

clear liquid oozed over the block and onto the counter.

From the far end of the sofa Roger sat with his mouth hung open. He thought of what he should be feeling but nothing appropriate registered. Her actions surprised him. There was no cue for her next move. She was going to sneer at him, he anticipated, and sign, "Now you know how me feel!" Instead, his wife walked over to the television, unplugged the wires from the closed-captioning device, and wrapped them around the machine. The television image shrank to a dot where the anchorwoman's lips were and disappeared. Rhondee snatched her keys off the top of the microwave oven and left by the front door with her captioning device under her arm. Roger waited for the vibrations to rock across the hardwood floor when the door slammed, but nothing happened. She left the door open.

Roger looked back at the television and saw that his wife left behind her muddy handprints all over the screen. He slowly got up to look in the sink. It smelled like a freshly-turned garden. He wondered which two of the leaves were the original ones that Rhondee gave him at the start of their relationship, before it had grown wild and out of proportion. Roger padded down the hall to peek into his son's room. Cody had slept through another silent argument.

Roger was still looking at the mastodon when Cody jumped on his back and knocked the remaining dirt out of his hands.

"Daddy! Me saw balloon man. He make-make balloon, like this . . ." Cody showed his father how the man blew a long, narrow balloon and twisted it into different shapes.

"Well, let's go buy a balloon. You know what kind of animal you want?"

"Yep!"

"Good. And, let's buy one for your mother. You know what kind of animal she wants?" Roger was thinking that Rhondee probably drove over to her mother's to cool off from the fight.

"Don't-know," said Cody. "Have idea—we tell balloon man make-make talking bird."

Roger raised his right hand to correct him but restrained himself. He lifted his left hand and signed, "Okay, and then, we'll go over to your grandmother's."

R.E. HAYES

GAIT

In the time of the half-remembered Korean War, army brass assigned young Victor Kittle to graves registration duty. On bloodstained burned hills, amid hell-on-earth battlefield chaos, he had risked all to bring out the KIAs and the wounded, often with vital organs exposed, dangling from grotesquely sundered flesh.

Decades later Kittle became the government über boss in the corner office, the director. Everyone on the staff at some point had heard his sermon regarding army combat medics. How, in anticipation of a dying GI's last breath, doctors had shrouded the soldier's face in gauze and waited out his final minutes on earth. Kittle always concluded with: "Sulfa killed infections, plasma saved lives, morphine stopped the screams." He relished the role of motivator-in-chief and was in his element linking this dying with work, with productivity, with "not spinning your wheels."

Cal Harris was a federal labor lawyer in the Chicago regional office. Earlier today, Kittle sent him a memo warning he might get passed over for third-year promotion, the big one.

Alone now in his small windowless office, Harris stared blankly at the memo thinking how heartsick Ellen and Justin would feel gazing down at his gauze draped, walnut-brown face.

Six months ago, Kittle evaluated Harris's gait. Said he had observed him walking with "greater determination," which in Kittle's rheumy eyes meant he could expect better productivity in the future, all monthly caseload time targets met.

Kittle was a paternalistic Boston liberal, and Harris did not intuit mean-spiritedness from the old man. But with only two and a half black lawyers on the staff of twenty-seven, the remark was demeaning, he thought, straight out of *Gone With the Wind*. As if finally he had learned to serve silver goblets of frosty mint juleps on the veranda without spilling a drop—and just