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some willful challenge ready, as if he prepared with flash cards. "Not awake yet?" if he saw Blondy with coffee in the afternoon. "Never awake at all anymore," Blondy would say, always willing to play the decrepit jester, the has-been, hoping he could un-push Zwelish's buttons. "Want a job, Blondy? You should write an opera about Donald Trump. He's what passes for a hero these days!" Blondy didn't compose operas, but never mind. Still, after Zwelish's initial remark they'd often fall into the earlier style of more relaxed banter. And Zwelish sometimes let his guard down and complained, obscurely, about "modern urban women." He'd only gloss the topic, and Blondy didn't press at the sore point. Zwelish seemed to know how vulnerable Zwelish wanted to get.

"Can't you get one of those babysitters to do your laundry for you?" Zwelish said one day when he saw Blondy humping a Santa Clausian bag to the Chinese dry cleaner. Zwelish seemed particularly keen and chipper, and rolled up his sleeve to show off a nicotine patch. More bragging. He explained that he'd already stepped down two patch levels, after fifteen years of pack-a-day smoking.

"I never thought of this before," said Blondy, "but if you *wanted* to smoke but were having trouble getting started, the patch could really do the trick, couldn't it?"

"What are you talking about?"

"If you wanted to be a smoker," Blondy said, explicating the joke. "You could step up instead of down." Zwelish brought out his silly side; he couldn't help it. "Once you get to the top level, you tear off that patch and—voilà!—you'd want a cigarette *urgently*."

"Fuck you," Zwelish said, and walked away. His self-improvements were apparently no laughing matter.

Yet Sigismund Blondy, being who he was, found Zwelish all the more precious for his touchiness. He constituted a test that Blondy, who'd sledded on pure charm through so many controversies, couldn't pass. He adored Zwelish for causing him, at this late date, to want to do better, try harder, give more.

It was months later that the real opportunity came: Alan Zwelish's definitive self-renovation, one that Blondy instantly vowed to treat only reverently,

beatifically. Zwelish returned from a mysterious trip in possession of an Asian wife. Blondy heard it first from another neighbor (shades of "the whole block knows"), who included a nosy speculation as to whether the union had been made by online advertisement or some other mechanical arrangement, before he saw her for himself. From Vietnam, it was revealed when they met on the street, and tiny enough to make Zwelish look tall. Doris, Zwelish introduced her as, though he later confided that her name was something else, Do Lun or Du Lan. Bright dark eyes and features so precise they seemed tooled. At this first meeting Blondy clasped Zwelish's hand, took his elbow, gave his warmest congratulations. Almost bent to kiss Doris, but thought better. She was too self-contained and skittish, a cipher. Zwelish pulled her close to him, seeming for once immune to hurt, a being formed only of pride and delight. Blondy was a part of the family if only because at the moment anyone, even a passing stranger, would have been. Blondy watched them disappear into the basement apartment, Zwelish gallantly rushing past Doris to unlock the gate, and felt a disproportionate happiness, one he suspected he'd have to make an effort to conceal.

Zwelish never attacked Blondy now, his sarcasm apparently totally evaporated, and if Blondy ever experimented with a teasing joke (calling Doris "Milly—nothing but elegance, with Z") it seemed to go right over Zwelish's head. Or under it, as if the man were floating. They'd greet each other hesitantly, with or without Doris in tow. It was as though Zwelish had advertised the director to Doris in advance as a sterling friend, a local pillar,

then so invested in the notion that he forgot his old wariness. Doris, who was along, watched carefully. Zwelish wasn't hopeless, once you peeled the gauze of the almost total delight she showed her husband, never without checking his eyes first. Who knew what else she was capable of.

What life she'd led before, what she expected coming here? Zwelish worked increasingly from his shoulder on the street. made fewer consulting trips out there, and, when Blondy kept her attached at the hip. he, he squared and delivered.

Soon enough Doris's pregnancy was noticeable on her scrawny frame. She asked Blondy. "Nothing

posture was too good for the third month. Zwelish congratulated, too, but it was a cold winter, even into woollen layers and from dawdling in the office and his expectant young more and more like figure globe, viewable but uncor the human realm. They happy or unhappy, just cur other, whispering on the st opaque domestic unit. Blond get a rise or anything else on ish, and I knew Blondy well feel how this irked him. It exp reckless choice he made. Lik his history with Zwelish alread new it was reckless, though holly in gentleness and out enthusiasm. One day when Dor e or sixth months along and d broken out on the street, E ng slightly, from the Korean ma insisted on carrying her plastic Blondy watched them disappear into this was bad enough, really, sin the basement apartment, Zwelish gal-lant beyond Zwelish's establish to feel this as a rebuke for n accompanied Doris to the stor worse, much worse, at the doo reached under Doris's sweat-shirt, not without asking first, his palm underneath the that burgeoned there. He did it an especially, was possible for Doris wasn't jarred. Blondy Just felt it and murmured Zwelish about "a miracle," and ing else about "lucky Alan." Boy or girl?" and Doris told as a sterling friend, a local pillar, who'd heard their voices to the window, now rushed heked the gate, and pulled Doris seemed to have some impre she showed her husband, never a kind of angry hiccup as he ing without checking his eyes first. Blondy. Then, with his Who knew what else she was capable of.