

THIS



IS NOT



THE END

Shelby Davis

This Is Not the End

Ten Short Pieces
by
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obooko Edition

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Lists

My mother's shopping lists were ordered by rules known only to her. As you slid your finger down the columns of groceries and toiletries, you would invariably be stopped by something along the lines of "2dozjumHerbal Essences" or "1pepperoni TC," with the "TC" underlined twice and flanked by gnarled masses of pencil scratch-outs. When we were kids, we dreaded accompanying her to Wal-Mart, or worse, the Cosco at the edge of town, where the echoing rafters and limitless aisles seemed to mock the confusion into which we were inevitably thrown when handed torn-off fragments of the list. Of course, it was easy enough to see in hindsight that "2dozjumHerbal Essences" was merely the bastard child of two drunkenly weaving columns--we had been supposed to get two dozen jumbo eggs and a bottle of my mother's favourite brand of shampoo (ever inventive in creating proprietary abbreviations--"TC" standing for, what else, thin crust pizza--my mother scrupulously wrote out brand names in full).

It was a little like ordering chemicals for a laboratory, *sans* any knowledge of chemistry--or, for that matter, laboratories, although my ignorance of the distinction between baking soda and baking powder cannot be entirely the root of my confusion. Eventually I--and my siblings--learned the difference between tomato paste and tomato sauce, and could readily distinguish one brand of laundry detergent from a similarly-styled knock-off, but my shame-faced trips back to the mothercart never ceased. I would track her down, most often in the produce section--she was usually loath to trust us with the delicate task of selecting the very best fruits and vegetables--and hand her back my portion of the list, asking for an explanation. Usually it amounted to a failure of awareness on my part--get the kind of soap we always get, of course! If I pointed out that we were in the habit of buying several different brands at different times, I would be informed that it had been *weeks* since we had bought Brand X, and we only got Brand Y when my father took the children shopping, and the slowly-diminishing pile of Brand Z had been entirely due to a single purchase, a regrettable experiment unfortunately conducted with a bulk package. This cycle of pattern-recognition failure continued even after I left for college--when I came home, every

few weeks, and in later years, on breaks, it was a remarkable point of contention that I didn't know what cereal my siblings ate for breakfast every morning. When I pointed out that we had never bought Chocolate Sugar Warheads when I was in the house, I was immediately reassured that I had indeed had them bought for me.

"Besides," she added, "it was your father that got that box last week."

Perhaps we dreaded these shopping trips so much because the magnitude of a mistake could be enormous. Ever thrifty, my parents bought in bulk--the idea of buying a single toothbrush was anathema to them, as was the thought that one could purchase toilet paper in anything less than a full pallet. We regarded the label "Family Size" the way professional chefs regard upscale kitchen appliances, as something that might hold some promise of fulfillment for the masses but were pale imitations of the real stuff. Because of this, a mistake at the store could disrupt family life for a month, consigning us all to an inferior brand of butter for however long it took to consume eight pounds of it. If that wasn't bad enough, my parents hated to shop as much as we hated to accompany them--with the consequence that, despite having six mouths to feed, trips were infrequent--and thus protracted--debacles.

When I married, it was at my parents' church. I stayed with them beforehand. I debated getting a hotel room, but my parent's wouldn't hear of it--who stays in a hotel when they have family? I also suspected they didn't like the idea of Kelly and I sequestered in a hotel together--better to keep an eye on this strange newcomer and invite her to stay, too. The first time we went shopping, it was just my mother and I, but the second time, Kelly accompanied us, reaching for her own cart when we arrived and taking, just as I did, a portion of my mother's list. I worried that she would see a side of my mother that she wouldn't like, but if she did, she didn't say anything. My mother, also, was gracious, and when Kelly pulled her own cart alongside my mom, laden with 2 rather than 1% milk, mom kept her mouth shut. The next day, however, I noticed that my father made a run to the convenience store right after breakfast, returning with two gallons of 1% milk. The gallons of 2% languished in the fridge, and as far as I know, were still there when Kelly and I pulled away from the church and started the drive to South Carolina.

It wasn't so much the anal-retention practiced my mother with such precision, but the arcane and private language that made shopping a nightmare. All too often, a list intended for her private perusal--she did not infrequently go shopping alone--was handed off to someone else, and symbols denoting quantity and flavour became riddles, cryptograms whose meaning could not be inferred from a document so inconsistently written--a bottle of olive oil may be designated extra virgin, but if no qualifier is given the next time, does the absence indicate a reversal, or has the one-time injunction become the new norm?

Scientists in search of meaning have claimed that the chaotic portions of the universe are merely acting out rules too complex for us to follow--that while God may not play with dice, the game is sufficiently complicated that one iteration of the pattern occupies the entire lifespan of the universe. I'd like to think that my mother's shopping lists are merely symbolic reflections of that pattern, each fitting into the rational incomprehensibility of the world. Especially now, as she lies in the hospital bed, her mind a buzzing mass of synapses and half-formed thoughts, I miss the scrawled litanies, the hybrids of computer-printouts and penciled-in post-hoc corrections. Especially now, I have to trust that the incomprehensible sibilants and moans are symbols, something that has meaning for her, something that ultimately means exactly what she means to say, and that brings me, head hung low, closer to her side, in order to understand.

All Ye Know on Earth

I was driving on Highway 35 on my way home from work. Up in front of me was a giant billboard

advertising yet another jeweler, in ten-foot letters and bright silver watches like massive alien machines. The traffic slowed and stopped on the ramp as it bottlenecked further into the city, and my head turned to examine the sign and the blocked view of the cityscape and land beyond. Past it was another billboard, with the name of a casino as its only text, filled with collaged images of money, plush rooms, and dancers. A quarter mile further brought me to an advertisement for business management solutions. Another few hundred yards and I was urged to try the new sandwich at the new sandwich place. The sun set and the signs stayed bright as automatic light switched on.

The city grew dark and the hills beyond feebled out, existing only in our minds and finally not even there. All that remained were the well-lit and shiny reminders that lawyers were standing by to take my case to court, and that somebody's air conditioners would outlast somebody else's.

I had an idea.

I made the call the next day. It would put me back a good half grand, but it would be worth it. There would be no design meeting; I sent them the image and it was printed. A few weeks later it went up.

Now on my commute, when I paused in the crush of metal bodies, I looked up and saw mountains by Maxfield Parrish, reaching up to the clouds in impossible cragginess, rivulets and gushing streams painted down their sides, with the sun striking vibrant oranges and reds into the shadows of the rocks. There were trees in copper-patina green and still pools quieter than the middle of winter but warm as the first day of summer.

No doubt people thought it was the first part of a two-stage advertising gimmick, or a filler to be used when no one was renting space on the sign. But I was happy.

The other signs were next. One by one, I placed the calls and sent the pictures to offices and printing shops. Van Gogh's epic wheat field, with the brooding sky and blazing earth, was pasted over the turnpike, and commuters looked up in astonishment at the approaching crows, bigger than life and settling to rest before them. Several other signs received his fields of poppies, the lilacs at Auvers and the mulberry trees, the olive groves and irises. I didn't stop there. Cezanne adorned the 5th street exit, with a breathtaking view of Mont Sainte-Victoire, the landscape spilling away beneath us in brash yellows and greens, in beautiful smears and daubs of colour. Homer covered the signs along the east end in huge washes of cliffs and trees standing alone against the cold, of rivers and autumnal foliage, and tropical palms ripe with fruit, and the placid blue of open ocean, and with jungles teeming with rampant life. A giant sky opened over the turnoff for Highway 675, fields and twisted oaks miniscule under titanic clouds and birds so far away they seemed to brush the limit of the sky, and van Ruisdael was before ten thousand people daily.

I went further. I had to move out into the manufacturing district, the nightlife zone, the suburbs. Renoir's peaceful meadow stilled the riot of the interstate. Manet's own garden graced the air above a textile mill. Sisley bestowed the fields of Veneux-Nadon on a crack house and the on-ramp that over-arched it. The pretentious McMansions, not so rich yet that they could escape an ad for toothpaste peeking over their back lawns, woke one morning to instead see a country lane by Gauguin warmed by soft sunlight. A daycare went about its business to the backdrop of Eragny in spring, courtesy Pissarro--and I was done.

I was done. My money was gone, the checks were already bouncing, and I did not know what I would do next. But I was happy. The city was covered in colour, colour rampant and exploding, with valleys and waterfalls where none had been, with open sky and trees, and flowers--flowers everywhere. The people walked and drove to the accompaniment of all nature. The night the last billboard went up, I climbed the broadcasting tower, the skyscraper that stands in the middle of the city and commands a view of it all. I

looked out, and saw the hills beyond. My billboards were pale dots, blotches of light here and there on the ground. Beyond lay the glittering nebula of humanity, in their homes and workplaces, streetlamps and headlamps and window panes and office space swirling before my eyes. I saw them for what they were. Their own efforts told me what was being lived. The lights in neighboring towers flicked on and off like so many stars twinkling, accompanied by the blinking red bulbs fastened along the length of the radio towers on the horizon. Under it all the ground undulated slowly, gaining momentum as the houses thinned, until there were no houses left and the earth rose up in a chain of hills, meeting the infinite sky.

Death and Mumbling

I thought I might get some good ideas if I went down to the hospital.

I always have stayed away from hospitals. People died or were born. But now I thought I might get some idea if I went down to where it was all happening, the being born and the dying. Mostly the dying. It was the dying that interested me.

I sat on a bench in a sort of waiting room. I wanted to call it a green room; it wasn't a place where the patients would wait to be called by the doctor; it was a place where the relatives would wait while the patient was in their room. It had a coffee bar, and comfortable couches, with trendy, muted colors on the walls and floor. Everything was clean and modern without being cold, a homogenized balancing act designed to keep everyone calm during their stressful time. It was a green room; patients were "guests"; their families were "guests" as well. Here was where the families would sit and be fêted while they waited to be called out to perform, to smile and encourage or to don faces of appropriate mournfulness. The old ones would put on smiles, the young ones would look sad.

I think I went there because it seemed to me that it was the place richest in emotional impact. It reeked of spent emotions, and the emotions were made all the stronger, here in the green room, by the efforts at suppression--the muted walls and gourmet coffees and scones, the overstuffed loveseats and couches, as if those in grief should not be permitted to sit on benches or folding chairs. It absolutely reeked of hush and hidden feeling. It was worse than a church. It was worse than a highschool hallway. It was more universal, more basic, something even the children could comprehend.

#

It was a funeral procession of the sort one sees in the smaller towns. The police cars escorted the hearse and the black funeral-house cars, slowly, with lights silently flashing. There was also a retarded man of the sort one sees in the smaller towns. Unlike his metropolitan counterparts, he was not seen passing his time at bus stops, nor was he institutionalized. He did not work as a janitor, or cashier at a thrift-store, or a factory. He appeared to have no job. Everybody knew him because he spent his time walking up and down the town's sidewalks, pushing a shopping cart. Unlike the carts pushed by the homeless, his did not appear to contain the sum of his worldly possessions, or at any rate not the possessions one would think conducive to a life on the streets and under bridges. There were no clothes or bedroll. There was a blanket, but the sort--light, and blue, about two feet to a side and delicately fringed--in which one would wrap an infant. There was no food, no tightly knotted plastic bags. There was a radio and some odds and ends--I remember a baby doll and a radio, in particular. The baby doll was naked, with a gigantic head of blonde hair, who would occasionally ride in the child seat of the cart. The radio played loud sports and oldies. It was because of the radio that the man was frequently startled; people would come up behind him on the sidewalk, and he would not hear them until the very last moment. As they passed he would jump and burst out a garbled exclamation about not seeing them. The garbled explanation was the same, word for word, stutter for stutter, each time.

He was thought to live with his mother or and older sister. It would explain the lack of an apparent job, as well as the lack of apparent means in his cart with which to live alone.

Sometimes he rode a bicycle. He was permitted to ride it in the annual Fourth of July and Memorial Day parades, just as he was permitted to wander, unsuspected and unmonitored, through downtown and quiet suburbia alike, where children playing on the lawn would politely ignore him. He was riding his bicycle now, easily keeping up with the respectfully slow pace of the funeral procession. He was actually ahead of the hearse, between it and the front police car. Whenever they reached a stoplight, he would stop as well, putting one foot to the ground, propping himself up, and when the light changed, the hearse would wait while he forced his whole body into pushing the pedal down, slowly overcoming his inertia.

I followed. When we got to the cemetery, the retarded man had to get off his bike. The main entrance road was paved, but the parallel roads branching from it, turning the gravestones into members of neat grassy strips, was dirt. He pushed the bike over the rutted ground, slowing down the hearse and the cars that followed behind. The police car got a little ahead, until the driver realized what was happening. He idled in the dirt path until the bicycle caught up. The air was cold and the retarded man briefly disappeared in the cloud of exhaust and vapour that had formed at the rear of the police car.

In a short while, they reached the plot, with the hole for the casket already dug. While the minister read the eulogy, I watched, standing in the back. I had come to know this family from long observation at the hospital. The dead man had been in his forties. I wondered if, after the body died, the tumor continued to live for a little while. Perhaps those cells were even now multiplying, albeit slowly and more slowly, until they would grind to a halt along with the rest of him. Was the tumor really a separate thing, that it could do that, exulting in its victory, like the winner in combat jumping up and down on the corpse of his opponent?

I hoped no one would notice me. It was a fairly large group, about thirty in all, and I was wearing black like the rest. The immediate family would probably recognize me if they did notice: we had exchanged words over the months of the deceased's decline; I had invented a backstory about my own aunt's convalescence to explain my perennial presence.

The retarded man was also standing in the back, opposite me. He was about ten feet behind the tightly packed group of mourners. It had begun to rain, a terribly clichéd graveside drizzling rain, and the mourners were tightly packed under the funeral-home provided canopy. The retarded man stood in the rain, one arm wrapped around the other, which awkwardly pointed down. He constantly shifted on his feet, as if the sound of spattering rain had awakened his bladder in him and he was fighting its urgings. It was the same pose and motion I had seen him take outside the hospital. He sometimes came by when I was there, and I could observe him through the vast glass front of the building.

The green room was made to be light and airy while still private, so it had been positioned in the lobby, to the side, but separated by zigzagging screens nine feet high, and a virtual ceiling had been suggested by lights that hung above the screens, a smattering of globes dropped from the real ceiling, high above. I could only see him if I stepped around the screens and stood in the narrow and bright space between them and the plate-glass window, in the avenue trod only by custodians and the more rambunctious children. The retarded man would pace back and forth outside, sometimes with his cart and sometimes not. If he did have it with him, he would stop periodically to arrange the items inside. Once or twice he stopped and looked at me. His pacings and circlings would become wider and wider, stretching into the parking lot, into the expectant mother slots, the hospital boardmembers slots, the grassy medians with picnic tables and cigarette cans, until he wandered off, to pursue an invisible track somewhere else in the town.

When the dirt was being dropped on the lowered coffin, cars began driving off, back to the funeral home, where they could be exchanged for brightly colored minivans and SUVs. A few stayed until the very end, when the steamroller arrived from some discrete corner of the yard and began flattening the mounded

earth. I had wandered off in order to avoid being conspicuous, but had continued to watch from a nearby parallel road, standing next to a mausoleum, carved with a serene Christ in place of the center columns. The dead man's sister and mother stayed until the end. I had lost sight of the retarded man in the dispersion, and now I walked down to the funeral home employees, who were disassembling the canopy.

"Why was that man here, the one on the bike?"

"Him?" said one. "He's the dead guy's brother."

#

This is the part where the Greek chorus comes on stage and says a word from our sponsors. Trying to force an idea out of an emotion just leads you to death. Even children understand dying, and Christ as caryatid suggests we don't get it ourselves. This is all the meaning I can get out of it.

Immanence

He's standing on the subway platform, reading from a book of poetry he published himself, making too free use of repetition and alliteration, and something in me wants to tear off my clothes and join him. I want to drop my suitcase where I stand and push the revolution forward with him, I don't want to document this, write about it, use it for my own purposes--this exists only for itself and not for contemplation.

I am running along the side of the road and it is dark. Something flickers and gleams, moves around the tall grass to my right, and I pull up only to resume my stride; it is not an animal but a piece of trash, blowing in the wind, when suddenly it rears up, a goblin, a ghost with eyes staring at me, and I regain my calm again as I realize it is just a mylar balloon printed and shaped like a moth. There is still a chill around me, however, as I move closer in my involuntary course toward it, as I realize the balloon is tied to, commemorates a child's death, the wooden cross littered with plastic flowers and other balloons. The demon facing me hisses shrilly, shrieks, and a bus runs by on my left, inches away, inaudible in the general roar of nighttime traffic but easing on the brakes two hundred yards from the intersection ahead.

I do not want to be this person. The child was not my own, not claimed by me in death, not known to me in life, but there is nothing to prevent it from having been. The madman on the subway platform is my kinsman in life underground, as are the housekeepers and old men, too scared to drive, too poor, too unstrung to drive across the surface. My car lies somewhere as a twisted pile in someone's junkyard. I do not know why. It is possible that I wished it gone, just as I wished myself an exit from function just as sharp, as clean and as definite.

Let us be honest. I do not feel guilty about the child. They are unhurt, and I doubt I would feel lingering shame even if it were otherwise. The child was the pretext, rather than the reason, for pushing my car into the tree. In the light of my subconscious, we must conclude it was no accident. This subconscious drive, I have decided, is what draws me to the subway performer--and, for that matter, to the grave of a child. They, together, present the polar opposites of what I, so recently, was; namely, the conscious obedience to the subconscious contrasting with the utter disregard for self-consciousness altogether. This, I feel, represents two entirely irreconcilable states which are nonetheless both preferable to the present condition endured by so many.

This monograph has run too long. I suddenly see ahead the subway, running impossibly above the ground, approaching the intersection to which the bus is headed. A collision is immanent. I cannot help

feeling responsible, but realize the futility of that emotion. For the time, I am the poet, but the child cannot be far away now.

Insect

I frankly haven't the slightest idea what the difference is between a *moka* pot and a *cafetiere*, but I'm going to pretend I do.

"Delicious," I say, setting down my cup. "Way better than that stuff you get at Starbucks."

Everyone else nods their heads in agreement, but I can't help but wonder if they're just being polite. Jason is pouring cream into his cup with a practiced hand, letting the white stream fall from the pitcher's lip in a smooth and slender column that blooms across his coffee's surface like a carnivorous plant photographed in stop-motion.

"Did you hear about Tibet?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, "Terrible."

"What's really shocking," says my boss, "is the complete *ignorance* of, well, most of America about what's going on right now."

"Terrible," chimes in Jason. "and what with the death of newspapers, soon practically no one will be able to easily come by a well-formed opinion."

"Did you hear the *New York Times* might be going bankrupt?" my boss asks.

"Now that," Jason says, draining his cup, "would be a tragedy."

Our biscotti has arrived and I'm reluctant to take the first piece. Is Dr. Burns paying again? It makes me feel awkward, because and despite the fact that she paid the last time--and this *was* at her invitation.

Jason, for all his *savior faire*, did not appear to know how a Turkish coffee tasting was really supposed to go last time, and did not question when Dr. Burns ordered for all of us. Tracy, similarly, followed the doctor's lead and silently acquiesced when she took the check from the waiter dressed in a vest and what I took to be MC Hammer pants. At any rate, it's not *too* weird for the boss to pay, right? After last time, I had gone home and dug out a 1984 copy of Emily Post, but that wasn't much help. There was no heading for "Research Assistants" nor did I find a chapter on "Student/Professor Luncheons."

"Now, really," Dr. Burns is saying, "biscotti is an Italian invention, but I like it with coffee, don't you?"

We agree. That's what I like about my boss, didactic, as, I suppose, all professors by definition are, while unpretentious, which would not be so difficult if she hadn't apparently picked up so much stuff entirely tangential to classical antiquities. An SUV pulls up outside and we can see it through the gauze curtains that are drawn across the floor-to-ceiling windows. Jason makes a face as we see a single occupant extricate himself from the cockpit and step heavily to earth.

"Did you hear they're going to put a new bike path in, connecting the university and downtown?" he asks.

"Yeah," I say, "it's a pity it won't be done until after I've graduated."

"What was the completion date?"

"2016," I say, because I remember exactly what I read in the newspaper three weeks ago.

"And, what, what with the bureaucratic hold-ups and stuff, what'd you say it takes a year or two past that?"

"Probably," we all agree, Tracy, Dr. Burns, and I.

Jason has a fine shell of cynicism, and I have to keep reminding myself that he's twenty-seven, far older than he looks, and already has a B.S. from another university. Still, I can't help but wonder if in this case the pessimism is part of a self-conscious faux-erudition, much like my affected use of the word "pity."

We're in a coffeehouse, eating *loukoum*, and we know it.

"It's a shame people don't ride bikes more," says Dr. Burns, "but I think a lot of it has to do with the lack of bike lanes; it's just not safe downtown."

"And decent places to lock up," I add, remembering a headline I'd seen in *Slate* that said something to that effect.

"Right." Jason says, and embarks on a long and, frankly, brilliant explanation of the history of the ups and

downs of bicycling in America, all the way back to the *draisine*, the penny farthing, and Susan B. Anthony. This starts him and Dr. Burns on a discussion of rational dress and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

Jason is like the friend your mother gushed over when you brought him home one day for lunch, the one you vowed would never again set foot in your house lest he again open the door for your sister or address your parents with a “sir” and “ma’am.” Sure, you’re their one and only son, but can’t you look at Jason and see how nice and well-mannered he is? He’s the research assistant Dr. Burns would have hired had she the decision to make over again. I came armed to this fete with my own conversational topics and various *bon mots* fresh-picked from wikipedia, but I can’t seem to find an opening where I can bring up my knowledge of fletcherization or the LaGrange points.

What Dr. Burns has done is managed to upend my comforting knowledge that all specialists are just that, and no more. She is the only liberal arts professor I know who keeps a chart of the periodic table of elements taped to the back wall of her office, and what makes it worse is that while she’s being pretentious, the façade has a perverse edge: she really never needs to refer to it, having committed the bulk of its information to memory. Its presence is a deceptive consolation, not a boast. In high school, I comforted myself when faced with the well-worn trench I had dug in the 84th percentile by deciding that the high achievers were thoroughly one-dimensional, while I was a Renaissance man. The first few semesters of college had confirmed this: the psychophysics professor who knew all there was to know about the transduction processes of the eyeball, but was stymied by a question I asked about lacrimal glands; the literature professor with twenty-seven published articles on Wordsworth who nonetheless had difficulty mentally calculating the number of years between 1798 and 1832. Dr. Burns made her name in analyses of 5th century Athens, but had on the side of one of her many bookcases a poster depicting Ernest Rutherford, below which was written, “In science, there is only physics; all else is stamp collecting.” If, say, psychology was being accorded the intellectual status of philately, I could only imagine that extolling the virtues of a Grecian urn was somewhere on par with nose picking.

“Did you hear in the news they found a new painting by Hunt?” Tracy is asking.

No, we all say, tell us more.

“It was in someone’s attic. They’re cleaning it up right now, but it might go on tour after it’s spent some time in New York. I forget exactly what the article said.”

My recent subscription to the *New Yorker* is serving me in very poor stead right now, as I know nothing about this. There was an interesting interview in *Architectural Digest* a year or so ago about restorative processes, but I can’t remember enough details to bring up anything useful. My grasp of details is, in fact, on loose footing no matter where the conversation turns: it has only just occurred to me that the *loukoum* we’re eating (or *rahat*, as Dr. Burns informs me it is called in Romanian countries) is, in fact, Turkish Delight, which up until now had only been something I had known about in connection with a showing of *Kismet* my uncle had once taken me to at a community theater.

“You know there’s a show in Britain about the Pre-Raphaelites?” Jason asks. Tracy’s indeterminacy has given him license to reference television, but he still adds, “I heard about it on the BBC. Apparently Germaine Greer really bashed it or something.”

I brace myself. Dr. Burns, while hardly the bra-burning type, and never one to succumb to the faddish practice of plastering rainbow-colored triangles to her office door, has her own firm views on gender, and I know that whatever I do understand of what follows will probably be something I can only limply assent to. I’m slowly realizing that any self-assessment I might have had regarding my progressive opinions are going to need to be revised; what counted as dangerously *outré* in Tennessee barely qualifies as baseline-civilized in any outpost of academia north of the Maxon-Dixon line.

“Try the *burek*,” she says.

“I thought that was *phyllo*,” says Jason.

“*Phyllo* is the dough, yes,” she says, “but you use it to make any number of things.”

“Like baklava,” says Tracy.

“Right.” Dr. Burns takes another sip of coffee. Her cup is smaller than ours, filled with the thick sludge of which our more familiar beverages are a pale American comparison. *Americano*, as I learned during

our last meeting here, is itself a dilution, espresso watered down until it approaches the strength of your familiar Krups.

"I was talking to my friend in culinary arts the other day," says Jason, "and apparently there's a sugar shortage."

"Well, that depends on who you ask," says Dr. Burns, "it really has to do with all the ethanol being produced now. Domestic production is fine, but other countries are using cane to make ethanol, which produces a shortage overseas."

"And there's a drought or something in India," says Tracy, putting down his *burek* and, I suspect, relieved to be able to contribute something again.

"Right," says Dr. Burns, "but the real issue is the ethanol. And, unfortunately, America is such an economic power that foreign governments will probably try to limit their own people's purchases in order to have enough to sell to American corporations."

It's statements like these that make me wonder why she even *needs* a research assistant. True, I'm handy at cleaning the coffeemaker, but the evidence of her discriminatory abilities regarding the brewed bean are causing me to suspect that even there I am incompetent.

"But the ethanol," Jason asks, "it's important to push ahead on that, right?"

He's hesitant, but I'm even more cautious. We narrowly dodged the bullet with the advent of the SUV outside, but discussions of fuel economy will inexorably confront me with the fact that while I'm convinced global warming is real, I just haven't been sold on the idea that humans are solely responsible. It's a feeling half-way between the atheist unable to convert to his friend's religion and the twelve-year-old's sight of his peers in the school shower: I know I'm inadequate and an outsider, but surely it's only a matter of time before I become one of them?

"Well, what we need to do is get rid of the trade agreements and pay whatever the rest of the world is paying," Dr. Burns tells us, "and stop using our consumption-monopoly as a way to manipulate the price."

"Yeah, I guess that makes sense," Jason says.

Dr. Burns then tells us about a plan by an Israeli entrepreneur to sell electric cars on a cell-phone model, in which the company owns the vehicle but customers pay per mile. Not once have we addressed a topic about Aristotle or the Penelopesian War. Jason and Tracy, I know, are both well-versed in classics, having had Dr. Burns in the past; Tracy even worked as a field intern for a while, going to Greece to help dig stuff up. He'd maintained a passing connection to her since then, remaining the perpetual student and taking scattered part-time classes at the college with no real major in mind. Jason had transferred in after I had, and had apparently made such an impression on Dr. Burns that he was included in this attempted round table as a matter of course. His grasp of quantitative analysis was a big factor, I knew; while I had entered the classics program to escape the threat of ever having to take any math more difficult than introductory algebra (from the Arabic *al jabr*), Jason's previous degree was in computer science. Far more than its practical applications, the worth of this accomplishment was the demonstration that *here* was a liberal arts student who could crunch the hard numbers and think the concrete thoughts. For someone whose master's thesis had involved Fourier transforms in the authentication of Tuscan frescoes, this was an invaluable accolade.

"I doubt they're going to come to any real solution anytime soon," I interject.

Everyone looks at me, and I realize I've made a mistake. The comment was negative, pointless, and, worst of all, I have no real reasons with which to back it up.

"I mean," I stammer, "the corporations are backing gasoline cars too much; there's no way we'll be able to move forward as long as they're showing a profit on their F-150s and Escalades." That was safe, I thought, but I could see from their faces that they assumed I'd next be decrying the HPV vaccine or public housing.

"I think," says Dr. Burns, "that the profit margin on the new hybrids is actually quite high."

"And the tax benefits are only getting larger," Jason adds.

"Well... good," I say. "I hadn't realized."

In a way, I think they are over-reacting. But I also realize that I will never display the intellectualism required in this circle. There is a difference between being a Renaissance man and being a dilettante. We sit in silence for a moment more.

“God,” I say, swallowing my food, “this *corek* is really chewy. I’m practically having to fletcherize it.”

#

When I bring a stack of copies into Dr. Burns’ office the next Monday, I place the Tyson article on top. “The noblest science, eh?” I say, nodding at the article, my tone of voice suggesting a long familiarity with a discipline that might entail casual danger and strenuous mental gymnastics.

“Hm?”

I hold up the piece, its top page swarming with contour plots illustrating the effective potential of a two-body system.

“Oh, that was just something I was curious about after seeing an article in *Scientific American*. Do you like physics?”

“Well--” I indicate the Rutherford poster.

“Oh, *that*? I don’t buy that stuff. It’s just there to remind me not to be a bitch about my specialty.”

“Really?” I look at the poster for clues that it’s been placed there in an attitude of irony, as if the placement of the thumbtacks or the slight slant of its orientation might indicate that the message is not to be taken at face value.

“Well, yeah, Rutherford was a great man, but that statement is incredibly arrogant. I’d much rather be a Renaissance woman than an expert in anything. I can’t remember who it was, but there’s a quote:

‘Specialization is for insects.’”

“Huh. Me too, I guess. I mean, I want to be an expert, too, but--”

“Of course you do.” she said. “That’s why I hired you. Jason’s interested in having coffee again next month. You up for it?”

Ron

“Ron, would you read verses two through twelve, please?”

“Um, okay. Uh, ‘And he opened his mouth, and taught them saying, blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. Yeah, blessed are the hookers, and smokers, and pot heads--”

“Ron!”

“--and pornos--”

“Ron! Please!”

Ron was opening and closing his Bible like it was a bellows, rapidly flapping the pages, his head thrown back and rolling side to side.

“Ron, I’ll ask you again to behave yourself. Tim, could you pick up?”

“Sure. ‘And He opened His mouth, and taught them...”

#

Ron was a demon. We got out of PE for a few days when our class had its mandatory sex ed segment. The first day Ron raised his hand.

“Uh, Mr. Brinkman, is that the same thing as *jism*?”

“Yes, Ron, now--”

“What about *spooge*?”

“YES, Ron, it is, but semen is the preferred--”

“What about *cum*?”

“Ron! Yes! Now be *quiet!*”

We were floored. Most of us had no idea where he was getting this, but we loved him for giving us new, illicit words. The guys snickered and the girls looked down at their desks, but some of them looked sideways at Ron.

On the playground a cluster almost formed around him as he stood, head down, leaning against the wall of the cafeteria. We found ways to approach him and say a few things in passing, a comment here or there and a veiled angling for more info. We would walk across the asphalt as if to talk to someone on the other side, setting out for a straight course but midway through deforming our trajectories like we were comets tugged at by a dirty-blond sun. He had positioned himself by the electricity meter, and one of us would swoop down and away, pausing for a few seconds, to be replaced by another. I was artless. “So, Ron, how come you know so much about this stuff?” No predicate was needed; it had been supplied by the anglers who came before me.

“Read my dad’s old books.”

He was chewing gum. There was a can of grape soda in his hand.

I was transparent enough to walk away at this point, without greeting or farewell, and let the next inquiry come up behind me.

#

His mother dropped him off every Sunday at the church. Our paths in all things were parallel--same Sunday school class, same homeroom, same swimming lessons at the Y and Boy Scouts patrol--and neither of us ever missed. We and the teacher were the three constants in that Sunday school class, and over the course of a year we watched as project kids dragged in by evangelistic families came and went, and as future juvenile delinquents appeared a few times each year as their grandparents mustered enough authority to insist they come along. There were visiting cousins and the children of occasional-attenders, “C&E” kids who only came during Christmas and Easter. The church’s bus ministry brought in a rotating cast of do-rag-sporting twelve-year-olds and loose-pantsed sixteen-year-olds who still occupied the eighth grade, who sat in the back and smirked and were gone the next Sunday. The pastor went on leave that summer and his family went with him, and his son, who was in our class, missed two weeks. At times Ron and I were the only people there, in which case the teacher made a conscientious effort to split eye contact between the two of us as she talked about the succession of Old Testament judges and the law of the prophets. I wondered when Ashley would be back in class and whether my slacks were too short, and whether my socks were showing. I wondered about this *jism*, and about my soul. Ron sat and stared ahead at the teacher, and sometimes flipped furiously back and forth in his Bible, or someone else’s. The classroom had basket of mismatched Gideons and disintegrating copies of obscure translations, like Darby’s or Worldwide English; the collection grew as people involuntarily contributed by leaving their Bibles under pews or in the bathroom, and Ron, it appeared, kept a mental inventory of the pile, expressing suppressed delight when a new Jerusalem Bible or New American Standard Bible appeared at the top of the basket. Sometimes he would sing, under his breath: “Sunday morning, Brings the dawn in, It’s nothin’ at all...” Occasionally he would raise his hand.

“Mrs. Rheims, what’s *shittim* wood?”

“It’s a kind of wood, Ron. Is that where we’re reading?”

“What *kind* of wood?”

“We’re in First Samuel, Ron. There’s no wood like that here.”

“But what kind of wood is *shittim* wood? Jeeze, God really likes this stuff.”

“That’s enough, Ronald.” Mrs. Rheims half-closed her eyes.

“He keeps saying to build all this stuff out of *shittim* wood.”

“Thank you, Ron. Now, David came to Ahimelech because...”

Everybody who had a Bible began to surreptitiously flip to the concordance. Ron spent the rest of class finding passages with “pisseth” in them, and showing them to me with a confidential look that seemed to say “Eh? Good, right?”

#

However bad Ron was, his sister was worse. Her tantrums were legendary among the church mothers, and most of us had seen at least one of these one-woman brawls. We all knew Ron and his sister were taking meds, although rumors of what they were taking, and what they were taking it for, ranged widely. Even Ron thought Laura was crazy; he told us she was out of control, a terror. He regaled us with stories of massive blowouts and epic scenes at school and the grocery store. There were crises at the community swimming pool and fights that nearly ended in hospitalization during craft classes. He told us more. There were stories about his dad and how he left, about things his mom had done, about the goings-on in his household. The stories had a strange, surreal feel to them, with Ron's logic appearing disjointed or entirely absent. There was often no flow to the stories, no orderly sequence of events; they were an undirected parade of outrageous images and characters. The people in Ron's stories--almost always limited to himself and the members of his own family--acted without motivation or consequence. There was no lead-up to his sister's purchase of three hundred plush animals; they were simply there, filling the living room. There was no reason for a lengthy (and hilarious) speech by his mother on the evils of his father; it simply occurred, isolated in time. He once explained to me that he had drawn a crucifixion scene for art class at school, but it wasn't suitable for female viewing: Jesus was nude, as were the criminals on either side. This, Ron assured me, was historically accurate, every Bible illustration and stained-glass window I had seen up until this time notwithstanding. I doubted his authority on matters of Biblical illustration; one time I caught him drawing ridiculous schlongs on the Apostle Paul and various Roman soldiers in a picture Bible, and a stain on the robe of a fallen Saint Stephen.

We were both Boy Scouts, Ron and I. Our parents thought it would be good for us, and while we never commiserated *per se*, we were friends to the extent that neither of us knew anyone else in the patrol. When we went camping, we shared a tent. Ron prayed at night, lying in his sleeping bag with his butt in the air, caterpillar-style, face turned to the side and lips protruding. They were ritualized prayers, following a formula, yet still highly specific to the events of the day, litanies of sins and requests for others--usually for others to shape up and stop bothering Ron. He was a terror to the scoutmasters, who mostly left him alone except to tell him to quiet down or watch his language. When he refused to go on a hike with the rest of the patrol, though, sitting himself down in protest by the embers of the campfire and kindling the tip of the twig he held in his hands to flame, the scoutmasters insisted, making remarks later among themselves that they couldn't have him burning the forest down while they were away. He chased squirrels and threw sticks in the pathside creek that flowed in and out of view. Occasionally he ran ahead and disappeared from our sight, into the leaves, to be followed by cries--every time--from the scoutmasters, telling him to come back. But the scoutmasters never moved from their positions at the head and rear of the line of scouts, and Ron would eventually reappear and resume walking with, and around, the group. Occasionally he would burst out singing that he was heading to the wild country, to Alaska, where he belonged, and everyone would yell for him to shut up.

It was Scouts that brought Ron to my dad's attention. He had heard of Ron and seen him a little, at church and at school, but it was because of scouting that we started giving Ron rides home. His mother would drop him off at the weekly meetings, and my dad would pick us up, after it was dark (dark even in the summer), and we would make the long drive through country roads, past the edge of town, through a rich subdivision full of giant houses and sprawling lawns, to the woods, where a ranch-style house sat under live oaks and Spanish moss. Ron, according to himself, was scared of his own house. It was haunted, and a corpse of a black man lay under the foundations. He had once seen in the window the face of a rapist in the news. The golf course was near by. Rich people played there, people like his dad, who hadn't left them anything when he went away (except the refrigerator, the lawn mower, and 23 volumes of Readers' Digest condensed novels. No motivation, no consequence.). His dad was a lawyer, his dad was in Nevada and he (Ron) had watched *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* last night. His dad had called once and Ron had told him that his (Ron's) mom had cancer and his sister had the flu. Suddenly he stared singing, to us now, softly, in the car, about a cat in a cradle, and a little blue boy who Ron urged to blow

his horn.

I had once had a book that contained, along with other nursery rhymes, a poem about Little Boy Blue. It was one of those books for infants, with cardboard pages designed to withstand drool and spastic, grabbing arm movements, and it had, at some point in my early childhood, disappeared in a box of items for the Goodwill, or younger cousins, or the curb. But the picture of Boy Blue, fuzzy with memory, and with the end of the story forgotten, had stayed with me, and I had tried, at various points growing up, to get a parent to tell me the rest of his story. They didn't know what book I was talking about. They had forgotten the book. There was a nursery rhyme, they said, but when they recited it, it was too short. There had been more about the boy, I knew, and I never found out what it was.

When we dropped off Ron my dad waited, the engine idling, until he had gone up the driveway and through the front door, unlocking it with a key he carried on a dog-tag style chain around his neck.

#

I remember his mother vividly, if not clearly, much as if I had formed my entire conception of her from Ron's stories. She had spent some time in the Army, and she attempted to control her children with a military discipline, which, by its very nature and hers, could only be sustained in short bursts, which resulted in Ron and Laura being farmed out as much as possible--keeping busy with Scouts and afterschool activities. Ron learned to swim each summer, and every winter participated in a Big Brothers/Big Sisters program, but he never went away to camp (except the weekend Boy Scout camping trips), or to visit relatives. They had no family, Ron told me, except for some crazy distant cousins out West. They stayed at home with their mother, who one imagined had given up smoking for the kids' sake but was forever longing and irritable because of it. She stayed at Sunday school a few times instead of dropping Ron off, to see what went on there, and did the same once or twice for Scouts. She would sit in the back row, in a folding metal chair, with her purse and a canvas bag, an orange rape whistle on a lanyard around her neck, along with a large pen and her glasses. I knew she was nearsighted, but she still wore the glasses on a chain, like they were only for reading, as if she didn't need to put them on again to drive or see across a room.

I watched them after the Scouts meeting, because their van's battery had died--Laura had left the interior lights on--ON PURPOSE, her mother shouted at her--and they were standing around while she tried to fix it. She reminded the kids that they were disabled, and medicated, and had to try extra hard to be good because of it. She told them the deck was stacked against them--by way of motivation, I suppose, to make them go to a good college and stay away from bad influences. When my dad saw their car trouble he offered her a jump, and when that didn't work he drove them all home. In the car Ron dominated the lack of conversation from the middle of the back seat, filling the void with lines from movies spoken *a propos* of nothing and with no explanation afterwards of the significance of that particular quote. When he mentioned his dad, his mother told him to shut up. When he revealed an intricate scam he had devised for tricking the CEOs of Hasbro, via the return policy on Furbies, his mother told him to not end up like his dad. "Oh, yeah." Ron had said, and been quiet for a few seconds.

One year both my mother and Ron's forced us to go to Vacation Bible School. Ron and I saw each other in the halls, but were never in the same class. But we ate lunch together, which consisted of snack size pretzels and potato chips, with Hawaiian punch, doubtless in an attempt to pacify the greatest possible number of children, as perceived by the organizers of Vacation Bible School. It went on for a week, and by the end I felt sick. I said as much, as we ate, and Ron agreed, voicing a yearning for some broccoli. He insisted they ate nothing but vegetables at home, except his sister, who demanded gummi bears. And his mother drank vodka. I didn't believe it, because Ron was the kind of guy who would have his soda confiscated by scoutmasters after he drank three on the bus ride up to the campsite and was revealed to have seven more in his backpack. "She mixes Peter Paul and Marys," he told me.

#

I lost touch with Ron after he changed schools during his sophomore year. He stayed in the area, but I only heard bits and pieces--we never bumped into each other or tried to meet up. I wondered if I would one day see him on the news--if his army-boot wearing mother had ever lost it and driven the family van into the swimming pool at the rich country club near their house, or if she had been arrested for torching city hall, or driving out to Nevada in hopes of castrating their father. I hoped Ron had done well, though. Of all the project kids and twelve-year-old gangster-posers that got dragged through or lured into that Sunday school classroom, none of them compared to Ron and his family.

But last year, Ron held an estate sale. Mom and Sis had boarded the van--the same van, with the unreliable battery--in the middle of the night and had taken off, and they hadn't come back. It was the night of Ron's high school graduation, and he would, I found out later, be attending a college in the next state come fall. Planning to raise some funds, and betting no one would ever come back to claim the stuff, Ron had a yard sale. From the depths of the house spewed every thing imaginable. His sister's three hundred plush animals were there, along with several real stuffed animals, a lion and an antelope among them. There were three refrigerators, twenty years' worth of *Better Homes and Gardens*, and--I am not making this up--a model UFO, twelve feet across with a single seat behind the lovingly crafted dash. There was an antique German wall clock and a bathtub. There was a set of billiard cues, but no balls or table. There was a record player, and a pile of records.

I came because Ron had advertised in every paper in the town--there were only two--and on nearly every telephone pole. There were flyers on the bulletin boards of every public building, and I'd found flyers in the trays at the local McDonald's--he had been industrious, everything short of a spot on the radio.

I picked up some records from the pile. Simon and Garfunkle, Harry Chapin--Ron walked up behind me.

"Yeah, those were my dad's. A buck for the whole lot, okay?"

"These were your dad's?"

"Yeah. Every last one. Never listened to 'em."

I took them.

"Good luck, Ron."

"Thanks."

I never listened to them either.

The Appreciative Life

He picked me up at my house, and after getting back on the main road he turned up the volume on the radio.

"Why do you even listen to that stuff?" I asked. It was schlock-rock, simple and unadorned wailing backed by incessantly grating guitars.

"I don't really know."

"You don't actually like it, do you?" I knew he didn't; I knew what he preferred. His apartment walls were lined with recordings of classical, even archaic music, European folk instrumentals. Maybe rock, once in a while, but he had had something amplified and pitch-altered on every time we'd been together

lately.

“I think we listen to pop music to punish ourselves,” he said. “An aural bed of nails to compensate for our sins.”

“Those sins being...?”

“I don’t know... sometimes, don’t you ever get so sick of everything you just want to cram your ears full of garbage to spite it all?”

This was not normal second-date dialogue, but Phillip and I had known each other for a long time.

“It’s like you’d rather inflict pain,” he said, “like you want to inflict pain on yourself, just for pure spite against... the stuff around us.”

“You’d choke on garbage to get back at a culture who would do it for you anyway?”

“Yeah, kind of. Does that make sense?”

“In a very cliched, pop-psychology sort of way, yes.” I turned down the volume, then shut the radio off entirely.

“Don’t you ever want to hurt like that?” he asked. “It’s why you read some thriller instead of a classic, it’s why you watch TV instead of reading a book, it’s why you watch a sitcom instead of PBS, it’s why you watch Family Guy instead of the Simpsons.” (I might have snorted at this point.) “Because you have to do the bad thing.”

I said nothing. We’d known each other since high school, but it was only now, as we both neared the completion of our undergrads, that we had decided we had more to offer each other. We were headed to dinner; at this date and the one previous, we had self-consciously avoided any places we had been to together before, as if trying to disassociate ourselves from those earlier social identities.

“I’ll tell you why I really listen to it,” he said. I waited. “It’s because it hurts too much to listen to classical music. Or anything good.”

“You still like it? Your tastes haven’t changed, you just have this imp of the perverse changing the presets on the radio?”

“No, I love the same stuff I’ve always loved. And it’s not a perverse impulse, not like that. It’s because I love it that I can’t stand to listen to it, here, now, in the middle of my job and school and everything. It keeps telling me I should be living something better, and I know I can’t leave this. It tells me to live the way I really want to live, the right way to live.”

We were at the restaurant now, parked and with the engine off, but he kept talking.

“There’s a better way, with peace and balance, and, and, just, *rightness*, and it’s a crime to bring music that talks about that to a place like this, and it hurts me too badly to know that I can’t do what’s right.”

“You want to live in some dirt-floored cottage in the Lake District,” I said. “Or in Bertie Wooster’s drawing room.”

“Yes! You get it? You get how either, both, are the same to me?”

“They’re both lives of leisure.”

“Leisure to do what’s important.”

“Such as?” But I already knew the answer.

“To appreciate stuff.”

“What is this life, if full of care, we have no time to stop and stare’?” I asked.

“Exactly! You--you’re not making fun of me?”

I loved him for the way he was, like this--to even acknowledge his sincerity imbues a certain cynicism to me, and my examination of him, but I loved him.

“No,” I said. “I wish we could do it--be the kind of people who go on Sunday drives, and picnics without a scrap of styrofoam in sight, and play cricket, or watch people play cricket, or croquet, and wear all those clothes--”

“And wear dressing gowns in the evening, and pour a tumbler of scotch and read a book in a wingback chair, and go for walks carrying a blackthorn stick--”

“Do you even know what a blackthorn stick looks like?”

“No! I mean, it’s a big gnarly stick but I don’t know what a blackthorn really looks like, and that’s what the problem is.”

“You can still pour yourself a glass of scotch.” I said. “There’s a Walgreens on the corner.”

“But I don’t have a dressing gown. I’d just squat on my futon and read *Newsweek* and glug the scotch down too hurriedly. I’d be thinking about having to get up for work tomorrow, and having to get to bed so I can wake back up again.”

I don’t consider myself the voice of reason and don’t make a habit of putting myself in that position, but I said it anyway:

“You’re talking about having money, hereditary money, having a castle that could never be bought in today’s dollars no matter how much you had, about servants, so you can enjoy dressing for dinner because someone else’s doing your laundry and laying out your neckties. That motorcar’s waiting on the gravel drive outside the door because someone already warmed it up and drove it around from the garage a quarter-mile away.”

“The fireplace is nice because someone else hauls the ashes away, *I know*. But listen, Mary, really, listen...”

I listened. I really listened. I could hear the music he was talking about. I saw the trees silhouetted against the sky, I could see the dear streams and ponds, I could, dear God, see the towers of Oxford. I saw homely dirt roads and the ditches on the sides, I could see a house, with a thatch roof, with the sod outside coming halfway up the walls. I wanted it as badly as he did.

I leaned over to him.

“Screw dinner.” I said. “Let’s go.”

#

We started small. Well, let me clarify small. We both got out of our leases and found a run-down farmhouse. We bought it and moved in together.

There never seemed to be any question that we'd move in together. We were in this together. We'd still have separate bedrooms, but this was only tacitly acknowledged as we inspected the property before buying; it was as much a given that we would be sleeping separately, for now, as it was that we would be eating breakfast together. We pooled our money; for the time being we kept our jobs.

The house was equidistant between two of the smaller towns in our county; the illusion of isolation was permitted only via the particular lay of the land. In front of our house, separated by a few dozen yards of brush, was a state route, and on the other side of that was a sharply rising slope of rock, in fact the exposed interior of the hill through which the road cut. Behind us lay field upon field which did not belong to us, through which ran the giant trestles of power lines. Our neighbors were not far off on either side, but they, as we, followed the highway, which curved away from us; brush and trees blocked whatever view might still have been visible around the bend.

The backyard was riot with wildflowers. The garden patch to the side was overgrown, and the brief fields on either side of us were completely given over as well. The house itself, a beautiful brick building, rambled, but was small enough. It was perfect, our own piece of Thomas Hardy created by perfect accident in the heart of the American Midwest. It was a real fixer-upper. There were weeds, seriously weeds, growing in the sun room, which of course only made Phillip more convinced than ever that we were supposed to be here.

There was some furniture already there, some mismatched chairs that we thought might have been some mid-century Victorian revival pieces, but when we flipped them over to clean them we saw the stickers saying "*Everyday Interiors Collection*" from Target. They weren't vintage, just really beat up.

So we had to buy new furniture. New kitchen towels, new dishes and cutlery, new everything, really. Phillip insisted we had to start new and I agreed with him. I bought a bench at an antique store, something to put in the hallway, and Phillip asked what was I doing buying a piece of furniture we didn't need. I said it looked fine in the hall, he asked why would anyone sit down in a hallway--we were here to live free of superfluous stuff.

"This isn't Walden Pond, Phil."

"I'm not saying it is, I'm just saying, we're trying to start new, let's not encumber ourselves with stuff we don't really want, I mean *really want*, things that we appreciate."

"I appreciate this bench. Look how beautiful it is."

"You impulse-bought it."

The bench stayed, and Phillip hardly bought anything after that, for a while.

He liked the tea towels I brought in--imported from England, bought at a tea shop downtown that sold postcards and cans of Bovril.

Phillip brought his vinyl record player along, and I bought a manual typewriter, for my thesis. (We both stayed in school, Phillip at his English degree, me with my anthropology. We wanted to finish this before embracing the appreciative life completely--our last kiss to our parents before slaughtering the oxen.) I found a cathedral-style radio at an antique shop. It only picked up a few frequencies, but it brought in the classical station, which is all we'd be listening to anyway.

#

In a way we were an almost unbearable indie cliché--your worst possible amalgam of twee and mumblecore and whatever buzzword the *New Yorker's* pushing this week. I guess we were distinguished from the whole "authenticity" thing by our decadence--we were dandies without a trace of irony. I mean we adopted this lifestyle without irony, and we sought to emulate those irony-less dandies, whoever they may be.

We did indeed buy the croquet set, and cleared a place in the back yard for it. (I'd suggested we put in a *bocce* court, on the grounds that there was a *bocce* scene in *Portrait of a Lady*, but Phillip didn't remember that part. A quick google search would have told us if any such scene existed, but neither of us wanted to use that.) By the time we got it all the wickets set up, it was too dark to play, but we agreed we'd soon have friends over and have a regular game, with all the women carrying parasols and the guys in waistcoats. I said we should get a Victrola.

#

I came down and he had breakfast out already, new silverware on crisp linen napkins laid with grace on the kitchen table, toast made and on white plates, a dish of yogurt--not the plastic tub it came in--waiting to be spooned into bowls.

Yogurt was a thing with Phil. He couldn't come up with a good basis for it, but he loved to sprinkle oats and slivered almonds and blueberries over the top of plain yogurt, with a drizzle of honey. I liked it too, and brought in pita bread and hummus. But of course we had the stopping and staring foods, too, jam and chutney in the fridge--the icebox, as I had taken to calling it--and artisanal bread in an actual breadbox. We carefully avoided calling it "artisanal"--it was just bread to us, of course this was the kind of bread we ate, what other kind was there? And buying artisanal bread would have been gauche--not that we would know that, because we never set foot inside a Panera, didn't know what they served there. We made soup, lots of soup, because we weren't really sure of anything else E. M. Forster ate. It was late in the year, and it was then that we decided that we would eat only seasonal foods--nothing frozen and shipped from Argentina, just what we might really be eating had we lived a hundred years before. We decided that we would make cucumber sandwiches in the spring.

Phillip poured himself some orange juice--from a pitcher, to which he would transfer all the juice when we bought it, throwing the carton away immediately into the growlery--our name for the basement, where we put everything we didn't want to have to look at--our computers, paperwork, plastic bottles of shampoo. We recycled, but we didn't want to see the bin in the laundry room, which we had outfitted with a collapsible drying rack and beautiful linen curtains.

"I think it's time we went to Europe." he said.

"Europe?" I was afraid to ask. "To visit?"

"I used Google Earth. I found Kenneth Graham's old home."

"Yeah?"

"It's beautiful."

"Street view?"

“No, just an aerial, but--you could zoom in really close.”

“You want to make a pilgrimage to Kenneth Graham’s house?”

“Stop asking questions! Stop asking questions like that! Don’t you *want* to go?”

“Sure, but we don’t have any money.”

“I don’t care. We have enough for a plane ticket.”

“And hotel fair?”

“We’d be living there.” he said, looking into his coffee, lightened with the little pitcher of cream sitting next to his saucer.

“We *cannot* just pack up and move to Europe. I still work as an office assistant.”

“You can get out.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Phil, we cannot carry this any further! We can’t go to Europe and pretend we’re Thomas Traherne, or whatever. Can’t you be happy here?”

“We’re just pretending here. It’s impossible to really live the right way here. The outside world doesn’t line up, it’s all imitation and derivative. I wanna go back to the *source*, the real stuff back of all this.”

“Look, Phil, that England doesn’t even exist anymore. It looks just like America. They use bar code scanners in Surrey too.”

“But do they use plastic bags?”

For a moment I didn’t know whether he was joking or not. It was the sort of comment you were supposed to say with a twinkle in your eye, you said it to acknowledge that things had gone too far and that you wanted to bring this conversation back on a more stable, superficial footing. But I looked more closely and saw that he was really sincere, not antagonistic, not trying to refute me, just really asking with an almost hopeful set around his eyes.

“I think they still use brown paper.” I had no idea, and I still have no idea why I thought that I did.

“Let’s go, please?”

We finished our breakfast without saying anything else. He unfolded the newspaper and began to read it, laid out at his side on a cleared space on the table. He’d already removed the colour comics page.

#

We did it. We really did it. We bought plane tickets.

Not, of course, that we were staying. We were just tourists. We both agreed to this, but I couldn’t get rid of the idea that Phillip was going to flee into a castle once we got there and barricade himself behind the door. He would decide to spend the rest of his life within that room, writing poetry on a continuous sheet of vellum and looking out the window at the surrounding wood.

Of course no such thing happened. We toured, like most people. I thought we might get bikes and strike out on our own, stopping at ponds and streams along the way, admiring the way the grass grew while thinking quiet, calm thoughts free of internal meta-commentary, our demeanors characterized by a serenity that knew no fear of end. But we landed at Heathrow airport and boarded a bus with “Hollycroft English Countryside Tours” painted on the side.

I wore a straw boater hat. Phillip wore a vest and a pair of spectacles--he’d thrown out his contacts when we bought the house, but had, I thought, always found glasses bothersome. That’s the word we would use have used to describe it if we were going to admit it, “bothersome.” But he liked the way they looked when he took them off and laid them across the open pages of a book he’d been reading.

The other people on the bus with us were tacky--wearing flip-flops and carrying bottles of hand sanitizer, as if the extra-American world was infested with germs new and novel to their immune systems already rendered well-nigh impervious by the handlebars of Wal-Mart shopping carts and weakened like a lords with margaritas and french fries. You can get them, in England. Margaritas. And french fries. You can

even call them that. They see the iPhone in your hand and know what you're talking about.

It almost happened, just once. We visited an old manor house, the kind of place that George Eliot would have lived if she'd inhabited one of her own books. As our tour group left the study, Phil lingered behind, looking at a tea tray placed on a table next to a globe which omitted Antarctica and depicted northern Canada as a sprawling mass that encompassed the arctic circle. When I went back to get him, he looked up at me with tears in his eyes.

Oh, Phillip, I thought. It'd couldn't have been a dirty alley in Dagenham and your visions of Dickensian chimneys. Why didn't you see a chartered Thames and think of burning tigers? It had to be this--not just beautiful but decadent. It wasn't just anglophilia, or authenticity, or anachronism--it was whatever was here in the mahogany globe.

"There's resin in the glass," he said.

"What?"

"The glass. The tea. It's full of resin, or something like that."

I looked closer. The tea cup was full of what looked like an amber liquid, with a sheen on top from the tall bay window to our left. I poked it. It was hard, an acrylic or resin that made for spillproof, insect-proof, evaporation-proof tea.

"I thought the English used milk," Phillip said. The "tea" was translucent; I could see the fine crack in the tea cup's glaze running all the way to the bottom.

We were silent for a moment more.

"Let's go home," he said.

#

We sold the house a few months after we got back. I got tired of going down to the growlery to microblog, and Phillip didn't like using a manual lawnmower. We ended up getting married. We live in an apartment. He loves me. He calls me nearly every day on the cell phone and leaves a message. I always delete them. To this day I can't stand to hear his voice on a recording.

Harold

I still remember the first time I met Harold. When my friend had told me about a tax accountant who worked on the cheap, I jumped at the chance. When I learned that this accountant operated out of a city trolley, however, I momentarily balked.

"You mean he canvasses for clients by riding the bus?"

"No," said my friend, "He works in one."

I had trouble shaking the idea that Harold, as my friend informed me was the accountant's name, worked as a mechanic to supplement his income, or perhaps took advantage of the commuting time to process paperwork.

"No," insisted my friend, "He has his office in the number 13."

#

I stumbled as the trolley pulled away from the curb, staggering the rest of the way to the back. At first glance, I thought there was some mistake. Perhaps I had the wrong bus. A bum was clearly occupying the rear three seats, his duffel bag, a bed roll, and bulging plastic grocery sack spread out around him. He was dozing, a paper bag-wrapped bottle in one hand and an oversized calculator in the other. I decided it was worth a chance.

“Excuse me,” I said, “Harold?”

He snorted awake. “Yeah?”

“Um, Mr. Blane, I--you were recommended to me as an accountant.”

He slowly straightened.

“What’ve you got?”

“Well...” I stalled.

“Give it ’ere.” He slurred, grabbing my briefcase and popping it open on his lap. “Ah.”

“Um, excuse me, could you hand back--”

Harold made a dismissive wave with his free hand, his other sifting through stacks of forms and certificates.

“Okay, I’ll take it.”

“Well.” I said, “I mean, I hadn’t quite decided, uh, that is, do you... even have any credentials?”

A part of me regretted using the word “even,” but I think I was justified, if you’ll consider the circumstances. Dimly, I looked on the trolley walls for framed diplomas. Harold snorted and began rummaging around in the duffel bag at his side. Eventually he pulled out a dirty, dog-eared piece of paper covered in stains, with one corner missing. I took it when offered and looked at it. There were several rings where it appeared Harold had used his authorization to practice accounting as a coaster. In the lower right corner, where the signature should have been, a massive blot obscured whatever name might have once been there.

“I think I’d better go else--”

Harold interrupted: “Here’s your suitcase.”

The suitcase, emptied of its pertinent documents, was thrust at me.

I’ll never know why, but I took it in silence and meekly turned to leave.

“Come back next Tuesday,” Harold muttered after me. It seemed almost a snarl.

#

I questioned the wisdom of the whole affair.

#

When the next Tuesday arrived, the number thirteen did as well, pulling up with a screech of brakes at the corner of Lovell and Main. I paid my dollar-twenty-five and walked to the back. Harold was there, hunched over what closer inspection on my part revealed to be a 1993 IBM Thinkpad. I followed the cord with my eyes, across the seat on the outer edge of which Harold sat, down to the floor, and into a highly improbable, not to mention dangerous-looking, electrical outlet.

“*Erhem*,” I said. It didn’t sound nearly as commanding as I had hoped.

Harold looked up, pulling as he did so a pair of plastic-framed glasses from his head.

“Oh, Phil, right? Got your return right here.”

He reached behind him and pulled from his duffel bag a manila envelope. I took it from his slackly-outstretched hand and looked through the contents. I wasn’t sure whether or not to expect beer-can rings or, perhaps, “balls” scrawled in the margins. All my 1040’s schedules seemed to be there, though, with at least a plausible number of boxes checked. I started to fill out a check when Harold stopped me.

“Cash,” he said. “I already made my bank run for the day.”

When I paused, he softened.

“C’mon,” he said, “I kinda need it now.”

“I thought you just went to the bank.” I’m not sure what made me say that, except perhaps a desire to stall what I felt was an approaching ominous stage in my financial life.

“Look, I’m just a little short right now. You don’t mind? I can take it... tomorrow I guess, if you don’t have it on you. Just a deposit now.” He was practically wheedling.

“All right,” I said, in the attitude of one halfway between accomplice and carnival-mark, pulling the bills from my wallet. I had enough. Like my friend had told me, Harold worked for peanuts.

#

I went over the documents when I got home. I was amazed. Harold was good. Really good. Also, I was willing to bet, slightly unethical, but I was too hard up to quibble about abstractions. The money he saved me would go a long way, and I knew it was air-tight. I took the H&R Block coupons that had been sitting on the kitchen counter, and I tossed them into the trash.

#

It wasn’t until the next year that I again went to see Harold. He was still there, greyer, perhaps, around the temples, his eyes set deeper in his face, but still there, hunched over his decrepit laptop and typing away, seemingly oblivious to the ups and downs of the bus as it rattled over the cracked thoroughfare. He seemed to remember me, but I couldn’t be sure. When I introduced myself as a returning customer, he may have just been acting polite, in an effort to maintain business. Our conversation was more relaxed, at

least on my end, and this time I found myself looking more closely at his makeshift office. Maybe now, confident that he knew what he was doing, I was unafraid of looking openly, without the apprehension surrounding the unknown elements I might discover.

The electrical socket was still there. I peered closer--it appeared that Harold had managed to open an access panel in the trolley wall, cut into the electrical wires that powered the bus, and splice in a convoluted sequence of transformers and power adaptors, finally terminating in a bare-bones outlet on a dowel lashed to the bench leg. With duct tape.

"Hey, siddown. I got people coming," Harold rasped to me as he closed his laptop and took a slip of paper from his plastic shopping bag.

A young man and woman were walking down the aisle of the bus, twisting their necks back and forth as if looking for someone. Harold ran a hand through his hair, a tongue over his teeth, glanced at the window, and cleared his throat. The two saw him and walked over.

I watched, fascinated.

Harold now had the slip of paper around his neck in a sort of clerical collar and was holding a Gideon Bible. With admirable efficiency of method, he ran through some vows and pronounced the fidgeting but clearly excited couple man and wife.

I noticed for the first time that the newlyweds had duffel bags at their feet. After a kiss and exchange of rings, they picked up the bags and walked hand-in-hand a few rows down, returning to the front of the bus, sliding into seats and promptly sliding from view until only the tops of their heads were intermittently visible.

When I looked back at Harold, the collar was nowhere to be seen, and the Bible was propping up the laptop, on which he was once again intently typing.

#

"Hell of a book. Great stuff. Gotta love that mother."

It was an exemplary specimen of Harold's sense of wit that he referred to Maugham as a mother. He and I were sitting at a table in one of the more pricey city restaurants. For the past half hour, he had talked of nothing but *The Moon and Sixpence*, of which I remembered only that I had read it sometime in college.

I was far from satisfying my curiosity (whose origins were mysterious even to me), but two weeks of riding the bus, after I got off work, at odd hours, had divulged a lot about this man. Most of it, though, was trivial. Most of what I had learned today had to do with his views on literature and the correct method of preparing tomato-basil bisque. (The bowl in front of him wasn't to his liking; the cook had apparently scalded it.) I nibbled a sandwich to fill the silence following his summation of art and artistry. There were still some questions on my mind, not the least of which concerned how he had managed to carry on for as long as he had. The trolley driver and patrons appeared to be either unaware of his existence or quietly accepting of it. I had gradually acclimated to the realization that no one seemed surprised to see a man leeching electricity off the city power grid, performing marriages that ranged from the civil to the highly ritual, holding an accountancy office, arbitrating disputes, and baptizing babies--all on a moving bus. In my past two weeks of intense and, so I had thought, undetected observation, I had seen him conduct

- 1) a bar mitzvah, attended by five people, complete with Talmudic scrolls and kosher after-food,
- 2) a shotgun wedding, actual shotguns present and barely concealed (this in addition to the probable elopement I had witnessed earlier), and
- 3) a baptism, which he accomplished by sprinkling water out of the canteen he always carried and on which he had glued a wooden crucifix for the occasion.

At one point I was called upon as a witness. Two angry men had climbed aboard the bus, snarling at each other and apparently seconds away from hand-to-hand combat. They had tromped to the back of the bus where Harold sat, talking to a young man with his hand on his stomach. When the two men, who appeared to collectively weigh a sum approaching five hundred pounds, tried to barge in, Harold waved them off; when they tried to shove the stomach-clutching man away, Harold, without getting up or any apparent effort, unleashed a string of profanity that described the two men's matrilineal descent and cranial capacity/contents in no uncertain terms.

This with a completely straight face, still fixed on his conversant, without so much as a glance at the two mammoths who towered above him.

Harold, who stands somewhere between my tie tack and chin, who has been known to become briefly airborne whenever his office goes over a speedbump.

Yeah.

It seemed he was in a discussion of gastrointestinal symptoms. After listening to the young man's complaints for another minute, he nodded sagely, reached into his bag, and pulled out a business card. He scribbled briefly on the back and handed it to the young man, who smiled, nodded, shook Harold's hand, and reached for his wallet. A twitching look of tension stole over his face as he rifled the folds, alleviated when Harold pointed at something in the wallet. I couldn't hear what was said, but I couldn't help smiling when I saw Harold pocket a bus pass as the doors swished open to admit the young man to the outside world.

Harold then turned and regally gestured for the two near-combatants to approach--although I have to admit that the regality was probably more in my mind than reality: his actual motion was somewhere between boredom and resignation. They came closer and I leaned in from my vantage point several rows away: apparently they had a dispute regarding a car one had sold to the other. Sans any examination of physical evidence, Harold dispensed his verdict after hearing a single testimony and single rebuttal from each party. Before dismissing them, Harold called me over (with a casual aplomb that completely destroyed my belief in the efficacy of my incognition) to sign a piece of paper to the effect that I had been present and seen the dispute's resolution and acceptance. This paper, after being signed by the men and Harold, was slipped into a folder containing dozens of similar papers, disappearing once again into Harold's duffel bag. Both men seemed pleased, and got off together at the next stop, without a trace of their former animosity.

#

After that, I no longer bothered to conceal my watching. Harold didn't seem to mind; he never acknowledged my presence unless he needed something. He seemed to have accepted me as a sort of apprentice, or assistant-in-training:

“Phil,” he would say, “what time is it?”

“Do you got a stamp? I need to send off this return.”

“Say, Phil, could you hold this kid while I get the oil uncorked?” He turned to the parents in front of him after handing off a squirming child. “He’s a good man, an old friend. We knew each other back in seminary.”

The parents seemed to accept this. After all, if you have one practicing Orthodox minister on a trolley, why not two?

This dual role of surveillance and abetment was getting me nowhere, and I had decided to ask him out to lunch. I needed to understand what was going on. And so far all I understood was that one must stir bisque frequently to avoid developing a skin across the top, and that salt should be used in said preparation sparingly.

“A man has a right to choose, doesn’t he?” said Harold, apparently referring to the amount of salt.

I wondered if Harold had ever conducted a funeral. I wouldn’t put it past him. Maybe a memorial service.

When the waiter came to present the tab, I paid, unprotested, and we left. It was so clichéd that I half-expected it, but I still had to suppress a second glance when, as we walked past the concierge, Harold grabbed a handful of complementary peppermints and stuffed them into his pocket. When he withdrew his fist the pocket flap stayed shoved inward and the bulge of the candy swung against the doorframe as we left. We said goodbye there and walked away, I to go to my car and home, and Harold back to the bus. He has a bed roll, I thought, but how does he brush his teeth? Then I remembered the small faucet I had noticed under the seat the last time I visited, a spigot lifted from a park fountain, attached to a thin rubber hose. A hole had been cut in the floor of the bus, and a basin, also with a hole, set inside. I remembered that the ancient city busses still used water radiators. He’ll manage, I thought.

#

Two years had passed since the day I first encountered Harold, and I again brought him my taxes. As usual, pockets of unforeseen money brilliantly appeared, and I walked away a happy man. We continued to lunch together, several times a week. He never protested my taking the bill, and never seemed to question my interest, although if he had my explanation would have been simple enough: I had never met anyone like Harold. I had certainly never sent my taxes to anyone like him. And he knew more than taxes.

When my transmission died, I went to Harold. I knew he couldn’t repair it, but it seemed a fair bet that he would know the best mechanics and could recommend a garage. The same for when I needed a rental while my car was in the shop. (When I went to pick up the rental, the clerk and I started chatting, and he told me that they had re-programmed the caller ID so that it displayed “Harold” when a call from a particular pay phone came in.)

The extra cash I was saving was adding up, and I decided to embark on the stock market. Harold knew what was piping and what was about to burst.

When a neighbor’s dog got loose and drowned in my uncovered pool (installed courtesy of a favorable market return), the neighbor tried to sue me. I went to Harold. Quoting the state’s revised code from

memory, with sizable reductions in the jargon, he coached me on what to say. My neighbor decided to look elsewhere for a fight.

I'm not sure why, but when I started dating Mary, I went to Harold. Not directly, of course. I took him out for a bite to eat, and let it come up in conversation.

"Mary who?"

"Crick. Why?"

"She used to work at the Eastwoods Club?" Harold gestured with a lettuce leaf on the end of his dessert fork.

"Yeah, that's how I met her."

"What the hell were you doing there?" Harold asked.

"I took up golf."

"Ah."

I waited.

"So?" I finally asked. "Do you know her somehow?"

"Yeah."

That was all.

"Y' ever read Kerouac?" Harold asked. "Sick puppy. But could play a typewriter like Beethoven on a concert grand."

#

When I decided she was the one, I went back. After some preliminary discussion of Hemmingway, the Japanese economy, copyright law, and shrimp bouillabaisse (I had, to my own surprise, started studying at night in order to keep up during these talks), I asked Harold.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"Don't."

#

I did. We were married in a chapel, with spotless surroundings, music, candles, flowers, and all the trimmings, by a soulless minister who droned on in a nasal warble. It felt makeshift and hackneyed. It felt fake.

#

I lurched to the back, gripping seat backs for support as I did so. The swaying of the bus was exacerbated by the hangover I was suffering, but the unsteady sensation was more nearly a symptom of my own bewilderment.

I had been fired. An e-mail had informed me of the fact the day previous, and the ensuing evening and night had been a blur. Mary didn't know; Mary only knew the new car in the driveway, the house we had just bought, the ring on her finger, and the aged wines in the basement, several of which were now contributing to the cloudiness of my mind.

I had been laid off. I went to Harold.

He was there, as always. He looked up at me as I approached, and I wondered if he could sense bad fortune coming. My imagination suggested that he looked up at me with a glare of unwelcome, as if he had already heard and wanted no part of me.

"Look, Harold, I need help."

Harold nodded.

Good, I thought. Just what was good, I wasn't sure, but I felt relieved by this simple act of recognition anyway.

"I lost my job."

I hadn't meant to blurt it out like that. I hadn't even meant to state bluntly that I needed his help, but a faint breeze of panic had blown me to it, as if he were a confessor who was required to grant immediate absolution, before I sank deeper in oblivion.

"Too bad," said Harold. "Me too."

I looked at him for a moment in silence, too shocked to say anything.

"Well," he continued, "what do you want me to do?"

"I--I don't know. I thought you might have some suggestion, some idea of where I could go. It wasn't my fault, getting laid off. There was a reorg, and my number just came up. Maybe I haven't been working as hard lately, but I just got married. Mary's a bit of a... high-maintenance type. I..."

I shook my head.

"You want me to offer you a job, don't you?" Harold held his fingers poised, motionless, over the laptop's keyboard.

I looked up. It hadn't occurred to me--at least not consciously. Perhaps some dim corner of my mind had hoped that it would be that simple, some dim corner unwilling to admit to my conscious self that things were as bad as they were.

"No. Yes."

Harold nodded again.

“Siddown.”

He pulled his cluster of bags aside and motioned for me to sit.

“I’ve been looking for an assistant,” he said, shutting the lid to his laptop slowly. “You have any experience with paperwork?”

“Yeah...”

“Show up tomorrow.”

It was fitting for a man who managed to get mail by torch-welding a slot in the side of the bus and writing “Greater Transit Authority, Rear Parking Lot, Vehicle 453” on his business cards. It made no sense, and I knew it would work.

#

What did he mean, he’d been looking for an assistant? I could just see the ad in the classifieds: Wanted: energetic self-starter w/ paperwrk exp. Must be able to serve in various capacities. Apply M-F on the number 13.

For what would Harold need an assistant, anyway? He was the epitome of self-sufficiency. One could be self-reliant by retreating from civilization easily enough; Harold had done that much harder thing: achieved self-reliance among his fellow men. Nevertheless, I was there the next day, at the Main and Lovell stop, dressed for my first day on the job, as if I’d never met this man before and needed to make a good impression, as if Harold would be impressed by my pressed shirt and firmly knotted tie. Harold, who wore a paper collar as temporary as a surgeon’s gloves--and just as sterile.

“Good. Organize these.”

Harold thrust a stack of papers at me, and I began my new career on that thinnest thread of instruction. I wondered vaguely about how I was going to be paid. It had never occurred to me until just then. The first customer of the day was arriving, a woman clutching her jaw and describing her symptoms to Harold. She had walked straight back, with none of the hesitancy I had seen on other patrons; she was evidently return business. Harold gestured for her to sit down and open her mouth. After a cursory examination made with the help of a penlight and popsicle stick, Harold took a small dark bottle from his bag along with a package of cotton swabs. He dipped two swabs in the bottle and applied them to the inside of the woman’s mouth. Then he pulled a dental scraper and pair of needle-nosed pliers from a pouch at his side. Instructing the woman to focus on the light above his head, he went to work. After a few brief moments, he pulled out his hands and told her to look. It took a moment for the dazzle left by the fluorescent lamps to clear from her eyes, but when it did, she saw in Harold’s pliers a small pellet.

“Nothing to it really, Mrs. Smiggins. Just a small obstruction. Tell me, did you feel any discomfort, any tugging?”

“Oh, none at all, Mr. Blane. That anesthetic did the trick, and staring at the light, with that breathing method you taught me last time, well, I wasn’t nervous at all!”

“Very good! Excellent! Always glad to be of help.”

Mrs. Smiggins was already in her purse, pulling out some bills which she passed to Harold.

“Thanks again, Mr. Blane!”

“Any time, Talma, any time.”

She got off of the bus and I sidled across the aisle to sit next to Harold.

“What was in the bottle, Harold?”

“That? Water.”

“Just water?” I asked.

“I added a tad of Jack Daniels. Gives it an antiseptic flavour.”

“Then how...?”

“Haven’t you ever seen a carnival palmer?”

“So there was nothing wrong with her?” I wasn’t really surprised, but felt a need to know for sure.

“Well, she’ll die of a heart attack in ten or so years thanks to the layer of flab, but her teeth are fine. Lady’s the biggest crank I know. But I have couple of ’chondriacs.”

I went back to my seat and back to sorting paperwork. After a few moments, though, I leaned over and asked,

“What if there really *was* something wrong with her teeth?”

Harold looked off in the distance for a moment.

“She didn’t feel it when she got off, did she?”

#

Several weeks passed, in which I continued my role as secretary, supply officer, and errand boy; I mailed envelopes and picked up new ones at the store. When our printer broke down, Harold told me that he’d fix it; I was to get a typewriter for the mean time.

“What model?” I asked.

“Whatever’s out there. Uh, electric, no manuals. Just make sure it still has some ribbon.”

It took some questioning on my part before I realised that Harold meant for me to get a typewriter second-hand.

“You think I pay retail?” he asked, snorting.

“Is there a Goodwill nearby?” I asked.

“A Goodwill, a Salvation Army thrift store, and a consignment shop on Fourth. But check the dumpsters in the business district first.”

I was skeptical. Sure enough, however, the third dumpster yielded a Smith-Corona, with a half-used ribbon, missing electrical cord, and no cover. Harold jury-rigged a cord and was typing in under five minutes.

#

Eating lunch out was difficult (I could not simply walk a block, eat, and walk back to find my office in the same place anymore), so I took to bag lunches. This measure of economy was further necessitated by my finances; Harold paid me, each week, reasonably well, but the lunches of two months ago now seemed extravagant, and extravagance was something I wanted to avoid at all costs.

A certain side of this was that, as I spent more time with Harold, I learned less and less about him. And even if I could have spared the money, you can't take your boss out to lunch, can you?

#

Mary still didn't know what had happened. She was pregnant now, and too sick every evening to ask how work had been. When I came home at night, I didn't even need to make up stories--we just sat on the couch together, watching television, thinking our separate thoughts.

#

Harold occasionally had me drop off envelopes at other businesses, running in while the bus was stopped and handing over the letters to a man behind the counter. They were his tax clients, he explained. A delicatessen manager here, an import shop there--I once even dropped off files for a fruit vendor, his cart of oranges glistening in the sun. It was, in certain ways, a carefree job. One day Harold asked if I wanted to get a drink on the way home. I agreed, and three stops later we got off and walked around to the back of the bus where the bike rack held a folding tandem. I wondered if Harold was in the habit of taking passengers. I even questioned if the bike was actually Harold's, and not one he had simply appropriated for the occasion, but as we rattled over the potholes and root-ridged asphalt, I looked down at the frame, and I could swear the clumsy welding marks at the folding mechanism screamed DIY.

Harold took us to a bar on the edge of the north quarter. I'd never been inside--had, in fact, never known that it had existed--but immediately wondered why I hadn't. The place was nice, with the kind of unpretentious pretension that gets a place stars in a city guide before quickly disappearing as people start to notice the stars. Harold ordered drinks at the bar, and although he seemed to know the tender, didn't waste any small talk on him. We ordered in the middle of the bar, but once our drinks came, Harold retreated to the far end, hunched up against the muted wallpaper.

I tried to talk about a book I'd been reading on religious drama in the twentieth century, but Harold didn't seem interested, staring ahead with his shoulders around his ears and both hands around his tumbler. The light from the cut glass played over his knuckles much as it did on the ice cubes inside.

“You ever stop to wonder if Kierkegaard had something there?” he asked, finally.

“What do you mean?”

“You're talking about plays in church. Well, Kierkegaard thought church *was* a play, more or less. The

problem, he said, was that people thought that God was the prompter, telling the preacher, who was like God's actor, what to say, while the people were the audience. The way it *ought* to be, according to dear old Søren, was for the preacher, or priest, or whatever, to be the prompter, the audience to be the actors, and God the audience."

This wasn't Harold as I had gotten to know him over the past several years. He was far more talkative tonight than usual, but also more subdued, speaking almost to himself.

"Well, it's an old concept." I said. "The world being a stage, we all being players, everything ultimately for God's amusement."

"Or glory."

"Or glory." I added. "There's bits of that idea everywhere"--I warmed to my subject--"from *King Lear* to Zoroastrianism to Job."

"The difference with Job..." Harold inhaled. "Maybe it was all a drama in God's theatre, but Job wasn't consciously acting. In real life, on the other hand..."

Rhetorical flourishes, even ones as small as "one the other hand," also seemed strange when spoken in Harold's voice. His eyes wandered around the room, to where four men had just walked in on the far side. Their looks locked on Harold.

"Shit, kid, we gotta go!"

Harold bolted from his stool and ran, knocking his glass to the floor on the other side of the counter as shouts erupted on the far side of the room. I risked one look back as I ran. It was impossible. The four men stood in pin-striped suits, their tommy-guns flashing fire.

#

I wasn't sure if I'd see Harold when I climbed aboard the bus the next morning. When we entered the darkness the night previous, Harold had disappeared, shoes spraying loose gravel and asphalt invisibly. I had looked around for him, wandering to a streetlamp and peering out from its light cone at the outlines of unfamiliar buildings. Neither he nor the four men from the bar came into view.

When I walked to the back of the bus, Harold was there, curled up on the seat, clutching his laptop.

"Harold?" I said. What is the etiquette regarding waking one's boss in the morning?

"Huh?" Harold rolled over and sat up. "Oh. Here, I think we need to finish this stack today."

He pulled a sheaf of papers from his bag and handed them to me. I'll never know why, but I took it in silence and meekly sat down and began proofing reports for a business I'd never heard of. I had planned to ask him what had happened last night, but it all seemed irrelevant now, in the face of what was in front of me.

After a few hours, Harold looked up from his lap. He had hardly stirred from his laptop all morning, but his focus seemed more the product of paralysis than industry.

“Hey, Phil, I need you to drop this off at the next stop.”

He handed me a manila envelope. It was for the fruit cart. Was it just the deep shade of the stand’s umbrella, or did the dark-eyed vendor glare at me as I cheerfully handed him his financial forms? It was the shadows, I was sure, cast by the harsh sunlight.

A few stops later, Harold had me put a package in the drop box in a wall of an office building. I must have hesitated as he put it in my hands, because he asked,

“What? You got a problem?”

“No.”

“Just drop it off.”

“Yeah, sure.” I said, breezily.

The building was on the block at the end of the bus’s circuit. The bus would come back around in a few moments, and as I waited for it, I realized with a shock that it was the same block on which my former building stood.

When the bus approached, a man in a long coat got on before me. He walked to the back, took a gun out of his coat pocket, and shot Harold several times in the chest. He was out the back doors and gone while people were still loading at the front. I rushed to Harold and tried to staunch the blood.

“Call an ambulance!” I yelled. Several people pulled out cell phones and started dialing while the driver came back to where we were, standard-issue first aid kit jerked from the wall niche and swinging in his hand.

#

When he finally woke up, he talked. I listened as he stared at the ceiling and told me what amounted to his life story. He knew more about that city and the people in it than I had thought possible. When the police arrived, though, he clammed up. He had nothing to say about the shooting (which had, fortunately, largely gone to his upper chest and shoulders, missing organs and spine on what can only be described as fantastic luck), the shooter, or his activities. He was homeless, he told them. Yeah, he lived on the bus. Yes, he slept there. Yeah, he made money--how did they think he ate? Odd jobs. What kinds? Everything. Lots of stuff. No, he was self-employed--a member of the service industry, good sirs. No, he’s not a wise guy. Yes, sir, Officer.

He gave advice. Where’d he get qualified? He read. He never claimed to be certified. (Never in so many words, I added to myself.) Anybody can look stuff up on the Internet. Yes, he had a laptop. The city’s coated in WiFi. It was powered off the bus. Why is that so hard to believe? Yeah, there was a plug. Okay, so he was a vandal. He was a damn tired vandal, too. Could they give him a rest?

#

The police eventually left, grumbling a promise to be back with statements and affidavits and summons, etc. I wondered if Harold could wrangle his legal way out of this. I wanted him to get out.

#

He was a philosophy student once, did I know that?

No, Harold, I didn't.

Yeah, a philosophy student. They threw him out when he tried to write his master's thesis on the *Bhavad Gita*, the *Principia Discordia*, and the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

Are you serious, Harold?

Yeah, he's serious. Why is everyone second-guessing him? Next I'm going to wonder how he lived on a bus. What's wrong with a bus? A man has a right to choose, doesn't he? Why can't people get it through their thick heads--

Harold, what was in the envelopes?

He doesn't want to talk about it.

Well, I do, Harold.

What's the matter with me? Did I or did I not ask for a job?

#

There's a long silence while Harold lies resolutely on his back, arms held at his sides, straight and rigid as the bed rails to which they are parallel.

"I think I helped people," he said at last. "I made them feel better."

"But did you care about them?" I ask.

"What does it matter? They felt better, didn't they, thinking I was taking care of them?"

"Even if it was all an act?"

"Even if it was all an act."

#

We're silent for a moment more. Then I speak.

"Harold, you've got to be at least sixty. The *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* wasn't published until 1979."

He continues staring at the ceiling.

"Yeah?"

"So if you wrote your master's thesis--"

“Shaddup.”

#

When I came back to visit him two days later, Harold had escaped. The four men with guns, and his attacker on the bus, made me afraid he had been kidnapped, but I say he escaped because I can't think he left under anything but his own volition. His gear, his bags and bedroll which I had salvaged off the bus and brought to him, was gone as well. If someone had taken him, or killed him in his sleep, they wouldn't have taken the stuff, would they?

At any rate, he appears on the hospital papers as missing. The nurses searched frantically, then gave up as more cases arrived that needed attention. It was another bum gone back to the streets that had dumped him briefly on their hands. I tried to look for him on the number 13, but while he had been in the hospital the transportation system had undergone an extensive and long-anticipated reorganization. Routes were changed and numbers reassigned. The path followed by Harold's bus had gone from being, in the early days of the system, one of the city's arteries, to a nearly desolate fringe, and the route had been dropped. The bus numbers now range from 1-12 in what is part consolidation and part public relations, an acquiescence to superstition revived by fear and hallowed by feelings that a tragedy, however trivial to the masses, must be accorded the memorial of isolation.

Preservation

The sound of the clacking grew unbearable, so we turned the volume down.

“Mute it.”

We muted it.

“Turn it up; we might miss something.”

It's a silent movie. We won't miss anything.

The sound of clacking gradually fills the room as my brother reluctantly turns up the volume. I can tell he's pressing hard on the button, jamming his thumb down in defiance or muted anger. He doesn't like for anyone to tell him what to do with the remote. But my grandmother wants the volume up, so we turn it up.

We're all sitting along the edges of the tiny living room, staring at the fuzzy black-and-white images as they hazily walk across the television screen. I can hear a siren outside, barely discernable and then gone entirely.

“Who's that?” my brother asks, evidently past his momentary and barely-noticeable indignation over the remote.

“Uncle Arehl, and maybe his sister, Edna,” my grandmother says, leaning in closer. “I think it's Edna,” she says, in the tone of a doctor diagnosing a disease, as if the verdict was somehow relevant to someone who has only the vaguest idea who Arehl's sister is, or was. Uncle Arehl (I don't know precisely whose uncle he is, or for what the two initials of his name once stood) saunters slowly across a dry, patchy lawn, and the camera follows him. For some reason I'm more interested in the lawn--if it can be called that--than in the people on it. The sun in the movie is blazing, and everyone filmed looks only briefly at the

camera before averting their faces once again to look at the stubby grass. The camera pans once again and I can see an incredibly rutted path leading from the porch to the fence at the edge of the yard, broken pieces of concrete amid deep tire tracks fossilized in sun-baked mud. The fence is low, wire like a chain-link, but lower, with metal stakes holding it up instead of tubes. It looks more like something with which one would contain chickens than mark a property. The scene changes to fuzz and whiteness, and now all I can see is what looks like the interior of a car.

“Sometimes the camera got turned on accidentally,” my grandmother explains. She doesn’t say this by way of apology, or even explanation; it’s almost as if she wants to make sure that we don’t make the stupid mistake of thinking this was filmed on purpose.

Now the television shows a scene of two girls playing in the sprinkler. I’m not one of those people who, when watching a home movie, always stare at the present-day subject, if present, panning back and forth between the child eagerly unwrapping their Christmas presents and the middle-aged adult sitting awkwardly as they watch themselves amidst the stares of their divided audience. Still, I looked back at my mom. She was asleep, her head flopped over to one side in the aging wingback. As long as she doesn’t snore, I think. Then grandma will get in a bad mood, and she’s take the tape out of the VCR. Not that it will do any good, because later we’ll just have to sit down and watch it again, quite possibly from the beginning, to ensure that we don’t miss anything.

There’s still no sound except the incessant clacking and an occasional squeal. The squeals, I know, are my cousins, though of what degree I’m not quite sure. Family boundaries, I’ve noticed, tend to blur even as the ties grow more defined. They have grown more defined in the past year, and I hardly know one relative from another. When I first had this thought, I felt smug for a couple of minutes, thinking I had found some great truth that would help me understand and quantify this new world around me. Then I was overtaken by apathy and abandoned that train of thought.

My grandmother, having seen this movie before, gets up to have a drink of water. My brother surreptitiously turns the volume down, just a few notches, leaving time for the green dashes at the bottom of the screen to disappear before my grandmother re-enters. With any luck she won’t notice.

“Jackie, you want anything to drink while I’m up?” The call comes from the kitchen. My mom wakes with a jerking but sufficiently silent start.

“No, Mama, I’m fine.”

“This new juice is really good. I’ve had it sitting for a couple of weeks now.”

“That’s okay, Mama. Come back in and watch with us.”

If we have to endure it, I think, so does she.

“It’s really good. I gave some to Bill last Tuesday--no, I think it might have been Thur--no, it was Tuesday, and he said it *really* helped him and his burns. Even if you don’t have burns, it’s really good for you.” But she’s not trying to convince my mom anymore; she’s coming padding back into the living room, tall glass of homemade tincture in hand. It’s just that she has to list all her reasons anyway. She’s probably rehearsed them, I think, and has to get them out, or they’ll be wasted. She doesn’t even want my mom to drink the juice anymore. I cast a very brief glance at the swirling liquid--too long, and an invitation might ensue, complete with all the arguments uttered not thirty seconds ago. But of course I probably didn’t hear them. Children never listen and pay attention--and besides, they aren’t supposed to eavesdrop on their parents’ and grandparents’ conversations.

Shots of buildings, taken from a moving car. A brief clip from an airplane. Somewhere that looks like the edge of civilization, where a thin man in jeans and a flannel shirt prances like Charlie Chaplin. Oddly enough, there are few “significant events” in these randomly ordered reels of film--no birthdays, no weddings, not even a vacation or picnic. Most of the shots consist of children playing; here they are in the sprinkler, here they are at the playground, here they’re chasing each other around steel barrels and piles of firewood (the detritus such as with all Southern yards were filled). My mind wanders to the piles of firewood on the slope out back. They used to run parallel to the house, but after the bomb my grandmother decided that they should all be positioned perpendicular to the dingy split-level. She had done most of the moving herself. Rovers, she explained, might hide behind the woodpiles if they were left parallel to the house. This made perfect sense. The neighborhood was infested with rovers (all neighborhoods were), and most of them had at least one eye on the fabulous wealth stored in my grandmother’s basement. Maybe they were after her juice.

The images continue to play across the screen. My brother has finally succeeded in turning the volume, by imperceptible degrees, down to a barely discernable hum. The tape is a copy of films my great-grandfather--my grandmother’s father--shot years ago. Ten years ago, his death--and basement--yielded piles of eight-millimeter, most of it from the early forties. Five years ago my great-aunt bought a camcorder. Last summer she had the idea to rummage in the detritus retrieved from my great-grandparents’ house and re-spool the reels of ancient film. She managed to hook up the aging but still functional Bolex and projected the home movies on a wall of her kitchen, filming the wall with her camcorder. Hence the clacking and squeals in the background.

“I have to go to the bathroom.” my brother says.

“We’ll pause it for you until you get back.”

But it is my brother, not my grandmother, who pauses the tape, getting up with a lurch. He starts to drop the remote to the coffee table but passes it to my grandmother as he exits the room. I know that while he wouldn’t ask them to, he still wants the footage paused while he’s out of the room, and I know that when he comes back, my grandmother will actually rewind just a bit to ensure that there’s a bit of overlap, and nothing has been missed. I wonder how many other tapes were found in the dog kennel, and if we will have to watch them all as well.

“Okay, let’s go.” His shirt is untucked and he’s wiping his wet hands on his shorts.

“Jackie? You awake?” my grandmother asks.

“Yes, Mama,” my mother answers from the depths of the wingback, her face concealed from view, her eyes no doubt closed. That wingback is a lifesaver, I think, and wish for an obscuring piece of furniture for myself--a confessor’s booth would be ideal.

My grandmother and mother talk a bit more, getting some preliminaries out of the way before actually starting the tape again--there is to be a minimum of talking once it starts.

I have to give my great-grandfather credit. The camera obviously isn’t mounted to a tripod as it swings from subject to subject, but still moves with a practiced--or intuitive--sweep, and when it stands still it does so without noticeable shaking. Still more fascinating is my great-grandfather’s choice of subject matter: he focuses almost exclusively on children, mostly my great-aunt, who is my grandmother’s junior by nearly two decades. The bulk of the filming was evidently done after my grandmother, now sitting next to me and sipping her drink, was married at seventeen. My great-grandmother plays a relatively

minor role in these clips, either from shyness or busyness with work. Or possibly disdain. When the camera does pause as it tracks across her face, she gazes at it briefly before looking down; the film is so degraded, and the glimpse so brief, that I cannot tell if it is an indulgent smirk or a grimace in the sun that tweaks the edges of her mouth.

The screen rapidly fades to white. For a full five minutes, all we can see are figures walking back and forth in the haze. I can't even tell if they're adults or children. The television abruptly darkens and we are treated to the sight of a cellophane blizzard. I can't make anything out. Maybe a building passes, maybe not. The screen goes black and we see "Cine Kodak Eight--Model 20" for about half a minute.

Surely great-aunt Mattie--that was what we called her, Mattie--didn't just leave the camcorder running through neglect. This was, I'm sure, a conscious--even conscientious--effort. She did it on purpose. Every second of those decrepit 8mm reels was going to be transferred to VHS, even by such a primitive method as filming the wall. And I know that when copies of this tape are made for other relatives, when the factories start back up and we can buy VCRs again, the wastelands of blank and inscrutable film will still be there. When someone finally buys a DVD burner and a converter kit and makes disc copies for everybody, they will again include the blank stretches like they are inspired--like this tape is God's last message to mankind, and if we don't preserve it all, even the parts we cannot and never will understand, we'll lose something forever.

Two hundred miles away, they have lost everything. I still cannot avoid the irony, that it was our refuse, the junk crammed in, that alone was spared. My grandmother does not understand how a Faraday cage works, nor do the neighbors understand the physics and chemistry behind their festering sores and blindness, but neither was necessary to send my grandmother into the basement at the right moment, storing on the spur of the moment various home videos in the metal box that once housed a pet poodle, now long gone.

"How much longer do we have?" my mother asks, hope in her voice.

My grandmother tells her not to worry; while the grid will shut down in a half hour, her generator will continue to power the television long past the 8:30 cutoff.

This tape was, and is more now so than ever before, a sort of denial of time, a way to stop the disintegration of the past. Minute by minute, the original reels become farther and farther gone, rotting to the point where they can't even be loaded onto the projector without snapping. The day is coming when the celluloid will be nothing but dust, and the day is coming when retribution, awful and terrible and destructive, will be meted out around the world for what has happened to us and those people further within the blast radius, now long gone. But here, for a moment, we've frozen the slide into oblivion. We've preserved whatever's left. And we can't afford to miss anything.

The Thing with Feathers

Phillip set down the cup of coffee, gently, the tremor barely passing along his arm, making the porcelain rattle for only the briefest moment on the tabletop. He brushed some crumbs to the side and set the newspaper down beside the cup. He stood, crossing to the open window. He looked at the grey water of the river below, running past his apartment on the sixth floor. In the sky above the river, birds were wheeling in large and perfect arcs--sea gulls, he thought. He stared for a moment at the birds before shutting the window. Something inside him still refused this as anything definite. He remembered a scene from childhood, the call to come inside as the snow fell softly down. He had been staying with his grandparents as his grandfather slowly died.

The newspaper does not lie. There is no equivocation in its black and white block letters. He had asked as the screen door closed behind him: "Is he dead?" and the answer had been so definite, so sharp and inarguable, like the shutting of that door, that what had come next seemed almost impossible. There is still a belief in isolated towns, towns close to the earth and real beyond anything, where religion is mixed with and touches everything. God still lives in isolated towns, and the dead, through religion or custom or habit, are never really gone. They had brought a healer, his grandmother and her daughters--they had called a woman from the church who would pray, "laying hands on the sick" to heal them. A bird outside the glass of his window tapped quizzically at the pane and cocked its head. Phillip stood there, fixated by its delicate movements. He crossed back to the table and leaned heavily on it, causing it to shift, making its feet scud across the linoleum, causing the coffee to slosh in the cup. The memory grew in him, how prayers offered for the dead man had been whispered, cried, and shouted. What he could not remember is how it ended.

Even now, it seemed impossible to him that 20th-century Americans could believe in a bodily resurrection--what did they hope for, that the dead man, lately their husband and father, would sit up in bed and begin talking like a cancer-riddled fleshy skeleton? And how did they decide to quit--what consensus was reached wherein the dead was officially declared to be such? At what point--he paused to turn the newspaper face down on the table--at what point had they decided that, were a divine intervention to occur, it would have happened already?

He grew restless. The newspaper was three days old. What, he thought, do you think you're doing? Are you going to rush in on them--stop them in their tracks? But he glanced at his watch anyway. Had the others honestly stopped hoping when the undertakers came, with embalming fluid and fresh soap? Did they assume that an injection of formaldehyde and ethanol really placed a barrier between the soul and the body? With a start, he began to pace the kitchen as another grotesque thought intruded--his grandmother, years before her husband's death, insisting that she be embalmed rather than cremated or given a natural burial. Better to place herself beyond all hope, she said, than risk, however slimly, the possibility of awaking to flames and stifling ceramic, or the soft, blind folds of casket lining. Everyone knew stories of premature burial; everyone knew that comas could slow the heartbeat, slow breath and cool bodies, until you could hardly distinguish the living from the dead. He tried to imagine what it would feel like, the lethal injection in the basement of a former church, or converted home, or a restaurant where delivery vans had been replaced with hearses but the innocuous pictures on the wall had remained the same. At any rate--his mouth twisted--he had not given up the hope first expressed by others. If God could overcome death (reasons the faith of a child), a loss of blood and lymph and the slow fixation of cells could be no great obstacle.

He looked at his watch again, pretending he was rubbing his wrist. In the bookcase in the living room was his highschool yearbook, and he knew exactly where to turn.

When the diagnosis had come, they had not believed it. He had been too young to know what to believe. There had been a mistake--and when there was no mistake, they rejected it, saying that God would heal. It had taken six months for his grandfather to stop walking, another two before he was unable to feed himself. It had been a long, slow decline, long enough, he thinks now, for anyone to acclimate to reality. It was not as if, he thought, the changes had occurred in a bewildering rush; the railings, the carpets, the new bed, the new foods, the bedside stool, and the oxygen tanks had all arrived in turn and separately, like polite friends come to pay their last respects.

He did not want to look, did not want to give in again, but he went to the bookcase and removed the heavy volume, cloth-bound and printed in three colors on heavy, archival stock. Page fifty-six, he knows, sixth row, fourth column. But he lingered, turning each page in slow procession, one by one. He admired the shots of the football field and the chemistry lab, the home ec. class and the school choir.

He realized then--it was the first time he had ever, in his adult life, contemplated it--that the refusal to acknowledge death was no more out-of-line than the refusal to acknowledge sickness; they were all, all nine months' worth of denials, points along the same continuum. When death came, it did not mark the end of that continuum, which struggled on in each person's mind for as long as they could bear it. But even now, he can no more remember the point at which he gave up hope than he can remember what was

said when the healer left, unsuccessful.

Here is the picture, no longer avoidable. His fingertip brushed the glossy printed page and spanned the entirety of an image whose every overset-printed dot he knew.

The newspaper carried the news that today was the day Miss--he ran back to the kitchen table, picked up the paper and carried it and the yearbook into the living room. He held them side-by-side:

Carrie Parker and Daniel

Born December 30, 1969, in Newport News

--at the First Lutheran

--President, Earth Club (1,2), Varsity Soccer (2)

--followed by a celebration at Burnes Banquet Center

--Swimming (4), Chess Club (1,2,3,4)

--daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Michael Parker

--Class President (3). Intended Vocation:

--is a graduate of

--and sings the tune, without the words / And never stops at all

--this Thursday at 3:00 P.M.

He took a pen from the jar on his desk and paused, the tip hovering over the page. What can be said now, after all this time? He wrote simply, all he ever wanted to say.

“I love you.”

He did not sign it, but merely inscribed, then underlined, his legend above the box containing her face.

He went to the window and opened it, frightening the birds from their perches, to sail out over the water.

He looked below, and pitched the book into the air. It fluttered, its pages splayed open to the water as it tumbled, and he had already withdrawn his head inside too soon to see it fall. Through the window he could hear the bells down the street, the church tolling three times slowly. He closed the window and sat back down to the cooling cup of coffee.

Afterword

Hi! I hope you liked *This Is Not the End*. In fact, I'm ecstatic over your reading it! The fact that someone will (or in your case, has) taken the time to give me a listen and give me a chance to tell them a story absolutely thrills me. This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-Share-Alike license, so feel free to pass it around, copy it, remix it, have fun with it. Just let your audience (friends, readers, whatever) know where it came from, and give credit where it's due. Of course, if you *do* enjoy it, or end up doing anything with it, I'd love to hear about it--email me at davis.shelby.s@gmail.com. And if you really, *really* like it, you can always throw a buck my way and buy the ecopy at Amazon (let me break even on all the coffee it took to write this). But anyway--I loved writing it, and, as the title says, this is not the end--I've got a boatload of new ideas in the works, so keep an eye out!

--Shelby