibility were assured, would his Pease-Stiles-Caxton persona be able to trump the pathos of that loser splayed across his walls?

But having stepped onto a figurative “up” escalator, he and Sarah were borne toward the inevitable. Summer found them venturing outside the bar and off the topic of his literary coups. Sarah’s life as “vice president for research” in the “outcomes-assessment” department of a midtown advertising agency offered a prism through which to view the pitfalls of the modern world. With her love for the biting social realism of Victorian and early-twentieth-century novels, she’d once seemed destined for anything but the promotion of commercialism. She and Dickie, making their own personal outcomes-assessments, found themselves locked in identical struggles with pragmatism and grinding anonymity.

And this recognition brought them back to the unfathomable ironies of Dickie’s achievement. With the publication of the “Stimsky” poems, Sarah’s long-suppressed activism began to reassert itself on his behalf. She thought maybe Dickie ought to claim his intellectual property, whatever the consequences. When the “Caxton” story came out, she began begging him to see a lawyer. After all, reclamation of his authorship was indispensable to capturing the attention of an agent, which was itself essential to the publication of his novel. For although he’d been withholding *Frigga’s Folly*, for lack of external validation, she already had an inkling of its premise and great faith in its appeal to an academic readership.

Dickie, under siege, realized that they had reached a watershed. If what she wanted in him was some literary arm-candy, he had to know. So on a hot July night he invited her to his loft.

Sarah was charmed by the unapologetic factory facade and steel-cage elevator. It seemed as if the building were pleasantly fulfilling her clichéd expectations of him. Then they were at his door; he turned his keys with a sinking heart, reached in to switch on the tracklights, and ushered her into his domain.

Sarah wandered slowly about his personal museum with her hands clasped together beneath her chin. Clearly oblivious to any implications, she propped a knee on his bed to read the Random House pronouncement thoroughly. She stood a minute, seemingly stunned, before the bathroom door. Dickie crumpled into his reading chair beside the windows while she began a second circuit. When he allowed himself to look up again, she was standing three feet from him, arms crossed, head tilted, wearing an uninterpretable smile. Was it pity or admiration that he saw there?

“It’s a crime,” she said quietly. “It’s the most outrageous, amazing crime.”

From nowhere that he’d known of, tears sprang to his eyes. She saw him, an author, sitting in his chair.

Now she had perched herself on the arm, ending their months-long physical diffidence. Her palms pressed against his cheeks and temples. “Don’t you see?” she asked with that same uncanny smile. “You’ve been robbed. You only did what you had to do. And now you can take back what’s yours.” He reached up trembling hands to devour her.

One inseparable week later, they sat together in the midtown office of a copyright attorney, describing their circumstances. Sarah took the lead, and Dickie had only to relax in his burgundy leather chair while she articulated a brilliant case for him. The middle-aged, tailored lawyer across the gleaming mahogany desk was getting a free ride, taking notes at \$350 an hour. In closing, Sarah flourished the trump card: *Antioch Review’s* call for the identity of an author whose two excellent poems had apparently been filed with the wrong cover letter.

When she’d finished, the lawyer asked a clarifying question or two about the sequence of events. Then he slumped down in his armchair, propping his chin against his bridged fingers and staring abstractedly at the notepad. When he looked up half a minute later, he wore a dubious, if intrigued, expression.

“This is an usual case, as I’m sure you know,” he told them in his smooth baritone. “I’m a copyright lawyer, which means I help authors protect their intellectual property from unauthorized use. But you’ve already ceded your property to others, and now you want to get it back. The problem is, your ceding of that property was not mutually consensual. In fact, it’s possible that your attribution of your texts to others constituted a form of libel.” As Sarah stiffened to object, he added evenly, “I’m not implying that your work is substandard when I call it a form of libel. I’m simply saying that if the author in question were to view your work as a deliberate misrepresentation of his own style, with a potentially damaging effect on his literary reputation, you would find yourself

smack on the defensive. Even if you argued that your public confession eliminated the libelous effect, a case could be made that your original act was malicious and your public retraction an embarrassment to the established author.

“Now, I don’t think you’d be liable to criminal prosecution”—at this, Sarah and Dickie exchanged a horrified glance—“but certainly you’d be facing some potential civil suits. I’m particularly struck by the number of possible plaintiffs here: we have to consider not only the authors themselves but the journal publishers. So even if one or another party were sympathetic, it’s hard to imagine that they would all be. In fact, I’d say that the publishers might very well claim injury to their reputations, since you will have exposed them to public scorn. Especially if the scorn is demonstrably well-earned, they may be able to sustain their case.

“And by the way, I’d steer a wide berth around that *Antioch Review* business, if I were you. It’s faintly possible they’ve heard something and are setting a trap. I’m only speculating, now, but it occurs to me that your ‘Sleight of Mind’ piece could have been a red flag. It’s pure hearsay, but there’ve been copyright questions plaguing Stiles before. A couple of people have accused him of appropriating stuff, so your free gift of a story may have scared him.”

Sarah had to go straight to work, and they parted down in the lobby of the lawyer’s building with a last silent, tortured glance. It had been \$350 well spent, but Dickie was horribly ashamed now and didn’t know if he could face her again, or if she would care to see him anyway. He bumbled aimlessly from block to block, the city and its vast, manipulated readership clinging to his ankles like dross. How could he escape from this thing that he’d become, this laughingstock in his own and Sarah’s eyes, this sidelined, generic failure in the eyes of the world? Fleeing the marble precincts of financial and legal wizardry, he ended up in the diamond district, where black-clad merchants huddled in rabbit warrens, tweezering their stones. These were men like him, forced into daily prostitution while their hearts yearned endlessly after a text. But in their proud, reserved glances he read a difference: what these men did behind their storefronts, he intuited, had little impact on their sense of personal worth. *Their* text’s authorship was indisputable; they cleaved to a word that ennobled rather than humiliated them.

Dickie emerged from the diamonds onto an avenue rife with every other imaginable luxury. None of it mattered; the boutiques had nothing with which to shame him. Material goods had never been his passion—though perhaps they should have been. Those, at least, a man could amass, by whatever means. No, Dickie had permitted himself one worldly appetite, one worldly goal, and had fulfilled and lost it simultaneously. And had let another human being bear witness to that moment, so that he could never, ever transcend it.

The fates had at least granted Dickie the night off from McShane's. He was lying on his bed in the dark, listening to Julian Bream, when she buzzed from downstairs. Without turning on the lights, he admitted her mutely to the loft and crept off to lie down again. On the bed, her body fastened to the length of his, she whispered healing words—words that sealed her contract with him and his genius, encompassing the years in which he was to be a free-lance “technical writer” for her firm, in which she was to read and reread *Frigga's Folly*, in which they were to raise a delicate-featured son who would himself aspire to write.

“Statute of limitations,” she whispered.