

Heaven's Door

By Kathy Flann

The Meteorite Man did not need this shit. "For every hour that the grass grows over my rock and *rusts* it..." he said to his assistant Hankey, pausing to decide on just the right empty threat, "I'm going to cut off a lock of your hairdo while you're asleep."

He saw Hankey's surfer-dude blond head turn away from the computer screen at a barely perceptible velocity. Hankey blinked at him, then pulled out one of his ear buds. "Do you want to have a *third* coronary?" Hankey drawled. "Chill."

Hankey had just played for the tenth time the grainy, three-second footage of the meteorite streaking across the June sky. Now, he clicked the play button again, glancing at the Meteorite Man as if daring him to say something about it.

The Meteorite Man's fingers tingled like he might actually do something—he didn't know what—to Hankey's hair. He stuffed his hands in his pockets and sighed. "You can't flip the coronary card every time you're being a dipshit, Junior."

"Zip it, old man."

The Meteorite Man muttered and paced for another minute, and then sidled up behind Hankey's chair, something he knew Hankey didn't like. Hankey hunched forward and lifted his shoulders, as if the Meteorite Man might reach around and twist his nipple. Hankey's fear wasn't unfounded—the Meteorite Man had done this a few times. But now he yanked Hankey's headphone cord out of the computer. Suddenly there was volume.

"There! Turn that up," said the Meteorite Man. "That's the sonic boom. We're within twenty miles of the impact site. I'd put money on it." He clapped his hands and laughed to himself.

"I already know that," muttered Hankey, plugging the headphones back in, but pulling out the ear buds and letting them hang around his neck. "This is exactly why I have to use these. You can't mind your own b-i-d-n-e-s-s." Hankey occasionally spelled out words while bobbing his head like a sassy afternoon talk show host.

Ever since the doctors had implanted that stent, they'd warned the Meteorite Man to retire; he'd told them where they could shove it. But he did agree to hire an assistant and to eat more salads—he'd even made good on the assistant part, which seemed like enough compromise for a lifetime.

"That's good, right? About the sonic boom?" said a voice—it was the amateur astrophotographer, who stood near the sliding glass door on the other side of the room, as if he might slip behind those musty drapes. The Meteorite Man had almost forgotten about him, even though he and Hankey were in the man's apartment. God, this apartment. A divorced man's special—rental unit with walls the color of instant oatmeal. The only decoration was a poster of the Milky Way Galaxy thumb-tacked over a couch that looked like it came from a Motel 6 auction.

"Where are we again?" whispered the Meteorite Man.

"Brilliant," Hankey said in unison with the man across the room, their voices in stereo.

"What—now you're *both* getting fresh with me?"

"No," sighed Hankey. "That's the name of the town. We're in Brilliant."

The Meteorite Man should not have forgotten the name of the goddamn town, even if it was their third or fourth stop through identical backwaters—large white town hall building, brick fire station, four or

five churches with imposing steeples, a lap-dancing club called The Palomino or Valentino's or Thumbelina's. This was the first meteorite fall in Virginia since 1923.

He pulled his hands out of his shorts pockets and then wasn't sure what to do with them. They were built for holding cigarettes and whisky. He smiled awkwardly at the man across the room. This guy probably lived out here in bumfuck and commuted over an hour to DC, just so he could see the sky better.

These amateurs—or "amateurites," as the Meteorite Man like to call them—were all gung ho know-it-alls until something useful actually happened. Then they became stuttering idiots. Still, the man had potentially earned the Meteorite Man his own body weight in gold—something like \$800 a gram. The Meteorite Man studied him, really studied him. The guy wasn't bad looking—tall, a full head of salt and pepper hair, chiseled jaw. Three different bicycles hung upside down in the entryway. And he had one honking big-ass telescope on the balcony. Celestron Edge 1400HD. Probably around \$10,000. The Meteorite Man experienced a strange little itch that was something like respect.

"So, Chad," the Meteorite Man said, moving across the room, having to reach up to put his arm around those broad shoulders. He maneuvered the man toward the balcony outside the open glass door. "An astrophotographer, huh? And a damn good one. I can see you know your stuff."

"Well," said the amateurite, gesturing to the telescope, "there really wasn't any skill involved. I programmed her to take five three-minute exposures of Andromeda, and I decided at the last minute to use the video option, too. Then I sat in there and watched Letterman. I was totally bummed when I saw those streaky images. I didn't even know it was a meteorite. If it hadn't been for Mister... Mister—Alisso, I think his name was—seeing the photo on my blog—"

"Whoa, whoa. Alisso? Alisso saw these?"

The amateurite nodded. "One of them."

The Meteorite Man looked at Hankey, whose head turned considerably faster this time. Hankey's wide brown eyes—the ones women wrote about in fan letters—searched the Meteorite Man's face, panic in them as if he were a spooked horse. Then Hankey threw his hands in the air and mouthed the words *Jesus fuck me!*

The Meteorite Man motioned calmly toward the floor with his palms, like a preacher easing the congregation into the seats—as if to say *Shhh. I got this.*

"Okay, Chad," said the Meteorite Man, working to keep his voice even. "When was this?"

"You mean when did he comment on my blog or when did he come by?"

"He *came by?*"

"Yeah. About an hour ago."

Out of the corner of his eye, the Meteorite Man saw Hankey drop his head back in response to this news and study the ceiling, but the boy didn't say anything or let out a noisy sigh. He was learning. It was easier to undo a person's allegiance to the competition if you downplayed the stakes.

"And did you show him this video, as well as the photos?" the Meteorite Man continued. He licked a finger and pretended to be interested in a smudge of dirt on his forearm.

"I tried to, but I could hardly get a word in edgewise," said the amateurite, shrugging. The Meteorite Man studied the guy's face. A word in edgewise? This geek hadn't said boo since they'd arrived, just shown them to the computer and retreated to the door like a dumb, happy dog waiting to be walked. "Mr. Alisso looked at the first photo with his 10x Loupe," Chad continued, "and then he took off."

"Ha!" the Meteorite Man clapped his hands. "Classic Alisso!" His rival Alisso's impatience coupled with Chad's reticence had probably saved the hunt, spared the Meteorite Man from making a wasted trip all the way from Arkansas with his goddamn ever-expanding entourage. He patted the amateurite on the back. "It's all good, Chad. It's all good."

Hankey exhaled, shooting the Meteorite Man a relieved look. Then he turned back to the desk, scribbling his calculations in his notepad. The Meteorite Man fought the urge to snatch the pencil out of Hankey's hand. He knew he could calculate faster than anyone, but he didn't allow himself to do the map and compass work anymore, not since he'd had those heart attacks on two different occasions just like this one — when he'd been figuring a zero-degree line between a camera and a strewn field. He'd chosen Hankey—who was good—who'd been breathing down the Meteorite Man's neck every time he went on a hunt in Texas. But who was also only twenty-six years old. Look at him there in those baggy shorts and the muscle shirt and barely able to grow that scraggly goatee beard. A kid. The Meteorite Man did have to admit, though, that he had earned more disposable income since Hankey had been featured on the show. And the chicks. Man, the chicks! Somehow, the Meteorite Man's sex appeal multiplied exponentially with the addition of a sidekick. It made him wish he still cared about getting laid by twenty-something groupies. The universe did have a sense of humor.

That reminded him—goddamn Lenny out in the hallway. He'd be pissed, yet again, that the Meteorite Man had not let them start filming. It was Lenny's own stupid fault for bringing a new camera man. How could the Meteorite Man be sure the guy wasn't Alisso's mole? Alisso wasn't just liberal with bribes; he wasn't just charming. When charm didn't work, he could be ruthless; he had a way of getting people into his pocket one way or the other.

The Meteorite Man said, "Listen, Chad, no one else has been here, right? Not Schaffer? Or Donnelly?"

Chad shook his head.

"Okay, good. I'll tell you what. You pretend the rest of those guys—especially Alisso—they don't exist. These pictures, and this video—they belong to the Meteorite Man now. You do that for me, and you can come with us tonight on the hunt."

He thought about promising Chad a cut of the profits or a role on this episode of the show, but one thing the Meteorite Man had learned over the years was that amateurites didn't care much about money or even fame. They were mostly would-be astronauts whose asthma or overbearing mothers had dashed their dreams of space travel. Which suited the Meteorite Man fine.

There was no way he was letting Chad Barkley out of his sight—it would be like the frigging witness protection program—or, no, the Alisso Protection Program. That unscrupulous fuck was so out of control, it was a wonder he hadn't taken to murdering the Chad Barkleys of the world just to cover his tracks. The Meteorite Man had once untied a retired carnival worker and his wife who he'd found in a closet of their own home after one of Alisso's visits. He'd found a note taped to the man's chest: *Too slow, Chester*. The Meteorite Man's name was not *Chester*, but that's the sort of character Alisso was—someone who sought to demean you by calling you *Chester* or *Skippy* or *Chucky*.

The Meteorite Man would never understand why his own ex-wife, Marianne, had fallen for Alisso. It shouldn't have mattered that the three of them went way back. She could have done so much better. She had been single for two years after their divorce and was so pretty—with wavy dark brown hair, a tiny waist, and feet you wanted to put in your mouth—who wouldn't have wanted her? Alisso had been with Marianne for three years now. The Meteorite Man pictured her kissing Alisso's thin, chapped lips and shuddered. It must be about power. Alisso made women think that he had it. It was sleight of hand, his Houdini-like ability to flim-flam so many, that had gotten him this far.

"All right," said Hankey, standing up from Chad's computer desk. "Let's go to the water treatment plant."

"You sure?" said the Meteorite Man. Hankey had screwed up their last gig by putting the decimal point in the wrong place when he triangulated the possible impact zone. They had ended up at a Jack in the Box outside Houston while Alisso got the prize, forty miles away in El Cielo del Campo. It wasn't bad enough that half his money went to Marianne, and therefore by default to Alisso (the wise bastard was a live-in boyfriend, not Marianne's second husband). But now, now Alisso also had one of the rare pieces of lunar rock from this decade, something which rightfully should have belonged to the Meteorite Man, which would have belonged to him, no question, ten years earlier. Before he needed goddamn Hankey, who would have been *sixteen* at the time.

"Yes," said Hankey, hands raised defensively. "I'm sure. I'm fucking positive."

If that sonic boom happened when the amateurite's video suggested it did—Shazam! They were in the less-than-twenty-four-hour money. Not only that, but witnessed falls increased the value of meteorites exponentially. This one had not only been seen by at least a hundred people, but had also been caught on numerous cameras, including the one at the water treatment plant. And the size of the thing! It would make El Cielo del Campo look like a rusted, lonesome pebble.

"Because this is a big one," said the Meteorite Man. "It could be *the* big one."

"Yeah, no shit," said Hankey. Then he seemed to grit his teeth and swallow a curse, which unsettled the Meteorite Man because Hankey didn't usually hold back.

"Fine, it's cool," said the Meteorite Man. "Keep your muscle shirt on."

Hankey gathered his equipment into his Billabong backpack. Billabong had become one of the show's sponsors since Hankey had gotten on camera, and now Lenny was always finding excuses to film right behind the backpack as they walked. It irked the Meteorite Man a little.

"At least I can *wear* a muscle shirt," Hankey said.

Ah, that was more like it. The Meteorite Man smiled the smile he knew Hankey hated, then he held—up to his forehead—three fingers in the shape of a *W*. "Whatever, Pretty Boy." He made a muscle and slapped it with his other hand. It might have been true that his diet was terrible—his favorite meal was the Bacon Cheddar Melt at Arby's—but he was still lean and wiry for a fifty-nine-year-old legend. "Like iron, kid."

Hankey rolled his eyes. "More like chondrite. And just as old."

"Come on, Barkley," said the Meteorite Man to Chad. "It's show time."

Out in the hall, Lenny and the crew walked backward, filming as the Meteorite Man summed up what they had found in the amateurite's apartment.

"Cut. Good, good," said Lenny. Then to the amateurite: "You can give us your video?"

"Sure, you bet," said Chad. He had the wondering eyes of a puppy taking his first steps on grass. Just how the Meteorite Man wanted him.

"Oh, man, Lenny." He turned to the camera man as they approached the elevator. "You smell like the fucking perfume counter at Bloomingdale's."

Hankey laughed out loud, then gave the Meteorite Man a fist bump. "I didn't want to say it."

"What?" Lenny looked hurt. "This is Lynxe. It's body wash."

"It's douche," said the Meteorite Man. "For douche bags."

All the guys in the crew cracked up, but not the Meteorite Man. He studied Lenny's face. Lenny with his art school glasses and sarcastic t-shirts. Jesus. These producers. Did they actually think TV was art?

What they did was as rigid and formulaic as an auto assembly line, which was where the Meteorite Man's father had worked. His father had dropped dead at the plant when he was two years younger than the Meteorite Man was now.

Out in the parking lot, the Meteorite Man studied the sky—a few cumulous clouds across the pinkening dusk, nothing to worry about yet, though rain was due from the south tomorrow morning. The winds that would bring it had already whipped up, and the Meteorite Man could feel the hair on his legs. "Hold still," he said to Hankey. He reached into the side pocket of the younger man's backpack to retrieve the detachable legs from his cargo pants, which he now zipped back onto the bottom of his shorts. While he had the backpack open, he pretended to fish his beta blocker from the bottle and then pretended to swallow it for the benefit of Hankey and Lenny, who harassed him daily to take his meds. The betas made him sluggish and surely he could skip one just this once. If they didn't find the meteorite before twenty-four hours went by, its value would plummet. And if it rained, and the thing rusted? "Gear up, everyone. It's going to be a long night." He stood up and surveyed the lot. Then he said to Lenny: "Keep that monstrosity of a van away from my car."

"We'll be invisible," said Lenny, which the Meteorite Man knew wasn't true.

"If Alisso spots us," the Meteorite Man continued, "I'm selling that camera on E-bay so I can make alimony."

Just six months ago, he had persuaded Lenny to stop driving that van that said *The Air and Space Channel* on the side of it. Still, a huge white conversion van was anything but inconspicuous. The Meteorite Man himself always used a rental, and always a different make and model each time.

Meteorite Man looked up and down the parking lot for cars that might be surveilling them. So far so good.

At the water treatment plant, Hankey sweet talked the foreman into letting them watch the closed circuit TV tapes from the night before. That was another thing Hankey did better—he played the dopey surfer dude to a tee, and he always pointed out the TV camera waiting outside. Turned out every schmo in the USA would risk his job and his kids' futures to have his face on the tube for five seconds. The Meteorite Man understood. He used to give two shits about being on TV, the attention it brought, the attention he *thought* he wanted. He liked the money; he liked the legitimacy; and he *loved* being able to lord it over Alisso. But as for possessing a face people recognized—was that really an accomplishment? Goddamn Colonel Sanders had that.

When they piled into the cramped booth to watch the tape, the Meteorite Man fought the urge to elbow Lenny, who leaned into him, pressed by the crew, the camera, and the boom. It was hard to breathe. Meteorite Man was sweating and regretted zipping those pant legs back on. The security guard pressed play, and then the Meteorite Man gasped. The footage was not black and white or grainy; it was as sharp and colorful and clear as the high definition television he had at home.

"Whoa!" said Hankey.

The crew echoed him: "Whoa!"

"Damn, that's good quality," someone said. "Who funds this crib, a drug lord?"

They had to watch a half an hour's worth of footage, waiting for that one second when the meteorite would streak across darkening sky on the screen. And they couldn't afford to blink. Fifteen minutes went by, and then another ten minutes that felt like an hour. The Meteorite Man kept wiping his face, but his hand was wet and it didn't do any good. He was probably addicted to those damned beta blockers.

"Oh my God! There it is," said the amateurite.

"We got it," said Hankey.

The Meteorite Man had been studying the moisture on his fingertips and missed the whole thing. When he looked up, the amateurite was still pointing at the screen, where there remained a greenish glow. "Let's see it again," he said.

The security guard hit the rewind button, and he played it again, this time in slow motion. The Meteorite Man opened his eyes wide and willed himself not to blink. But this was not the dingy gray flash he'd seen so many times before on closed circuit TVs all over Texas and Arkansas. Instead, a colorful fireball burst across the giant screen, breaking up as it fell, sparkling like a firework. The light illuminated the faces of the open-mouthed crew. "Damn," muttered Hankey. A trail remained for a full minute, sinuous and smoky against the purple twilight, a slight bend in it. In his whole career, the Meteorite Man had not come this close to witnessing a fall for himself. The only time he'd seen one with his own eyes had been the time that started it all, the time when he was twelve and he'd been standing outside the funeral home in Lutherville, Texas, his father's hometown.

"What are you doing out here, young man?" said his mother when she found him sitting on the back steps, chin in his hands.

"We don't know any of these people. How can we leave him here?"

She had shrugged. "This is where his family is buried."

"*We're* his family."

"They were his family longer." His father had been twenty years older than his mother, embarking on this second marriage at forty-three.

She kissed her hand and pressed it to his cheek before she got up and went back inside. It was the last time she'd made that particular gesture—certainly she never did it anymore after she married Larry, the shoe salesman, back in Arkansas and began to produce four more kids.

When he'd stood up to go back inside, he'd stuffed his hands in the pockets of his new stiff dress pants and he'd sighed and tilted his face toward the sky, and that was when he'd seen it. Like this footage on the screen—the sparkle across the purple dusk. He had almost forgotten how bright it had been, almost like it was alive.

"Did you get it?" said Lenny now.

"Yup," said Zane, the camera man.

"Perfect," said the Meteorite Man, wondering if anyone had noticed how pallid he must look. He'd suddenly gone from sweltering to shivering, just as he had shivered that night in his twelve-year-old body, as if the fiery sparkle in the sky were now tingling inside his kneecaps, his stomach, his fingertips. He brought his elbow to his face now and wiped it good, and then he tried to stand taller. Hankey sidled in close and showed him some numbers he had scribbled on his clipboard. They locked eyes. "Ten miles northeast," they both said. The Meteorite Man laughed and patted Hankey on the back. Outside the booth, he drew several deep breaths. "Every hunt could be your last," he muttered to himself, quoting something his doctor had said at a recent checkup.

It was then that the Meteorite Man glanced over and noticed the amateurite had tears in his eyes. *Oh Christ*. He patted Barkley on the back, too. "This is getting good, Chad. With any luck, you'll make history tonight."

"This is so cool," said Barkley, dabbing at his eyes with the *Meteorite Man* terrycloth wristband that someone from the crew had given him.

Lenny put his hand on the Meteorite Man's shoulder on the way out to the car and leaned in close. "This is why you have the highest ratings on the Air and Space Channel."

"This isn't about ratings," said the Meteorite Man. He shrugged off Lenny's hand.

By the time they'd driven ten miles to Smoky Ordinary, population 8500, it was 7:00 p.m. They had the advantage over Alisso because the TV crew gave them credibility as they slogged door-to-door. They weren't just a couple of creepy guys trying to gain access to the backyard. In fact, when he and the crew showed up, housewives squealed and said, "My hair looks a mess!"

By 9:00 p.m., they'd canvassed nearly half the town, or at least it felt like it. "Could we have miscalculated?" the Meteorite Man said to Hankey. His right knee hurt, as it sometimes did before a storm.

Hankey stopped walking and turned to face the Meteorite Man: "We did *not* miscalculate. It's here. We just have to be the ones stubborn enough to find it." Then he gasped with exasperation: "You're the one who taught me that, Dickhead!"

With that, Hankey marched off toward the next house. Damn it, he was right. The Meteorite Man had seen all the calculations for himself. What the hell was his problem?

Just then a woman in running clothes huffed past the Meteorite Man and grabbed Hankey's arm. The Meteorite Man recognized her from one of the first houses they'd visited a few hours ago—large Rottweiler, no husband in sight, tight juicy ass. "I just got off the phone with my friend Abilene. She lives over there." The blonde pointed to the next block, one they hadn't done yet. "I forgot until you left—she said something hit her roof last night. She thought maybe it had been a really aggressive squirrel throwing rocks from a tree or something."

The Meteorite Man and the amateurite took off running, Hankey and the hot blonde close behind. Count on Hankey to score every time. The kid was an asset.

"Wait!" Lenny called. "We can't go that fast!"

When they got to the house, the hot blonde's friend already stood there with the front door open, silhouetted against the warm light from inside. When they got closer, they saw a giant redhead in a tight blue

dress. Or no, actually, as they got closer still, they saw a *man* in a tight blue dress and barefoot. The Meteorite Man laughed out loud. Excellent! Now Lenny could stop worrying about the episode, about what its hook would be. He would interview the drag queen, and leave the Meteorite Man alone. Hallelujah. The Meteorite Man hugged the drag queen in greeting and then gave her a big kiss on the cheek.

"Well hello yourself," said the queen, blushing, one hand fluttering over her chest. "Come right in. Go right up to the attic."

She followed them, jabbering about the racket the night before.

"What time was that?" said Hankey.

"What time did I call you, Sugar?" said the queen to the hot blonde, who didn't seem to know the answer. They looked at each other quizzically for a moment. "Mmmm.... Maybe nine?" said the queen.

She then paused at the door to the attic, and flipped on the light in the stairwell. The Meteorite Man and Hankey had already begun to traipse up the steps, and suddenly saw ahead the illuminated wooden eaves of the low attic ceiling. Below, the amateurite was saying, "After you, Ma'am."

When Lenny and Zane got to the top of the steps, they shined the powerful spotlight from the camera. And zow! There it was, resting on top of a box marked *Football trophies*—a two or three gram dull black nugget with the characteristic thumbprints, the regmaglypts. Hankey picked it up and held in front of the Meteorite Man's eyes for inspection. There were visible streamlines from the entry into Earth's atmosphere, so there wasn't even any point in wasting time with the diamond file and digging beneath the fusion crust to double check that it wasn't just a rock. Jesus, the Meteorite Man's whole scalp began to tingle like it might lift off and crawl down his face like a centipede—a feeling he hadn't had in a long time. He and Hankey both shoved some boxes out of the way and examined the hole in the roof. Even though the hole was only about two inches in diameter, the wind whistled into it, and he could see the alarmingly fast movement of the

clouds two miles up. The fragment had entered from a southeasterly direction. "I bet I can guess where the big boy is," said the Meteorite Man, longitude lines triangulating in his head.

"Me, too," said Hankey. The two of them looked at one another for a moment and then turned back the way they had come, shoving past Lenny, the crew, the drag queen, the hot blonde, and the amateurite, all clustered at the top of the steps like people who'd gotten lost in a mall.

The two of them hot-footed their way back down the stairs, fast as tap dancers, giggling all the while. Hankey moved faster, and the Meteorite Man tried to slow him by grabbing his backpack. The amateurite had regained his senses, and clomped down the stairs behind them.

When the three of them, in the rental, reached the approximate spot, a half mile to the northwest, they found themselves at Francis Scott Key Middle School. The van hadn't caught up yet, but wouldn't be far behind.

Just then, a red car swerved past them, tires screeching, and halted right in front, perpendicular to them like a police car ending a high speed chase. Alisso. He clambered out of the driver's seat and trotted toward them, leaving his door wide open. Then he was rapping on the Meteorite's window. He said: "You're too late, Sparky. Check out this shit." He held up a fist-sized meteorite, worth probably \$5,000.

The Meteorite Man did his best to make a pissed off face. Then he turned to Hankey and exclaimed, "Damn it to hell!"

Alisso hadn't seen the video or heard the boom, so he had no idea that the rock in his hand was not the big boy. It was all the Meteorite Man could do to keep himself from giggling again. He dared not look at Hankey.

As the two of them trudged into the knee-high grass behind the school, Alisso shouted, "All you're going to find out there is scrabble."

The Meteorite Man glanced over his shoulder and watched Alisso cup his hand up to his mouth so he could project better. "This guy," he called, kissing the rock with a loud smack, "was two miles from here. You're nowhere close!"

The Meteorite Man flipped Alisso the bird and heard Alisso bray his donkey laugh. Somewhere behind them in the darkness, Lenny had arrived, and the Meteorite Man could hear the voices of the hot blonde and the drag queen, too.

Lenny—leading the camera and the sound boom through the tall grass—had obviously clocked Alisso's rock because he was saying, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," under his breath. Normally Lenny never cursed, as he'd be the one to have to edit it out later.

Barkley, who'd done the polite thing and waited for Lenny, now ran to catch up, his face ashen in the bright light from Zane's camera, which shone out onto the field. "I'm so sorry," he said. "I feel like this is all my fault."

"Eyes down, Barkley," said the Meteorite Man gently. "Look for something dark and knobby."

If he craned his head around Barkley's tree-like frame, he could see in the distance the silhouette of Alisso eating a Quiznos sub on the hood of the Meteorite Man's rental car, the wrapper flapping in the wind so that he had to keep pulling it out of his mouth. There would be mustard and mayonnaise smeared on the paint job. He would leave his trash on the Meteorite Man's seat. It was how Alisso liked to celebrate his wins whenever he got the chance. His bald head shone under the streetlight, and he was jabbering away on the phone as he ate, undoubtedly to Marianne. The Meteorite Man hated to admit to himself how comforting this was—the predictability of Alisso and also the fact that Marianne was still tied to his life, albeit indirectly.

The wind carried Alisso's weedy voice. "I'm taking you to Vegas," he was saying now. "Okay, well then, someplace else. Tell me where you want to go." It had never occurred to the Meteorite Man to take

Marianne anywhere when they were married. He'd hardly ever gone home between hunts—unlike Alisso. It was nice to think that she had that now, that she wasn't lonely like before.

The streetlight way out in front of the school, beyond where Alisso lounged, cast his rival in backlit shadow. The faint warm light delineated the dark outline of his body, charted the wide arc of his beer belly. The Meteorite Man experienced a kind of double vision—he could see Alisso as he was now and also as he'd been at Hankey's age. Long hair in a ponytail, a baby face that wouldn't grow a beard. Still chubby, of course, but less so—wide across the chest instead of across the midsection. They'd both been interns for Quentin McCarthy, the best meteorite hunter of his day, before the advent of the big magnets. The Meteorite Man had played second fiddle to Alisso for the better part of a year, supplying calculations and priming Quentin McCarthy's gear while Alisso trotted out front like an overfed hunting dog and retrieved the prizes.

Alisso had been there in the office when the Meteorite Man had first asked out Marianne, McCarthy's indispensable administrative assistant. "You bastard," Alisso had said later, in the lab. "You knew I was going to ask her." His baby face, those large brown eyes, looked shocked, as if the Meteorite Man had refused to carry the crew's gear as he normally did or had failed to relinquish the last sandwich and go hungry. In fact, the Meteorite Man had *not* known about Alisso's designs on Marianne, but he did know one thing. Alisso's jealousy, the way the Meteorite Man suddenly mattered, had been exhilarating—almost as good as the first time he'd held that meteorite fragment in his hand when he was twelve, a fragment he'd made his mother take him to see the following night on a display table outside the fire station. Closing his fingers tightly around it, stretching his arm toward the sky as if his fist were the moon, it had been as if the knobby chunk of iron might awaken like a rocket to propel itself home, as if it might take him with it.

Now, the glee was like a pain in the Meteorite Man's ribcage. A light feeling—the opposite of heart attack pain-like he could fly.

Hankey had trudged ahead off to the right with his own flashlight and the magnetic wand, which resembled a walking stick. The amateurite shadowed Hankey, pointing at chunks of asphalt nestled in the grass, saying, "What's that?" If you didn't know, you'd think the two of them were a couple searching for seashells on a beach.

"Stop," shouted Hankey at Barkley, struggling to be heard over the wind. "When we see it, I'll tell you."

The Meteorite Man paused then to straighten his back, stretching to one side and the other, hands on his hips. He massaged his neck, studying the clouds which had grown into cumulonimbus, had sunk lower in the sky. He turned his head as far as he could one way and then the other, trying to make his vertebrae pop.

It was then that his eyes fixed on the abandoned school bus farther out in the weeds. And they registered the completely shattered windshield, fresh glass on the snub-nosed yellow hood. But he did not shout out, as he imagined he would. He did not crow.

A meteorite of that size. One that had landed within the shelter of a bus instead of on the ground. Well, its value was beyond even his own calculations. But he did not speak. The light feeling inside his chest swelled like helium against his breastbone, and it felt like hope—the hope that if he stood very still, if he did not yet go over and tap Lenny's shoulder and quietly wave him toward the bus, the earth would cease its relentless rotation. Nothing would change. Not a single thing.

He turned and surveyed his own immediate horizon—Alisso lying back on the hood of the car, hands clasped behind his head; the drag queen and the hot blonde picking arm in arm through the grass with their own flashlight, hair flying every which way; Hankey and Barkley hunching forward against the wind at the same angle as the meteorite had flown through the June sky; Lenny and Zane and the crew making themselves as motionless and quiet as the air had been the night before, the night it landed.

Probably if you'd been standing in this field, you would have heard the sonic boom, like a boulder pounding on the sky's door, and half a minute later you would have heard the rock's first experience of air, the sound of friction, that whooshing overhead, above the fireflies, and then finally the crash through the bus glass. But if the Meteorite Man could choose between being here last night to witness that miracle of the heavens or being here tonight—he'd choose this moment, this miracle, right now. His twenty-four hours were almost up.