

Chapter One Excerpt (End of Men by C. B. Murphy)

Ben stood on the patio in his bare feet, arms outstretched like a scarecrow or Jesus. He was waiting for the sun to warm the red stones, making it impossible for him to remain where he was. This was the ritual he had stumbled onto and performed religiously every day of the month since his father died. He wore what he jokingly (Kay didn't think it funny) called his work clothes: cut-off jeans like he wore as a kid. Kay had made him agree to put on a shirt when he worked in the front yard.

Thinking of his wife, Ben glanced at the wall of picture windows above him, but the glare made it impossible to see if she was watching him. But she was there, he knew, drinking coffee and worrying about when he would return to his normal life and stop acting strange. She would stand there a few more minutes and then join the commuters flowing out of the houses around them and then he would be alone with his plants.

Morning was the hardest part of the day. The ritual helped. All around him garage doors had been opening and closing for hours. Breadwinners, men and women, but mostly men, were hitting the Kennedy Expressway in their upscale cars—BMW's, Saabs, giant SUV's, and the occasional minivan. The traffic was probably backed up to the Forest Lake exit since six. He was glad Kay's hours were forgiving, though she took her assistant curator position more seriously than most of those around her.

Ben heard the distinctive roar of the yellow school buses driven by reforming alcoholics while electricians, plumbers and handymen were hitching up their pants, and fantasizing about the lady of the house being a nympho-mom. Hispanic maids

hopped out of beater Fords laughing and waving goodbye. Men began spraying lawns with toxic chemicals from vans ornamented with ecologically friendly logos.

Ben knew if he could get through this last hour of the rush, he would be free once again to pretend the world beyond his backyard didn't exist, especially the world of jobs. Somewhere he still had (as far as he knew) a desk, a secretary, work piling up, and young men eyeing his office hungrily. He was fully aware that by all standards—Kay's, his secretary Evie's, and surely those hungry young men and some women (who had named themselves the Young Turks)—his sabbatical had already crossed over from acceptable grief into questionable sanity. He would have to make a move soon, take a stand.

The patio stones were heating up fast.

His mother, Cass, had told Kay she knew what he was doing. Ben was waiting for her to confront him and shame him into reactivating the Protestant work ethic and “stop messing around with the family's good name.” She could say something no one else could: “I loved your father more than you, and I'm functioning normally. You don't see me skipping out on my responsibilities and walking around the yard half naked. Whatever you call this, it isn't grieving.”

Ben agreed with that in part. This thing he was doing wasn't exactly grieving, but he didn't know what it was. He had read an article, years ago, in one of Kay's art magazines, about a woman (a dancer or performance artist, he couldn't remember) who lay on her floor for days until she found what motivated her to move. From there, ostensibly, she rose and created the work for which she was being interviewed. But Ben couldn't tell anyone about how this woman's story reminded him of his own. Even Kay would think he was putting her on. He wished he could find what motivated him before something tragic happened.

