

SUCH KINDNESS

A NOVEL

ANDRE DUBUS III

*NEW YORK TIMES BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF
HOUSE OF SAND AND FOG AND TOWNIE*





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W. W. NORTON & COMPANY

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For Philip

Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?

—*Sylvia Plath*

Some stars went out on me for good; part for me, O sky.

—*Wisława Szymborska*

PART I

OUR GOOD SAMARITAN DRIVES US THROUGH SOFTLY FALLING snow under streetlamps that have come on early. The boy's car is filled with cigarette and pot smoke, and over the rap Jamey plays he's just asked Trina a question. He looks over at her on the passenger side, his wispy beard dark in the dim smokiness of his rusted sedan. Trina shrugs and cracks the window and exhales smoke. Twice their age, I sit in the backseat. It's late in the afternoon but already the lights are on inside the shops and restaurants we drive slowly past, both rear windows streaked with melted snow. Trina takes a deep drag off her cigarette, and she's laughing at something Jamey has just said.

Behind the rapper's plaintive voice is a low percussion beat that sounds to me like bare hands on a joint compound bucket. It's almost three weeks from Thanksgiving but hanging in the window of the bookstore is a Christmas wreath decorated with dozens of tiny paperbacks, and soon we're through the town center and into a neighborhood of big homes going back two hundred years. Many are Greek Revival with gabled pediments and fluted columns painted white to look like marble. Years ago, as I became more committed to the building trade I somehow mastered, I started to read more about architecture and learned that back in the 1800s banks were the first to adopt this look, choosing low gables supported by heavy cornices and wide trim to more closely resemble the temples of ancient Greece.

Banks as *temples*.

And now, like a ripped photo from a trip I never should have gone on, I can still see the glossy raised panel of Mike Andrews' office. It was walnut, Andrews' desk cherry, his tie a full Windsor, his cologne too strong, and he was probably just about my age at the time. Propped on the desk was a framed color photograph of him with his wife, both of them smiling into the sunshine with their ski goggles strapped to their flushed upper foreheads. I'd never gone skiing in my life. It was a sport for rich kids, kids I never knew, and in another time I might have felt put off by

that image and this young banker's office. But that warm afternoon in late spring, seven thousand hard-earned dollars in my account, all of my taxes paid and up to date, I felt strangely one with him sitting across from me, just two guys climbing that ladder we're all called to climb, Mike Andrews just steadying its base for me with a generous loan.

But ladders can get kicked over, especially when you're on one. And I had trusted him. That's the funniest part. I had trusted a bank.

Jamey passes the joint back to me, but I shake my head no. I want to tell him to put it out and to be more careful, that nice towns like this are full of cops with nothing to do but look for beat-up cars like his that don't belong, but I don't say anything.

Afternoon has turned to night and we're passing the grounds of Phillips Academy. Under the falling snow the windows of its old brick buildings are warm with lamplight and I think of my son having gone to a school like that, a place dedicated to opening door after door for its students, most of whom come from families for whom doors are rarely closed anyway.

"Look at these fucking houses, you guys." Trina's voice sounds childlike, though she's twenty-seven and has three kids. She's leaning forward in her seat, both hands on Jamey's dash, her cigarette glowing between two fingers. Jamey takes the turn and accelerates down a two-way that is already plowed, salted, and sanded, and the female voice on his phone comes in over the music and tells him to continue on to Jefferson Lane. The young rapper is still slapping the joint compound bucket in time, but now there's the low cry of a synthesizer, the boy singing in a falsetto about his girlfriend or his mother or both. Jamey says something about private property being theft.

I ask him where he heard that Marxist bullshit.

"It's not bullshit. And it wasn't Karl Marx, it's some French anarchist dude. I just took a class."

The female voice says to turn left onto Federal Drive, Mike and Kerry Andrews' street. It's a winding road through a stand of hardwoods that opens into a narrow lane lit every forty to sixty feet by streetlamps, snow falling past their LED bulbs, the sidewalk under them looking as bright and cold as the surface of the moon. But on this moon stately houses are set way back from the street and hundreds of yards from each other. Most have floodlights embedded in the ground, lighting them up from below, and I can see right off that they're of the Federalist period, many of them brick with arched windows and heavy dentil work under their copper

gutters. Some even have round living rooms. Jamey's still talking about capitalism and social justice and the redistribution of wealth. I say, "I used to own a nice home too, you know. And I worked hard as hell for it. There's nothing wrong with private property you work hard for."

"But we stole it from the Native Americans."

"Yeah, no shit."

The female voice speaks through the rapper's falsetto, telling us that we have arrived. Jamey's saying something about "boomers" and he pulls over to the curb and shuts off his lights. I'm looking across a snowy lawn at a Federalist painted white, the windows of the first floor lighted, and I'm about to tell the kid that his GPS has it wrong when Jamey says, "Is that it across the street?"

"That's the biggest one, Tommy."

And it is. The entire structure is canted to the east so that I'm seeing it through my water-streaked rear window at a three-quarter angle, but even its side is lit up from the ground by floodlights, and not for security. No, they're the floodlights of a stage, this house the star, and now I recognize from Mike Andrews' Facebook photos the mortared fieldstone that makes up the exterior walls of the first floor, I recognize the bleached cedar shingles above that, their courses tight and narrow all the way up to the fascia and its Grecian key I hadn't noticed on my laptop before. But there are the tall fluted columns on either side of the front door with its round port window matching the round three-season porch that most likely opens to the pool and cabana out back. Under this porch is a three-car garage, each of its doors a raised-panel oak like the front door. I'm shaking my head, have been shaking my head for a while now, my hands squeezing the back of Jamey's seat. "That's it, that's them."

Trina's door opens and the cold rushes in. She's running across the street in her hoodie and pajama bottoms and new white sneakers. I don't feel good seeing her do this. I feel the way I did so many times when I sent my young son Drew out into the cold to buy me a baggie of Os.

Trina runs back to our car, slides in, and slams the door shut behind her. "It has a lock on it. Who locks fucking mailboxes?"

"Bankers, hon," I say. "But we just need to check their trash. I'll do it." It feels so strange to be hurrying across Mike Andrews' street under a lightly falling snow. A car's headlights sweep through the thin stand of hardwoods behind me, and I walk quickly onto Mike's white lawn and into the shadow of a cypress tree. The car slows as it passes Jamey's rusted

sedan. It's an SUV, and as it passes the Andrews house I can see through the back window of the car a movie screen hanging from its ceiling playing a cartoon for the kid or kids sitting in the backseat.

Then I'm rushing behind Mike and Kerry Andrews' house. Wet flakes brush my face and it's a relief to see no vanity floodlights back here, but then motion-detecting security lamps come on and shine right on me.

Set into the fieldstone of the first floor is a Palladian window twelve feet wide, and it's hard for me not to think of my own wall of windows overlooking the marsh. It's hard for me not to think of my one lovely acre of land and my homemade home, both taken from me.

From here, standing exposed under bright lights, I can see Mike's daughter sitting at what looks like the kitchen's island. In her ear is a cordless bud and she's eating something while staring at her laptop and then her phone. Soon she'll lift her head and see a man her father's age out in the backyard, his hands in the pockets of his Carhartt jacket, watching her.

So I'm moving again, but now the fires rage along the pins of my broken hips and pelvis and I ignore them and reach over the gate and unlatch the latch.

I'm wheezing and already sweating under my clothes. The bolt sticks to my bare fingers and I have to yank it free, and now the gate is open behind me and I'm standing at the edge of Mike and Kerry Andrews' covered swimming pool. It's dark here. A car passes by out on Federal Drive, and then another. It has to be close to five o'clock, mothers and fathers coming home from work and school. Not the wisest time to be doing what I and my young friends are doing, but it's too late to stop now.

On the south side of the covered pool is the cabana in that Facebook photo where Kerry Andrews sat with a glass of wine in her hand. Next to it is what looks like a pool house and maybe a toolshed, and I'm about to head in that direction when there comes the muffled groan of a garage door opening. And now light pours from a transom window high up in the wall supporting the round rec room, a light that falls on me and the covered pool, but also on four large trash barrels up against the garage's outside wall.

The squeak of damp brake pads, an engine shutting off, then two voices, both of them male. I hurry out of the light and into the enclosure that holds the barrels. A car door slams, then another, and now the garage door is sliding back down its track.

One of the voices rises in the notes of a question and the other answers. Mike and his son Tyler. And of course Mike would pick him up first, probably from Phillips Academy a half mile away. His wife commutes to the city and back and so has the longer day, coming home each night spent from peddling other people's mortgages. Does that mean that Mike is the cook? Or is he one of those guys who order takeout—they can afford it—or makes everybody pancakes for dinner? Or does he ask his eleven-year-old daughter to cook? Or does he, like Drew and I used to do, prepare a meal with his son, one of them chopping the vegetables while the other pours olive oil in the pan?

Once my wife Ronnie started graduate school, that's what I did. I was never much of a cook, but I looked up recipes online, simple ones made with pasta, and Drew and I learned together. Our favorite was a fast dish made with fettuccine, pistachios, and blue cheese, and my son's favorite part was crumbling up the cheese with his fingers.

On the other side of the garage's wall a door pulls shut and the transom light switches off, and I just stand there a second in the darker darkness. Why's it so much darker here than a few minutes ago? The motion-sensing lights. They've gone off.

Hip flames lick down my legs. I need to lie down soon, but why does *Mike* get to come home and be with his kids?

My hands are cold. I rub them together, blow on them, then feel for the garbage can lids. I unlatch each barrel, then slide their tops down to the ground. I reach inside the first, but it's empty. Inside the second seem to be only plastic milk bottles and empty wine bottles, a lot of them. I picture Kerry coming home in an hour or two and pouring herself a glass, the way Ronnie used to, though Ronnie would stop after one and maybe Kerry just keeps going.

In the third barrel are tied-off plastic bags and I pull out two of them. One feels heavy with decomposing food, but another feels lighter, drier, and I run my fingers along the outside of it and feel envelopes and papers. I'm tempted to check the fourth barrel, but it seems like I've been gone a long time from Jamey's rusted sedan. Mike might even be watching it right now from behind one of his mullioned windows.

I reach for each plastic lid and latch them back into place. I grab the full trash bag and start for the open gate, but no, Mike could be in the kitchen and those lights will go off and then Mike will look out his grand Palladian to see what's what.

The trash bag weighs no more than a gallon of milk, but still my right leg is on fire. Another car passes out front, and it's only a matter of time before someone on Federal Drive calls the cops on the stoner kids parked in this neighborhood they will never be invited to.

Between the sunken garage and the pool house is an eight-foot fence with no opening anywhere. There's the faint sound of rap music and I can only hope that this is coming from Mike's son's bedroom and not Jamey's car.

My heart's beating somewhere above me, and I'm looking at the open pool gate and the snowy backyard, the light from Mike's kitchen casting warmly over it. There's just no other way. I'll have to keep low and close to the house, that's all, and I'll have to move fast.

Carefully, I latch the gate behind me. I turn and the yard has stayed lighted from the kitchen windows only. I lift the bag and clutch it to my chest. My fingers have gone numb. I press my left shoulder to the stone wall of the house, a design flourish that cost thousands of dollars just for the materials, not including the labor, I happen to know. And now I and my flaming hips move one leg after the other so that my shoulder rubs along the cold stones, and as I get closer to the center of the house I hear laughter inside, Mike's laughter, and then my knee bumps a hard metal corner, the bulkhead entrance to the basement.

Muffled but clear comes Mike's daughter's voice, flabbergasted yet amused, "*Dad, stop it.*"

"Oh yeah?" Mike says. "What're you gonna do about it?" Playful, having fun, and I picture him lightly snapping a dish towel in his daughter's direction or mussing her hair and I don't know what I'm going to do about this obstacle at my knees, but there's only one thing I can do, which is to hug the trash more tightly to my chest, sit on the steel bulkhead, its surface dusted with snow, and try to shimmy across it without sliding to the ground. I'm just about to do this when two things happen: Trina whispers my name and a bank of lights snap on her in the middle of the yard.

Her face is an oval of startled flesh under her hoodie, her eyes squinting up at the white glare. Inside the house the playful banter stops and I'm sliding to my feet and running, Trina still standing there gazing up at Mike Andrews' massive kitchen window like what she sees on the other side is a show being put on just for her.

The trash bag is bouncing against my leg and I keep my face pointed to

the dark woods at the edge of the yard, grab Trina's bare hand, and now we're running around the corner of Mike's house, me slipping nearly onto my side as we pass the cypress tree, the side security lights flashing on us, Jamey's headlights coming on as Trina jerks her hand from mine and runs across the asphalt lane and around the front of Jamey's car. Mike Andrews yells *Hey!* and I yank the rear door open and toss in the trash bag, falling facefirst and wheezing onto Jamey's backseat, the door still open as the kid pulls away from the granite curb, Mike yelling, "I've called the *police!*"

ON THE SUB SHOP'S TV PERCHED IN THE CORNER, THE NIGHTLY news pans its cameras over skyscrapers bearing the president's name in gold letters twenty feet high. There are images of a congressional hearing of some kind, microphones in the face of a white politician from Louisiana, and there are the smells of fried steak and melted cheese, of sautéing peppers and onions, of French fries dripping from a basket.

Trina and Jamey sit hip to hip across from me and they seem suspended in a stoned, edgy radiance. Their faces are turned toward each other and Jamey's wool cap is pulled back on his forehead. He's speaking low and fast, describing to Trina and me, like we weren't there ourselves, what the three of us have just done. And he's so proud that he didn't lose his cool and drove slowly back through all those rich neighborhoods until we hit the highway.

Trina's face is flushed, and while I know that she's high, it's clear that this boy has mesmerized her beyond that somehow. In the flat fluorescent light of this place I take in his dark complexion and the smooth skin of his forehead. His black hair and curly black whiskers. His brown eyes, glazed over by what he's been smoking all afternoon. His narrow shoulders and boyish voice.

"Because there's no way they're gonna find us."

"Why do you say that?" Behind my hip bones are glowing coals. I don't believe that Mike had time to call the police, but what about after? How much of Jamey's car had he seen?

"Because it was dark out and because my plate lights are busted."

"You sure about that?"

"Yeah, it's a shitbox. 'Sides, all you took was some trash. Is that even a crime?"

"I can't believe how big that fuckin' house was, you guys. How much do you think we'll *get*?"

"Maybe nothing."

"That's a shitty attitude, Tommy. I need a cigarette." Trina smiles at

Jamey. She has to be eight or nine years older than he is, but her entire face seems to soften and now she glances over at me like I've just caught her in some private act.

Jamey stands for her and she scoots across the bench, and now she's outside leaning against his small rusted car, smoking. The snow has stopped. Her shoulders hunch against the cold.

Without her beside him the boy seems even younger. He picks up our receipt and studies it. "They call 36 yet?"

"Can I trust you, Jamey?"

"Of course." The boy says this before he even looks up. Then he does. "Yeah, man, of course."

"Good."

Behind Jamey two men rise from their booth with their plastic trays and empty ketchup-streaked paper plates. They're both big men, like me, and they're dressed in fleece coats embroidered with the insignia of an HVAC company I hired once.

One of the men nods at me as they pass. It's the tired, brotherly recognition one tradesman gives to another at the end of a long day. I become aware of my old Carhartt jacket over my atrophied shoulders and I can't remember the man's name, but I know that he hung the ductwork for an addition I did in Swampscott not long before Mike's adjustable rate kicked in. The man probably thinks I'm just grabbing a quick dinner with one of the kids on my crew or maybe my own son, and this leaves me feeling both regretful and justified in what we've just done.

Jamey glances out the window at Trina, who lifts her hand in a wave and blows out smoke. He smiles at her, then looks back at me. "You can trust me, dude."

"Tom."

"Right." Jamey studies the receipt between his fingers, then pulls out his phone and studies that. When he paid for our food I told him that I'd pay him back. My disability comes in soon, my EBT card not long after, though I have to sell it for cash for the liquid pain distracter I need right now.

On the other side of the glass Trina flicks her cigarette butt out into the parking lot, her eyes passing over both of us like we're not here at all. Then Jamey's standing for her so she can scoot over on the bench. There are the smells of damp hair and cold cotton and Marlboro Lights. "You should take it to your place, Tommy, and then I'll come over right after I

feed my kids.”

“It may just be trash, hon.”

“Then we’ll go get some more, right?” Jamey looks from me to Trina, then back at me. A teenage girl behind the register calls out, “Thirty-six? Thirty-six, your order’s up.” Half the girl’s head is shaved, a dark tattoo on her scalp. It is the look of the Apocalypse, the look of prisoners of war, and there’s the nearly dizzying sense that I have just entered a more lawless world.

I HAVE SPENT MANY HOURS CONTEMPLATING PAIN. ITS CONSTANT presence seems like such a dark joke, really. Like the school bully who sits on your chest and spits in your face years after both of you have moved on. My pelvis and hips were fractured years ago. Do they have to keep spitting in my face?

It's close to nine and I lie on plywood over the cushions of my couch in the 8. On the floor near my feet is the Andrews household's unopened trash bag. From here, I can see through the thin plastic the outlines of commercial-size envelopes, a sheaf of papers, and what looks like a pencil. On the other side of the wall there's only quiet: No yelling. No barely muffled video games. No fucking.

All day and night I hear through its concrete walls the muffled sounds of bad behavior. Trina yells at her babies. She calls them names. She swears at them. Sometimes her boyfriend Brian will be there and he yells and swears at them all.

Some got their units here in the 8 by lottery, others because their family names were on the list for generations. I got mine through my former brother-in-law, Gerard, who was a boy when I married his older sister, a man who is now a lawyer and who in an act of pity secured me my own unit here in the 8.

My neighbor Fitz drives a new Mustang. It's red with tinted windows, and when the inspectors come to check in on us, he hides it out behind the dumpsters filled with wet diapers and cigarette butts, with old TV sets and eggshells and used condoms, with plastic toys and empty bottles of wine.

Fitz only pays me seventy-five percent the value of my EBT card. It's what I have to do so that I can buy the liquid pain distracter that keeps me from falling back to the Os. That and toilet paper. Which I'm not allowed to put on my EBT card. After Fitz's cut, I'm left with only \$100.38 for the month, and now Drew's birthday is in less than a week, though I have never stopped thinking of my son. Ever.

In the unit across the dirt yard from Trina's lives a young couple. He's

black and she's white, and if I add their two ages together, I've still been on this earth ten years longer. The woman's name starts with an A, Amber or Ashley, and she must've gotten pregnant in high school, and now they have three brown babies all under the age of six. Those kids are always dressed in clean clothes, their hair and faces washed, two boys and a girl their mother doesn't let play with Trina's kids, who are not clean and who do not wear clean clothes. Trina's little one, Cody, five years old, looked at me one summer afternoon as I rose slowly from my Taurus and he opened his little mouth and yelled, *Fucka*.

In the next unit over lives an old woman. I believe she's close to a hundred. Every afternoon a visiting nurse shows up in her blue Corolla. She spends an hour in there, then leaves. On Sundays, the old woman's son picks her up for church in his sedan, its rear passenger doors covered by white letters in cursive: *Bongiovanni Shoe Repair*. He's a big man like me, though he has twenty years on me and is clean-shaven, his bald head covered with a scally cap he takes off before stepping into his mother's unit.

For the thousandth time I think that I do not belong here. I do not belong here with any of these people.

In just a few days my son will turn twenty, but how am I going to get to his campus a hundred miles west? All because I drove Trina to the lab to sell her plasma to make rent. It's something I do every week, but this time a young cop in his parked cruiser took note of the expired decal on my rear plate, and now, sitting on the plank over two stacks of books I call a coffee table, are the three crumpled fines that may as well be loaded guns pointed at my head. One is for \$607 for driving an unregistered vehicle, another is for \$530 for driving an uninsured vehicle, and the third—because I left my empty wallet back in my unit—is \$500 for driving without a license. The tally pushes hotly through my head: \$1,637. And this doesn't even include the cost of towing and storing my Taurus, the only thing that ever gets me away from here.

Usually at sundown I drive out to Cape Ann to see what used to be my home. I leave the 8 and this neighborhood of box houses like the one I grew up in, the vans and pickup trucks in their driveways, the strip plaza across the street with the liquor store and a salon called Dawn's Hair & Nails. I accelerate east for the highway overpass, a McDonald's on the other side, then a NAPA Auto store next to a home for old people, the front lawn just a strip of grass between the sidewalk and a parking lot that

was always full. I think of my mother then, of the early dementia that has claimed her, of how I should visit her, but not till I'm back on my feet. A pathetic phrase, really, given how much pain I have to endure when I stand.

Sometimes I turn onto the entrance ramp of the highway. I join the traffic of my fellow human beings and feel, for a few miles anyway, part of them again, a man coming home after a long day's work, a man who had every intention of carrying his own weight.

I glance to my right and left, see women and men behind their wheels, some talking into their phones or driving quiet, their eyes on the road, on the spouses waiting for them at home, maybe, the hot meals, the happy kids.

But other times, I stay on the back roads all the way to Cape Ann. It takes longer that way. I drive east past the gas station and sub shop, the movie theater and franchise restaurant with its Italian name and dimmed sconces. I pass the Lawn and Garden Center, mulch piled in its lot in the summer, cords of split hardwood there in the winter, and how many times had I loaded my van with wood just like that? Then I and Drew—seven? eight?—carried each log up to our rear porch where we'd stack it? And Drew would be in his wool Patriots cap, down coat, and gloves, all of which his dad had been able to buy him.

Soon I'm driving south through the salt marshes, thick stands of pines and birch between it and the grounds of Trevors Academy. Driving by, I look out at its baseball diamond and lacrosse and soccer fields, the brick buildings of its campus built a hundred years before the War Between the States. It's where my Ronnie was raised by her historian father and her mathematician mother, two people I can't deny still loving, but also resenting for while they did not make a materialist out of their daughter, they did raise an elitist, one I could never keep up with.

No, that isn't fair really. She's no elitist, she's an abundist. It's a word I made up, meaning one accustomed to abundance. She spent her girlhood in a brick house filled with books and the savory smells of her father's homemade soups and stews, her mother's ginger cookies and English teas. At night, when she was young, they took turns reading to her until she fell asleep under thick blankets in a room decorated with framed paintings of landscapes and horses and the moon and stars she went on to study at Smith. From when she was a young girl, she and her little brother Gerard had eaten most of their meals in the academy's dining hall with high

school students who came from rich families up and down the East Coast, well-dressed teenagers who treated her and her little brother like their brilliant and adorable mascots, so that years later, when I first saw her at a house party off the UMass Amherst campus, there, in the kitchen doorway, stood a young woman with long brown hair spilling out of a cloche hat, an expectant joy in her pretty face that here was yet another room full of people who would like her just for being among them. No arrogance, just a deeply affirming relationship to the world I'd never witnessed or even considered possible, and then I was stepping toward her, a bottle of beer in each hand, her face turning toward mine with a question in her eyes, and I sure as hell hoped I had a good answer.

What used to be our home sat in a grove of pine and cedar trees overlooking a marsh, and it was a miracle that it was ever ours at all. The land was part of a larger acreage I bought from a man who needed some fast cash and less taxable land, and sooner than I could even begin to believe my good luck, I was the owner of one precious acre with an open view of a saltwater marsh and it had only cost me ninety thousand dollars.

That was all I should have borrowed. I had no business asking for any more than that. But when Ronnie first gazed out at that marsh, two-year-old Drew beside us picking up a twig and throwing it, the air warm and smelling like pine needles and the ocean, the view so similar to what she was able to see every morning from the bedroom of her soft and billowy girlhood, that was that. I had to give her the rest of it. I *wanted* to give her the rest of it. And Mike Andrews was only too happy to lend me the kind of money I had no business even thinking of borrowing.

Driving back to our former home, I park just a few yards into my old driveway, then walk through the woods. Sometimes I pick up a long stick and use it as a cane and there are the smells of pine and the sea and I walk as far as the clearing, the very one I cleared, and I lean against a tree and stare at what I made.

It's like watching an ex-lover dining with her new lover on the other side of a crowded room, her hair styled differently, the happiness in her face so apparent. The truth is, the new owners of my home took better care of it than I ever did. Once Ronnie and I and our son moved in, I never stopped working.

The crash hadn't yet happened and I still had more work than I could bid on, but meanwhile there came the winds and snows of winter, the spring rains, the summer heat, then fall with all those leaves and pine