A Quiet Alarm

by

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A Practicum Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Fine Arts

Approved April 2012 by the
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ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2012

ABSTRACT

The stories in this document are only loosely related thematically. They cohere instead by way of other mechanisms. They are often the products of significant formal experimentation. They are an attempt to privilege mystery and asymmetricality over causality and shapeliness.

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SHEET OF PAPER

The new clock has a quiet alarm. Alarm clock makers know you hate startled mornings so they've devised a tapered wakeup. The noise trespasses lightly enough at first, but it accrues steady volume. It gathers and swells there and bleats, finally, like synchronized geese. The light through the window is insistent, but your dreams are insistent too. All exs: ex-lovers, ex-Cocker Spaniels, ex-nieces-in-law. This feels like a kind of hangover. At least there's not that anymore: you are years past a love affair with alcohol—the serotonin crash and three-day rebuild—a fool's drug for sure.

Oh but now the real task: to summon and kindle a paltry resolve. You swallow one of the pills, kept bedside as a reminder. These appointment days are the worst. Meetings with p-doc constitute an admission. It was better not knowing, you think. Humans shouldn't know the chemicals comingling in their synaptic gaps. And humans should get out of their beds.

The shower, hot as it will go. You focus the spray on the base of your skull, top of your neck, bend head forward and drown in the sound—like bb's in a tin pan. No, (to get this right is important) like childhood tube slides, pea gravel poured down, but denser. More thunderous.

The news is heartening at least. A new vaccine on the market. The missing girl is found, three states away. Brushfires scorch California but legions of trench diggers are routing its path. You realize, this is a way one can feel: ahead of a fire-line, desperately digging.

Do you sign in? Or just give the receptionist your name? Does signing in obligate you? To examination? To perusal of a ragged *Reader's Digest*? To waiting room chitchat with strangers? A child makes wooden blocks follow paths preordained by twisty colored wires. She rolls a car with cartoon features up and over her mother's foot. You smile at this, at the mother too. Mothers like when you smile about their children, but not necessarily when you smile *at* them. Patients mark time with page flips, with clearing of throats, waiting for their names. You examine the underside of a silk leaf, its imitation vascular intricacy, its approximation of life.

Today's pills are peaking. You pick up a magazine. Words swim and float. Boreal, underbrush, watershed, furl. Your name, when called, sounds enormous, and like an accusation. It fills the room. You are uprooted, from National geographic jungle expedition, to the white light and false vegetation of the waiting room. You wave bye to the girl.

"Wait in here, please."

Blood pressure, temperature—the requisites—then alone again. The examination room contains new literature: small-incision surgeries for hip replacement, Asthma Facts, a diagram of the inner ear, those tiny bones whose names sound too muscular. Otitis, bronchitis, tendonitis—everything, it seems, gets inflamed. More waiting. They've shut you in. Why must you wait twice? It is several minutes before p-doc arrives, doctoral sternness, white coat, prim beard. A stethoscope—for effect? Torsos not much his concern.

"So, has the medication had any side-effects?"—out of his mouth as the door shuts behind him.

Insomnia, headaches, confusion, restlessness, tingling in your fingers in the morning. You believe the value of the pills has to do with their properties of distraction. A mental shell game.

He squints. "What if you take half in the morning and half before bed?"

This is a clever doc. You've made a careful study, but overlooked that solution. Take it the morning and you shake visibly—you fear people will notice. Take it before bed and you cannot sleep. Two doses might eliminate the peaks. Level the curve. (Consistency is key, they say.)

"I can give you a week's worth of something for sleep. A half-pill at first." He scrawls in doctor-pharmacist code, something like Arabic and kindergarten.

You'd appreciate that. (You really would.) It could help establish a routine. With luck it might be sustained.

"You rated symptoms last time you were here. Eight on a scale of ten. How about now?"

How about in five minutes? You wouldn't rate symptoms on a numerical scale at all, really. It's a difficult thing to quantify, the conversion of insomnia, lethargy, despair, to such hollow abstraction. Ten, four, seven, nine, four, seven, three, six, nine. You believe that the medicine has set your brain to shuffle them endlessly, without causality or purpose. With enough medicine they will maybe shuffle fast enough to blur, blur into a nice mean six and a half. You could handle six and a half, with naps.

He is nodding, and nodding—to make sure you understand that he understands, that he has seen it all, that he is board-certified, that St. Jude's and the Red Cross receive his donations monthly. They have chosen strange wallpaper for this room. It is neutral, as you would expect, in color. But rough like sandpaper. You can tell by looking, to rub your fingertips on it too long would make them go numb, then bleed.

"Fluctuations are expected in the beginning. This is completely normal. Would you say you've seen improvement?"

You might say that. Just as likely, you might not. You might say anything.

"As well as being an imbalance of certain neurotransmitters—"

—norepeinephrine, propriety, piety, being in imbalance, windblown, weather-strip, hipbone. On auto-shuffle. They're trying to fix you with ceaseless involuntary free-association you think. With incoherence, with mind-snow.

No you cannot remember the start exactly. There is a questionnaire however that may shed some light on… to get a better idea about… to help assess the nature and extent of… You will submit dutifully, of course. You'd be glad to, if it may shed some light on…

The room has no window. It's the kind of room where casts are cut off, where sinus infections meet their preliminary doom. Tongue depressors and throat culture kits and instruments to illuminate your cavities. (To shed some light on them.) You sit atop your personal sheet of paper, pondering the marvels of medicine. It is conceivable, you understand, that in the next room a lump has been noticed, a murmur discovered, the wolf kept from the door.

"Here's a script for—"

A *script* for?

"—for trazadone, before bed. It shouldn't cause too much drowsiness in the morning." (Though it may cause *some*.)

You have known drowsiness—like sinking in a lake. You think you might like to drowse in this room, on your own sterile piece of paper, amid cotton balls and alcohol swabs, wound dressings, the biohazard canister keeping your fingers safely unpricked, the nurses outside quickstepping to the soft, department store music.

"Understand," he says, "that there are always side effects. Our focus will be on finding a routine that minimizes them. Then we can chart progress over time."

"Patience," he says.

He is speaking in a way that assumes, at this moment, that *future* is a concept you can value.

You understand, you feel like saying—that nights are a burgeoning doom, days a pale scrim. You should know that inside there are ants who want *out*. Instead you focus on minimizing side effects. The alignment of chi, balancing of chakras, the convergence of will into a surgical, micro-sized ray. That's exactly what you wish for: a precision beam of intent to zap the wayward factions in your head, not the chemical bludgeon of medication.

"I assure you that we'll work until we find a system that suits you. Take care. Call if you experience any—"

—any experience, effects on the side, interactions, mania, minefields.

You are shown to the counter in the lobby. The room is dry and smells faintly like ozone, an atmosphere maybe preferred by fake fauna. The receptionist smiles. Mother and daughter are gone. The toys are put back for the next child to find. Another girl will tug another sleeve *Can I?* You remember how to handle that question: *Yes but quietly.*

You remember another thing, a thing you once did. A strange thing to do and now, a strange thing to remember. Planting a tree. It was midnight or later. The lawn at the new house was barren. You intended what? Midnight visitation? From tree-fairy? From God?

The dilemmas of co-pay are remote, unknowable. There is a discrepancy. A check was returned; a balance is owed from last visit.

The shovel made a muffled *snick* when plunged in the dirt, glancing rocks, inscribing a circle of sod. The sod lifted off like a blanket.

You will pay the balance, yes.

It took longer than you thought. The deepening pit, the heaving breath, a plume in the night, a whole shirt soaked through. What was it, a Birch? A Poplar? It seems important.

A man at the nursery said how deep to plant it, to stake it against its top-heavy limbs, to help it grow strong roots. You smashed your hand with a hammer, the web between index and thumb. You finished anyway, the blood and dirt drying together. You are having a reverie, admiring the tree, its leaves white in the dark, when she pushes toward you a pen.

You sign something. You are handed an appointment card. You are handed a receipt. You are handed the scribbled apothecarial cipher. The nurse calls a new name. An in for an out. The new name strolls back. He looks haggard, gaunt, as if newly exhumed. He gives you a look. Plea? Recognition? Shame?

He's gone through the door. You think: a meeting of eyes, not sympathy of souls, strange ghost.

The receptionist's eyes make a smile that says your business is through, they point toward the door. Through the door, the blinding world. The light from outside makes a square on the floor. She nods at you again. You have a moment of doubt. There are more things to tell, to strike at the heart, make plain what you know. You've been having dreams—a man rings a bell, the wall has collapsed, a canal and a raft and a penitent oarsman—but you know these are useless.

You are blind in the sun. It takes a moment to make things make sense. There are birds overhead in swoop-dive pursuit of each other. A car glints past, a red streak as you step from the curb.

You thought you'd take the train back but you are afraid it will be crowded. And the thought of it, the swaying and rocking, makes your stomach go knotted. So you begin to walk. There is a hotel a bank a newsstand a high school on the way. A home. A diner you once ate at four pancakes apiece. It's a long walk, but humans are made to walk you think, to stare ahead and perceive a distance growing smaller, to listen and walk hear their own footfalls like the rhythmic lub-dub of their hearts. And right now you are fine. It's a rare thing that fine can recognize itself, so you keep walking exactly the same.

Walking and hearing, looking and walking. You remember the doctor, his professional opinion: this is completely normal.

ROADWORK

Natalie was in my bed sleeping that morning. She would stay awhile because she had the day off. When I got up she was sprawled, hair fanned everywhere. She made little snorky noises. I had a small apartment with a small bed that summer, on loan from a friend who was travelling. I felt like a traveler myself—in and out of college twice, set to try again. One last determined push. But it was late summer and I was still in my hometown, trying to work as long as possible.

As I dressed Natalie slid, aware of my absence, into the warm vacancy to her left. We had a thing for thunderstorms and the window was open from watching one the night before: the baleful wall cloud, the erratic electrical happenings, the pink sky before its terrible edge, the ozone smell after. The curtains were in full-sail and my desk papers all over the floor. I boxed up the movie we'd rented, to return on my way to work.

I remembered as I put on sunscreen in the bathroom, that I owed Brian an answer. Waterproof, unscented, noncomedogenic. I learned the jargon that year, to stay besmeared in the stuff, but not over-scented or shiny with oil. Brian mistrusted ambitions for college. He had found me a job. Not at the Highway Department, where he was my boss for the summer, but with a bridge crew at a big company. Union work, here as everywhere, required an *in*. "Think about it at least. It's good money. Best maybe you'll ever see."

In the kitchen I looked at things to eat, things that might be eatable, but decided it was too early to eat anyway. Eating seemed largely optional for several of those summers, a means to an end. A typical assemblage: one slice cheap cheddar cheese, one

half pear, two bites leftover eggplant parmesan, the last cold fibrous corner of some unfortunate roast.

Natalie's cigarettes were on the kitchen counter, cheap brand, rumpled pack. I lit one and put another behind my ear. I wrote a note before I left: *There is cereal, and eggs, and pickles. And a place down the street. Probably safest bet. Off to burn skin. Wake well*. I patted pockets last-check-like and tried to summon gusto—I sometimes came up short of gusto. Once outside I felt better. The still-cool air, the low fog—I wasn't a morning person, but these predawn moments felt full of possibility.

I felt keenly glad about Natalie being at my place. I hated to leave for an over-fraternal summer job like roadwork. But I admit, I liked the idea of it—Natalie drowsing still as I'm off to my sweaty male job. Truthfully, Natalie worked harder than I did, made more money than I did—but we had been playing house and I enjoyed the idea of her staying, the odd chance of her being there when I returned. Bartending is an inadequate term for Natalie's work. She encouraged ambitious drinking, six nights a week, with faithful enthusiasm, with selfless promotion and exuberance. She bartended her ass off. I liked to see her sleep in. I offered my bed as habitat for the indulgence.

Later I'd find it hard to picture Natalie in the winter. My early memories of her are summer ones, rushing into and out of air-conditioned places, illicit midnight swimming pool trespasses. We used to walk the neighborhood at night. I taught her a game I knew for cars and she adapted it for trees.

"That one is ravenous and has a big mouth and devours whole Buicks."

"This one is misunderstood and separate from the other two telling secrets."

Natalie went to school in Boston for a while but didn't like it, she said. I pictured her there, scarf-wrapped, a wholly different person. I was just getting to understand how many people a person might be over the course of a life. It was either reassuring or terrifying—I didn't know which. I'd known Natalie for a while, as a friend. Our new affiliation was exciting—to meet her, as sushi lover, as 70's art-rock fan, as piano phenom and trivia-master—but without the inelegance of strangers. All in all we were happy, which for both of us I think, was a welcome bit of change.

At work I'm early, but there is coffee percolating neatly in the break-room, which is populated by my silent coworkers. Brian is making concrete estimates—inches a fraction of feet, feet a fraction of yards, yards cubed—bic pen, click click, double tapped on temple. He calls Rex "Tex" but names me correctly. "Morning!" he says—says unfailingly. Dan is Tex's son. He carries in three frozen bottles of water. Dan is my age, that is, under forty, and so we usually shared a work-truck, dividing drive-time alternately. He flashes me a look, to ask am I hung over too. I smile, commiserating. I'm not really hung over, but he'll feel better if he thinks I am.

Something is off this morning, something making Brian, unflappable foreman, slightly saturnine man, stalk across the shop in over-the-phone dilemmas with the asphalt plant. "No. That's right. For TODAY! Six and nine." A purchase order has not been received, or a quantity is incorrect. Rex is drinking orange juice instead of coffee. Gary is late instead of early and, too, outside, crows are flocking and circling. Everyone is agitated. Probably though, it's the heat and that they are already sweating, at sunrise.

They are sore from a long week and thinking consentingly about winter, over-time in plow-trucks, murky brown slush flung curb-ward.

A skinny kid named Ed had recently been hired. He and an older guy were assigned to mow ditches, a job I had done summers before. There was a pecking order and Ed was at the bottom. When I saw him I gave him shit for the poor job he'd done sharpening mower blades. It wasn't vengeful, just a habit I'd picked up. In these kinds of workplaces shame and guilt are accepted instructional tools, but I immediately felt bad. I was that kid once.

A municipal highway department can make for an interesting convocation. We had ex-heavy-construction workers no longer able to play a young man's game. We had self-described mechanics, tinkerers of every stripe, forever breaking more than they fixed. We had sincere but incapable guys. But we had lifers too, who were humble, able, modest, and in it for the duration. Maybe they did not intend careers in road maintenance, but awoke one day too close to retirement to justify leaps of faith, lapses of insurance, stretches of uncertain income that might sink the dinky boat of savings they'd kept afloat so far.

I was raking asphalt that day, spreading it flat by movements of push and pull as it was dumped from a truck and fed through a paver. It crackled with held heat and radiated it up. Asphalt is mostly stone but flows like cooling lava and, at best, can be manipulated with long purposeful movements of the lute. Once cool, it refuses any sort of cooperative behavior, so speed and precision were the order of the day. I learned early that asphalt must be feathered and worked with, not against, lest it's tarry aggregate heft overwhelm

its handler, or steam them into a state of almighty defeat. I pushed it toward the edge of the road and pulled toward the saw-cut we'd made, or I'd flip the lute over and use its straight backside to drag a neat bead to a specific spot. It wasn't that hard, just urgent and stiflingly hot. Between loads I sprayed the long aluminum rake with diesel fuel, to keep the tar from sticking.

The morning was wet and agreeable, the sun yawning weakly. And there was a breeze. By eleven it was gone. The dew burned off and became humidity. The sun coaxed out sweat faster than it could be replaced and we worked in autopilot. There is a way you can work so that your mind doesn't notice the discomforts of the body—we had that figured out. People who didn't usually quit. After raking the asphalt flat a drum roller followed behind to our efforts permanence.

Across the road Tex arrived with another load and was futzing with bungee cords that held down a tarp that roofed the hot-rock. I was hiding in a work truck while others ate lunch, leaning on machinery and talking. I could hear them joking, their appraisals of the heat. I was determined to give my skin a break from the sun though. I stared out the window and wished we'd do more work in the country. It was nice to look at a cornfield, mirage-waves of heat rising off it, the shoulder-high stalks making their own plane above the ground like a false ground, the bug-eating birds above that, in swoop-dive pursuit of their meals.

It was early and I wondered if Natalie had left my place. I wondered if she ate breakfast before she left, or made a quick inspection of my properties, my prescription medicines. I wouldn't have cared. *I* would have snooped. You can't really appreciate a

person's place while they are home. You have to scrutinize their oddities, their knickknacks, their methodology of cabinet organization, while they are not looking. I wanted to go home right then, before she left. We could go somewhere—lunch on a barstool, wax conspiratorial about work, our absence from it, like skipping school and ducking in cars. I fantasized impracticable scenarios for leaving work, wondering if Brian could believe any of them. Finally, I called my home phone from my cell. I let it ring three times and hung up, feeling embarrassed about calling my own phone and hanging up.

Brian was a deceptive kind of boss. His beard and longish wolf face made him look like a starving animal, but he was easy with confidences and surprising in his sympathies. We drank beer after work sometimes, catching a quick buzz on our dehydration before going home—this too from some shared conspiracy. His arms swung slap-dash then, in the telling of tales. A sort of Chicago southside blue-collar Polish would emerge, an animation not seen while in full foreman mode, task-minded boss mode. Sometimes though, he would drop from the conversation after a few beers and retreat to the office, citing one or another duty. He would bother and scowl at a computer screen, or shuffle through measurements, or convert lineal feet to cubic yards again for the fourth time. It was like he'd remembered something he didn't want his face to betray.

Gary drove the roller and was good at it. I envied the guy on the roller. No heavy lifting, no running around, just the steering the machine. This was optimistic though. Gary knew how to pinch slowly toward the edges. He could cover some of our mistakes. He knew how to roll the edges without hanging the drum too far over and smashing the

lip. He would glower and fume in the steam he created. After the last truck was emptied and I had finished raking, Gary still had the last rolling to finish and I watched him—the careful glance over the side of the machine, the straight strips of blacktop pushed down, reversing direction unerringly. And despite my envy, this job was not easy. It occurred above the hot new road. The machine was hard to operate. It required unfailing attention. I pushed a neat little divot into his work with my boot, like a kid writing in new concrete. Gary used to frame houses. He could do plumbing and electrical. He remodeled his kitchen the previous month and his wife had plans for the living room. He seemed good at everything but content with considerably less.

The end of the day was a push. We scrambled to clean tools with gasoline and scrapers and chisels. Dan wedged a shovel against the drum of the roller as Gary inched it forward, to remove tar that had stuck. Brian was in true form now, shouting and pointing. Brian never ate lunch and usually looked ready for another shift. Equipment was flying into the back of trucks, trailers being loaded, engines shutting down, others starting up, boots being scraped, the sun a weakened dying orb to be resurrected later—for now, its allotted reprieve.

I rode back to the shop with Brian, the air conditioning set to high, making the windows fog. The tar-black strip of our new road lay like a ribbon on top of the old road.

Brian asked my opinion about the work as we drove over it. He didn't need my approval, or even my opinion, but he asked anyway.

"Pretty good?"

"Like a pool table."

"Like a putting green?"

"Like a putting green."

In another decade Brian worked for one of the largest construction companies in the country. He told fantastic stories about bridgework and skyscrapers—how he was supposed to wear a safety harness but didn't sometimes, because it was a hindrance. He said that I could make money in heavy construction. He said that I would be hired right on—he'd make sure of it.

"A guy can make something of himself before he ruins his body, these days.

He nodded as he said this, rapping a long finger on the steering wheel."

"A young man has it made. Lots of money to make. Lots of time."

I had heard this before. It sounded like a promise from the past. Like a hope.

Brian lived alone and I never saw the inside of his home, but I imagined it very uncluttered, like a new paved road, like his small office, organized with the sensibilities of a monk. He had never married, he had no children.

He had to go visit his grandmother that day. She was in a nursing home. How often did he see her? Twice a month, he said. That much was expected of him. The facilities were nice, as they go. Clean, and not as bad smelling as most—nice staff, very polite. We rode with the radio off. Silence was a treasured commodity after a day near the rumble clank and shudder of machinery. She wasn't terribly sick or anything, he said. She had suffered a stroke, but recovered well. It was too risky to let her live alone though, to cook for herself, to manage a house and its needs. These were things she'd done for the

better part of her life and denying her the home she'd made was something his family struggled to forgive themselves for. "It really is a nice place though," he said.

At the shop we hurried to put things away. We left some tools in the back of trucks, because we needed them the next day. We made a line at the fuel tanks in the yard and filled up trucks. We washed the tar from our hands with carburetor cleaner or Lava Soap. We pointed propane torches at our boots to soften the tar that had stuck.

Everyone filed out after smoking post-work cigarettes, or after letting their cars air out their greenhouse swelter. I wanted to leave right away, but Brian had already started giving Tex some shit—a kind of after-work tradition. There were no feelings hurt—it was a good natured thing. Tex grumbled and took the abuse and even smiled after a while. I stuck around the shop for one, then two, then five beers with Brian. Tex stayed too. He was good for shoptalk, a reliable ear for complaints. From lazy coworkers to splintered shovel handles.

A phone rang in the office. A late call could mean someone had hit a deer on a back road and the police wanted it cleared from the road, so Brian let it ring. He went to check the caller-id though. Tex smashed a beer can with his foot and threw it in a box we would empty in the dumpster before we left—to hide the evidence—government property and all.

"So when does the summer end for you?"

I wasn't sure how I would make rent all year at school, if I went. I hoped for a last minute windfall from my family, but it seemed unlikely.

"When I make enough for that apartment. I signed the lease already, is the thing."

The doom of that hadn't set in yet. I wouldn't have said any of this to Brian. He gave me more credit for my work than I deserved. I was a kid mostly, only playing with concerns like occupation and income, concerns my coworkers toiled away nights over, argued and disbanded families over. I felt sick when Brian saw potential in me, offered to find me jobs, to pull strings and call in favors. I was a dabbler and a fake.

"Ha! So you'll be a lifer then."

I never believed that Midwestern, sweat for your salvation ethic, but shoveling was therapeutic somehow and I could almost talk myself into a career at it—especially in the mornings, if there would always be a low fog, if there would always be a bare shouldered girl and a storm then I'd sweep the weeks together—a cold June, or rain, unrelenting heat, the week of the sunburn or broken pinky finger, I'd run them pleasantly together.

I was starting to feel sick thinking about things. I needed more than ever to go home, to cook a real meal, to have an understanding silence with a girl who has waited for me.

The sun was below the bay doors of the shop, casting the outside in. Brian sometimes wore his sunglasses inside, forgetting their presence, or because of the west-facing doors, or because he was hung over in the morning. He had them on and was sitting in his office, his feet on the desk. I grabbed my lunchbox, made my way exit-ward, freedom-ward, but felt a stupid passing regret that I am usually befuddled to name. I yelled:

"Brian! Have a good night."

“In the morning kid,” he said. “In the morning you owe me an answer.”

I had to drive east going to work and west going home. It was always very orange either way. My mind ran wildly at the end of certain days. I wished I could record those double-quick driving thoughts, but they were thoughts about nothing, ultimately—a hanging light bulb, a broken locket, the smell of horse manure, where the bread-basket of civilization is, words: obelisk, rust, fountain, vigil, granite. I hoped Natalie hadn’t left—and now, as hard as I try, I cannot even remember if she had. There are reasons and reasons for leaving. Among others: boredom, loneliness, guilt, habit. The future looming hugely, like it might be outrun. I owed Brian an answer, and I eventually gave him one, though it took several more days.

WILL YOU FORGIVE THE AUTHOR THIS ONE SMALL DIGRESSION

Before we start, let me just say: I make no promises whatsoever. We are set to traverse, there and back, the seas of youthful tumult! (Which, as you know, has never been my domain.)

She had three brothers, all older—no guidance there I'm afraid. Off to college, each of them, well before the tumult. (Which we will get to.) The father was not perfect, certainly, but a benign apparitional figure at worst. He appeared during the night and left crumbs on the rug. (Shall we crucify him for enjoying a sandwich?!) He made sloppy concentric rings in the lawn with his mowing: So what? Evidence of his commitment at least, to the appearance of things at their ramshackle residence on Larkspur. Consumed in his work, maybe. For certainly he was no *hell*-raiser. No dervish carouser upsetting the familial applecart. No tirades or drunkenness—he was *distracted* is all—not wholly unfit as a parent. (Though, of course, that would make a better story…)

Her mother, Malory, *she* was the one who had dalliances. You can ask her. She makes no bones about it. And more: from the beginning Malory wished nothing more than to relinquish the parenting to one Marta Le Guin, prodigiously acclaimed au pair. Let's strike a point, shall we, for the father, who drew the line at

that abdication? ("Just so you are free, any time you wish, to run across town to that *Peter*son of yours?" he said. "I don't *think* so!" he said.)

And because her mother was, really, quite absent and because he always worked at home, the father actually spent many long hours with his daughter during those early years thank you very much! He'd be working half-heartedly when she'd appear, like a miracle, in his study to deliver a secret in the manner of children. ("It sounds like rocks but it's rain.") They'd sit on the porch on days when it rained and swing on the swing and be jointly amazed by the weather. He couldn't work when it rained anyway—it felt like being under some siege and he'd have to quit, or risk some shift and subsequent rudderless guessing. Sometimes his daughter would dare him to run out in the deluge and he'd oblige with a frantic sprint to the garage and back, feigning a shriek of panic. (He secretly loved this!) Or summer barbeques (pre-vegetarianism) when she'd insist on making a dish of her own. He'd allow her to mix whatever concoction she wanted. Once, a whole bottle of truffle oil into the mix! And he'd dutifully taste the final result. Now (in the narrative's present) his daughter refuses to remember *those* days.

Well look. You've heard it a hundred times. Or one like it, I'd guess. I'll tell it if you want, but they all come out the same, don't you think? The names change, the plots change, but they're all the same shape. If you close your eyes and roll them around in your mouth they all *taste* the same. Must we particularize the

whole shameful shebang? We could end it now and just assume the worst, couldn't we? It's more of the same-old from here.

You're not convinced.

Well, get comfortable then. Frankly, it's a lot of time to invest. And for a fairly modest payoff. I hereby give notice: There shall be no denouement, no meditative calm at the backend of the arc, no lateral shift signifying epiphany, no device affording graceful exit. We have only contradiction to look forward to, consternation, rapid perambulation down the path of discontent—let's be clear on that.

Have you found a comfortable spot? It looks like rain—have you rolled up the windows in your car? By all means! By all means! This next part, I'm afraid, is typical of the genre: exposition, a touch lyrical, imperiled by pathos, sweeping summary, etc. I'm less than proud of it so I'll just soldier on while you're out, if you have no objection? Good.

—so that by the time she was old enough she had very little interest in learning how to drive. When her parents insisted (she had a little part time job to go to and from) she took the test but refused to let them match her savings on a modest little compact. (Independence, at that age, a vocation in itself maybe.) The start of aversion to debts of all kinds, emotional ones especially. Instead she begged rides, bicycled when necessary, and sometimes was late for—

Forgive me. It's just, I feel compelled to interject, to point out that *already* we see the seeds of stubborn resolve—I thought it would take longer. It's less pronounced then, say, her dreadful high school years, but it's there all the same. The trait then, we must conclude, is wholly inbuilt. For she didn't get it from her father! And her mother, well, is no fount of determination.

We might suspect some moral impasse, some dilemma met early in life—a refusal of the moderate compromise—but this isn't that kind of story I'm afraid. There were the normal early formative events sure, but none that will help us here. We shouldn't look for causality with this character anyway. I've searched and searched and I'm afraid it's just not there to be found.

From here on I'll ask you to not to assume too much about our character at all. (We'll call her N, by the way.) It's a thing we tend to do, to read quite a little bit of ourselves into fictional persons. And while on one hand it seems natural, and maybe even the point, it also threatens to lead us astray, to blind us to the enormity of a free and sovereign consciousness. It begs the conclusion that a character, in some way, is symbolic of a universal "us-ness." I used to think this way too. Allow me to spare you the research.

In fact, as you will see, certain parts of the narrative are designed to dissuade you of the very notion of causality. You may find, for example, that placing yourself in N's shoes is quite discomforting. (Don't be fooled by that early scene with the rain. N, by now, has grown into a full fledged catastrophe.)

Inhabiting her directly could be disastrous, like feeding a computer a paradox, you might self-destruct in endless loops of frustrated binary gibberish. Smoke might issue from your ears! You've noticed, I take it, the narrative's considerable distance from N? Well it's for your own good. Stay emotionally unentangled, is my earnest advice. It won't do for you to risk your own emotional balance on a story with, frankly, negligible resemblance to your life. This isn't one of those neat morality tales for which I've become famous. (And maligned—I have no delusions.) This is something else entirely.

Take the cooking scene coming up. The stark emotional response to the cold animal flesh, the too-close scrutiny of the joints' articulation, that teary business there by the counter. I can barely stomach it. And surely *you* reject these too, as models of your own life? Originals from which your own experience is traced? And if there *is* some resemblance, some tangential link, it serves only to remind you of your own separation, your own sovereignty, yes? I should hope so—N has long since exhausted any reasonable stores of sympathy. (Full disclosure: I had a little crying jag in the kitchen once too, an onion related incident, despite what my slanderous wife will insist.)

If we must, we'll even look at N's ill-advised marriage. (A courthouse affair, despite both parties possessing the requisite cousins, uncles, and grammar school chums. And parents, who though skeptical, would have been thankful at least to attend.) How quickly the thing dissolved! Ask *that* poor boy about causality—he's

reeling yet! No, the reader will not gain, in this case, by mere compilation of incident. It's as likely that N reads presages in tealeaves, as it is that she's *actively* confounding her parents. (Their longing for grandchildren, for one. It's a tired, pedestrian familial dispute I'm aware, but they're getting no younger, you know?!)

A word on N and chickens: It should be noted that N, despite her restrictive dietary philosophies, is known to enjoy the odd feta spinach omelet. The author can't help but indicate how offensive an omelet should be to our meat shunning vegetarian neophyte. (For let's consider a moment the honest nature of its whisked embryonic contents.)

In Portugal, where she ultimately landed, N considered her distance from home—a whole Atlantic—but wondered what tendrils of her old life encumbered her yet and set about to sever them. Is it as simple as that? To flee like the bat from the proverbial cave? To swing the machete quickly once around and split a life in two? Mitosis? She certainly tried. (And found others also trying. Whole European economies ateeter, I suspect, on the plastic cash of coddled American kids.)

A Bostonian barman led to an El Centro expat who is said to be her employer, as best her father can tell. Who, at this point, is struggling mightily with his own notions about causation. (We however, dear reader, will fall into no such

trap—as I have said, we stand to be led significantly far astray by such conjecture.) Can we help what fabrications N chooses, in the wee small hours, to occupy her mysterious mind? Let's just note it and move on, shall we? Yes, lets.

And besides, for my money, N's habit of invoking a fraught childhood is mostly a kind of fiction. The sort of indulgence we might be inclined to excuse, were it not a habitual deception. We sense the tinge of melodrama in it—which, to be fair, is a trait N has conquered in other realms of her life. How *did* she come by that icy façade? That personal, inborn, protestant-flavored penal system?

It makes it difficult to get the finer points of her character on the page, I admit, so given is she to typical Midwestern reserve. That air of having acquitted herself reasonably in the cosmic game of checkers. Distant, even as a child. A stony, far-gazing kid. Can her father be blamed for undervaluing the needs of so impervious a creature? For failing to consider the more incidental hurts of childhood—inattention, the occasional coarse word, neglect for the ease with which the clatter of marital dispute filters upward, through ceiling and floor boards, to the vigilant ears of a nine year old child? Should we assume that these determined the west-coast college, the hasty marriage and subsequent split, the flight to Portugal, the cramped small flat there for cash to a conman? (No hot water even, last time I checked!) I think no, we should not. Such an indictment is going too far. This is not a literature of blame, I'm afraid—though I can direct you toward some, if you wish.

Can't all of us point to injustices? Hurts, pettiness, cruelties aplenty, casualties only of having been born? N likes to remember the time—she was young, seven or so—in the middle of a (much anticipated) TV documentary (a visual achievement for it's time, by the way, Australopithecus, Homo habilis, all the early hominids, made animate, digitally) that she requested, "Please Dad, no more monkey-men. They're creeping me out." Must we interrogate such minutia? If we try I'm sure we can ascribe it some import. (Her ephemeral husband had a prominent brow-ridge.)

And wasn't N afforded every comfort in her upbringing? Did she want even for a (expensively imported) Bluthner piano during the peak of that (promptly abandoned) pursuit? I can report that no, she did not. In fact what, of the *many* advantages of her childhood, are of use to her there, in Albufeira? (Where literally *any* tragedy might happen!) Not *dressage* lessons, nor portraiture photography equipment, nor the half-completed graduate study on the history of the Roman spice trade. And certainly not six years of personal German language instruction.

And where is her mother in all of this? She is excused simply by dint of her absence?

Okay. So, you see? I haven't led you astray. It's just as I told you. And we're arrived at a perfectly plausible place to issue another warning: We're about to "flash back." We refer to this sort of thing as a *temporal shift*. It allows us to talk about the device in a way that doesn't invoke mustachioed Hollywood B-film

producers. And you should be warned, an experimental gesture is forthcoming. As you may know, I generally don't skew toward the untested, and fairly loath the *avant-garde,* but I've decided to indulge my whims here a bit. At this point in my career I may well have earned it.

I began to write at age nine. (Another shopworn plot I'm aware. With all writers it seems, they either know by age nine, or the impulse strikes mid-thirties, while rebuilding a carburetor.) Of course the passion for it waxes and wanes, from the first ambitious verbosity and throat-clearing, to a false maturity in the middle, short lived slumps of despair, etc. The end remains yet to be seen, but I'd like to believe it will be graceful. No parading out of the belabored masterwork—no, that shall remain, yellowed and sprawling, securely in the desk drawer. If current opinion can be any predictor (it probably cannot), I may be read for a decade more (or probably less). And I am fine with that end. If it's said that I had "(insert adverb and adjective) talent for (insert narrative device)," that is enough. I'll take "room for comparison with" over "heir to." No problem. The present work has always been my focus. And there is no use denying that the present work is troubling. There seems to be no way out, I admit.

Who am I to say it's not a life she's arranged on that distant Atlantic coast? Should we just leave well enough alone? Would this, too, be better confined under the lock and key of the desk drawer? Would we do better to give N her peace? Who hasn't, in devil-may-care bouts of reverie, conjured themselves a coastal

town, an economy flat, a job schlepping trays? I've thought it myself, but to go through with the scheme!

Let's leave it at this: our character alone on a rain-runneled beach, in a post-work euphoria, having walked outside the halogen glow of the lights of hotels, thinking what it means to be enveloped in sound as it's born in the contest of surf sucking out and sloshing back in. It builds and thickens in the cavity made by the up-rising beach so that she imagines it is a kind of energy, or physical medium that might cling to the skin, it fairly crackles and pops in the hairs on her arms.

You'll agree what a nice image that makes.

And really what choice do we have but to leave her here? It would be customary to offer her thoughts, but I don't have the strength to hazard them.

Oh Nina, Dummy. You were loved. You were loved. You were loved.

OWL TREE

Out of us three only two are brothers, but we don't mind. Two brothers plus a half-time brother equals us three any day. Like this one time. Let's not go home to our home we say us three this one time. Each of us agrees. We head for the woods instead. By our home there are trees. Through the trees is where the woods are. A creek burbles through. Us three throw rocks at fish in the water.

We say let's make us a fire to sit by. Let's try to be quiet this time. We can be quiet, each of us three agrees. We say let's find boxes or buckets or bedsprings or stumps. Let's find something that us three can sit on. These are beer-can bedspring woods these woods, but us three we don't mind. And here at this point we start looking.

We don't say-so when us three are going. This way we can't get found. We bring a rusty corn-knife. We bring matches and our wooden walking-in-the-woods sticks each of us have found. We know how to hide us three down low in a gap to hear anyone not us three who's coming. We can run fast in the woods. We can duck under trees and see in the dark. Our six arms are arms that can carry our things a long way.

We find us three some things to sit on. We gather dead grass and leaves. Then twigs. Then bark. We build up with our six hands our handfuls of kindling. We strike matches to our tinder. We tend the glowing ember. We make ourselves a three-part bellows to feed the glow with our lungs, until it jumps from grass to bark, before we put the big sticks in. We watch it grow, this fire.

We have a house we live in, back before the trees. With beds and rooms and Cowdog, who is an old dog, and places also for hiding. But we like the dark of the

woods, for one thing. And silence. We like blue moon and night-sky and fireside like lamplight and cold air for us to get chilled by. We like the way us three look in the dark. Changeable, on the verge of becoming.

By the fire we make with our tongues the low talk that is the right kind of talk for a fire. By now our six hands are cold hands and we show them the warmth of the glow. We are pleased with this, this gathering and kindling of a fire to sit by. When we are quiet our six ears can hear our hands breaking twigs. Our hands know it's good to feel the snap of a twig, to toss it through the air when its size is right for the fire.

When we are quiet we know us three are thinking our thoughts. We know we can't live in these woods, but our three bags are full bags, full of things that we need. When we say lets build us a fire, we know what us three should bring. We put blankets and food in our bags. And socks and flashlights and knives. We say lets stay as long as we can.

We see the three of our faces, how they get moon-blue and fire-lit, becoming. We see the fire cast our shadows out flat and make big wing shapes behind us. Shoulder to shoulder we make a bird's shadow. In the trees' shadows, behind our own shadows, we hear night things chasing noises. But we are safe we say by a fire.

When the fire burns low we say let's walk. Let's walk us three across these woods clear to the other side. Or build up our fire and stay. Let's pick one or the other. We don't know how big these woods are, but we could do it we say. We say night things are not real things and are only things in our heads. Let's, when the fire burns low, walk clear to

the other side. We won't run out of food. Our three stomachs are stomachs that don't need much food in the woods. And how big could these woods really be?

We walk carefully us three through the trees. We crouch low in the dark. This in fact is a thing that we love, to see what we see crouched low in the dark as we walk through the woods in the moonlight. We can run fast in the woods. And duck under trees. We hear the noise of a thing in the woods that's for sure a thing getting closer. But it's not a thing we can see. It's probably the wind blowing treetops together, we say, making the noise getting closer.

We say, us three to each other, let's crouch low in the dark. Let's climb up the point that the creek burbles round. Let's see what its like to look down. We can wait until morning to walk to the other side.

We see eyes in the dark as we walk. But us three, we are not scared we say not scared of eyes in the dark. Not scared because we are also eyes seeing back those eyes that see us. Our six eyes see back the eyes of an owl—an owl who blinks twice and lifts from its treetop. The owl who sees us, it bends its wings around the air. It makes a crashing noise in the treetops. Us three we swing our sticks at the owl, we hoot and yell.

We climb up this one time the tree that is the owl's tree to see what we see from the treetops. We do not see the noise getting closer. We walk and listen. We do not hear, us three, the sound of a thing getting closer. We say maybe the sound is a thing in our heads. Or the sound of a squirrel in the leaves. We say squirrels are loud when they run through the leaves. Each of us three agrees.

We say, let's climb to the top of the point. Let's see what it's like to look down. When each of us three say yes, we make a plan. We say let's take off our shoes and take off our socks when we cross the creek to the point. Let's leave our bags in the owl-tree. And this is what we do. We each of us three take off our bags, our six shoes and socks. We hang us three our things from the owl tree's treetop. We tie together our shoes' shoelaces and swing them out over the branches. We hang our bags by their straps. We hang our coats in the owl tree too. We push our blankets in the crook of a branch. We say let's roll up our pant legs and wade in the water and climb to the top of the point. From the top of the point we'll see what we see, maybe the thing making noise getting closer. We might see what it is that it is.

It is deep in the creek since it rained. The water is up to our six ankles first, then quickly our knees. When we are half way across we take us three our shirts off our backs and hold them up over our heads. When we have crossed we are cold but we agree, the noise of the thing getting closer is not the noise of a squirrel. We say it is cold, but maybe when we get us three to the top of the point, maybe we can build us a fire. We can see what we see and build us a fire and dry off our clothes, we agree.

We are too cold to care at the top of the point about the noise of a thing getting closer. We are so cold our six hands are blue hands. Our jeans are soaked to the waist. We say let's build us a fire to sit by. We'll build us a fire and stay quiet. We'll stay by the fire until morning. We'll get our blankets and coats in the morning. On the top of the point there are trees and dead grass and we gather up our kindling again. We strike matches to the tinder. We tend the glowing ember. We watch our fire grow in the night.

We say, us three to each other, let's build our fire big. Let's build a fire no noise will come near. We feed it sticks and branches. We look down and can see us the owl tree. Our bags and our blankets our shoes and our coats all hanging up there in the owl tree. But we hear the noise getting closer below.

Us three, we build our fire bigger. We put dirt on our faces and yell. We yell at the noise down below. We yell at the noise and throw rocks down below. Let the noise make its noise, we agree.

By the morning our fire has burned low. We stop yelling when the sun reappears. We walk to the edge. We can see what it's like to look down. We see our things in the owl tree and the creek burbling round down below. The noise is gone with the night. Us three, who are two brothers plus one half time-brother, we agree, if we look out over the trees, if us three look very hard, we might see the other side.

GOGEBIC

Buried once digging a sewer, gassed by chlorine twice, my father—imagine—didn't die young. But between then and now, there were wars, unemployment, recession. The internet. The world changed: story of fathers forever. When they are finally and truly gone the photos are almost an insult. To our need for knowing, I mean. That goofy hat, that duck down vest, why was he holding a teapot?

My wife and I have taken a trip, the fishing kind ostensibly. She's not the type, but has indulged me generously in this. She's a walks-in-the-park kind of outdoorslady, a you-bait-the-hook kind of fisherwoman, but also, she is not to be dared. We have arrived and unpacked and showered and now it's too late to go fishing but we walk down to the dock anyway and lookover our boat, look out at the lake, which is huge and, I'm shocked to find, frightening in its grey enormity. A thing I hadn't noticed when I a kid.

"We're two weeks late," he said, I remember, standing in this same spot thirty years earlier. He surveyed the water as if prophesying from tealeaves. We, back then, were also on a trip—him and my brother and I—to lake Gogebic, not in the mitten part of Michigan but that upper-northern part that looked to me, nine years old, like a bounding rabbit with a messed-up spine. I tell all of this to my wife.

He had been getting up in the dark and walking down to the dock. If I was up he might take me with. He'd stare out over the lake impossibly long, as if looking for something impossibly small, bobbing out there on the horizon.

"Two more and the ice is on, pal. Two more and we don't need the boat. We just walk right out on the water. Whaddaya think? Maybe we stay the winter."

He sweeps his hand across the backdrop here, like broadcasting seeds, like bequeathing a kingdom. There is something there in the speech—from his parent's parents, from the Polish or Swedish—a trace of the first generation. He eyed me, grinning. He was, I realize now, a man who liked jokes. Lydia is polite, but is relieved, I can tell, that she didn't get to know him—that she wasn't obliged to love him.

I have made my wife promise we will take our own, yet hypothetical, children on trips like this. It doesn't have to be fishing. Historical sites maybe. It doesn't really matter. We are resolved to be a family that goes places together. I make too much of this planning, I know, but Lydia—the miracle of her understanding—she thinks this is okay.

"I hope this surf calms down by tomorrow," she says. "Do they call it surf when it's a lake?"

I'm not sure about surf on a lake. It sounds oceanic, marine. Maybe on inland seas. All I know is it freezes, this lake. All these years and I still cant imagine it freezes.

"Sure, right out on the water," my father said. "You don't think so? I drove a *car* across this lake once. Ok not this one. But they do that here," he said.

"Why did he do that? There or anywhere? Do you think he really did?" Lydia wants to know. And here I'm stumped. He may have been joking. But possibly, a race to last call? A rescue mission? A drunken dare most probably. I pictured his Pontiac, springs shot, careening across the snowpack.

"He was sort of an idiot, Lydia." I say this, but I don't believe it. My father was not an idiot. It's just handy, that sort of thing. It's quicker than parsing the literal facts, which are obscure and yellowed and brittle.

That trip, under his skippering, was a series of temptations of fate in an aluminum flat-bottom boat. I was not an adventurous nine-year-old, but I remember I had a wild time riding in that boat. It didn't cut through waves but rode *up* them, achieving perilous verticality before slapping down on the other side, ringing like a gong. I never felt scared, even if I should have.

We managed to get the same cabin, Lydia and me. The one my father preferred. Though they've been given campy names under the resort's new ownership: Loon's Nest, White Fish, Pine-Bough Lodge. We are in, sort of elegantly we think: Mallard.

I tell Lydia how my mother always said have fun but not too much, when we'd go somewhere without her. She also said I was a water child, March-born, which I thought, back then, might explain my thrill to nautical adventure. It made as much sense as anything.

"I can picture you as a kid," my wife says. " You're the best like adult guy so I think you must have been the best kid too." It's the kind of faith that makes me grimace. I am painfully aware of the ways her love is unearned. I want, above all, to *deserve* the faith of this lady. We've been married three years and the source of her goodness is still mostly a mystery to me. This woman, if she sold religion, I'd convert in a hurry.

Reasons—even then I sensed the misdirection in that word—had delayed our trip by a week, causing us to miss the last of an Indian summer by a matter of days. I understood that the rest of the week would be cold, wind-whipped, damp. Later, back in the cabin, I asked if boats could sink. Somehow I thought only ships could sink, that

small boats had their own buoyancy, like the toy boat I had back home. You could release it from the bottom of the tub and watch it breech like a porpoise.

"Bumpy ride today maybe, but good fishing. Out in the deep stuff. Trolling, crank baits."

He looked at me as if awaiting response. I'm not sure if his vagueness was deliberate, meant perhaps to be instructive? He could be a vague man. He assumed you were following whatever path he was ambling.

I was only familiar with the kind of fishing that involved a bobber and long stretches of daydreaming. I didn't know what trolling or crank baits were, but they sounded menacing. I had an image of my father in a darkened room pouring over charts with other men, possibly in uniform, possibly smoking pipes. "Hmm, yes. I was afraid it would come to this: trolling, crank baits."

I tried to look solemn, like I knew all about it.

"We'll buy you new coveralls tomorrow. Snug as a bug. Just remember, you go overboard those boots fill with water.

He points at my boots with his cigarette.

"Gotta shuck'em off fast, coveralls too, or down you go!"

He did a little cartoon whistle, the coyote plummeting from the cliff-top, and smiled. I thought I'd leave the laces untied, to be safe.

My conversations with adults, my father included, were usually routed through my brother. There seemed to be an age related barrier—Aaron could at least, waving and shouting, make his presence known to the other side. But Aaron was having "a difficult

time" lately and was ignoring my father like it was a contest. This meant my father was speaking directly at me more often than was usual. He liked having a new audience, I think. It was understood that I would listen, that what he was proffering were the choicest nuggets of his accumulated wisdom. For him, fishing was a deadly serious business. It had its own arcana, its own lore. Fishing was fine, but I'd decided it was largely a venture of chance. I saw no sign that fish could be tempted, coerced or influenced whatsoever, except by their own fickle impulses.

"Look, the next time we do this we bring your mom, eh? Can you see it? The look on her face? She catches a big walleye? You think she'd like that?"

I wasn't sure Mom would like fishing. She never came with us on these trips—boy stuff, she said—and I didn't know why she would now. She did not enjoy trials by inclement weather. And, now especially, it seemed a strong gust might whistle right through her, send her overboard where she would, most likely, dissolve. I pictured her at home, becoming slowly invisible. She was killing herself, slowly and tenderly, in a way no one could hate her for.

I think about him a lot now. I try to decide his part in all of it. It's unfair of course, but it's something. It would work, on paper, this blame.

She spent her time on the couch looking through photo albums, as if puzzling out some riddle she found in there. In the middle of the night I'd hear her clanking through cupboards, sliding drawers open and shut. For a month in the spring she visited her mother in Tucson where she could, my father said, rest.

"This wind is a bitch though, ya? Maybe it dies down maybe it doesn't. We'll see."

She finally did evaporate, first into rehab, the kind for addicts of middling means, then the houses of cousins who loved her and failed her in turns, then the apartment on the south side where I visited only once, becoming more diffuse later, so that what remains of her finally is a residue that turns up—chocolate milk and garlic toast, my brother remembers, were things she really loved—in the unexamined corners of our lives.

The next day I threw a coat over my pajamas and carried our gear down to the boat before breakfast. It was one of my father's basic philosophies: First you get cold, then you warm up. I wanted no delays when it was time to cross the open water. I pretended to enjoy the endless stationary jigging we'd been doing, but I was really only in it for the sprints back and forth, the long ride across the lake in the morning and the return trip at night. If we went full speed and hit a wave just right it felt like we might take flight, might hang there, stuck above the water.

I stowed my pole and tackle box and seat-cushon life-preserver and bailed the few inches of water that had leaked into the boat overnight. I made a note in my book to learn more names for waves. These were wonderful, heady waves. They crashed and foamed under the dock, like the ocean I guessed, minus salt. But still, they were only waves. My father seemed to have some personal relationship with the water—standing there staring I couldn't invoke it myself, so I went back up to the cabin.

Aaron was awake and fiddling with the rabbit ears on the TV. It was old even then. A color set, but everything glowed an eerie green. He'd managed to tune in an episode of Captain Kangaroo that scrolled like movie credits in perpetual upward loops. I had been telling Aaron lately he was an ass-face. Not in a hateful way. It was just exploratory. I'd tested other things, wrote them in my book, but ass-face seemed—obnoxious, bodily, absurd—like the height of profane abuse. I thought about calling him it as I walked through the door but he looked upset, defeated by the elusive airwaves. I thought I'd let it drop. I thought maybe I'd convinced him his face actually did look like an ass, which it didn't, but was still a thing I liked to picture.

I sat down next to my brother and watched the Captain feign chagrin as ping-pong balls rained down on his head.

—She won't be there when we get back, he said. I think she's going to Canada.

I knew he was making it up, but that didn't make it untrue. He might have just thought of it, and needed to say it, to see if it held. It's a thing children learn, to sound out a lie as it hangs in the air, to say a lie as a kind of divination.

I said I thought she would be there.

—She's going to move out. I heard dad say she might.

I said he was full of shit and went to look in the fridge. I knew what he'd heard because I'd heard it too. My mother told my father she'd move out if he wanted, move out and get clean and come back in a year. That was her plan. She thought it would take a year to make it stick, once and for all. My father wanted her to stay.

I know this now: my father wanted too much. His problem, I think, was one of scope. He wanted to buy a belated ring. He wanted new blades for the mower. He wanted an in-ground pool and blacksmith's equipment and a two-way radio to talk to the dead. He wanted booze without hangovers and a machine to stop time. He did not want millions of dollars, just the freedom to not think about dollars. He wanted a dairy farm in Malvern Iowa and my mother as she was in pictures.

Out the kitchen window I could see him in the cab of the truck struggling with the mobile phone. He'd bought it specifically for the trip. It was a bulky device with its own shoulder-strapped bag, a battery big enough to crank over a Cessna. Unplugged from the truck's cigarette lighter it died in minutes however.

My brother snapped the following picture: my father hanging out the open door, standing on the Chevy's bench-seat, hoisting the base of the phone toward the sky, the receiver pressed to his face by his shoulder, his stocking cap lop-topped and Smurf-like and precariously attached to his head. His face indicates cursing.

When he came back inside he went straight for the bedroom (my brother and I shared bunk-beds in the loft—creaking steel army-surplus jobs, pads thin as pot-holders) and began pulling on layers of clothing. He shouted that we should be doing the same.

A father's clothing a great mystery to their sons, I believe—heavy, industrial, canvas. He had boots I could put my head in. I'd have to wear my old coveralls for the time being. They were synthetic and silky, too blue, too small—they made me crouch, hunch-backed, which I didn't really mind because I imagined if I stood suddenly up,

raised my arms above my head, I'd burst out of them like The Hulk, which might even save me from drowning.

When they were younger, first married, everyone thought it would be the other way around. My father, I've heard secondhand, was affable, funny, handsome. A charmer. Also, a mercurial dervish drunk. Days at time.

He'd dried out by the time I was old enough to have memories. In my thirties, when I found myself in bars he'd frequented, men—living talking artifacts of his youth, preserved there on barstools—might see the resemblance. As long as there was beer they'd happily recount the past.

—The junker Impala, sixty bucks cash.

—He drove it a year unregistered.

—He left it crossways in traffic on Addison.

—He walked to the nearest bar.

—When the squad car and tow truck showed up he bought rounds. A bribe for silence.

—When the squad car and tow truck took off, he howled, bought more rounds.

I picture them peeking from the windows of Sunny's, grown men giddy with havoc, horns going everywhere, backed up to Western, a cluster-fuck of cars to be proud of. My father abuzz with the glory of mischief.

He woke up in jail anyway, a misdemeanor, an unrelated offense, a night in the tank. This much I'm sure about: His head hurt terribly. His ego was bruised, along with his femur. He was thirsty enough to suck slush from the gutters. The Impala was one of a thousand unregistered heaps in a chain-link Chicago impound. The light on a morning like that is clear and piercing and a penance in itself, and so he hoofed it, two miles home, where my mother and brother watched cartoons.

—Several like that.

I couldn't sleep that night in the loft. Before the trip I had never slept in a two story building. I thought about our double weight, mine and Aaron's, on the heavy steel bunks. I worried we'd go through the floor. And I kept thinking about our mother. I had only been missing her at night. On the top bunk in that loft I was maybe as high off the ground as I'd ever been. That night I dreamed I was in charge of an antenna, a blinking red-tipped cartoon radio apex. Each time it blinked I had to throw a switch or Chicago would suddenly go quiet. Radios dead, televisions fuzzy, cars would stop confused in the street. I woke up convinced I'd messed up the switch.

SHIFT

I thought that it would help things, Maria coming back. And it has in a way, so maybe it's just the arrival of fall at the root of all this madness. A new chill signals some terrifying wonder. A north-wind kicks up to jar loose August's complacence. Silver cottonwood leaves, having been signaled too, flutter and jangle as if to wave bye. And if you think I'm being too wistful here, getting all far-gazing and ponderous on you, it's because it's that kind of day now. The cool light, the new air, the thin dread is upon me. Things feel doomed again and I can do as much about it as I can the earth's slow axial wobble itself.

We had been pretending at a kind of family—an impromptu family, here in a city that was none of our homes. When Maria left though, everyone came to their senses—the spell was broken. That cautionary voice in the night, that whisperer of snide reminders—age, net-worth, woeful job portfolios, heart disease statistics—it drifted in as you slept and worked its powers of suggestion. Everyone left, for hometown love interests, for last-ditch dissertation attempts, for the security of the family business, and some, for Portland or Anchorage, as if the cloying midnight voice might be outrun.

Maybe because I'd lived here the longest, or maybe because I didn't want to learn a new city, or maybe because this place was full of memories that I couldn't abandon—anyway, I stayed. And at first it was great, this aloneness. I always claimed to envy a solitary existence. I missed Maria, of course, but I found that I didn't really miss the rest of them. They were a sort of family but, like them, I was ready to begin something new. My thoughts felt uncrowded for the first time in years. Mundane objects seemed to radiate with possibility, a palpable energy. I became observant and appreciative of life's

small wonders—the way the city smelled different at night, the orange light of nightfall making my living room into a wholly different room, the liberty to explore, literally, what lay around the next corner—a visceral awareness that I have always admired, a trait, I thought, of the beatific and enlightened.

But I discovered: this sort of thing turns solitary people into crazy people. I found myself frequently moved to tears by dog food commercials. The water-spots on the shower door threatened to deliver me some cosmic insight. If I stared long enough at the bathroom wallpaper, faces would emerge. So when I wrote to Maria a month ago it was partly out of loneliness. I was still in love with her, yes. But also, I feared the role of wandering mutterer was in my future, that a disembodied voice might charge me with propagation of some grand unified-field theory. I was worried that, anytime soon, cats would become an unreasonably large part of my life.

The first part of the letter went like this:

> Maria,
>
> So how are you?—is how I want to start. How is Ft. Lauderdale? Tell me about life and work and things. Are you, as we speak, lounging beachside lizardly? Are you newly tan and lithe and exuding a healthful glow? Are you brushing up on your nautical vocabulary? You never know when you might need to lash the spurling pipe to the spinnaker pole or belay the bowsprit or something. Are you pretending to be a pirate? Because I think

it would really help endear you to the locals. I guess you have never had a problem endearing yourself to the locals. And what about Hemmingway's cats? You should really drive down there and verify the toe thing.

Ok, the real reason I'm writing is because I feel homesick, even though I'm at home—

You can imagine where it heads from there. I'll spare you the rest, but I can tell you that it amounts to a great deal of optimism. I knew it was a potentially shortsighted letter, but I wasn't going to send it. As far as I could tell, Maria had no reason to come back. It would represent a return to old problems, old routines. I could promise her that it would start differently this time, but I feared it would end the same.

It was no coincidence that all of our friends left shortly after she did. Maria is someone who people stake their life to. That's how it has always worked. People, men, women, dogs—after meeting her—uproot themselves from whatever little turnip patch they're planted in to look for one closer to hers.

That is *really* why she left. Our life together had turned into a group affair. Our place had become a kind of boarding house. Laurie had her own place, but kept a room in our attic too. Colleen planed weekly adventures for the group that had become such a routine that they were impossible to decline. When Adam lost his job and moved in, he stayed for five months. There were people over nightly. When Maria took off, a year ago,

I could read it on their faces. They looked mystified, bewildered, hung-over. Slowly, they all left.

The day after writing the letter, I went shopping for groceries, which usually cheers me up. It's hard not to feel optimistic strolling among produce—it's particolor promise of health, of vegetal wellbeing. I ran into Tommy, who works there. Tommy is the wrong size for stocking broccoli, but it is the only thing I ever see him do. I've become convinced it's his only job, or that they give him that task as a joke. Someone is surely having a laugh at Tommy as he bends his towering torso to the bottom-most tier of the produce case to stack and arrange those bundles of green florets.

From what I can tell Tommy only likes to talk produce. He'll shrink and stutter and beg off at the mention of a sports game, but prompted with heirloom tomatoes, or hybrid squash varieties, Tommy lights up. We discussed the merits of garden cress, Swiss chard, the elephant foot yam (or stink-lily), which Tommy says, is nearly impossible to find in our city, which led naturally to elephant *garlic*, leeks, shallots, asparagus, and so on. I had exhausted all the bulb and root vegetables I could think of and was feeling pretty positive about things, so I suggested that we, Tommy and I, grab a beer and (here is my mistake) watch a football game sometime. The color drained from Tommy's face. He frowned a little and said "Good to see you. I should get back to work. They'll fire me if I don't get this stuff stocked. I'll see you around."

With that, I made my way to the door. I hadn't bought anything, but I didn't really need anything. I had been carrying the letter with me all day and when I left the store I

walked straight to the mailbox on the corner and deposited it there, where I knew I could not retrieve it.

That night, as I lay on the floor, the fan-blades whirling overhead suggested several alternate dimensions of reality; matter vibrating too fast to see. When I woke up it was three in the afternoon.

The next two weeks were sort of a blur. I went to work, but the work is monotonous. I can do it in auto-pilot, which I apparently did, because I couldn't tell you anything about it. I went back to the grocery store, but Tommy wasn't stocking broccoli. Some new employee was picking wilted leaves out of the bulk spinach. She didn't look like she wanted to talk. I ended up drunk at a bar where the bartender *did* like to talk, but, it turns out, only about playing the guitar. I remember sitting on a park bench and watching some pigeons. Not feeding them, mind you, or talking to them—it was not that bad yet. Also, there was an incident with the microwave and an extra zero digit, which I learned can have profound effects on the odor of one's couch cushions. I was on the phone signing up for guitar lessons when the doorbell rang.

* * *

So what do you do with a Maria—answerer of desperate letters—when she is at your very doorstep? You call in sick from work, for one. You rejoice for a while. Surprisingly, you don't say much. You go upstairs to bed and fumble with clasps, buttons, socks. Also, you take her riding on roller coasters, that is a given.

Maria had arrived in her car, which meant that she intended to stay. It was filled with her stuff. She had moved into a furnished apartment when she got to Fort Lauderdale and so the sum of her earthly possessions fit more or less easily within one forest green 1999 Honda Civic. We unpacked her things quickly and left for the amusement park.

As we drove I realized that Maria looked fairly different. I had been taken so off guard by her arrival that I hadn't really thought to look at her closely. She was as beautiful as ever, I suppose—dark hair, tall, singularly feminine, but square shouldered in a way that makes me think she could beat me up, if she wanted to—but she was tan now, darker than I thought she could get, and her hair was a cropped-to-the-chin, feathered-in-the-back kind of arrangement. What really struck me were her clothes. Maria had never seemed to care much about her clothes. Her wardrobe was chosen randomly, at best. But now she had on a smart looking coat and khaki pants. She wore earrings. She wore earrings! She looked older. I didn't give a shit about her clothes, but I couldn't help but think, we might stand a chance at a normal adulthood after all.

It was a sunny day, one of those that can trick you into forgetting that the night will be cold. At the roller-coaster park we rode The Zip-Train, The Twister, The Maniac's Revenge. We ate two corn-dogs apiece and watched the people go by—

families, couples, a group of high school football players, all wearing their jerseys, a mob of starved looking middle-school hipsters—it occurred to me that the whole thing was too perfect, but I didn't really care.

"So, can I ask. What was it you did in Florida? I mean, what did you do for work??"

"Several things."

"Like?"

"Took pictures of tourists in front of a famous sail-boat, for one. I got commission for that."

"So why'd you come back?"

She said she'd decided she missed me. Among other things.

"Like?"

It turns out that Adam had showed up in Florida, looking for a place to stay. I felt something from my chest rise to my throat. It was a sickening revelation, that her magnetism crossed state lines, had long-distance implications. That at the end of the day I was one of many minor satellites swept up in Maria's monstrous orbit.

"My god. Why didn't you just throw them out? They followed you to Florida?"

"I did better. I left them there. I told them I was taking a trip. It was a cash rent situation, where I stayed. This is what you wanted right? Think of it this way; they're not here. Are you mad?"

I'd provided a convenient means for escape. On the other hand I could feel the weight of loneliness already lifting. The strange confusion of the last few months had disappeared as if it never existed. The promise of a new start with a new tan Maria was enough for now. I didn't really care why she was back.

"I'm not mad. But you do want to be here right. I mean, you want this to work?"

"I've always wanted it to work. You know that."

In the whole of my experience with the English language, no words had ever sounded more reasonable.

* * *

It had been one week to the day, one really excellent week. We drove an hour north and went fishing in a lake whose name I cannot pronounce. We ate at two restaurants we had never tried and one we have always loved. We drove endless miles through the city, like the old days, until we were well and truly lost, ending up out in some suburb we didn't know how to drive home from. It no longer felt like pieces of myself were abandoning me—drifting off to other states along with everyone I knew. There was that feeling of possibility again, like when everyone first left, but this time there was someone to share it with. It had been one week when Laurie called.

Laurie—sometimes sculptor and Maria's best friend, occupier of attics, teller of long jokes, recently engaged and recently disengaged, it turns out, is why she was back in

the city. She was thrilled that Maria was back too. She wanted to see, please, oh please, if she might take up her old room in the attic for a while, until she figured out a plan. And she could, as a matter of course, have back her room. As I have said, this thing we all were, was once a kind of family. She had leapt into the air, made hugs all around for the third time, offered to go buy groceries, and to cook them.

To be honest, I could deal with Laurie. She knew when to give us our distance. She had her own life that occupied her days and many of her nights. She was seeing a fellow sculptor and staying at his place several nights a week.

John showed up several nights later—a duffle bag full of heavy clothes, still smelling like the insides of codfish. The fish processor job hadn't panned out. He was back in town to stay. John's real family wouldn't see him anymore, for reasons that were largely mysterious.

"The way I see it. You guys are the closest thing to a family I'll ever have. I'm moving back here and staying."

* * *

The weather has been moody and changeable all day. Tonight the four of us went out to dinner. A tapas place downtown. No matter what John did, he could not get the smell of fish slime out of his clothes. His good cloths smelled like his work clothes from having spent a plane ride next to each other in his duffle bag. We joked with him about

this and he swore he would buy *new* clothes when he got his *old* job back. We all got fairly drunk on sangria and set out for a long walk through the city. Laurie was taking snapshots and making the rest of us pose next to every statue, lamppost, and fountain that we came across. When we finally made it home Laurie and John offered to go rent a movie. We watched it, all four of us on the big couch, like kids.

And now I am sitting awake. Things are feeling doomed again, though like I said, it may just be the weather. An animal awareness of the earth's cyclical shift—the feeling of something huge approaching, like feeling thunder in the ground before a storm. But then again, it could be that they are on their way. Jim, Colleen, Adam, John, Laurie, the whole fateful gang, and others—the waitress, the whole amusement park, cab-drivers galore, a movie theatre attendant. They are all on their way. By the boat-load, in trucks and on horses. They coming with fish-smelly duffle bags. They'll all want to stay.

MURIEL AND SAM

A bad night—that's what they'd concluded, Muriel and Sam, refusing defeat on the steps of their third story apartment. Refusing defeat, one, because of the weather—jauntily ambivalent to Chicago April protocol—Midwesterners committing all kinds of false starts, layering errors, premature flip-flops—and two, they were the same that way, stubborn in the face of an encroaching dawn, its insistent blue-grey glow an affront to their sense of due diligence.

"So what now?"

"You tell me, mister."

It had been drinks with friends. Three too many was the mean average. Typical. A monthly thing. Someone would pick a place—sometimes just Johnnie's Tavern, other times someone would want to try somewhere new. An email would go out, replies would be made in the general and cautious tone of the infamous "reply-all." It was a chance to catch up, cut loose, to reclaim those selves that they were less and less apt to inhabit. So why did they feel a need to escape, to sneak off into the night, to loose themselves upon it and redeem it from some cloying dissatisfaction.

The place maybe. An empty yet over-loud club. Two very young looking women on the dance floor and then a third, back from the bathroom maybe, and it was her—in the throes of some hip-hop ecstasy—who squeezed the lip of her red Solo cup too hard, its sugary contents running out in a fat cascade onto the floor, and an absolute tower of mammalian bouncer-flesh was obliged to mop at this mess half-heartedly, as of to

suggest the task's inadequacy to his stature. Muriel's shoes stuck to the floor in that way that made her skin crawl, nails-on-chalkboard-like, all night.

Their friend Zoe—they all called her "Zo," but all agreed, one similar night, that this was not a name, but was the ominous jumping off point for Russian/Ukrainian inflected dealings of all sorts—was showing off still milk-swelled cleavage and, successfully, hiding eight or so extra pounds that no prodigious amount of stair-climbing had yet to banish. She told them stories of recent domestic hyjinks, parental mishap, comparison shopping car-seats. Her husband Chris alternated between awkward silence and practiced accounts of patent litigation. Muriel glanced at Sam, rolled her eyes in a way he would understand and nodded toward the door.

The man tending bar was flipping channels on a small television, trying to satisfy some sports score curiosity. A server leaned toward him, between two of those curved brass rails, the hand-holds of a swimming pool ladder. She tried to get his attention but he looked engrossed. The three on the dance floor were two again and Chris glanced at them in what Zoe thought was a look of approval, or bemusement at least. She undid her shirt one button further and smiled at Matt, who was very much with Jackie. Married.

In college Jackie and Matt had been that couple, doomed to causeless weekly indetermination of "togetherness." They had Hannah though and sometimes it seemed to help, a stopper for their petty and lesser controversies. Matt was an unlikely father—clumsy and ill-equipped for the emotional delicacies needed to navigate the tide-pools and murky backwaters of parenthood—but Hannah was a great secret teller. At any moment she was likely to spring to the chest of the ear nearest her and bestow revelations

so benign and so ambiguous as to suggest a haiku. “The candle blow out in the kitchen. Cause the window’s open.” And her eyes were so sincere and so full of hazel import that Matt would find himself stooping to take her hand, to be led to the kitchen, to close the window and re-light the candle and confirm, indeed, the presence of a spider on the ceiling. “Long-legs.”

It seemed like Matt’s turn to speak, so he did, about Hannah. But the DJ was intent on crowd-rousal—the twelve or so, scattered and huddling in groups at the perimeter of the place—with a thumping, sped-up, techno Simon and Garfunkel redux. Matt went unheard. At this point a plot was devised, diversions affected: Muriel walked to the bathroom, shuddering at the million-fold micro-spiderlings that must be stretching, snapping, and re-congealing in the infinitesimally tiny tolerances between shoe sole and dance floor. Sam would excuse himself a moment later. When he finally slipped away he had a pang of unreasonable guilt as he found Muriel waiting near the back exit.

“I’m not sure about this, Muriel. We set this one up. We even picked the place. Maybe we should just grit our teeth. Everyone else is enjoying themselves.”

“People do this Sam,” Muriel said. She hugged him around the neck tightly. “They sneak out of bad bars and apologize to their friends later. We were too drunk. My mom called. Anything. And we did not pick this place. Zoe picked it and we said ok.” She hoped to convince him, but she knew that Sam’s honest streak was broad and mostly immutable and she knew too, that if pressed, she would agree with him. This is the closest thing they’d had to an argument in weeks, maybe months.

Sam insisted and they wandered into a room with pool tables. They would be present but separate. They would make the best of it. They liked pool after all. They tried to play a game, but an older and short and visibly impatient hustler was defending the only open table. He wanted a friendly, no stakes game with an amateur about as much as he wanted his thumb-nail removed by his Ukrainian creditors. ("Zo, where is my money?") He finally conceded though—it seemed no one else was going to plunk their quarter down to challenge him anyway—and Muriel and Sam each took a turn, trying to claim the table from him, so they could play a game together.

"They won't play me," the man said, nodding in the direction of the other tables. "I've beat them too many times." In pool-hall-speak this translates to: "I've stiffed them too many times." The man looked vaguely Mediterranean, and more like a pudgy restaurateur or insurance salesman than a wily or hardscrabble pool hustler. Maybe it was his strength. Maybe the unassuming look caught an occasional college kid or optimistic drunk off guard. The aging pool shark was bored—he missed the eight ball once for each of them, a grudging display of reserve—and sent them packing back to their table. The whole thing took less than fifteen minutes.

Jackie now sat between Zoe and Matt, as if to snatch any wayward glances mid-air, like a bullfrog.

"And where did you two sneak off to for so long?" someone asked.

"Well, we just realized we were childless. We thought we'd better conceive immediately," Muriel replied, laughing lightly, trying to amend the general note of shittyness with which her words had landed. There was now a dramatic purpling of the

lights, followed by a gradual shift to red, then orange, like being captive in a lava lamp's nauseous amniotic interior. Jackie pulled Matt to the dance floor, both wobbly now, having not stood for several hours. Zoe and Chris remained. They shrugged, as if in dismissal.

"I always thought," Zoe began, wobbly in her own way. "I always thought it would be you two first."

"Would be what?" asked Sam.

"Would be *you two!"*

"No, I know. But what?" Muriel interjected for Sam.

"Oh, you know—knocked up."

"Yeah," Chris said. "You've been together the longest, right? And you don't fight."

"And you'd produce, like, fucking attractive offspring, I think," offered Zoe. A piece of her hair fell into her mouth as she said this. She wiped it away with a look of confusion that did little to suggest a sober or credible advisor.

It was true that they didn't fight, but in college Muriel was a famous arguer. Usually defending someone else. Her friends thought she would become a lawyer. She could not stand to see someone bullied, even strangers. She intervened in a street brawl once—two drunk men doing terrible abuse to each others faces under the yellow flood lights of a parking lot. It didn't matter who was right. Within a minute Muriel had the less bloody one nodding and offering handshakes and apologies to the more bloodied one. She'd met Sam, though. Sam seemed to have a pacifying effect on her that had nothing to

do with coercion or dominance. They just rarely disagreed. Often they went weeks without a single thread of tension cutting the shared air of their apartment. They refused to analyze this part of their relationship, lest the thing evaporate under the clinical lights of its own observation. They sat close to each other on couches and shared the same side of a booth at restaurants and generally, listened patiently when others described their suitability for parenthood.

Across the room Matt and Jackie looked to be fighting. They had stepped from the dance floor and into a corner. Matt was gesturing broadly and Jackie shaking her head in a way that precluded any listening that Matt may have had in mind for her.

"Should I go talk to them?" Sam asked.

"No. Leave it alone. You can't save them from themselves."

In another corner there looked to by the preliminary posturing of a different fight. Two men in immaculate white shirts, dress pants, Italian leather shoes. They looked ill-prepared for a fight—their pomposity recommended, perhaps, a duel. One had just pounded his fist on a table when Muriel nodded to the door once more and it was clear—this time they would be leaving.

They went for the front door this time. Outside the city smelled like the lake and like organic things recently thawed, released from winter's iron preservation and permitted again to take up their microbial busyness. The air was wet with the smell, so that when you breathed, you were aware of it.

They made their way three streets north on foot then headed west toward their apartment. There was a burrito place—they'd eaten there once before—so they stopped and split a gristly steak burrito before continuing on.

"I don't want to go home yet," Muriel said.

"We don't have to."

They decided on a bar along the way, under the el—Ted's Under-Bar. Along the way they played a game that involved scoring cars as they negotiated the speed humps on the street. Ten for a high speed approach that did not cause a nose-dive landing. A zero for any scraping noise. Also, assigning names and personalities to the faces made by the headlights and front bumpers of parked cars. Muriel kicked a pop can, but Sam sent it fluttering errantly into the street. Everywhere they looked there were signboard's that begged comic rearrangement. They made bets on how close they could get to a pigeon, whether the walk sign would be preceded by a green arrow, on what time it was, without looking at a clock. It was 3:17. At Ted's they played a game of pool, then a game of darts. They took their shake-of-the-day at the bar and pulled several pull-tabs. They sang along to "Crystal Blue Persuasion" which was Ted's favorite song—the whole bar joined in.

The bar closed at five, but Ted invited them to stay for one more. The regulars filed out as the el clattered overhead. It left a ringing silence in its wake with a half-drunk Ted humming those first bars of his song "HmHmHmmHmHMM Hmmm." Sam noticed, and Muriel shortly after, that Ted's was decorated with a hodgepodge medley of trappings that mostly bespoke the past—a bowling trophy in remembrance of a past

patron, a gnashed and broken football helmet, beer-signs from defunct Chicago Breweries, Pennants of relocated sports teams, yellowing photographs of the bar itself, then populated with mustached men of another decade, their faces wearing joys and concerns that no amount of belabored gazing would summon into the present.

"You two are on the youngish side to haunt a place like this," Ted said. "Not that I haven't enjoyed your company. I've got customers that can stare down the bottom of a beer glass for three days straight. It's good when someone new comes in."

They all three finished their beers and Ted sighed at the time. The street was empty and yellowed by a lamp on the corner. The rest of the way home was dark.

So now they sit on the stoop. The sun was still sunk in the lake, but it threatened its inevitability with a silvering of treetops, as if a light snow had fallen. Every few minutes an apartment window across the street would be illuminated—a shadow might pass it, move to another room and illuminate another window. Sam nudged Muriel with his shoulder and Muriel nudged back in kind and their movements meshed and they went like that, like windshield wipers, for a full few moments before Muriel stood up. She bowed, said "Allow me to lead the way," and did and Sam followed, because there was nothing else he'd rather do.

Tomorrow they might end it, might start looking for other apartments, negotiating the division of three years worth of mutual properties, they might hug tightly on these same steps and cry briefly for each other and for themselves and for the terror of a future absent of one another. Or they might not. Probably they would not. As always, it was

clear. It would all depend on how much could be salvaged, right then, of what remained of the night.