

# Part of the World

A Novel

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*For my parents, Toni and Bob.*

*Thanks to Heather Lopez, Sam Ligon, Joe Salvatore and Derek White.*

**Part of the World**

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I'm not sure how I had the money to buy the car. Sometimes I know the particulars when asked but I just as often forget. I cannot recall having earned any money recently is the problem. When I say recently I mean time I can remember. Time I can't remember doesn't concern me. Most of the world doesn't concern me. I have enough trouble maintaining a checkbook and dialing phone numbers. An account I opened years ago had the funds to obtain the vehicle is what I'm trying to say. At the bank I took my place in line behind an old woman with an egg-shaped body who was behind a man with a similar shape. Actually they were shaped more like teardrops. Many of the people here are shaped like this. It might have something to do with evolution or gluttony. Next to the bank was a delicatessen, where I imagined the both of them had either come from or were going to afterward. No one in line knew each other. Sometimes people recognize one another and talk so that everyone in line can hear. They discuss children's milestones, activities, traumas, diets. I'd listen to these conversations carefully. It was my way to keep up with what was going on in the community. Always I avoided making eye contact. This I was good at. And there was always a blonde woman with legs and toes in line or else at a window. Everyone in line would pay her particular attention whether talking to each other or not.

There were only two tellers on duty and six customers in the bank, including the two Teardrops. Three other tellers' windows were closed and there were four empty desks on the other side of the lobby, where the serious banking took place. Mortgages, loans, financing, investments, individual retirement accounts, things you could roll over. Those people were almost never at their desks. Perhaps no one did serious

banking anymore. Perhaps the people at those desks were fired because no one did serious banking anymore. Regardless, those people were gone and maybe the bank didn't know what to do with the furniture.

I was surprised when the teller handed me the cash though I pretended otherwise. I looked around the room like this was a routine occurrence for me—transactions, withdrawals, officials in shirts and ties handing me money. I noticed security cameras placed strategically here and there, four in all. There might've been a blind spot in the middle of the lobby between the island with the umbilical pens and the velvet ropes. I'd always do this, look for the blind spot. I was never involved in a robbery, but I'd always look for the blind spot.

I cannot remember the last time I'd visited the bank. Should I look through the bankbook I'm certain the information would be there—provided I knew where the bankbook was. Normally I keep documents in a folder, which I keep in the top drawer of my bedroom dresser. The last time I had to look through the folder was when I noticed the bankbook missing. I forget why I was looking through the folder. I was always looking for something; keys, bottle openers, stamps, papers, medicine, blind spots. I think we misplace things so we can kill time looking for them. Otherwise there is too much time. Someone asked How can you kill time without injuring eternity? Eternity is unassailable. That's how. There is time enough to live lives, commit wrongheaded profundities to paper, evolve into Teardrops and die horrible deaths. I never look through the folder without reason, without having a specific document to retrieve or reference. Lately, I have looked through the folder in an effort to locate the bankbook and after doing this I am certain the bankbook is not there. I cannot imagine what may have happened to it. The teller handling my account returned the bankbook to me after having stamped it with the appropriate figures. I remember checking

the figures as I exited the bank. Before that he had asked me for identification while pointing to a sign. This was before any transacting took place. It was the first thing he said to me.

*The bank might have to ask for identification if we do not recognize you. Please do not take it personally.*

One of my best things is not taking things personally.

Almost nothing has anything to do with me.

I always carried my driver's license and social security card and handed both to the teller along with the bankbook, which was to go missing. I've had the social security card in my wallet since childhood. I have changed wallets several times, but never the card. The first wallet I ever had, which I carried all through school, was Velcro and beige colored. Almost everyone in school had one. I can't remember if this was a communal decision or if someone got one first and everyone followed monkey see monkey do. As youths, we'd stick an unfortunate between two of us, toss a ball back and forth just over his head and taunt, *Monkey in the Middle*. We'd call these unfortunates names, too, which was part of our heritage. We'd do this during recess to the children who didn't have Velcro wallets. We were all horrible children in my school. I don't know why this was. I also don't know if someone was horrible first and we monkey saw and did after them or if it was a communal decision. When the sound of the Velcro became intolerable was when I retired it. I think I still have that wallet tucked away in a dresser drawer. I have seen it recently. Since, I have owned only leather wallets, three in all. I manage to keep wallets in good shape or else the wallets I have owned are durable regardless of how one keeps them. There was a time when I kept an Emergency Medic Alert card tucked within an obscure fold of one wallet. This particular wallet had something like a secret compartment. There I stored the Emergency Medic Alert card indicating an allergy to penicillin. As a child I had an adverse reaction to penicillin

once. I forget what infection the penicillin was prescribed to combat. Probably it was an upper respiratory infection. I used to have trouble breathing. I'm not sure how the reaction manifested itself but I think I almost died. They may have had to resuscitate or put me on a ventilator and I may've had to stay that way in the hospital for weeks. I don't remember this happening to me but I think it did happen this way. The pediatricians diagnosed the allergy at once and I have not taken the drug since. For years I wore a bracelet but discarded that in favor of the card. The bracelet was conspicuous, like a scarlet letter. Bracelets are for diabetics, epileptics, etc., the seriously afflicted. I was not one of those. The card, though, was lost sometime before the last transfer. There was no occasion for me to present the card to anyone, I don't think. The only times I've ever handled the card was to transfer it from one wallet to the next. The signature on my social security card looks funny—like it was the first words I ever wrote in script and was using a ruler to keep the lines straight. Although, perhaps rulers are only used for printing, I can't remember. As a schoolboy my penmanship was shoddy. I was envious of the students with good penmanship. We'd stick the students with good penmanship in between us to taunt with the ball the same as the ones without wallets. To this day I am sometimes unable to read my own handwriting. The signature on my social security card is a constant reminder of those troubles. Although I rarely have to look at my social security card so it is more of an occasional reminder. I no longer sign my name like that and wondered if it would be a problem. Perhaps the bank officials would think I was an imposter. I've been imposing for years. I've also been mistaken for other people more than once. People have approached me with outstretched arms and smiles, calling out strange names. I've never played along. I've never taken the imposition that far. My signature these days is an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines. I remember

someone advising me to sign my name in this fashion to discourage forgery. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. It was late afternoon. The sun was that shade of orange when it is about to plunge into the horizon for good. I was someplace unfamiliar, someone's home, or else a bar or restaurant. I am uncomfortable when I haven't been somewhere before. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I remember the person saying an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines is best for signing documents so as to discourage forgery. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of an inimitable signature mentioned no other benefits and I have employed such a signature ever since. The teller did not mention the signature or my imposition and handed me the money.

I looked around the bank and tucked the envelope into my coat pocket. There was a young woman filling out forms at the island with an umbilical pen. There was nothing noteworthy about her shape. She was shapeless, if such a thing is possible. She was shapeless and standing a few feet from the blind spot. There were four people standing between the velvet ropes waiting to be called to a window. The old woman with the teardrop body was still at a window asking questions. There is no need to speculate as to why she was shaped like a Teardrop. The whys and wherefores mean nothing here. Whenever someone tries to explain something to me I get lightheaded and fall down. This is why I had trouble in school and why I've had trouble working, too. I imagine I'm not the only one this happens to. There is probably a word for this condition because there are words for everything now. This is part of what's wrong with living in a world gone to the Teardrops. The Teardrop people, as people, are not to be pitied, shunned, examined, discussed, etc. We will let them be like words of



wisdom, like the proverbial elephant in the room. I've seen dogs and cats in rooms, and fish and maybe a turtle once or twice, but never an elephant. Not even Teardrops have elephants, I don't think. I did beat her, though, the Teardrop. She was unaware I'd beaten her; unaware she was in a competition at all. Sometimes I make up games to keep myself amused when I'm in banks, streets, restaurants, highways, etc. This was a race game and I probably had an unfair advantage but someone always has an unfair advantage so that too means nothing. I glanced up at one of the cameras on my way out and winked like I was a winner.

My plan was to bring the money straight to the man who had agreed to sell me the car. For a while I thought of retracting my initial offer, downplaying my interest. But I figured the car-seller would see through this so I did no such thing. The acquaintance I'd mentioned earlier introduced me to the car-seller some time back and I had been in his home during the first round of negotiations.

*Tell me about the car.*

*What do you want to know?*

*How does it drive?*

*Like a dream.*

*How many miles?*

*150,000.*

*Are these actual miles?*

*These cars are built to last forever.*

*Forever?*

*These cars do.*

*How much you want for it?*

*Make me an offer.*

*I'm not going to bid against myself.*

*Two thousand.*

*That seems like a lot.*

*You get what you pay for.*

*I'll think about it.*

*Let me know as soon as you can. I have three other people interested.*

*I have a buffalo head nickel and keratoconus in my left eye.*

*Friend of mine is looking at it tomorrow.*

*We'll be in touch.*

I did not like him, his negotiating style, or his dead fish handshake. No grip at all, hand bent awkwardly, limp-wristed, presenting only fingers to take hold of. There is something wrong with a man who shakes hands like this. Women shake hands this way but there is nothing wrong with it. It felt as if he was expecting me to kiss his hand or his ring, but I don't think he was wearing one. Otherwise he was in no way delicate. His fingernails were too long for his fingers, which were thick and short. He scraped my palm with one of those fingernails and I had to see if he'd drawn blood. There wasn't any, only the lines that bisected my palm into unequal sections. That is probably impossible, to bisect something into unequal sections, but nevertheless. One line ran across the entire length of my palm and I always took this to mean I'd live forever. This was until my neighbor told me the lifeline was on the other hand, that the line on my right hand meant nothing. I remember being disappointed by this, if not devastated. I may've stayed in bed for a week after I was told this like I did when I was on the respirator. Regardless. The man's white collared shirt was a size too small and looked like he had been wearing it for days. He had tits, small but noticeable. I wondered if anyone had ever touched them or if anyone would ever want to touch them. I did not allow myself to think this for long and there is nothing to read into this particular wonderance, either. Whenever I see tits I wonder if anyone has touched them or when was the last time someone had touched them. And idle thoughts should go unexamined. I think the fellow in the woods said that in between his beans and the chairs in his room. I have never been in the woods or

even near the woods and I don't think the car seller has, either. The car seller's arms were beefy and hairless and the hair on his head was black and greasy and specked with dandruff and if he ever found himself in the woods he'd probably stay in bed for a week.

I wasn't sure how my acquaintance knew him.

I called the next day and after some back and forth we struck a deal. We were probably on the phone for an hour, which is something I've gotten better at. Time was I did not like talking over the telephone. I don't know why. When someone tried to explain why I didn't like talking on the telephone I got lightheaded and fell down. I don't know who tried to explain this to me though I doubt it was the car seller. I didn't like him. I got the impression he had sold cars before, that he was a hustler. He told a story his uncle had told him concerning Helen Keller right in the middle of our conversation about the car. I think this was a sales technique. Some salesmen tell jokes or use your name over and over again, others tell stories about the deaf, dumb and blind. Whenever Hellfire, that's what they called her, was alone on the porch the car seller's uncle and friends would creep up, molest her, and run away. He said she didn't have the greatest figure even as a young woman. Her breasts had no meat on them and she was too soft everywhere else. They knew she was smart, though, so they had to make sure to use the same soaps and deodorants. In the beginning she would try to defend herself, throwing short jabs and wild left hooks. She'd also make these noises from the bottom of her throat that sounded like a dog drowning. Eventually she resigned herself to it and sat through the attacks with a plaintive face and limp arms.

I didn't believe a word of it.

I think the car-seller realized this, but that didn't stop him from trying to finish the story. I wanted to get off the phone as quickly as possible and changed the subject back to the car. I

did this right after the dog drowned. I don't think he was offended but I didn't care either way. He cleared his throat and I stood up, which was supposed to mean I meant business. I do this sometimes; alter my posture as a means to communicate. The problem is we were talking over the phone so this gesture was useless. Still, one does not always have to endure the sound of one's voice. I was pleased with myself regardless. He didn't mention Helen Keller again and we came to an agreement. I think I got a fair price but I'm not sure of that, either. I wasn't familiar with cars in general, whether used or new, so I had no frame of reference.

I'm not certain what the make or model was, for instance. There is nothing memorable about the names assigned to these machines is the problem. There are people who name cars themselves. While turning the ignition I have heard people say things like, Come on, Betsy, Come on, Girl. Coaxing Betsy to start, turn over. I forget which people have said things like that. The first time someone did this in my presence I had to look in the backseat to see if anyone was there. It is almost always a feminine name for cars. Cars in this regard are like boats. I don't know whether or not motorcycles are namable or planes for that matter. I also don't know why it is almost always a feminine name for cars and boats. I guess it is because feminine names tend to be pleasing to the ear. I base this on my own ear. What I assume you shall assume and I have always enjoyed saying certain feminine names, accentuating the soft vowel sounds.

The car was colored like the pages of an old book. There is probably a word for this shade, for this condition. There are words for everything. Here there are only so many words for so many events. *Only so many* sounds wrong, which proves something, I think. There were rust spots scattered about the hood, roof and doors. What might be dubbed the body of the car if that is the proper term. I assumed the previous owner

painted the car himself or had the car painted by someone else, by someone who paints cars. It is doubtful a car would be made available to the public in that color deliberately. There were a number of dents I was also not responsible for in the beginning. The most conspicuous was located on the driver's side towards the fender. Whatever accident caused the damage had to have been serious. Perhaps there were injuries, fatalities. I didn't ask after it when I bought the vehicle and certain information was not volunteered. Driving a car that may have been instrumental in a fatal accident didn't concern me at the time, I don't think.

I had gotten along without a car and in my neighborhood everything was within walking distance. When I say everything I mean most of what I required from day to day could be purchased at a store within walking distance. For something to be within walking distance means it can be walked to in less than ten minutes. Anything longer than ten minutes seems beyond walking distance. And the walk has to be at a leisurely pace. No strenuous arm pumping, no heavy breathing, no undo stress on the joints.

I have since forgotten what made me think I needed a car. There had to have been a reason. Before I commit to a significant purchase I need time to think things through, consider all the ramifications. This is why the negotiations took longer than they should have. Choosing something from a take-out menu can induce anxiety, even paralysis. I have gone without more than once, have gone to bed without my supper. This can go on for weeks at a time, which has kept me thin over the years. That's not true, either. Sometimes when starting a thought I'll think it correct only to realize halfway through that it isn't. Sometimes the realization doesn't come for days, weeks, etc. In other cases the realization never comes, but there's no way of knowing this, of course.

I don't know what I haven't realized.

I am not thin, but am not teardropped, either. My waist size has grown exponentially over time, occasionally to alarming figures. Although *exponentially* implies a steady and unwavering progression so exponentially is probably incorrect, too. It's important to recognize what's wrong and what isn't before things go too far. I don't want to mislead anyone. There was a time when my waist size was greater than it is today and for this I am grateful. The steady progression has had peaks and valleys, ebb and flow, if that is possible. At some point the trousers I'd been wearing no longer fit. I will say pants or slacks but not as often as I say trousers. I'm not sure if the three words are interchangeable. What I mean to say is I'm not sure if there is an actual difference between pants, slacks or trousers. I've always made it a point to have several pairs in a variety of colors. I can recall the first time I had difficulty buttoning my trousers. There was some appointment to tend to, a social occasion I wanted to dress for. My favorite pair of pants was navy blue, soft cotton, pleated and reliable, despite the small hole in the front right pocket through which I had lost upwards of twenty dollars worth of change over the years. I guess I did not have to wear this particular pair for some time. How I struggled to button those trousers around my waist, sucking in my gut, doing deep knee bends to loosen the fabric, etc. It was appalling. Ultimately I had to change into another pair of slacks, which were also tighter fitting than I had remembered. This seemed to have happened overnight, my waist size expanding to such dimensions. The incident sparked a commitment to reform my eating habits, which lasted only for a short time. Since, my waist size has gone up and down. These days I am tired of the food I eat which can make choosing something from a takeout menu difficult. Consequently I am probably thinner today than I have been, perhaps as recently as a year ago. I associate, rightly or wrongly, this aversion to the foods I eat with my fluctuating

waist size, in time. Which in turn only feeds the indecisiveness, in a manner of speaking. That other links exist, on other levels, between these phenomena, is not impossible.

Which made my purchasing the car something of a watershed.

My next-door neighbor was kind enough to give me a lift to the car seller's house. We made the arrangements the night before, a few hours after I had agreed to buy the car. I called her on the telephone. I am always nervous when I have to place a call. There is no reason for this, I don't think. There was no post hoc ergo propter hoc with the phone. I remember post hoc ergo propter hoc from school. They taught us Latin in the afternoons after we'd taunted someone with a ball at recess. I can only remember a few phrases. Turns out I've forgotten more Latin than I'll ever know. When speaking on the telephone I tend towards formality, employing a sophisticated vocabulary. That is when I'm not fumbling and stuttering my way through a conversation. I am either incoherent or perfectly articulate on the phone. In this way I am bipolar. I don't think I am bipolar in other ways. No matter. I have been told I have an excellent phone voice, deep and soothing. I've never believed this to be true. On answering machines my voice is nasal, monotonic, if that is an actual word. Answering the phone has rarely been a problem, for whatever reason, when it rings. I can say the hello how are you when the phone rings with no trouble. When it does not ring is never a problem.

My neighbor seemed to enjoy speaking with me on the phone and encouraged me to use the phone more often. Thus, I tried to call regularly, twice a week, although I did mix up the days. Some weeks I called on a Monday and Friday, other weeks Wednesdays and Sundays. Anything fewer than three full days between calls and the conversation suffered. I always checked to see if she was home before calling regardless what

day it was. I did not want to have to leave a message. Even still, I would prepare a two or three sentence message in case she did not answer. *Good evening neighbor, it is whatever time it is on whatever day it is and I am home and will remain home should you care to return this call. Hope you are well, talk soon and so on.* The one time I didn't prepare a message I said something I later regretted. She almost always parked her car on the street directly outside my living room window. Also, I could see into her bedroom from my kitchen window. I never saw her naked. Nor did I ever use binoculars or a telescope to try to see her naked. I never masturbated while looking into my neighbor's bedroom, either. I did masturbate while thinking about my neighbor but never while looking into her apartment. If I could see either her car or bedroom light then in all likelihood she was home so I could call. She lived in the adjacent building and had been in her apartment longer than I had been in mine. I called a few hours after I had agreed to buy the car. After observing the usual amenities I mentioned the car, the negotiations, all of it. This is when I asked for the favor, which she was kind enough to grant.

Which was after having partially dialed her number three times before successfully placing the call.

*Good evening.*

*Hi. How are you?*

Amenities observed.

Favor asked for and granted.

The first thing I do after waking is to reach for the notebook on the bedside table. I keep track which side of the bed I wake up on and whether or not I had an erection. I usually wake up hard on the left side of the bed. That week the ledger read—Hard Left, Hard Left, Hard Right, Soft Left, Hard Left, Soft Right, Hard Left. The results don't seem to depend on anything. I am not more likely to wake up hard or soft on the left or right side of the bed after having done this or that,



sleeping more or less, eating a particular food or at a certain time, etc. Then I take allergy medication. This medication has nothing to do with the allergy to penicillin. These pills are for common allergies: dust, pollen, ragweed, etc. You are supposed to take this particular medication on an empty stomach so I am always careful to wait at least an hour before breakfast. Then I read the newspaper, starting with the sports, then the entertainment section, then the hard news and finally, I start the crossword puzzle. Occasionally I'll read the gossip columns but only occasionally. And lately I have been checking my horoscope nearly every day. I find it amusing but not at all instructive. Also, I can never remember how it is I'm supposed to behave and with whom. Today's horoscope may have said something like—*If you say what you mean and mean what you say, you are guaranteed to get attention and feel relieved.* I don't see how this could apply to me. I don't say anything to anyone and certainly don't mean anything by it. I am also not looking for attention or relief. I require neither. Concerning the crossword, I will rarely finish, but am able to fill in most of the boxes most of the time. Then I eat a bowl of cereal while either attempting to finish the crossword or re-reading the stories I only skimmed through. After breakfast I check the mail. More often than not the mail isn't in the box yet. Apparently the person or persons who deliver mail in this neighborhood do so at their own pace. If the mail has come then I will answer whatever letters need answering, particularly past due bill notices. I try to keep up with the bills but sometimes I have trouble. My checkbook is in disarray is the problem. I don't keep track of the checks in that ledger you are supposed to keep track of the checks in. I shouldn't have opened a checking account to begin with, but once you reach a certain age you are supposed to have one. (Someone told me this, I wouldn't have known otherwise.) I don't remember when I opened the checking account. This account has nothing

to do with the other one, the account from which I withdrew money to buy the car. They are two different banks, I think. I sometimes keep a running tab in my head on how much is in the checking account. I deposit money a day or two after I send a check to whomever comes calling for one. I always send the minimum amount due and deposit that much, plus or minus a few dollars. I have no idea how much is in the checking account now. I even lost track of the running tab. They send me a statement every month but I never look at it. I don't know what they say in the statement. Perhaps they are upset with me.

But this is what I do, how I start my day.

My neighbor was smartly dressed the morning we were to pick up my new car. She wore slacks and a sweater and had a scarf draped around her neck. She usually had some kind of accouterment like a scarf draped around some part of herself. People noticed her. I would watch the people looking her up and down, men and women. I used to walk slower than she, usually two to three strides behind. Her gait was that of an athlete, standing perfectly erect, head up, determined. I liked to watch her walk. I liked almost everything about her. She had painted fingernails and toenails and spoke in complete sentences, although her vocabulary was peculiar. I always associated the word *jumper* with basketball or sexual assault so when she said she was looking through her wardrobe for one I didn't know what to think.

She was not from this part of the world but that was not her fault, either. Her parents uprooted the family when she was a child, though most of her countrymen and countrywomen stayed behind. There were no severe circumstances compelling her parents to flee, I don't think. No war, famine, drought, pestilence, political or religious oppression, degradation, etc. The people were free to do whatever it was they wanted including uprooting the family. In her part of the

world, the part of the world she grew up in, they call sweaters jumpers. There are other differences to be sure but that is perhaps the most difficult to swallow.

My neighbor's phone number was one of the few I had committed to memory. I'd dialed it both partially and fully, twice a week for some time. Always waiting a full three days between calls so that the conversation not suffer.

On our way to pick up the car we ended up in a part of town one would rather not end up in. Driving through those neighborhoods was unsettling even after locking the doors and rolling the windows up. My neighbor feared for her virtue, her good name. She said she saw a gang of similarly dressed teenagers tossing an infant back and forth in lieu of a ball. I told my neighbor to keep her eyes on the road, that if we hit a pedestrian to keep going. She started praying to St. Jude or St. Anthony, whoever the patron saint of precarious situations was.

*Did you see that?*

*See what?*

*There is a gang of similarly dressed teenagers tossing an infant back and forth in lieu of a ball.*

*That can't be right.*

*Where are we?*

I didn't answer because I didn't think it mattered. Also, I didn't know.

*They gang rape people over here. I see it on the news all the time.*

*It's sport for them.*

*Where are we going again?*

*Just don't make eye contact with anyone.*

We managed to come across a recognizable street that led us to the car seller's address. I cursed my lousy sense of direction and was ridiculed by my neighbor. In her part of the world people are quick to ridicule. It is part of the heritage, a birthright. At some point I had remembered a street that

started with the letter Q and felt vindicated when we happened upon Quicken Lane. From there we bushwacked our way to his house.

Although I do know from which direction the sun rises and sets, this knowledge has never been helpful to me when finding an address. And I can never remember which streets/avenues run north-south and which go east-west. I usually think in terms of forwards and backwards and everything looks the same to me regardless. There have been many occasions when I have been unable to find where it was I was supposed to go. This has happened to me repeatedly, on foot, while taking public transportation, my own automobiles, etc. I have walked or driven around streets for hours looking for a place I was expected to be. There are almost never any reliable people around to ask for directions, either. Once I was looking for a particular address located in a neighborhood under a bridge, or at the foot of the bridge, to be precise. An acquaintance had moved into a new apartment there. He was excited about moving into this apartment and wanted me to see it. I had seen apartments before and felt no need to see his but for some reason I acquiesced. I had known him for a while, but I couldn't recall meeting him. I don't think we'd worked together. Time was I did important work but not with him, I don't think. Otherwise, he had a wide face, long hair, and kept his head down when he spoke like there were cue cards taped to his shoes. He said he'd spent some time in prison, but never said what for. I think I eventually decided I did not like him but that is no matter. This was to be my first visit. All the streets in the neighborhood were one-way streets so making a U-turn was out of the question. I had found the actual street a few times but I could only turn down the wrong direction each time. After driving around the block for approximately twenty minutes I could not find the proper access to the street in order to drive in the proper direction. I was told to use the

bridge as a landmark but this didn't help. An amiable little fellow was crossing one of the surrounding streets and looked like a native. His directions led me to a highway ramp leading away from the area, the bridge getting smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror. This is when I decided to stay on the highway and drove home. When my acquaintance asked what had happened I feigned ignorance. I said I didn't remember promising a visit. This was probably a week later on the phone. I almost never apologize to the person, persons or organizations I have left waiting for me, which has led to many misunderstandings but what can one do. I ordinarily have to go to a particular place three or four times before I know for sure how to get there. There are probably others like this.

*Goddammit.*

*I thought you said you were here the other day.*

*I was.*

*What is wrong with you?*

*I don't know.*

*Try to remember.*

*I usually have to go to a particular place three or four times before I know for sure how to get there.*

*You just don't pay attention.*

*Look for something that starts with Q.*

Most of the houses in this neighborhood looked the same but I have found that most houses in most neighborhoods look the same regardless of the socioeconomic makeup of the neighborhood. The streets were not one-way so we were able to turn around and go from whence we came. We did make several U-turns in an attempt to do just that. There were no landmarks, no bridges, churches, tall buildings, etc. At some point we happened upon Quicken, from which we were able to wend our way there.

The front lawn was thousands of pebbles spray-painted a lime green. Several of the lawns in the neighborhood were like

this. There was no way of telling whether it was a communal decision or if one homeowner planted a pebble lawn first and it caught on monkey see monkey do. From the outside the car-seller's house looked like a shack—inside a hovel. I did not want to have to go there again. I had hoped he could deliver the car to me but apparently that was not possible.

My neighbor waited for me in her car. I didn't think she could handle seeing the man with tits and how he lived. The people are delicate where she comes from. Fragile. I told her I'd only be a minute and to keep the doors locked. She had a white sheet of paper look on her face and kept her hands on the wheel.

It began to rain. Walking up the driveway I wondered if the paint on the pebbles would run.

I was having second thoughts while waiting for him to answer the door. Time passed. Rain trickled off the roof in pathetic drops that made no sound when hitting the cracked driveway. There were no gutters to keep the rain from doing this. I remember thinking I could tell my neighbor the man wasn't home and apologize for putting her out. I could tell her I would make it up to her. She was still in the car, looking splendid, disconcerted. There seemed to be no one home. The house was dark, quiet, almost like a condemned building. I found myself searching for a poster or some sort of official document confirming this. This is when he answered the door wearing black jeans and a white t-shirt. He looked like he had just woken up, his greasy hair was mussed and he was squinting. I immediately looked downward and saw his misshapen and yellowed toenails. There were no cue cards down there. I don't like to look this kind of person in the eye but I was afraid to look at the rest of him. He noticed my neighbor in the car and changed expressions, from tired to confused. He invited me in. I kept my hands clasped behind my back and followed him into the house, like winners do, and

we sat at his kitchen table.

The table was small, stained from countless spillages I presumed, and looked secondhand, if not third or fourth hand. The stains resembled a map of the world before continental drift. I sat on a chair nearest the front door and tried not to touch anything. His face was a shambles, covered with acne scars, pockmarks and pimples. The kitchen was also a shambles. There was a cabinet door missing above the sink, open cereal boxes and egg cartons on the countertop, piles of newspaper against the walls, three coffee cans collecting leaking rain water, and an open garbage bag in the middle of the floor, which had different patterned tiles all tiled together. There was no small talk, no stories about cripples. I looked out the window toward my neighbor in her idling car. She looked handsome, catatonic. She was still holding onto the steering wheel as if it were life itself. God knows what she was thinking, if anything. I signed a crude bill of sale hastily prepared in front of me and handed him the money. One of the hundreds fell onto Antarctica, which he picked up with his right hand. His horrendous face seemed to light up when he did that. He handed me the title and keys and said, *You're going to love this car.*

*I'm sure.*

*Take care of her for me.*

*Thanks. I'll see you around, maybe.*

*Hey, what's wrong with that girl?*

*She's having an episode.*

*What kind of episode?*

*She's not well.*

*Is she going to be okay?*

*No, but there's nothing to be done. She'll either calm down soon or have to be sedated. Eventually she'll need another surgery.*

He opened the door for me and I walked out, hands in pockets, grateful not to have to touch the doorknob. I looked

at the car parked in the driveway. It was smaller than I had remembered and low to the ground. I didn't think I would be able to get in it. The car looked like it should belong to someone else, perhaps my neighbor. I thought maybe I should give her the car, though she probably wouldn't want it and would probably disparage me for offering it. This is when I realized I had forgotten to ask him the car's name. Or it was sometime between walking out the door and getting into my new car when I realized I had forgotten to ask him the car's name. I have trouble remembering the sequence of things. I'm not sure sequence is important. These events were not contingent upon anything, I don't think. And certainly no one event influenced the next in any real or causal way. The information, though, is accurate. I did pick up the car this way and I was sure he was the sort who would name a car but I didn't want to ask. I felt like I had to throw up right there in the driveway. Whatever I'd eaten last was somewhere between my stomach and throat. I readied myself. When nothing happened I keyed the door. I wondered what he would do with the money and then I stopped myself from wondering this. He was still at his door looking at me through the tattered screen. I regarded him and he waved.

I suggested my neighbor follow me home. I wasn't entirely sure how to navigate my way back but all I had to do was find Quicken. It was a matter of two or three turns at the most. My neighbor nodded her approval and did not make any smart remarks regarding my sense of direction, which was part of her heritage. She was still shaken and in no shape to drive home on her own. I started my car for the first time and let it run. The car seller suggested I warm it up for at least three minutes every time regardless of what the weather was like. After turning on the windshield wipers I signaled to my neighbor and we pulled away with her following close behind. There was never more than six inches from my back bumper to her front



bumper the whole trip. We must have looked strange to other motorists; it must've looked like I was towing her. I didn't care how it looked. I was determined to lead her home, looking into the rear view mirror every few seconds to make sure she was there. If she had been pulled over for tailgating I would have paid the fine.

We managed to avoid the neighborhood one should avoid and made it home without incident. We parked our cars next to each other on the street directly outside my living room window. I thanked her several times when we got out of our respective cars and walked to our respective apartments.

She hasn't spoken to me since.

I spent that first night driving around in my new car. I don't remember where I went or what roads I took. I drove fast around turns as if I were test-driving the car for the first time. I had indeed test driven the car before but there were several maneuvers I forgot to try. Reverse, for instance. The car shook in reverse, it convulsed. I'm not sure if this would have dissuaded me from buying the car. Reverse is only important in certain situations and can be avoided to a degree. One could not keep the car in reverse for long, though, when one did have to reverse. Also, reverse was difficult to negotiate due to the car's poor handling. You could turn the steering wheel forty-five degrees without the tires reacting. I also had forgotten to test the brakes, stopping abruptly to simulate an actual traffic situation.

The brake pedal had to be depressed fully for the brakes to work. One did not necessarily have to slam the brakes to stop the car but one did have to apply a certain pressure. The braking distance was likewise appalling.

The car had vehicular manslaughter written all over it.

There is never any mention of vehicular manslaughter in the horoscopes.

The car behaved well enough during the test drive,

considering it was old and had 150,000 miles on it. The brakes squeaked and the car made a knocking sound when turning right which turned out to be the axle. There were holes in it apparently. A mechanic informed me of this as I would never have known otherwise. An acquaintance recommended this particular mechanic when I'd mentioned the knocking sound. I was told I would get a good deal, that the mechanic was not a criminal. I was told to mention my acquaintance's name. I did this. After examining the car the mechanic said there were holes in the axle. He pointed the holes out while the car was on the lift. I nodded, though I couldn't tell where the mechanic was pointing. I couldn't identify the axle itself let alone any holes in it. I asked if the holes would hinder the car's performance and the mechanic said the axle could hold out a while longer but would eventually need replacing. At one point the car would become dangerous to drive. I was inclined to believe this having been told the mechanic was not a criminal so I authorized the mechanic to proceed with installing a new axle. The procedure was to take two hours and not having anything else to do I decided to take a walk.

I've forgotten where it was I walked, as there was nothing at all memorable about the experience other than the length of time, which was considerable. I walked for two hours. I must've stopped in a store or two. It would not be like me to walk for two hours without stopping. If there was a bench along the way then I probably stopped and sat on the bench. I like a good bench particularly if it is well constructed with the proper back support. When the weather is agreeable I can sit on a well-constructed bench for hours. This is what I probably did while waiting for the mechanic to replace the axle. I probably did more sitting on a bench than actually walking during my walk if there was a well-constructed bench along the path I was walking which I'm sure there was. There is always a jogger with long legs or a student on a nearby bench

reading. I will study the habits of the joggers and students and other park goers when I am at the park because what else does one do at the park. The jogger won't look when she passes, determined not to break stride, lose momentum. She checks her watch and mops her brow with a wristband. Slight grimace contorting an angular face, head up determined. The student looks around while turning every third page and squints. Her eyes rest on an old couple feeding ducks and geese or else pigeons. There is always an old couple feeding some kind of bird. There might be kite fliers, ballplayers, malingerers, the odd Teardrop. Signs telling people what they can and can't do. Many warn against the feeding of water-fowl. The signs pertain to no one. I have never read anything on a sign that had anything to do with me. I was at the park for an hour or so that day.

I walked back to the garage to find the mechanic under my car. I said, *How does it look?*

*It's a good thing we're taking care of this now.*

*I'm glad to hear that.*

*Have a seat, it'll take a while longer.*

I found a chair against the near wall of the garage. Music was playing from an oversized radio. There was another car on the lift next to mine, but there was no one working on it. There was no one else in the garage. I couldn't remember if there was anyone else when I'd brought the car in. The mechanic's legs were splayed all over the floor as he tinkered. He had on brown construction boots and green trousers.

*I'd like to get this done this afternoon, but if I can't can she sleep here tonight?*

*I don't have a ride home.*

*I can take you home, it's on my way.*

I'd assumed the *she* he was referring to was the car. But he couldn't know where I lived, I don't think.

*Sure thing.*

*I'm going out tonight with a friend of mine and his girl. So I might not be able to finish this by then.*

*I understand.*

*She's something else this girl. She drinks white wine between panic attacks, scotch during them. You know what I mean?*

*I've seen it done that way, yes.*

*She had one last week. It was something else. She starts shaking and crying, "I don't like feeling this way," she says. My buddy whispers baby talk to her, tries to calm her down. Then she starts hyperventilating.*

*Sounds troubling.*

*Well, it is and it isn't. I go to the bar to get the scotch and I position myself next to these two ladies. Meanwhile, the whole bar is staring at her, wondering what she's on, if she's mental.*

*I see.*

*So, I order the scotch and the bartender has to go to the cellar because he's run out, which is great because it gives me more time. I know one of them is going to say something. And before you know it, "Is she going to be okay?" Green light, go sign. I put this serious look on and tell them she's had a nervous breakdown, that she's schizophrenic. A second or two later, "How do you know her?" and "Who is that with her?" come at the same time. So, I look down at my watch like I'm keeping track of something and excuse myself to bring the scotch over to them. I walk slowly to the other end of the bar. I know the two ladies are watching. I lean down so I'm looking up at Mary, that's her name, and I put a hand on her shoulder. I mean, It's great. My friend says, "What's that looking like?" I say, Possibilities. Then he asks, Which one? And I say, What's it matter?*

The mechanic picked up and put down a host of tools laid out on a green towel under the car. I couldn't tell what he was doing, if he was assembling or disassembling or what. There was no telling how long he'd been under there, either. I considered the car lift as he spoke and wondered if they ever collapsed and how many mechanics might've been crushed over the years. I

waited for him to invite me underneath with him, to point out where it was I went wrong, or the car had. He continued.

*Now the thing is, I wouldn't mind doing something with Mary myself. She flashed me once. She was just out of the shower and wrapped in a blue towel. She readjusted it around her body, but I knew what she was up to. She even suggested we play strip poker but Butch nixed the idea. We were out camping, got loaded on rum. I jerked off that night in my sleeping bag hoping Mary would catch me.*

*Do you think you can fix it by the time you have to go?*

*Not sure. You never can tell with a bad axle. But back to the bar, Mary starts to calm down. She drinks the scotch, Butch babytalks her a story or two and she's fine. We settle into a booth across from the two ladies. Mary puts her hand on Butch's lap and goes off into her own world. It's like she's catatonic after an attack. Before long I go back to the bar and one or the other of them says, "How's that girl?" I say, Mary is doing much better. We gave her a mild tranquilizer. They say, "It looked really scary." I answer, Actually this one wasn't that bad. Then comes, "The two of you are so good with her." Now here's the great line, It tears me up, watching her go through this. We should all count our blessings.*

*I didn't say anything. Sometimes I don't say anything.*

*At any rate, this will be done in another five minutes. If you want to meet me inside we'll total you up and send you on your way.*

*Good then.*

I walked into the office and sat on another chair. There were certificates on the walls and a refrigerator full of soft drinks. There was a black desk with papers strewn all over its top. I waited. I almost left at one point; thinking I probably shouldn't have a car anyway. The car would be in better hands with the mechanic and I wouldn't have to drive it anymore. I was halfway out the door when he came into the office with a towel in his hand. I turned around, signed something, and that was the end of it. I'm not sure if I did get a good deal, if mentioning my acquaintance's name made any difference. I

was charged a certain amount for parts and a greater amount for labor. Or perhaps it was the other way around.

The car's acceleration was poor so I had to learn to be careful when merging onto highways. I never timed the car going zero to sixty miles per hour. It probably took two to three minutes depending on the weather. When the temperature was below freezing the car did not perform as well. I don't know why this was. Warming the car up didn't seem to be of much help, either. Regardless of conditions the car always took a while to get going. Merging onto highways was tricky business, too. There could be no cars in the intended lane for a successful merger. I almost caused several accidents that first week alone.

The crack on the windshield was the result of a favor I did for an acquaintance. The crack looked like an intricate spider web, with berserk lines going this way and that. This was the same acquaintance who had introduced me to the car seller, the man with the tits and fingernails. I didn't know how they knew each other.

This favor took place the next day, the day after I spent the night driving around. Transporting an off-colored miniature couch from store to home cost three dollars for gasoline, \$4.50 in tolls and a cracked windshield. Perhaps there was an even a greater toll, but I'm concerning myself with only the tangible now, the math. It is always better to talk only of the math. I remember calculating the figures, allowing for the possibility of the crack spidering or mushrooming or spreading or whatever cracks on windshields do. If the windshield needed to be replaced it would've been expensive. I wasn't sure if I could replace the windshield. The couch, though, sustained no damage. Initially my acquaintance thought the couch would fit inside the car itself. This was not possible even without the cushions, which we stored in the trunk. What it did do was crack the windshield right at eye level on the

driver's side.

*Shit.*

*What?*

*The windshield cracked.*

*What?*

*I don't know.*

*What don't you know?*

*The windshield cracked.*

*How did that happen?*

*I said I don't know.*

*Great.*

*We'll strap it to the roof. I'll go get some rope.*

Apparently the arm of the couch made contact with the windshield cracking it. The contact had to have been gentle, as I cannot recall the couch ever moving with any momentum once inside the car. I'm not familiar with the laws of physics but this seemed wrong. Perhaps windshields are especially fragile, I don't know. I didn't see the couch break the windshield myself but I also couldn't remember a crack being there before. It's like going to bed with no snow on the ground and waking up to find snow on the ground. You can assume it snowed during the night even though you didn't see it snowing. I think I heard someone say this in a movie, probably one my neighbor made me watch with her. Otherwise, I came up with this on my own. I can be clever like this from time to time, though I try not to make a habit of it. I don't like to mislead anyone. It was not snowing when my acquaintance cracked my windshield; that much is certain. I tried to maintain composure. This I was good at. Almost nothing had anything to do with me. The car, though, was another story, the windshield cracked, and the operation was against my better judgment in the first place. I said this to my acquaintance. I had voiced doubts, concern.

*That couch isn't going to fit in the car.*

*Sure it will.*

*Not even close.*

*There's plenty of room. You can fit a whole living room set in there.*

*Where are you going to sit?*

*We'll figure it out.*

*This can't work.*

*We have things to talk about.*

I have trouble saying no to people. I'm not sure what that says about me or about the people who ask me questions requiring yes or no answers.

My acquaintance then suggested tying the couch to the roof of the car. I thought the couch too bulky for the roof but said nothing. I preferred keeping certain thoughts to myself, so I said nothing. I always defer to anyone with practical experience in a particular endeavor. I am always Pontius Pilate washing his hands. I'm not that good of an imposter when it comes down to it. Or my imposing has its limits. *Imposing* is not the correct word in this instance, the proper usage. This is the second time *imposing* has been misused. But I like the sound of it, accentuating the soft vowel sounds. It is similar to *only so many* or certain feminine names. The tip of the tongue taking a trip of three steps down the palate to tap, at three, on the teeth. Im-po-sing.

I had visions of the roof caving in on us while we were driving.

We bought twine and made all the appropriate knots in what seemed like all the appropriate places. We both thought the couch was secure although most of it was hanging over the sides of the roof. It took four blocks to change our minds.

*The couch isn't secure.*

*I think you're right.*

*We're going to kill somebody.*

*We should pull over.*

My acquaintance got out of the car and re-fastened the



couch to the roof. He said something about the crack; that he'd seen this sort of thing before. He said a sofa-bed broke the driver's side window of his first car. I think he said this to comfort me, to assure me this was would turn out fine. I stayed inside and examined the crack. It looked like a small caliber bullet had shattered the glass. A hole no bigger than the ballpoint of a pen served as the epicenter. There were eight lines spread out in berserk fashion from this point. The two longest lines formed a cockeyed horizon at the bottom. The other six lines went all this way and that. It almost resembled my signature but looked more like a spider web. I was reluctant to press my acquaintance further or accuse him of wrongdoing. Clearly this was his fault. Clearly this was something he should take responsibility for. Ultimately, though, I think I decided it didn't matter.

Still, I'm not sure a couch could've done this to the windshield.

The clock in the middle of the dashboard said it was 2:45, which meant it was probably closer to 3:00. The clock had a tendency to lose time, lagging behind the actual rotation of the earth on its axis. I tried to keep on top of it, stay ahead of the lag. I was always resetting the clock according to one of my three wristwatches. All three watches seemed to keep good time. There was a black watch with a black band and two brown watches with brown bands. One of the brown watches had roman numerals on its face pitted against a blue backdrop with a thin brown leather band which made my wrist appear thicker than it is. I have very thin, almost feminine wrists. My wrists look like they should belong to someone else, which is why I keep my hands in my pockets when I can. The black watch was a gift from my brother-in-law on the day of his wedding, the date of which was engraved on the back. My name was not engraved on the watch, only the date. There was nothing at all to infer from this, I don't think. I didn't feel

slighted at the time, though I did note it. Regardless, I was partial to this black watch and would wear it more often than I did the others. Although I always reset each watch for daylight savings time each year regardless if I had worn the watch recently or not. I remember someone advising me to always wind a watch clockwise when winding a watch or clock. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. I can recall parts of the conversation. It was late afternoon. The sun was that shade of orange when the writing is on the wall. I was someplace unfamiliar. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I remember the person saying one should always wind a clock or watch clockwise when resetting so as not to addle the works. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of winding clockwise mentioned no other benefits. I've done this when winding all of my watches and clocks including the clock that was located in the middle of the dashboard. Unfortunately I was never able to calculate the rate at which the clock lost time. I tried several methods to determine this, none succeeding. For some time I presumed the clock lost approximately five seconds every two minutes, however, subsequent measurements did not bear this out.

My acquaintance got back inside the car, assuring me the couch wouldn't fly off the roof and kill innocent motorists. I was skeptical but had little choice. I was stuck on an unfamiliar road with a couch strapped to the roof of my car. This is the kind of thing that happens to Teardrops all the time. You see Teardrops driving along highways with mattresses strapped to the roofs of their cars or other furniture shoved inside their trunks. If I'm behind one of these Teardrops I always slow down and change lanes. I never drive behind a Teardrop if I can help it. My acquaintance wasn't a Teardrop himself but you could tell he came from a long line of Teardrops; that he'd done this sort of thing before. We drove the couch home

without further incident, to my surprise. I thought we would at least get pulled over. Surely one needed a permit for this sort of thing. We did, in fact, encounter a police car on the way.

*What?*

*We're finished.*

*Why?*

*There's a cop behind us.*

*So, what? The couch is paid for.*

*It's over.*

*You need to take it easy once in a while.*

*We're going to jail.*

The cop was weaving in and out of traffic. I was sure he was about to pull along side us and wave us to the curb. In my head I was practicing my getting pulled over speech.

*Is there a problem officer? You see, it isn't even my couch. My acquaintance here, he's the one who said it was okay. Yes, the crack just happened. I said the couch wouldn't fit. I'm taking it in straight away, right after. No, I just bought the car yesterday, I had no idea it... Yes, A man with tits and fingernails and a dead fish handshake.*

*The acquaintance spoke.*

*Yesterday was spent putting things to rest. Did I tell you that? The problem is I like to know where I stand. It is a grave mistake to want to know this. One should keep one's head down and forge ahead at all times.*

*Once more unto the breach, dear friends.*

*The second you ask, Where the hell are we? Where do I stand? You're fucked. You're no place. This has happened to me repeatedly. Time and time again it turns out there is no place for me to stand. I have no important standing.*

*I know it.*

*All you have to do is look around.*

*People don't look.*

*Glance leftward, then rightward, then left again to make sure.*

*You're right.*

*You said it, my friend. It was never my intention to save her or rescue her like she was the proverbial damsel in distress and I was the proverbial knight in shining armor, untying her from the railroad tracks. I made that mistake before.*

*I know.*

*And I vowed not to repeat that mistake. I would've been satisfied with other mistakes. I know from mistakes. Listen. But there is this instinct to fix the damaged, the lame. There's a fundamental benevolence. I might be full of shit here. It might not be an instinct at all, just something that is wrong with me.*

*It's never easy.*

*I am always torn between preying upon the weak and lame and being noble. I liken it to a cheetah crouching in the tall grass scouting a herd of zebra.*

The cop wound up turning off the highway at the next exit. I turned the radio on. I was never uncomfortable turning the radio on in my own car when I had a passenger. Some people found it rude or antisocial: an invitation to cease all conversation. This is why they put radios in cars so people wouldn't have to talk to each other. Often I had nothing to say to people. This was true both in person and over the telephone. Time was I would go months without placing a call. I would not even answer the phone when it would ring. It occurs to me that this contradicts something I said earlier. Otherwise, it might contradict something I was planning to say later on. I'm not sure it's possible to contradict yourself before the fact. No matter. This behavior led to several misunderstandings. To this day when the phone does not ring is never a problem. My acquaintance attempted to raise his voice over the radio noise. He was referring to some woman who could suck some kind of ball through something else, a garden hose maybe or a drinking straw. I miss a lot of what people say, particularly if they demonstrate poor enunciation.

My acquaintance did have a slight speech impediment. He always seemed in a hurry to finish whatever sentence he was in the middle of, as if what he was about to say was more important than what he was currently saying. There also may have been something wrong with my hearing. I have never been diagnosed but that doesn't mean anything. I am easily distracted, as well. I often think of something completely unrelated to a particular conversation and conduct an interior dialogue for minutes at a time on the unrelated subject losing my place in whatever conversation I might currently be engaged. I'm certain this is what happened during the car ride, although God knows what the interior dialogue concerned. There were only two speakers located on the inside panels of the front doors. The speaker on the passenger side door cut in and out. There was probably a loose wire, a faulty connection somewhere. I had programmed the radio stations the night before and settled on the third button, which was the news station. The announcer was going on about the fiscal shenanigans of a disreputable energy company and the disappearance of a little girl out west. Eventually my acquaintance stopped trying to talk over the radio and we arrived at his place.

I had no idea who he was talking about or why it concerned me.

We untied the couch from the roof of the car and carried it inside the house. The couch was heavy and ugly. The color was similar to beige and there was a pattern of flowers and plants and vines all over, what might be known as a floral print, if that is the proper term. It was difficult to maneuver through the narrow doorway leading into the living room. I scraped my left arm on the door latch, producing an inches long red line with tiny drops of blood dotting it from stem to stern. We had to upend the couch then let it fall into the room at a certain angle. This is the kind of problem movers tackle regularly. I

was no mover and neither was my acquaintance. I pointed this out to him, that maybe we should get some help; that I was bleeding. My acquaintance said we could handle it ourselves.

Two despicables in conversation, A and B. Tempers flared.

Then—A on ground B looking for help. Not B looking for help. B helped A to ground, guiding A down. A on ground grounded. Two despicables in conversation. B helping A look. A on ground maybe bleeding. Maybe gasping for breath. A on ground B looking. B elsewhere. No help on ground. B guided A down. A on ground B looking at A on ground. Standing over A. No sign of B. B gone. Two despicables in conversation concerning couches and floral prints and cheetahs in the tall grass. A helped to ground by B who guided A down. Then A on ground maybe bleeding and gasping for breath. No one standing or looking.

I left, anxious to get myself home. I think I left my acquaintance safe in his apartment with the new couch but I can't remember. I was too concerned with getting myself home. I was always more concerned with getting myself home than going anywhere else. I can't remember the drive home; although I'm sure I exceeded the speed limit. I was probably looking forward to calling my neighbor or at least trying to see her through my kitchen window. That is if I didn't get arrested retroactively for endangering the welfare of innocent motorists. I think my acquaintance thanked me for the favor and apologized for the cracked windshield. But he offered no restitution, which was like him. The whole affair took forty-five minutes according to the clock on the dashboard which means we were probably at it for an hour.

I haven't seen my acquaintance since.

The left blinker did not stop blinking unless the driver stopped it his or herself. The clicking sound that often accompanies indicators did not work, either. There were many occasions when I'd drive around for miles threatening a move

left or right, almost always unbeknownst to me. Once in a while I would keep the blinker on to keep other drivers from passing me. It was a little game I played. I'd see drivers trying to figure out if I was intending to change lanes and when they decided to make their move I'd maneuver halfway into their intended lane. Then I might swerve back to see what their reaction was. Usually it was hand gestures, fingers, curses, nothing violent. Teardrops were always the most demonstrative. Most often I was unaware when driving along with the blinker blinking. In fact, that was most like me. Looking like I was about to do something when I had no intention of doing anything.

Along the lines of impeding the driver's vision, the passenger's side mirror was missing. On most cars the side mirrors will say something like, *Objects may be closer than they appear* or something like that. This is probably due to some kind of reflective visual phenomena. I have no idea why objects may be closer than they appear or vice-versa. I'd assumed the missing mirror had this warning written on it. I imagined the mirror was damaged at some point and had fallen off. Sometimes you see these disembodied mirrors lying around in parking lots, streets, etc. I don't recall ever seeing any cracks in the mirror but I also don't recall looking into the mirror much regardless. I usually depended on the rear view mirror to track the progress of vehicles driving behind me. Only on rare occasions before merging into right lanes did I consult the passenger's side mirror and it was during such an occasion when I noticed it missing. I must have been daydreaming at the time when I had almost missed my intended exit. I would sometimes fail to pay attention (usually while conducting an interior dialogue) and wind up missing exits, turn-offs, addresses, etc. I'd find myself in unfamiliar neighborhoods and have no memory of getting there. Luckily there was no one else on the road this particular time because I swerved across

two lanes to make the exit.

And I was always looking for the blind spot, which was probably a mistake, too.

The left front tire was perpetually in need of air, like an asthmatic. The tire wouldn't struggle for breath or fumble with inhalers, of course, but still. I would've filled the tire myself but I could never remember how. I recall being taught at some point but cannot remember who it was that taught me. This person would have been good with cars, perhaps a mechanic. I recall something about the size of the tire maybe or some numbers or letters written on the tire itself. You coordinate that with the pump somehow. The last time I'd brought the car in to be serviced I had them fill the tire with air. A different mechanic this time, one I had found in the yellow pages.

Sometime shortly thereafter the tire was low again. An old man on the street pointed it out to me as I was about to get in. He was hunched over so that his top half was almost parallel to the ground, and he was pushing a walker. One of those old men who walks around like he's looking for a quarter that dropped from his pocket. I don't know why you never see Teardrops like this. It might have something to do with evolution or anatomy. I thanked the old man and watched him make his way down the street.

I didn't recognize him until he turned into the smoke shop. I knew the left side of his face better than I did the right and better than I would looking straight at him. He had an age spot on his left cheek, a liver spot, maybe. I don't know what the difference is between the two or if there is a difference. It may have even been a mole or perhaps a growth of some sort. I'm not sure if a mole qualifies as a growth, I should think not. Melanoma may have been another possibility. At any rate there was something there on his left cheek, an oval-shaped brown discoloration.



We worked at the same restaurant together once. He was a cook, I a waiter. I was unqualified for the job but that didn't matter apparently. The people there were happy to have me work for them. On the floor I was asked questions I did not have answers to and always had to refer to someone else. Most of my colleagues didn't know anything, either. We would ask each other the questions that had been asked of us individually and stare at each other blankly. We were all incompetent. We'd guess at the answers, figuring a consensus guess had a better chance. People would always want to know certain measurements, whether something was this or that, deep-fried or broiled, salted, baked, chilled, heavy, light, etc. The cook was the one responsible for preparing the food but everyone avoided asking him questions. He'd know the answers but they'd always come with some profane remark. He was a cook as opposed to a chef, who is a cook that has taken classes or some such. He had been a cook at this restaurant for over forty years. No one liked him, not even his family. He was married to the sister of the restaurant owner and I doubt he got a watch with numbers engraved on the back. His brother-in-law gave him the job because he was his brother-in-law, probably against his better judgment.

I'm not sure what that says about the owner or the people who asked him questions that required yes or no answers.

The cook took advantage of the relation throughout his tenure. He would borrow money from this brother-in-law, ask for advances on his salary, etc. Blew most of his wages at the track, which is why he had to keep working well into his seventies. He drove old used cars that were always breaking down. He was shunned, pitied, unexamined. He'd always need a ride home, asking whomever he could, usually the women. I'm sure he would make advances towards them while they were on these drives. Perhaps he even exposed himself to one of them. I think I remember hearing something like that once,

but that might've been someone else.

In the kitchen the ovens and fryers were to his right and he was always turned sideways standing in profile. Part of his belly would hang out of his cook's uniform—white collared shirt barely buttoned and tight white pants hanging low around the waist. He'd wear a bandana around his neck at all times, sweat pouring off him. I always wondered if his food tasted saltier, gamier than the other cooks.

I never let him cook for me.

He would bark at the waiters and waitresses when it got busy, calling us names, hurling epithets. With each new ticket would come some nasty remark. If you had the temerity to hand him two tickets at once he was liable to throw something at you, maybe a dish-towel or a handful of pasta noodles or a brick. He sometimes kept a brick at his station, I don't know what for. He was also uncomfortable in social situations, he'd twitch and fidget like a child. He probably wouldn't leave the house for weeks at a time, not even changing out of his cook's uniform. Agoraphobes are often abusive cooks who wear bandanas. Worse, he didn't know what to do with his eyes during conversation. Either his eyes would fish all over or he'd stare at you, unblinking, long after it was appropriate to look away, and always with an expectant look on his face.

*Get the fuck out of here you fucking punk.*

*Just cook the food you fat fuck.*

There is a natural adversarial relationship between cooks and servers. The cooks resent the servers making all the money while they sweat out their pittance next to ovens, stoves and fryers. The servers don't like being called names. That's the nature of the relationship, more or less.

The cook was also a sexual harasser. Restaurants are usually a hotbed for this kind of activity. A waitress would ask for sausage.

*I need a side of sausage.*

*I bet you do.*

He would also hang several links of uncooked sausage from his fly and walk around. Some of the waitresses would grab a hold of his sausage and jerk it off. He'd fondle waitresses' buttocks and breasts. Some of them liked the attention. These were the same waitresses who would give his sausage hand jobs. Everyone thought he was a cretin.

I'd parallel parked the car where he happened to be crossing the street when he said what he said about the tire. I did not notice him while I was attempting to park. I was too busy trying to maneuver into the tight spot while the car shook like a recovering alcoholic with the DTs. I always managed to hit the curb or the cars I was trying to squeeze between. Parking is all about angles and geometry and I'm no good at either. Although I think angles and geometry are one in the same. Regardless. It was the same story with my acquaintance's couch and the doorway.

*Your tire's low there.*

*It is?*

*Can't you see, looks like you might have a slow leak.*

*I just had it filled.*

*Sounds like a leak then.*

*Okay.*

*You should get that fixed. It's dangerous.*

*I will. Thank you kindly.*

*Okay.*

I watched him hobble off all sideways. I remember feeling pity for the man or wanting to feel pity for him at least. Not sure if there's a difference, which may or may not be similar to the difference between sympathy and empathy. I've never been able to keep that straight, either. I think one has to do with a relative experience, actual knowledge as opposed to imagination. Feeling sorry for people is not one of my best things. I didn't recognize him until he turned into the smoke

shop showing that aged liver spot mole growth tumor he had on his left cheek.

I'd figured he was dead or still working at the restaurant.

Actually, I never gave him a second thought.

The windshield wipers were useless. They went back and forth well enough but the plastic wipers hung off the blade and didn't actually wipe the windshield clear of anything. Worse was the horrendous squeaking. I'd find myself more willing to peer through the raindrops than turn on the wipers. I had been meaning to replace the windshield wipers or at least have them replaced for some time. I would not have known how to do it myself and didn't want to know, either. I have never been taught how to change wipers and even if I had been taught I probably would've forgotten anyway.

I had been in only one accident as a driver. It was raining and in the middle of the afternoon. The rain was beating on the windshield. I was coming home from somewhere but I forget where. That morning there was something in my left eye, towards the corner closest to the nose. What that part of the eye is called I don't know. I'm certain it isn't the pupil, cornea or iris. Those are the only parts of the eye I know of, or can recall the names of. Whatever was in my eye wasn't in that little red pocket, where that dewy crust forms when you sleep. (I don't know what that little red pocket is called, either. Certainly optometrists don't refer to it as *that little red pocket*.) That crusty matter wasn't what was in my eye, nor was it an eyelash. Sometimes when I trim my mustache the little hairs will shoot up and get caught in my eyes. But those little hairs are easy to spot and remove. I couldn't find any foreign matter, which led me to believe that what was causing the discomfort was the same color as the eye itself, white with berserk lines of pink. Every time I blinked I could feel it. This continued all through the morning and afternoon. I went about my day, running whatever errands I had to run and tried not to

worry about my eye. While on a busy road with traffic lights and stop signs I made the mistake of trying to look into the rear view mirror to check it. Meanwhile a traffic light had turned red. I looked down, slammed on the brakes and hydroplaned fifty yards into a stopped car. My car at the time, a compact foreign job, folded up like something that folds up easily. The car I plowed into barely moved and sustained no damage at all. None of this happened in slow motion. Sometimes Teardrops say things like this happen in slow motion; that their lives flash before them. My accident happened in real time, earth time, and nothing flashed. The driver of the other car was not from this country and wasn't a Teardrop. Most Teardrops come from here and not abroad. Presumably foreign Teardrops stay home. I don't know whether or not his parents uprooted the family when he was a child. I figured most of his countrymen and countrywomen stayed behind but not if there were severe circumstances compelling his own parents to flee, war, famine, drought, pestilence, political or religious oppression, degradation, etc. He was dressed in a suit and tie and spoke a language I was not familiar with. He seemed agitated, confused. He was speaking with his lone passenger, a similarly dressed individual who was probably a colleague. They may have been related. The both of them were demonstrative little fellows gesturing with their hands as they spoke, pointing back to my car. I always wonder what foreigners are saying in their foreign tongues. One assumes whatever is said is disparaging. Doubtless they were talking about me.

We exchanged all the requisite information and went our separate ways. This was after the police were called, though. I don't remember who called them, but I do recall speaking with an officer. I don't remember speaking with the other driver or his companion but I do remember exchanging insurance information with someone. I was asked certain

questions about my driving record, too. Yes, I was coming from the doctor's office. (Not an optometrist, however. Whatever was causing the discomfort in my eye went away by itself a day or two after the accident. I almost did make an appointment with an optometrist, but decided against it. I'd already spent too much time in doctor's offices. For those two days, though, I was worried about my eye, which was irritated from my having rubbed it repeatedly. I was certain there was something in there; something camouflaged white, red or pink. My vision was unaffected, but I was still concerned that what was in my eye was doing irreparable harm, that I would wind up blind.) I needed to re-fill a prescription, although I forget what for. It was either for the allergies or the breathing, probably. There I did provide information about my insurance coverage. I remember filling out the forms. The policeman was wearing a raincoat over his uniform, a slicker, if that's the proper term. He also had plastic wrapped around his hat. The water trickled off the brim in pathetic drops that made no sound when hitting the pavement. There were flares around our cars there in the middle of the road. I didn't know how they could burn in the rain. The upshot is my car was totaled and I had to bring it in to get fixed.

Consequently and given the poor performance of the windshield wipers I was forced to pull over during rainstorms at least ten times. I always kept a book in the car to read while waiting for the rain to let up. Usually it was one of the novels my neighbor recommended. I didn't like any of the novels but never said anything about not liking them. I've never read a novel that had anything to do with me, that pertained to me in any way. The worst part is that none of the novels would stay with me for long; they were all in one bloodshot eye and out the other. More often than not it was too dark to read, though. The interior light did not work. Even if the interior light did work it would've probably been a mistake to leave the light on

for too long as it would've drained the battery. I am not sure how old the battery was but I remember thinking it couldn't last much longer. So listening to the radio was not an option, either. I didn't think the hazards affected the battery so I always turned the hazards on when I was pulled over. I wanted people to know I was there in the car and they should proceed accordingly. Most of the time I'd just wait for the rain to let up regardless of how long it took, I didn't read or listen to the radio. I'd sit and look at the cars with functional wipers speeding along, going places. I'd count how many cars were driving without headlights, with out of state license-plates, bumper stickers and whatever else I could think of. Whenever it rained I was late for appointments, meetings, social functions.

On the windshield were two stickers—one depicting the crucifixion and the other advertising the local police. The sticker depicting the crucifixion had a large brown cross, pitted against a blue backdrop. There was a tiny Jesus nailed to the cross with even tinier figures at his feet. One assumes these tinier figures were Mary, Mary Magdalene and someone else. The tinier figures were indistinguishable. The crucifixion sticker was located on the upper right quadrant of the windshield. The police sticker had a shield and the words, *Police Benevolent Association* written on it. This one was located on the lower left quadrant near the state safety/emissions inspection and registration stickers.

I don't know who applied those stickers to the windshield. I doubt the car seller would endorse either organization. It stands to reason that whoever stuck the Jesus sticker on must have stuck the police sticker on, too. I should think one would want the blessing of both while driving, particularly a car with vehicular manslaughter written all over it. I never attempted to peel either sticker off. An acquaintance had introduced me to the car seller some time back. He did not mention the

stickers or who may have been responsible for them. Neither did my acquaintance. I do not know how they knew each other. He lived in squalor.

The rear defroster/defogger was faulty, temperamental. I have always called this apparatus a defroster although many call it a defogger. There is no reason I prefer defroster. Sometimes certain vernacular is endemic, although I suppose that is the very definition of vernacular. Defroster/Defogger is more nomenclature than vernacular, although I am neither linguist nor etymologist. Time was I did important work but in neither of those fields. There was no telling when the defroster would or would not work. Sometimes opening the windows defrosted the windows but only sometimes. I'm not sure what it depended on but it did depend on something. Perhaps air temperature or humidity. Riding around with the windows rolled down during foul weather has never been a good idea.

I remember playing tic-tac-toe on frosted windows with my sister when we were kids. She would win because I let her. I felt it was my duty as the older brother. I'd always let her go first, X in the center square. I'd respond with an O in one of the corners. After her next move I'd make the fatal mistake, not anticipating her covert endgame strategy. She'd fill in the final X and draw a crooked line connecting the winning formation. I'd congratulate her and she'd offer a rematch and so it went. I don't recall what vehicles these tic-tac-toe games took place in. They may have taken place in buses, perhaps on the way to school or perhaps on the way home after school. I believe we did attend the same schools, at least during the ages when we were likely to play tic-tac-toe on frosted windows. I have forgotten certain periods of my history. I don't have any pictures of us as children, either. I don't remember anyone ever taking pictures of us. No matter. I do seem to recall seeing my sister roaming the hallways of some school or another. She was remarkably poised for a young girl, as if she



was royalty or had been to an exclusive finishing school. Her posture was impeccable. I don't recall ever seeing her balancing a book on her head but I wouldn't be surprised if she'd done so privately. Her neck seemed to stretch out like an elegant tropical bird's. She never made any sudden movements, jerking her head to see who tapped her on the shoulder, say, or some commotion going on behind her. There was no surprising her; her shoulders were always squared. She'd glide down hallways and stairwells, letting her subjects scurry past her on their way to the next class or wherever. She even handled the goldfish with grace. We weren't allowed to have a dog or cat so we had two goldfish. I wasn't sure what gender either goldfish was or even if goldfish have separate genders. I've heard of creatures that have both male and female reproductive organs. This might be hermaphroditism, if that is an actual word, or asexual reproduction, but asexual reproduction might be something else. The goldfish never reproduced one way or another. They were both named Goldfish. It was not difficult distinguishing between the two and Goldfish were the only names I've ever given anything. We both liked to say that Goldfish died of natural causes, twice. I wasn't responsible for either death and I don't think my sister was, either. She found one dead and I found the other. There was no pomp and circumstance on either occasion, no funerals to mark their passing. I'm certain she did not attend an exclusive finishing school. Surely, I would remember something like that.

The car had a blue interior. The shade was soft, effeminate. I cannot identify the fabric used to make the bucket seats, but it was like corduroy. I doubt they used corduroy to make car interiors though I wouldn't know one way or the other. The leather portions of the dashboard were also smooth and intact. There were no tears in any part of the interior. However, there was a stain on the passenger seat. I don't recall the stain

being there when I first got the car. The stain was dark red, almost brown colored, but had no shape. I remember a poem called *The Good Man Has No Shape*. I think it concerned Jesus or Lazarus or some other biblical character. Until I saw the stain I wasn't sure if something could be shapeless. People yes, but probably not things. The stain looked like blood, but not the kind of blood when you skin a knee or prick a finger. More like the black-cherry used to fill transfusion bags. Blood that's been someplace, blood you can't spare. I remember scrubbing it with stain removers, which never worked.

The backseat was spacious. Car commercials are always going on about legroom as if it was a luxury. I will hear part of a commercial before I can change stations. My reflexes have never been sharp or rather they are not as sharp as years ago. The medication may have something to do with that, or else age. There seemed to be plenty of room for legs and other limbs and appendages in my backseat. I cannot say for sure because I was never in the backseat. In fact, I don't think anyone was ever in the backseat while I had the car. The same blue corduroy fabric was all over the back as well.

I was always looking in the backseat to see if anyone was there.

The glove compartment was shallow and had no light that came on when opened. Some glove compartments have a light like a refrigerator. This was not one of those. One could not store many items in this particular glove compartment, nor see what one had stored in the glove compartment at night. I have referred to this apparatus as both a glove box and a glove compartment. For no reason whatsoever—neither box nor compartment is particularly enjoyable to say. No vowels to accentuate, no taps of the tongue. The two extra syllables in compartment rarely pose a problem. In this regard it is like the use of *Pardon*, *Excuse me* and *I'm sorry*—whenever I need someone to repeat something they've said. I have used all three

phrases although lately I have been going with *I'm sorry*. I often ask people to repeat themselves. I miss a lot of what some people say, particularly if they demonstrate poor enunciation. I have never been diagnosed with a hearing problem and I am easily distracted is the problem. I will think of something completely unrelated to a particular conversation and conduct an interior dialogue for minutes at a time on the unrelated subject, losing my place in whatever conversation I might currently be engaged. Also, I say *I'm sorry* so I can have more time to compose a response.

There is another reason. *Ars Apologia*. It is always best to assume blame, culpability or guilt beforehand. To wit—

This entire exercise is an attempt to distance myself from anything I may have done or said in the past, regardless what impact, if any, it may or may not have had on whomever it did or did not concern at the time, be it merely perceived or otherwise.

I preface everything I say with the aforementioned and for all of it I am sorry.

The seat belt did not work, either. There was something wrong with the latch, it didn't fasten properly. I would've rarely used the seat belt even if it did work. I don't like being strapped in or tied down or closed in spaces. I don't know where this comes from, either. It almost certainly has something to do with childhood. Perhaps I was locked in a closet, abandoned in a cave like the Greek fellow with the shadows. I doubt claustrophobia is genetic. I have heard of people being strangled to death by seat belts. *A neck God made for other use than strangling in a string* I remember reading somewhere but I didn't have to be told about it. I also wanted to be able to flee the auto without any restrictions—fire, explosions, car jacking. I like to sit in the back of theaters and near front doors in restaurants for the same reason. I prefer not having my back to anyone and sit always with my back

against a wall. This is the God spot and I always take it.

Which has nothing to do with claustrophobia or being strapped in or tied down, I don't think.

The passenger's side worked fine and I always encouraged whoever might be in that seat to wear the belt.

I don't know of anyone who stores gloves in the glove compartment. I seem to recall the authorities saying you should keep a flashlight in there and I'm sure other items, as well, in case of emergency. But not gloves, I don't think. I can't think of an emergency where gloves would be needed. I kept some cassettes, napkins, proof of insurance, a pen and notebook, etc., in the glove compartment, none of which were for an emergency, although, the napkins could've served as gauze and the pen as a weapon. The cassette player worked although the rewind function did not. If one needed to rewind a cassette one had to eject the cassette first, flip it over to the other side and then press the fast forward button. I rarely listened to cassettes in the car, though not for the lack of rewind function. The sound system was not good. There were only two speakers, both located on the inside panels of the front doors. The speaker on the passenger side door cut in and out. There was probably a loose wire, faulty connection somewhere. Still, I kept cassettes in the glove compartment. I had been advised to keep a map in the glove compartment, too. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. It was late afternoon, maybe early evening. The sun was that particular shade of orange when it is about to go gently into that good night. I was someplace unfamiliar. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I may have just arrived somewhere with this person after having gotten lost, perhaps after driving through a neighborhood one should avoid driving through. I have always had a horrible sense of direction. Although I doubt I would be

very good at reading a map anyway.

Apparently everything to do with cars has two names.

This, too, must stop.

Perhaps the most curious peccadillo concerning the vehicle was the back driver's side door. The door did not open. The car seller informed me of this straight away before any of the negotiations.

*I should tell you the driver's side door does not open.*

*That's odd.*

*It's the truth.*

*Doesn't open at all?*

*Not at all.*

I did not like him. He had a weak handshake, tits, fingernails and a phony lawn. He lived in squalor.

I did appreciate his candor regarding the door. I probably wouldn't have discovered the problem until well after the deal was done a la caveat emptor. I did not ask him why the door could not open and certain information was not volunteered, either. I imagined it had something to do with an accident. Perhaps the very accident that also caused some of the conspicuous dents, maybe even fatalities. Although, I was not told the car had been in an accident and I did forget to ask after certain specifics.

I tried opening the door several times. It never opened, didn't matter whether the lock was up or down. Or rather, it didn't matter whether the door was locked or not. Whether the lock was up or down is immaterial. I have seen locks that were locked while *up* and vice-versa. In this way locks are like light switches. More often than not light switches have to be flipped *up* to cast light but I have seen it where one has to flip the switch down. I have flipped in the wrong direction countless times. I also tried to open the unopenable door to load something into the backseat, forgetting the door did not open.

I only tried to open the hood once. The *Check Oil* light came on while I was driving and I knew I should at least check the oil myself before asking someone else to do it. They used an oilcan as the symbol for this, with a drop of oil dripping from the spout. Most of the dashboardia was creative in this car. I considered electrical failure a possibility, but I was going with the better safe than sorry theory, ounce of prevention and all. I've never been good with measurements. Ounce, pound, gram, liter, quart, pint, acres, hectors, breaker of horses. I can never remember which how many of one makes up another. And I did detect an aroma, an unpleasant burning smell. I released the lever indicating *hood* inside the car to the left of the steering column and heard that distinctive pop when a hood is opened. However, I was unable to locate the lever inside the hood. There are two levers. Generally, the second lever is located somewhere near the center of the barely opened hood. One has to stick one's hand underneath the barely opened hood and feel around for the lever. Why they do it this way I don't know. Once the lever is pressed the hood can be opened fully and held upright by the metal rod, which usually lies either to the side or front of the motor. I was unable to locate the lever and almost sprained a wrist in the effort.

A gas station attendant was able to locate the lever the next time I refueled. I usually employed the full serve when buying gasoline as the attendant will check the fluids as part of the full service. The attendant will also wipe both the front and back windshields clean. I always needed the windshields wiped clean. The wipers were useless. I've never liked to pump my own gasoline particularly in extreme or inclement weather. On this day, though, the weather happened to be temperate. I sometimes didn't like to get out of the car regardless. Turned out, the oil level was dangerously low, needing one and a half quart's worth. I'm not sure what happens when a car runs out

of oil but I'm sure it is not good. Apparently the car burned oil at an exaggerated rate. It was something I would have to keep an eye on.

There was a series of numbers and letters written in white chalk on the back window, *WH462734—FWL—2/15/XX*. On the windshield it looked like this:

*WH462734*

*FWL*

*2/15/XX*

This was from when the car was towed. I had parked the car the evening before the towing in a legal space on a quiet side street. I felt confident leaving it there overnight, however the alternate side of the street parking rules were such that I had to wake with the birds to move the car to a new legal spot. From 7:00 to 9:30 a.m. on Mondays and Thursdays the aforementioned legal spot becomes illegal due to this rule. Apparently it is necessary for the city to sweep the streets clean two days a week.

I spent the night prior to the towing with my neighbor at her mother's apartment. Her mother was out of town and my neighbor was house-sitting. This was the mother who had uprooted the family years ago. The mother did not look like someone who took part in an exodus with most of her countrymen and countrywomen, escaping war, famine, drought, pestilence, political or religious oppression, etc. People who flee have it written all over themselves but there were no traces of anything like that on her face. The mother was a small woman with small hands and feet. The few times I spoke with her were riddled with awkward silences. I was told she would not leave the house for weeks at a time, often not even changing out of her house frock. Agoraphobes are often short foreigners with small hands and feet who wear house frocks. Worse, she didn't know what to do with her eyes during conversation. Either they would fish all over the room

or she'd stare at you, unblinking, long after it was appropriate to look away, and always with an expectant look on her face. I was glad she was out of town.

Her apartment was called a railroad apartment. I'm not sure what this was supposed to mean. There were no train tracks anywhere in the vicinity. Perhaps railroad describes the apartment itself, the layout, design. There was a long narrow room which served as first foyer, then living room and then kitchen, book-ended by two spacious bedrooms. How this may resemble a railroad or railroad car I don't know. The bathroom was off the kitchen. Pictures of fat babies hung in the bathroom. Fat babies dressed in frills and hats, made to look like adults. Sometimes the fat babies were naked. Sometimes they were sitting in a washtub or lying on what appeared to be a bed of pink roses. It looked like the thorns were digging into the rolls of fat. I don't know why she had these pictures in her bathroom but I thought it might've had something to do with the agoraphobia.

House sitting generally involves watering plants, feeding pets and retrieving mail, I think. I have never been asked to sit for anyone's house so I can't say for sure. My neighbor's mother did not have any pets and there was a lone cactus on an antique armoire. Cacti do not require watering, I don't think, and I doubt she received much mail save the occasional bill. Still, my neighbor had invited me to spend the night with her at her mother's apartment. The building had a roster of doormen who all dressed in red suits. I had seen two of these doormen before, both asking me to sign the register before allowing me upstairs. My signature was an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines so as to discourage forgery. I was told to sign this way by someone who knew such things, someone who had been around the block a time or two, who perhaps had fallen victim to forgers, grifters, imposters, etc. Both doormen made no mention of the signature, instead



choosing to announce my arrival through the intercom. I could have been anyone. In fact, I was anyone. I was the anyone they mention when they say—He could've been anyone, he could've been your next-door neighbor. On the news they interview the people who say this. Usually it is the Teardrops interviewed on the news. This might have something to do with evolution or gluttony but make no mistake this is me they are talking about. The doorman on duty this particular evening was polite, which was not always the case. I remember feeling good, though for no particular reason, I don't think. Polite doormen generally have nothing to do with feeling good. I rarely felt good so it is easy to remember when I did. I've since forgotten what we did exactly while she was there house-sitting and I visiting. Doubtless we had a typical evening. We were in the habit of ordering take-out food and watching movies on television. She would pick out the movies and decide which take-out food we'd order. I was always grateful when others made decisions for me. Life is easier when someone else is responsible. At some point we probably had a benign conversation that led to an inflammatory discussion. Typically, I would make some innocuous remark or another that would prompt my neighbor to make certain deductions about my character, what it was I wanted; ambitions, attitudes, etc.

*Such and Such has a new movie coming out.*

*I know. It doesn't look too good.*

*Why do you say that?*

*The subject matter seems redundant, derivative, tired.*

*I think it looks interesting.*

*It's been done before.*

*So, you don't want to see it?*

*I'm just not interested, I've seen it already.*

*(Silence)*

*(Silence)*

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

*You don't want to go to Thailand, either.*

*I'm sorry.*

*You've never wanted to go to Thailand. You don't want to see other cultures, how other people live.*

*When have I said this?*

*You've said it.*

*What have I said?*

*You've said you don't want to go to Africa, you said it would be too hot. You said you don't like bugs. You don't want to see poor people. You need modern conveniences. Thailand is hot and there are bugs and there are poor people. It goes on and on. You just say things to placate me.*

*I've said there are certain places I'm interested in and certain places I'm not as interested in.*

*This is your problem.*

*What is my problem?*

*This. Right here.*

*I'm lost.*

*You dismiss something out of hand without knowing anything about it.*

*Wait a minute. This comes from me saying I did not want to see a movie?*

*That's the nature of conversation.*

*I don't understand.*

*I know you don't.*

*We were talking about a movie.*

*Conversations aren't static, they move of their own accord.*

*Etc.*

After such there would be a cooling off period, followed by half-hearted acts of contrition by both parties. I'd fashion a rose out of a paper napkin, she'd tug on my ear, etc. Then we might play. That would depend on a variety of factors, most of

which I never understood.

First she would be in the bathroom doing I don't know what. She'd be in there a long time. I'd listen for the sound of running water, cabinets opening and closing, sobbing. That night I thought maybe the fat babies had done something to her. Regardless, I never heard a thing. Then she'd come into the room barefoot and sit on the couch. She wouldn't look at me. If I were on the couch she'd stretch her legs toward me, her feet coming to rest in my lap. I'd grab onto a foot, usually the left one. The left one was always my favorite. It seemed cleaner and more expertly constructed than the right; each toe in proportion with the next, each nail the proper length. The right one would invariably have a blister or callous somewhere. This might've had something to do with evolution or her shoes. But the left one was perfect. I'd start rubbing beneath the toes. I'm not sure if this part of the foot is called anything. There is an arch, heel, instep and I think that's it. Eventually I'd get up to the toes themselves, starting with the little one and working my way back and forth along the row. By this time the other foot would find its way between my legs. When I'd take a toe in my mouth is when she'd slide a hand inside her skirt. Her eyes would close. She didn't like me looking at her but I would anyway. Her face did what you'd expect it to. The eyes squeezed shut, top row of teeth biting the bottom lip, contortions, a spasmodic mouth breath or two. We'd do this until she was done. Afterwards, she'd motion for me to undo my pants. She'd take me between her feet and go up and down. This is when she'd look at me, her eyes fishing between my lap and face. Sometimes I'd have to use my hand if she got tired. I didn't mind. This is what we did; it was our routine. We tried other things but it never worked. She'd cry. I felt like a criminal each time so eventually we stopped trying. I think this bothered her more than me, but I could be wrong. There was no telling. I never missed it much and apparently

she didn't, either. Whatever it was had nothing to do with me. She'd say this. She'd say, *This has nothing to do with you*. I always believed her; that it had nothing to do with me. Then she'd beg me to tell her certain things, which I would do. Then we'd fall asleep together, her first, then me an hour or so later.

She never said what it had to do with.

I had set the alarm for 6:45 the morning my car was to be towed. Waking early to move a car is as hollow and unrewarding a task as any. Particularly in winter, which is the time of year it was. One had to get dressed to accomplish this. I put on the new pair of trousers I had recently purchased and was wearing for the first time. At some point the trousers I had been wearing no longer fit. This seemed to have happened overnight, my waist size expanding to such dimensions. The incident sparked a commitment to reform my eating habits, which lasted only a short time. This particular pair was two sizes larger than what I was accustomed to wearing. After dressing one had to drive around the block probably twelve or so times before one happened upon a legal parking space. I did not want to take any chances. There were several questionable spaces available—this one too close to a fire hydrant, that one too close to the end of the street. I had attempted to park in each of these questionable spaces before reconsidering. Eventually I parked on a major thoroughfare where there were several stores including a delicatessen, saloon, Laundromat, etc. There were a number of cars parked there as well. On the far end of the street was a sign I don't remember reading at the time. I walked back to my neighbor's mother's apartment, nodded to the doorman who did not ask me to re-sign in, walked up the two flights and back to bed. I have forgotten what time it was. My neighbor was still asleep so there was no chance of any early morning play. There almost never was regardless.

Time passed. Two hours later I walked to where my car had been parked. The plan was for me to drive my neighbor to work, then go back home. After that I had no plans but I was anxious to get back home even still.

The car was gone. I knew that it had been towed rather than stolen. No one would steal this car. My neighbor, who by this time had caught up with me on the street, thought I was kidding when I told her the car was gone.

*The car's gone.*

*You're kidding.*

Why people say, You're kidding, in response to this sort of news is something I've never understood.

I suggested my neighbor take a taxi to work, that it would be hours before I would locate and retrieve the car. I hailed a cab and gave the driver directions. My neighbor's workplace is somewhere I knew how to get to. She apologized like she was the one who had towed the car away. She felt sorry for me, responsible. I did not discourage this.

From there it was an odyssey worthy of Greek legend. I had to take a bus, two trains, two cabs *and* walk several miles to get to the various places I had to go. First, I walked to the local police precinct where I was directed to the lot where my car was being held. The walk was leisurely; no undo stress on the joints. At the time I thought that would be the end of it. The people there told me I had to go somewhere else to pay the fine. This is when I took a bus, two trains and the first cab. I forget what that place was called. It was an official building with officials in shirts and ties pretending to be busy. I took my place in line behind two young women, Teardrops. Many of the people were shaped like this. There's no telling if they were always shaped this way or if this was something that happened over time. The two young Teardrops in line ahead of me knew each other. I listened.

*We had a little thing for them the night they got engaged at our*

*mother's house.*

*How was that?*

*At some point I found myself stealing away to the upstairs bathroom for a cigarette and some quiet. I was flicking the ash into the toilet and listening to the hiss it made when hitting the water.*

*Did anyone say anything?*

*Downstairs she was showcasing the ring for the throng.*

*It was a throng?*

*It was an adoring throng happy for her and her ring. Meanwhile I'm listening to hissing ashes.*

*That's understandable.*

*I was thinking it was bad form for me to be up there by myself.*

This is when the one who was doing the listening gestured toward me. I turned my head to allow the consultation. There was nothing to look at on the other side of the room, only people and a few Teardrops. When I turned back the upstairs smoker was about to say something.

*Can we help you?*

*I don't think so.*

*Well, what are you doing?*

*I'm waiting for my car. It was towed.*

*It's impolite to eavesdrop on private conversations.*

*I agree.*

*Well, then?*

*I'm waiting for my car.*

*Never mind.*

*(Silence)*

*(Silence)*

*We're waiting for my car, too.*

*I see.*

*We've been friends for fifteen years.*

I'm not sure why the relationship needed explanation. Perhaps it was important for me to know they weren't involved romantically. I made no such assumptions and didn't

care one way or another. Otherwise, friends always tell you how long they've been friends like it's a milestone to be proud of. Shortly after our conversation their number was called and a few minutes later I was at the window. I was surprised when the clerk handed me a voucher and told me what to do next, though I pretended otherwise. I looked around the room like this was a regular occurrence for me—getting towed, standing in line, officials in shirts and ties handing me vouchers. I noticed security cameras placed strategically here and there, four in all. There might've been a blind spot in the middle of the lobby. I was told where to go and what to do. This other place was miles away, a hassle getting to without a car. Then I would have to come back to the lot to retrieve the car. I went outside to hail a cab. The Teardrops were already trying to do the same thing. One of them asked where my car was being held and seemed pleased when it turned out to be the same lot as her's.

*Perhaps we should split a cab.*

*Okay.*

A minute or so later we filed into a cab. I followed them in so as not to be stuck between them. I did not want to be taunted with a ball. Once settled, I told the driver where to go. I waited. They spoke to each other and I looked out the window.

*My mother has me filling out applications. That's how she puts it. "Did you fill out any applications today?" I almost always tell her yes.*

*What about the party?*

*I'm not big on engagement parties. They're sucking all of that money out of you on the wedding, What do they need more for?*

*Exactly.*

*Did I tell you my mother made us watch King of Kings again? I told her it was yet another manifestation of the Christian propaganda. My sister said, Jesus was a stud.*

*That's not funny.*

*How is your grandmother?*

*My mother says we have to be patient with her, she's losing her mind. What I want to know is who is going to be patient with me?*

*That's sad. To lose your mind like that.*

*She is constantly asking me how old I am now. Sometimes I tell her the truth. Sometimes I tell her age doesn't matter when you're in love.*

The cab driver was making his way to the other side of town. He was aggressive, maneuvering between other cars, driving fast. He leaned on the horn whenever someone failed to react quickly to a green light. I thought perhaps he was in a hurry to get to the lot himself, that maybe his own car had been towed. As he drove, left hand on the steering wheel, he talked into the CB receiver he held in his right hand. I couldn't understand what he was saying and couldn't tell what part of the world he'd come from. The radio was on during the ride, as well, which contributed to the cacophony. An announcer was going on about the weather and traffic and then said we are living in a world that is high on computers and low on frogs. The two of them giggled. Then one of them said -

*Fuck the frogs.*

*They get what they deserve, the bastards.*

The both of them laughed. We pulled into the parking lot and the three of us fumbled with pockets and purses while coming up with the fare, which I collected and handed to the driver. One of the Teardrops told me goodbye, that it was nice sharing a ride with me. I agreed out loud but didn't know what was nice about it. Then I said, Fuck the frogs, as we exited the cab. They laughed again and looked at each other like they were in cahoots over something.

*WH462734*

*FWL*

*2/15/XX*

I don't know what those numbers were supposed to signify, other than the last set, which was the date. I never washed it



off. I kept it there on the window like a tattoo.

The car tended to run hot. The first time it happened I was coming home from the country. I was speeding along a highway; that is only after I had successfully merged onto the highway for the first time without receiving the usual chorus of car horns and curses. Teardrops are usually the most demonstrative cursers, often shaking a fist in the air or extending their middle finger and shaking that while they curse. I insinuated myself into the middle lane and accelerated without incident. I had the air conditioning turned on high. I had difficulty breathing in hot and humid weather so I always needed the air conditioner on. I've always had some kind of respiratory difficulties, period, regardless of air temperature. As a child I had to use vaporizers, nebulizers, inhalers, etc. They were always giving me something to help with my breathing. I used to take pills but the pills may have been for something else. The vaporizer would keep the air moist and I can recall trying to fall asleep to the dull hum of the vaporizer. I'm not sure the vaporizer ever helped, though, either with my respiratory condition or as a sleep-aid. I think I would wheeze quite a bit and stay up half the night. My sister would be asleep on the other side of the room. There was never anything wrong with her breathing. We also had an air conditioner in our room, which was located on her side of the bamboo room divider. She'd complain whenever I'd turn it on. She did not mind heat or humidity. Then I'd tell her if not for the air conditioner I would probably die. I forget what she would say to this though I'm sure it was contrite. She was always very good at apologizing though she rarely had to, her manners were impeccable. The air conditioner in our room was powerful and probably had a great many BTUs. I don't know what BTU stands for. The U might stand for Unit but that is only a guess. The radio was on and set on the fourth button, which is a station that played old time country music on

Monday afternoons. The car took a while to build speed but once it got going it could reach up to seventy miles per hour. Anything more than seventy and the car shook, like it did when in reverse. I can't imagine what would've happened if you did seventy in reverse.

Sometime during a Johnny Cash song I heard a loud beep coming from the console area. I looked at the dashboard and noticed a red light on the temperature gauge. The needle was pinned all the way to the red portion of Hot. I had never noticed the temperature gauge until that moment. I figured none of those gauges on the console had anything to do with me so it never occurred to me to look at them.

The car was behaving itself and there was no smoke or exhaust rising from the hood. Exhaust might be wrong here. I know there is an exhaust pipe where exhaust is expelled into the air. This is almost always located in the rear of the vehicle, I believe. I don't know if it is possible for exhaust to escape the engine itself, for the exhaust to circumvent the pipe. Regardless, no vapor of any kind was rising from the hood. I took that as a good sign. I wasn't entirely sure what to do. Usually when something beeps and there is a red light on it means something bad is happening, or something bad is about to happen. But the car was old and perhaps the electronics were all shot to hell and not trustworthy. I did not want to overreact so I drove on, but after a few miles I decided to pull over to let the car cool off.

I was coming back from my sister's home in the country. She had invited me to spend the weekend with her and her husband, children and dogs. They all of them live in a big house in the country.

Driving to my sister's I encountered few cars and fewer places to pull over to eat, fill the gas tank or use a restroom. There was nothing for miles. One has time to think on such a drive, which is rarely a good idea, particularly when driving a

car that tends to overheat and has vehicular manslaughter written all over it.

Seeing the horizon was something I wasn't accustomed to. Perhaps on rare occasions I had seen part of the horizon in one particular direction, but having empty endless space surround you, to see the edge of the earth on all sides, was disconcerting. There was nothing to mark where you were in relation to anything, nothing for the eye to focus on, no reference points, texture, perspective, something. I also failed to discern a difference in the fabled country air. I actually found it more difficult to breathe in the country. The best place to breathe is near the ocean. There is something about ocean air that feels healthier, but even that can be too much at times. I have often left the beach with a strange feeling in my chest. Breathing deeply can cause a certain discomfort, particularly at the end of the breath, just before exhalation. Perhaps my lungs aren't accustomed to fresh salty air; perhaps they need pollution to function properly.

Actually, I did see an accident along the way to my sister's. Not the accident itself, but the aftermath, the detritus. There were two police cars, an ambulance and the two cars that had crashed into each other. Flares were set up around the ambulance, which was parked in the right lane. The two cars, a big black one and a small white one, had been moved onto the shoulder. I remember finding this amusing at the time, I'm not sure why. The big black car looked worse off than the white, which seemed to only have a dented front end. The black car's rear fender was damaged and so was the driver's side door. The windshield was shattered, too. The car looked like it was hit twice from different directions. They were loading someone into the ambulance just as I was passing. It had to be the driver of the big black car. He probably went through the windshield. His body probably careened off the hood and landed on the concrete. They found him with pieces of the

windshield tangled in his hair, embedded in his face. I don't know who found him first, whether it was the other driver, a passerby or the police. Someone bandaged his head but not tight enough to keep blood from staining through. The driver of the white car was probably fine, shaken, shocked. It is always upsetting to be involved in an accident, particularly if there are injuries or fatalities. I couldn't tell if the victim being loaded into the ambulance was a man or a woman. I've assumed it was a man but for no good reason. I don't know of any statistics that show men as more or less likely to go through windshields. The person was wearing black trousers and a white tee shirt, but was shoeless. The feet were nondescript or else I was too far away to get a good look. I wondered if the person was driving without shoes. I've never driven without shoes but I think Teardrops will do so during the summer months. Sometimes people get hit by cars and come right out of their shoes, like it's a law of physics. This seems wrong to me. Can't see where it fits into *Bodies at Rest—For every action, etc...* *People who get hit by cars tend to come out of their shoes and land on the pavement yards away.* But this is always a pedestrian, never a driver, I think, and pedestrians almost never cross over highways. I couldn't tell if the victim was conscience or not, he or she didn't seem to be moving. The victim may've been dead. The paramedics seemed in no hurry and there was a sheet covering the body, though I couldn't tell if the sheet was pulled up over the head or not. Meanwhile, all the traffic had been directed into the far left lane. Glass littered the two lanes closest to the shoulder. I considered getting out of the car, but I figured one of the police officers would've chased me away. And I didn't want to walk across broken glass. It was cloudy so the glass didn't refract any light or twinkle in the sun. The glass was as lifeless as the body waiting at the ambulance. I slowed to watch them lift the gurney into the ambulance and shut the doors. I couldn't find the other

driver. Perhaps the other driver was already in there. There was no way of telling.

I drove the rest of the way to my sister's and left the accident behind me.

Of course my sister had accumulated quite the clan, too. That was another reason I rarely visited the country or my sister in the country. There was my sister, her husband, two children, one boy, one girl and two dogs, one male, one female. Apart from upsetting the hormonal balance of the home I often felt over-stimulated.

I arrived early on a Saturday morning. I was pleased with the drive, which took close to six hours. The car performed well. Since there were few cars on most of the country roads and interstate highways that time of day, that time of year, out in the middle of nowhere, merging on and off was a breeze. The car did not like to pass other cars on the road. When increasing the speed while already driving over sixty miles per hour the car had a tendency to shake. If the car were a thoroughbred it would've been known as a game front-runner. Sometimes I'd pretend the car was a horse and I its jockey. Time was I'd spend the day at the track instead of working. The people I worked for didn't understand why I did this. This is one reason I don't work anymore.

If the pace was slow I'd look for openings, perhaps weaving in and out of traffic, eventually dropping the car on the rail to cruise a few furlongs. If a car passed me on the outside I'd let him go, thinking the car would burn itself out—the jockey asking too much of the horse too early in the race. You can tell when a horse is rank—the rider inches forward a little, rises in the stirrups, back arched, straining to hold onto the reins. The only trouble I'd have was in the backstretch. My horse was no closer and never responded to the whip. The other horses would fly by us like they were on a different track. All I'd see were rumps and flying dirt. We'd finish out of the money but

grateful for a clean trip, horse and rider still intact.

On this drive there was little horseplay. Only three or four times was there a car impeding my progress and the passing of those cars was smooth each time.

I pulled into the driveway to find my sister and her daughter outside on the front lawn like they were waiting for me. I hadn't seen my sister in two years and had never met my niece, but I had no time for a lengthy greeting. For the last hour of the drive I was desperate to relieve myself. Holding it in is one of the most unique physical sensations a male human being has. I have no idea how it feels for the female human being. I imagine it is similar in most respects. For the male it is a peculiar and exquisite agony. I believe I can speak on behalf of the entire gender here. In fact, this might be the only topic in which I may be an authority.

I am forever holding it in.

The one time I didn't I got into trouble. This was years ago when I was working. Time was I did important work. I'd take the train each day back and forth. Late one night I found myself on the train platform with a small crowd of people after a long night of important work. I had had a few drinks. I waited for the crowd to disperse and then positioned myself next to those walls you find on train platforms, the ones with posters and maps, etc. I don't know what those are called —billboards, maybe. I looked around to see if anyone was watching. Then I made the mistake of indecent exposure.

I was surprised when a plainclothesman stopped me though I pretended otherwise. I nonchalantly looked around the platform again. There was almost nothing to look at. It was quiet. There was a phone booth lying on the ground, probably pushed over by the neighborhood kids. It looked like one of those street signs or light poles leaning at some impossible angle you see along the side of the road, the result of some car crashing into it. I was asked if I had a record, to keep my hands

where he could see them, if I lived in the area. I was made to feel like a criminal so I made sure not to say anything that would incriminate me. I thought about what could possibly incriminate me and decided there was a lot to not say. The plainclothesman asked me for identification. This was before he asked any of the other questions. It was the first thing he said to me. I remember telling myself not to take any of this personally, which was one of my best things. Almost nothing had anything to do with me. I handed him my driver's license, which may have been expired at that time. I didn't have a car then. I think I wasn't supposed to have one but I forget why. The plainclothesman had a disappointed look on his face when he handed me the ticket. I couldn't tell if he was disappointed in me or something else. It was no matter. He returned my license to me then made some disparaging remark or another. It was part of his heritage or duty. I try not to talk to police officers or look them in the eye. I left him there on the platform to cite the next public nuisance. I paid the fine in due course and that was that.

I was all bent over, my knees practically together as I tried to walk. My sister asked me if I was all right before she even said hello.

*Jesus, Are you all right?*

*Where are the rest stops in this Godforsaken place?*

*You should've gone on the side of the road.*

*I've been cited.*

*What?*

*Never mind.*

*Go inside already.*

*Thank you, your grace.*

I hugged my sister quickly, tugged on my niece's ear and ran inside the house.

I found my way to the bathroom, avoiding an array of toys and junk all over the floor. I called out the names of my

brother-in-law, nephew and the dogs. No answers. I was grateful not to have to explain myself to anyone else. The rest of the clan was out for a walk apparently. The bathroom door was wide open. Light on, toilet seat up, nirvana.

My sister had been living there for five years and this was the second time I'd visited. The house was cavernous, as close to a mansion as I'd ever set foot in. I was afraid I'd get lost and I think I did once or twice. Although I do know from which direction the sun rises and sets ... My brother-in-law made an excellent living apparently. I'm not entirely sure what he did. He wore a suit. He woke up early each morning, put on a suit and drove to a building. It was a very long drive—with no place to pull over for food, gasoline or urination. Inside the building there were other people wearing suits. They had desks in offices and talked on the phone and had lunches with other people in suits from other offices and buildings. Sometimes he'd go on a plane or a train to talk to other people in suits in other parts of the country. I don't know what they talked about. I remember my brother-in-law giving me the breakdown once. I seem to recall something about *corporate accounts* and the phrase *headhunter* rings a bell although that might be something of a misnomer. Headhunters do not actually hunt for heads from what I understand. He carried a leather briefcase. Inside the case were papers, flow charts, pie charts, spread sheets, contracts and electronic gadgets. I think he put people in touch with other people; people with certain qualifications or experience; people who wore suits, or wanted to wear suits and go to buildings with offices and desks and telephones.

Every so often I'd ask him about work. I heard people asking this all the time in regular conversation. It's a way of relating to one another. I did this.

*How's work?*

*It's good. Busy.*



*When aren't you busy?*  
*Jesus, tell me about it.*  
*Been anywhere recently?*  
*Was down in D.C. for a few days, then up to Boston. They got me flying down to Miami in a few weeks. Might be able to play some golf. We've got to get you out there.*  
*Yeah, I know.*  
*Let's go hit some balls tomorrow morning.*  
*Sounds good.*  
*Good.*  
*Any new accounts?*  
*Working with Chase mostly. Few other ones here and there.*

My brother-in-law was always trying to persuade me to go golfing with him. He thought I would be good at it, because I used to play baseball. He was an excellent golfer, apparently, which surprised me. He walked with a limp and I didn't think someone with a limp could be a good golfer. He shot in the low eighties, which I understand is good, nearly professional. I'd been to the driving range twice and only once did I hit a ball straight and far and we're talking out of two-hundred balls probably. It was pathetic. The rest were all groundouts to short and line drives down the right-field line.

Saturday night we had dinner at home. My sister and brother-in-law cooked the meal together. I stayed in the living room and watched them from the couch. The children were napping upstairs and the dogs were outside.

I think I liked the children better than the dogs.

I can't say I was comfortable around any of them, though.

My nephew was a typical boy of five. I hadn't been around many five year old boys so I am only assuming he was typical. For all I know he may have been extraordinary. I had no reference point, nothing to relate to, like being in the middle of nowhere, holding it in, surrounded by horizons. He had boundless energy and curiosity and was always eager to display

his command of the English language. He liked to call my name over and over every few minutes. He'd grab me by the hand and lead me to his bedroom. There I'd sit on the floor next to him, Indian style. I'd watch him play with his toy trains. There was a town square, church, schoolhouse, townspeople, bank, park, derelicts sleeping on benches, cars, policemen, transients, dogs, all enclosed by the circular tracks. Every so often I'd take hold of a train car and push it along the track. I didn't know what else to do. One looked like the caboose, which had broken away from the rest of the cars. I made train sounds with my mouth. I think he liked that.

*Do you go to school?*

*No, I finished school. What are your favorite subjects in school?*

*These are my trains. Did you have trains when you were my age?*

*I sure did. Which is your favorite train?*

*Do you want to go downstairs now?*

*You don't want to keep playing trains?*

(No response.)

He was not much of a conversationalist despite an eagerness to display his command of the language. He seemed unable to concentrate for very long on any one topic. It might be hereditary, which means I could be responsible in a way. Where I got it from I don't know. Certainly someone was responsible for it, for all of us. I can't say my nephew reminded me of me at that age because I have no memory of me at that age.

Time I can't remember. Time out of mind.

Which is a phrase I suspect I may have never properly understood. Time out of mind meaning mad, or time out of mind meaning simply forgotten?

My niece was a toddler learning to walk. I suppose that's what a toddler is, someone who is learning to walk. I was fascinated, frightened. Children scare me and they can sense it like animals do. And I've never understood the people who fall

all over themselves whenever a baby is in the room. The Teardrops are the most guilty here. Whenever I look at a baby I wonder what's in store for it. It's that they can't tell you when something is wrong and I don't see myself being smart enough to figure it out is the problem. But I watched her toddle around like a stumbling drunk bouncing off walls, furniture, etc. She had trouble with balance but was always moving forward. At one point over the weekend I spent half an hour watching her pick coasters off the floor and place them carefully in a particular order on an end table. There were six coasters and when one of the coasters fell off she did a double take after she discovered it missing. She bent over, retrieved the coaster and placed in its proper place. I remember being impressed by this.

The dogs were interesting, too. One was sociable, hyperactive, rambunctious. The other was sedate. Both were golden retrievers. The lively one, the female, was always looking for attention. She'd roll over for you to scratch her belly, go into kinetic frenzy when you walked through the door. The introverted one, the male, seemed as if he had been lobotomized. There must've been something awry in his brain or his blood. He never chased after balls or sticks, a retriever who did not retrieve. The female wanted nothing to do with the male. The male would harass the female, trying to provoke her whenever she went off to do her own thing. Then they would engage in combat, which was how they played. They'd make growling noises and bare their teeth, wrestling each other to the ground. They'd nip at each other necks, grab the other's collar and yank. Every so often the male would attempt to mount the female. My sister would shout *No* or *Off* and the male would stop and hang his head. The female would sometimes mount the male, which seemed to make little instinctive sense to me.

I do not know the genealogy of the dogs or who was

responsible for them.

The table was prepared and set for a feast draped in a sturdy beige tablecloth. Spotless crystalline china, two forks, a knife, spoon and cloth napkin at each setting. Water glass and wine glass. Bottles of red and white near the centerpiece, a beige colored vase with Hawaiian orchids placed neatly inside.

My brother-in-law grilled a tuna steak and lamb chops. He watched cooking shows on television, bought cookbooks, traded recipes, all of it. My sister did not share his enthusiasm for cooking or food in general. Even as a child she would eat very little. I was always finishing whatever she couldn't finish, scraping the food from her dish to mine. My sister was thin but did not look unhealthy. I sat next to her at the table and the both of us stayed away from the tuna steak. I've never been able to eat food that hasn't been thoroughly cooked. No trace of blood or redness is acceptable. The lamb chops, though, were excellent—as were all the side dishes. Biscuits, corn, mashed potatoes, homemade apple sauce, etc. My sister cleaned her plate so there was nothing to finish for her.

The children were still napping having eaten earlier in the evening. The dogs remained outside in the corral. The three of us had what is commonly referred to as pleasant dinner conversation.

*So.*

*All ready to smack some balls around tomorrow?*

*Grip it and rip it.*

*How was the drive up? Directions good?*

*A cartographer couldn't have done better. No complications, no delays. Got a little lost once I turned off the interstate.*

*Everyone does.*

*That's reassuring.*

*Is that a new car?*

*Indeed, it is. Picked it up a couple of weeks ago.*

*Is it safe?*

*Safe as houses.*

*What does that mean?*

*I don't know.*

*Looks like it's about to come apart at the seams.*

*Looks can be receiving, deceiving, believing.*

*So, what else?*

*Yeah, What's new?*

*Things are good. How about you guys?*

*The kids are good. The dogs are good. We're good.*

*What happened to that woman you were seeing?*

*What woman is this?*

*Weren't you seeing your neighbor there for a while?*

*She's good.*

*And?*

*I don't know. She gave me a lift when I picked up the car.*

*That's nice.*

*So, what else?*

*What kind of mileage do you get?*

*I'm not sure. I think it's good on gas. Only takes about ten dollars to fill it up. How does one gauge that sort of thing?*

We talked like this until we finished eating. I thought it went well. I was apprehensive about the whole thing, my visit, the dogs, the children, the dinner conversation. I hadn't seen my sister in a long time and we talked on the phone irregularly. I tried calling once every few weeks so that the conversation not suffer but would sometimes lose track. I should've kept a calendar to keep track of the calls. Her schedule varied so there was no telling when she'd be home or not. I usually called in the afternoon when I did remember to call. She was almost always distracted when we spoke, admonishing this one for bad behavior, warning that one to stay away from this one, etc. I always felt like I was interrupting when I called. I would ask about the children, the dogs and my brother-in-law. My sister would relay any

number of amusing anecdotes about all of them; then she'd apologize for rushing me off the phone because she had to take this one for a shot or that one to school. I almost never spoke to my brother-in-law on the phone. He seemed uncomfortable when speaking on the phone though that may have been in reaction to my phone manner. I tended to utilize a more sophisticated vocabulary when speaking on the phone. I'm not sure why. Whenever he answered the phone he'd rush through whatever he was saying as if what he was about to say was more important than what he was currently saying. Also, he talked this way so he could get off the phone and hand me to his wife. I never blamed him for this. I helped clear the table as my brother-in-law went outside to check on the dogs and bring them in. My sister said it was good to see me.

*It's good to see you.*

*It's good to be seen.*

*I'm serious.*

*I know. It's good to see you, too. You look great.*

*It's about time you came for a visit, met your niece.*

*I know. I've been swamped. How are things?*

*Things are good.*

*You deserve it.*

*Let me know if you need anything later. Extra towel, pillow, blanket, whatever.*

*I'll be fine.*

Dessert was fruit cocktail and ice cream. I had to fend off the female dog while shoveling the vanilla into my mouth. The fruit cocktail had two red grapes and something yellowish that didn't taste as sweet as it looked. My brother-in-law let both dogs lick his spoon and then he used the spoon himself. I looked at my sister but there was no reaction. That sort of vulgarity must've gone on all the time. When we were younger we used to know what the other was thinking without having to say anything. She would arch an eyebrow, I'd wink.

We retired to the living room after dessert, adults and dogs. The children were still asleep upstairs. My brother-in-law and I smoked cigars.

*What's this?*

*How often does your brother visit?*

*A foul and pestilent congregation of vapors.*

*I'm sorry?*

We stayed in the living room for about an hour or so, smoked our cigars, talked about baseball and watched the television. My sister fell asleep on the couch next to me and then my brother-in-law followed in short order. The dogs had been asleep since we'd entered the room. I was the only one left awake.

I looked at the sleeping people and the sleeping dogs. I monitored their breathing. My sister took one breath every five seconds, as did my brother-in-law. The dogs' respiration was much quicker, one breath per second. I wondered if this had anything to do with dog years. I remember a ratio, one human year equals x dog years, maybe seven. The ratio could be wrong. Math has never been my strong suit and I have never understood the concept of dog years. Shouldn't a year on earth be the same for all residents? This is why dogs get killed off before people do. All animals are this way, I think, except maybe sharks. No matter. I've been allergic to dogs from the start. What happens is I'll have trouble breathing and my eyes will water, throat will itch, etc. It's worse with cats. Cats could kill me. The doctors said I should stay away from cats. Dogs were okay from time to time but never cats. I have had two Goldfish but no one can be allergic to goldfish, I don't think. I remember watching my sister breathe as a child, too. I never did time it back then. It stands to reason children breathe at a more accelerated rate than adults. The rest of the house seemed almost out of context—like the way an empty playground looks wrong. I did not know what to do with

myself. If there was something expected of me I did not know what it was. I stayed on the couch for almost an hour watching and listening to the breathing. I wondered what my sister and brother-in-law talked about when everyone was asleep and the house was quiet. I wondered what they thought about me visiting.

Finally I turned off the television, lights, stepped around the dogs lying on the floor and quietly walked up the stairs to the guest bedroom. I tried not to disturb anyone.

The rest of the weekend went more or less like that.

We never did play golf that morning. Maybe one of the kids got sick or else a dog. The somnambulant male had a habit of eating socks and vomiting. Watching a dog throw up is odd. It doesn't seem as violent—just a simple rejection of inappropriate matter. Or maybe that's how lethargic dogs throw up. In any event there was a reason we didn't hit golf balls.

Between the blind spot and the God spot I was happy to go home.

Before leaving, my brother-in-law gave me several pairs of pants and some shirts. He always gave me clothes he didn't want to wear anymore. My brother-in-law was bigger so his trousers would fit when I'd gained weight. He wasn't a Teardrop, though. I think he came from Teardrops but sometimes it skips a generation. I left early Monday morning wearing my brother-in-law's khaki colored trousers and an oversized turtleneck sweater. Not early enough to beat my brother-in-law out the door though. He was off to his building and office wearing a gray suit and I was on the road soon after. That was when the car started to run hot. I was speeding along the highway after having merged onto the highway without the usual chorus of car horns and curses. I insinuated myself into the middle lane. The air conditioner was turned on high. I have no idea how many BTUs it had. The radio was set on the



fourth button, which was a station that played country music on Monday afternoons. Sometime during a Johnny Cash song I heard a loud beep. There was a red light flashing on the dashboard. The needle on the temperature gauge was pinned to the red portion of Hot, which usually means disaster is imminent. I had never noticed the temperature gauge before. The car was behaving well, no shaking or knocking sounds. After a few miles I pulled over on the side of the road. I waited for twenty minutes. Not many cars passed and none stopped to offer aid. I forgot to make up a game to keep occupied and there was nothing to read, either. I figured the car needed time to cool down. I was in the middle of nowhere. There was a strong smell of cow dung and freshly mown grass in the air and I was nauseous from it. There was no steam or smoke coming from the engine, which I took as a good sign. I found out later that turning the heat up and rolling down the windows is what you should do when a car runs hot. This information would later prove invaluable. I would have to ride around with the heat on in the middle of a ninety-five degree day, sweat pouring off me, repeatedly. After about twenty minutes of noxious air and waiting for the car to cool off I decided it was time. I re-started the car, turning the ignition with a quick snap of the wrist. I think I may have grimaced as well. The needle on the temperature gauge rose to the halfway mark and stopped there. I pulled onto the highway and successfully merged into the right lane where I maintained a steady pace of fifty-five miles per hour. The drive was long and tedious but eventually I made it home where I had nothing to do.

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I found this apartment years ago. Actually, I wasn't the one who found it. I hired a real estate agent to find the apartment for me. I had no luck finding an apartment on my own after weeks of trying. Although *finding* an apartment seems inaccurate as far as the expression is concerned. One does not *find* an apartment as if it was lost—one does not discover an apartment. One becomes aware of an apartment's availability, visits the apartment, tours it, decides whether or not they are interested in renting the apartment, and so forth. I do not think there is a word or phrase that properly defines this process. This is the *only so many words* problem. I would talk to people on the street, peruse classified ads, read community bulletin boards and check photocopied signs nailed to trees and light poles. The ones leaning at impossible angles never have signs nailed to them, only the upright ones do, but that is no matter. I woke early on Saturday mornings to call the phone numbers listed in the newspaper. I was told this was the only way to find an apartment. The early bird gets the apartment, so to speak. I can't recall who told me these things but I was inclined to believe them. I had no idea how one found an apartment or whatever the actual word should be.

*People wake up early on weekends to look for apartments.*

*Really?*

*Yes. You have to be a go-getter.*

*Don't people like to sleep late on the weekends?*

*Not people who are looking for apartments.*

*What about the people renting out apartments, don't they like to sleep late?*

I have since forgotten with whom it was I had this dialogue. I can recall the conversation, even the time of day. It was late afternoon, maybe early evening. Or else it was dawn. I have seen the sunrise once but can't recall if it looked similar to a

sunset. I was out all night. I have never been up early enough to see the sunrise. I may have been driving home, as I can recall lowering the visor to block the sun. I also recall noting that I had never lowered a visor to block a rising sun before. I cannot remember where I was driving from or to. The sun was low in the sky and was that particular shade of orange when it has sounded retreat or advance, it doesn't matter either way. I had been someplace unfamiliar, someone's home, or else a bar or restaurant. I was probably uncomfortable, as it always takes a while for me to get acclimated to new surroundings. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I may have been drinking. Time was I would take a drink after work. Otherwise, I would take a drink at the track. Sometimes I'd go to the track instead of going to work. I think I may have said something about looking for an apartment, which probably triggered the conversation.

I made it a point to wake early on the weekends. I wouldn't eat breakfast or do anything that resembled my morning ritual. Normally the first thing I do is reach for the notebook on the bedside table, although I hadn't in some time. I used to keep track which side of the bed I woke on and whether or not I'd had an erection. I usually woke up hard on the left side of the bed. The last entries I'd made read: Hard Left, Hard Left, Hard Left, Hard Left, Hard Left, Hard Left. It had been too long since I'd woken another way so I'd stopped recording the results. I thought maybe there was something wrong but I didn't want to think too much about it. The results didn't seem to depend on anything, whether or not I masturbated the night before or how many times I'd masturbated. I rarely masturbate in the morning, regardless how I wake. Usually, I have to urinate whilst having an erection, which is always complicated. This is where physics comes into play; angles, trajectories, gravity, etc., although that might be geometry instead of physics. I'm no good at

either. It is never a good idea to masturbate while also having to urinate. This I learned the hard way. At any rate, then I take my allergy medication, if I've remembered to refill the prescription. Sometimes I'm off it for a while and find myself suffering. My throat closes and I have trouble breathing. This medication has nothing to do with the allergy to penicillin. This is for common allergies: dust, pollen, ragweed. You are supposed to take this particular medication on an empty stomach so I am always careful to wait at least an hour before breakfast, except for when I get too hungry and eat right away. I don't know if this has an adverse effect on the medication, if it negates its properties. I almost never feel different on the days I don't wait the recommended hour before breakfast. Then I read the newspaper, starting with the sports, then the entertainment section, then the hard news, and finally, I start the crossword puzzle. The hard news can be skipped most days. There is almost nothing in the news that pertains to me in any way. It is all in one eye and out the other. Occasionally I will read the gossip columns but only occasionally. And lately I have been checking my horoscope nearly every day. I find it amusing but not at all instructive. Also, I can never remember how it is I'm supposed to behave and with whom. Today's horoscope may have said something like—*A chance meeting with a new acquaintance touches on common ground, but be careful what you say.* I don't see how this could apply to me, not anymore. I don't say anything to anyone, let alone have chance meetings with new acquaintances. My old acquaintance I haven't seen in God knows how long. I don't know what happened to him. Same goes for the common ground. Concerning the crossword, I will rarely finish, but am usually able to fill in most boxes most of the time. This is not always true, either. Only sometimes am I able to fill in most boxes. Too often I skip the crossword altogether because I don't like to remind myself of all I don't know. Then I eat a bowl of cereal while

re-reading the stories I only skimmed through. (I don't always eat cereal, though. Sometimes I have frozen waffles or scrambled eggs and toast. Other times I skip a morning meal and starve myself until lunch. I call this fasting although it never lasts beyond 3 p.m. I think of it as purification. The only other times I feel pure is after a stomach virus or a glass of water. It's like wiping the slate clean or being born again. The other thing is I can never eat lunch or any lunch-like foods before noon, which resembles the trouble with sequence—Ideas of Order. This is more superstition than anything else, though. When I said I eat a bowl of cereal I didn't mean to say I always eat a bowl of cereal, Give us this day our daily nada y pues nada y pues nada, just as I can't always fill in most of the crossword boxes or take my allergy pill.) After breakfast I check the mail. I always check the mail because I might find something in there that's not in the newspaper, but it never works out that way. More often than not the mail isn't in the box yet. Apparently the people who deliver mail in this neighborhood do so at their own pace. One of them is not from this part of the world. He wears a white oval hat when it rains. This hat is shaped like the hats rickshaw drivers wear. People who work in rice patties wear the same hats. I don't know what this kind of hat is called, although I'm certain there is a name for it. Otherwise, he wears the standard postman's cap. I have never spoken to him. I've watched him from the living room window as he enters and exits the vestibule. The other person who delivers mail is androgynous, which might be synonymous with hermaphroditism, if that is an actual word. There is no telling one way or another. This person has a habit of putting the mail in the box in two tries. Meaning you hear the slap of the lid twice, regardless of how much mail is actually going in the box. I always wait a full minute after the second slap before going to the vestibule to retrieve mail. If the mail has come then I will answer whatever needs

answering, particularly past due bill notices. There are never any letters. Once I got a letter from my neighbor, but that was years ago. I put it in one of the folders for official documents and haven't seen it since. Otherwise I go about my day from there.

On days I was actively looking for an apartment I'd get the paper and circle advertisements in my price range, foregoing my usual morning routine save for the allergy pills which was an essential during that time. It was a clear spring and the pollen count was high. Then I would make calls. For some time I was uncomfortable calling people on the telephone. Didn't matter whether it was a personal call or business, I always felt like I was imposing. I tended to employ a sophisticated vocabulary when speaking on the phone, I'm not sure why. I think it made certain people uncomfortable. Answering the phone has rarely been a problem, for whatever reason, when it rings. When it does not ring is never a problem.

*Hello, I'm calling about the ad in the paper for the apartment.*

*... What?*

*I'm sorry. Did I wake you up?*

Most of my conversations with potential landlords started like that. It's akin to getting off on the wrong foot. After stumbling through the amenities I would schedule appointments to visit apartments. I did miss an appointment or two. Although I do know from which direction the sun rises and sets, this knowledge has never been helpful to me when trying to find an address. And I can never remember which streets/avenues run north-south and which go east-west. I usually think in terms of forwards and backwards and everything looks the same to me regardless. This was the case when I was to visit a studio apartment. My price range was limited, although there always seemed to be money in the account. I couldn't remember the last time I'd visited the bank

though I was certain I had a standing account there. I had it in my head I could only afford a certain amount each month on rent. Perhaps I would have been able to live in a posh neighborhood with high-rise buildings and doormen in red suits but it's academic now. I have found that most houses in most neighborhoods look the same regardless of socio-economic conditions. This is where some of the Teardrop people live. All the streets in this particular neighborhood were one-way streets. I had found the actual street where the studio apartment was located a few times but each time could only turn down the wrong direction. After driving around the block for twenty minutes I could not find the proper access to the street in order to drive in the proper direction. I was told to use a church steeple as a landmark but this did not help. I mistakenly drove onto a highway ramp leading away from the area, the church steeple getting smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror. I decided to stay on the highway and drove home. A week or so later I saw the same studio apartment advertised in the newspaper. I thought of trying again, perhaps calling under an assumed identity to schedule another appointment. The person responsible for renting out the apartment I'm certain would not have recognized my voice. I have an excellent phone voice, deep and soothing, although I do not like the sound of my own voice when recorded. On answering machines my voice is too nasal, too monotonic, if that is an actual word. Theoretically, I could've used a host of monosyllabic words in a stilted falsetto and probably have gotten away with it. I did not call the person responsible for renting the studio apartment to explain myself, either. I almost never apologize to the person, persons or organizations I have left waiting for me.

Only one or two available apartments that I did manage to locate piqued my interest, though the landlords seemed disinclined to rent their respective apartments to me. Perhaps

they misconstrued something I might have said. Certain questions I may have asked.

*How close is the nearest police precinct?*

*Where is the nearest hospital?*

Etc.

This is the kind of pertinent information one needs when deciding where to live. I thought the questions routine, standard. I had other questions concerning local crime rates, public transportation, traffic patterns, the recreational habits of upstairs neighbors, and school districts.

*Are you married?*

*No.*

*Do you have any children?*

*None I'm aware of.*

I presumed one was supposed to ask these kinds of questions. I thought it was expected. I was curious but more than that I wanted to appear civic minded. I always wore my Sunday best, which at the time was my favorite pair of trousers, navy blue, soft cotton, pleated and reliable despite the small hole in the front right pocket through which I had lost probably twenty dollars worth of change over the years. This was the first time the trousers didn't fit. I struggled to button them around my waist, sucking in my gut, doing deep knee bends in an attempt to loosen the fabric, etc. Ultimately, I had to change into another pair of slacks. I also had to change shirts. Not because the shirt was tight but because the shirt did not compliment the pair of trousers I had to change into. I had been accused of having no fashion sense, though I cannot recall who may have said this, nor can I recall the general conversation, time of day, etc. This was probably true, a lack of fashion sense. Still, I made efforts. Like the time I had to change trousers before seeing an apartment. I did not like going on an important appointment without my Sunday best. There was a time when I would not have gone through with it,



I would have stayed home. But this was during a time when I was making efforts. I was told I had to start making a concerted effort by someone familiar with the disconcerted efforts I had been accustomed to. This ended around the time I started looking for an apartment or whatever the actual word should be. I was always clean-shaven whenever I went to see an apartment. I have had problems shaving. On a day I was scheduled to tour several apartments I cut the upper part of my lip and it did not stop bleeding all day. For a while I thought I'd severed an artery and would somehow die from it. Each time I removed the new swath of tissue paper I'd just applied the bleeding continued. I didn't leave the house that day. I was afraid I'd pass out and be left for dead on the street. Past that I would walk slowly from room to room, hands clasped behind my back, while I asked the questions I had thought I was expected to ask. I'd look out windows, open and close closet doors in a genteel fashion. I'd make non-threatening eye contact and shake hands with a firm, yet pliable grip.

Perhaps there were other reasons I was not rented those apartments. Perhaps these people resented me for having woken them early on a Saturday or Sunday.

*Hello, I'm calling about the apartment, if you recall I toured it over the weekend.*

*The apartment's been rented.*

*Okay. Sorry to have disturbed you so early in the morning.*

That is when I decided to put myself in the hands of an expert. I contacted several realtors and visited apartments with them. They wore gold bracelets and talked fast and had electronic devices attached to their belts. All of these apartments were dingy, uninhabitable. Eventually I happened upon one realtor whom I felt I could trust and who showed me the apartment I have called home for four years now.

It is a modest one bedroom in a family neighborhood,

mostly Greek. Most of the apartment buildings in this neighborhood look the same but I have found that most apartment buildings in most neighborhoods look the same regardless of the socioeconomic or ethnic makeup of the neighborhood. There are very few front lawns and most are comprised of thousands of pebbles spray-painted a lime green. There is no way of telling if this was a communal decision or if someone decided to plant a pebble lawn first and it caught on monkey see monkey do. I don't know whether the Greeks came here as part of an exodus or whether they left most of their countrymen and women behind or if they were fleeing for their lives. People who flee, who do take part in an exodus, have it written all over themselves. The people here have any number of things etched into their faces so it is difficult to say. The building is what's known as a pre-war building. They don't say which war, though one assumes its World War II. The building does seem to be that old if not older, so perhaps they mean World War I in this case. There's almost no way of knowing.

Isn't everything pre and post war at the same time to one degree or another?

The deal was closed on a weekday afternoon. I was taken to the apartment building by the realtor. He told me I would love this neighborhood.

*You are going to love this neighborhood.*

*I'm sure.*

*It's nice here.*

*Looks it.*

*Today we talked about her marriage.*

*I'm sorry?*

*This woman I'm seeing.*

*I didn't realize.*

*She is divorcing her husband. But she's not officially divorced yet.*

*I don't know what that means, but I understand completely.*

*So is what we're doing considered adultery?*

*I don't know.*

*You'd think the married one would be the guilty party in such a case, but technically I don't think it makes a difference.*

*Probably not.*

*She got married because it was a sound business deal, a man with a job and house. She knew it was a mistake from day one. She says he was always complaining, miserable. She says everyone thinks it's her fault.*

I was grateful when we pulled up to the apartment building. I don't know why people talk to me like they do. Perhaps it is because I don't have anything to say myself. This is what you have to endure when you don't have anything to say to people. He said he had some paperwork to fill out and would wait in the car until it was time to sign the lease agreement. He had a white sheet of a paper look on his face when he said this. He looked like he was about to keel over. This is when it began to rain and I wondered if the paint on the pebbles would run.

I rang the buzzer three times. I was having second thoughts while waiting for the landlady to buzz me in. Time passed. Rain trickled off the roof in pathetic drops that made no sound when hitting the stoop. The gutters were poorly designed. I remember thinking I could tell the realtor she wasn't home and apologize for putting him out. I could tell him I would make it up to him. He was still in the car, looking splendid, disconcerted. There seemed to be no one home. The building was dark, quiet, like it had been condemned. I looked around for a poster or some sort of official document indicating this, but then she answered the door wearing a blue house frock. She was teardropped, with tits, small but noticeable. I wondered when the last time someone had touched them, or wanted to. She looked like she had just woken up. Her greasy hair was mussed and she was barefoot, toenails misshapen and yellowed. She invited me in and we sat at her kitchen table.

She lived in squalor.

The table was egg-shaped and uneven. I sat on a chair nearest the front door and tried not to look around. I did not want to see what kind of shape the rest of the house was in. The kitchen was a shambles. There was a cabinet door missing above the sink, open cereal boxes and egg cartons on the countertop, piles of newspaper against the walls, three coffee cans collecting leaking rain water, an open garbage bag in the middle of the floor, which had different patterned tiles all tiled together. There was no small talk. I looked out the window towards the realtor in his idling car and then went outside to get him. The landlady buzzed us back in. She did not say anything about wiping our feet and there was nothing for us to wipe our feet on. The landlady and the realtor exchanged a few words in Greek. I always wonder what foreigners are saying when speaking in their native tongues. Whatever is said is usually disparaging. Doubtless they were talking about me. I signed a crude one-year lease hastily prepared in front of me. The landlady's horrendous face seemed to light up when I signed it. The realtor acted as intermediary. The way he held the pen between his middle and forefinger made him look like an illiterate making his mark. He pointed to the lines where I was to sign after having marked each line with an X. My signature was and still is an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines. The signature is illegible. I remember someone advising me to sign my name in this fashion as to discourage forgery. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. This was a person of the world, who had been around the block once or twice without getting lost. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. It was evening all afternoon. It was snowing and it was going to snow. Had the sun been out it would've been that shade of orange when it is about ready to pull the plug. I was uncomfortable but I am often uncomfortable when I haven't

been somewhere before. I could've been anywhere, though, as I have been uncomfortable everywhere, even in my own apartment. The apartment has never felt like home to me, although I have called it home for four years. I remember the person saying an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines is best for signing official documents so as to discourage forgery. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of an inimitable signature mentioned no other benefits. I signed the lease using a facsimile of that same signature, a simulacrum, if that is an actual word. I can never sign my name the same way twice. She handed me the lease and the keys after signing the document herself. She said something.

*You love this apartment.*

*I'm sure.*

*Take care for me.*

*Thanks. I'll see you around, maybe.*

We left together, the realtor and me, after he exchanged a few final words with the landlady in Greek. The landlady walked us to the door. Her gait was that of an old lady, too much effort for the ground covered, blue frock sweeping the floor around her. I nodded to her as I walked back to the realtor's car. She waved.

I was filled with remorse almost immediately. I didn't know why I needed an apartment. I think I was content where I'd been. I think I enjoyed myself. There was a sense of community. I had a routine. I did things and didn't have to make any decisions.

I also don't like spending money. Before I commit to a significant purchase I need time to consider all the ramifications. This isn't always true, either. I bought my first car without any forethought. This was the car I'd wrecked while checking my eye. I'd said it was raining in the middle of the afternoon—that the rain was beating on the windows. It

wasn't the middle of the afternoon and it wasn't raining. It was a beautiful clear morning. I don't know why I'd said it was raining when it wasn't. It is not my intention to mislead anyone, but sometimes I get confused. I may have been pulled over on the side of the road reading but I can't quite remember. True, I always pulled over when it rained but I sometimes pulled over for other reasons. Sometimes I was tired of driving. Sometimes I thought I was putting myself and others in danger by driving. I must have been on the side of the road for some time. Perhaps I was sleeping. I would sleep in my car sometimes if I'd had too much to drink the night before. Time was I'd take a drink after work. I can't remember if something happened or if I'd grown bored with what I was reading but eventually I continued my drive home. I may have been finishing a novel my neighbor had recommended. My eyes always burned whenever I'd read the novels and I'd always have to close my eyes for a while afterwards. I never did like the novels, but never said anything about not liking them. There's nothing in a novel that has anything to do with me, that pertains to me in any way. Regardless. The word that should conclude every novel. Regardless, I got back on the road and wrecked the car. Buying the car without forethought had nothing to do with the accident, I don't think. Still, I learned a lesson. I'm certain I would've considered the ramifications before signing the lease, which I have since re-upped three times. I am a good tenant. I am a model tenant, perhaps the best tenant they have ever had. I rarely have anything to do with the landlord or other tenants and I've managed to not break or damage anything. I also manage to pay the rent on time every month, which sometimes surprises me because I do not recall having earned any money recently.

I'm sure they would like to see me live out the rest of my years here.

Two days after I had signed the lease a foul stench was

emanating from the bowels of the kitchen. I thought maybe something may have died and was stuck within the walls decomposing. I didn't see anything and didn't look for anything, either. I almost moved the refrigerator out from the wall and opened a cabinet but decided against it. Otherwise the odor was coming from outside, perhaps the garbage that was stored in the lot between my building and the adjacent building. I called the landlady in. She was out of her blue house frock and into a matching sweater and slacks set, perfumed, and had a flowing scarf around her neck. I think she was looking for a compliment, but I didn't know what was expected of me. This was the first time I'd seen her dressed. I waited for the building to collapse around us, for one of us to keel over. I remembered the first time I'd seen someone keel over, although, I wasn't actually there for the keeling over part. This was in the restaurant where I'd worked as a waiter, a job I was unqualified for. That didn't matter apparently, that I was unqualified for the job. By the time I found my way over to the commotion the customer was unconscious on the floor, bleeding from the nose and mouth and his face was swollen. It looked like he had suffered an injury. His eyes were bruised bloodshot and there were pieces of glass sprinkled on his face, hair and the floor around him. I remember not knowing what to make of this. Perhaps he crashed into a drinking glass while collapsing. Otherwise the busboys didn't do a good job the last time there was an accident in that station. There was a faint gurgling sound coming from his throat. Another waiter shook him like he'd come to, but I knew he wouldn't. I kneeled down and put my finger on his neck to check his pulse, knowing I didn't know exactly where to put my finger and knowing even if I had he probably wouldn't have one. Next I tried to listen for breathing sounds, but there weren't any. Meanwhile the restaurant had come to a stop. No one was eating or serving or speaking. The man who was dying, who was only partially

teardropped, was there alone, so there was no one crying or screaming, which seemed wrong somehow. I took his hand and gripped it like we were about to arm wrestle. I figured if I was the one dying I'd want someone to hold my hand while I was doing it. With my other hand I made a fist and pounded on his chest once or twice until someone stopped me. I'm not sure who that was but it doesn't matter. I hadn't seen anyone die before but nothing about it surprised me. It was ugly, violent. Eventually the paramedics loaded him on a gurney and wheeled him out of the restaurant. It wasn't long after that I quit. No matter. Almost everything that comes to mind is beside the point, has nothing to do with anything. If I didn't say I'm sorry before let me say it now. But the landlady wasn't keeling over and neither was I so something else would have to happen. I'd assumed she was agoraphobic because of the blue house frock and the condition of her own apartment. Agoraphobes are usually old foreigners who wear too much perfume and blue house frocks and whose houses are in disrepair. I invited her into the kitchen. I told her there was a smell.

*There is a smell here in the kitchen.*

*I don't smell nothing.*

*I'm sorry?*

*I don't smell nothing.*

*It smells like something died in here.*

*No. We don't have mice here. They come exterminate every month.*

*Something has to be done.*

*You want to move?*

*I'm sorry?*

*You want to move?*

*No, I don't want to move.*

*I don't know what to tell you.*

*There is a foul stench coming from this kitchen.*

*Maybe I call my son. He come in here and maybe he smell*



*something. I don't smell nothing.*

During our conversation she had walked to the sink, leaned over and inhaled. She then found her way to the side of the refrigerator and did the same thing. Between the inhalations she'd sniff, flaring her nostrils as she did so. I did not want to look but couldn't help myself. Initially, her scent overpowered whatever was dead and decomposing in the walls, but only for a short time. She had probably lost her sense of smell years ago, maybe in an accident. I don't know if one can actually lose this sense, though. Certainly hearing and sight can be lost but maybe not the others. There is something wrong with my hearing, but the rest of my senses are sharp. She then raised the telephone she'd been carrying in her right hand and dialed some numbers. I hadn't noticed the phone until she started dialing but I acted like this was acceptable, like I was expecting this. She spoke in Greek, although occasionally she would lapse into English. Doubtless she was talking about me, something disparaging. She seemed to be perfectly at ease while speaking on the phone in either language. She had made herself at home, too, untying her scarf and leaning against a wall. Worse, she didn't know what to do with her eyes during the conversation. Either they fished all over the room or she'd stare at me, unblinking, long after it was appropriate to look away and always with an expectant look on her face. I tried to appear as though I was doing something important, looking through official documents, signing papers. She stood in the hallway occasionally shifting her weight from one leg to the other. I imagined her in the blue house frock and wondered if she had more than one. There was probably a closet full of blue house frocks in her apartment. All of them reached well below her knee and were sleeveless. All of them showed the white brassiere underneath; the right strap inching its way across her shoulder. And always white slippers that'd fail to cover either yellowed or sometimes freshly painted toenails.

Certainly she had a network of varicose veins hidden under the frock going all over berserk. There is nothing to infer from this wonderance. I never thought about the landlady while masturbating, nor could I see into her bedroom window. But this day she looked almost handsome, regal. I wanted her to go home. I wanted her to go home and never come out of her house again. The conversation seemed to drift into personal matters. I heard names, places, events; information that had nothing to do with me or the foul stench emanating from the bowels of my kitchen. I went to the refrigerator, which was empty save for a bottle of water, carton of milk and two packages of sliced cheese. I opened the door and pretended to look for something inside. From where she was standing she could not tell what was or wasn't in the refrigerator. This is when she hung up the phone. I'd won but I didn't let on that I'd won. This is when she told me her son had a wife and family living overseas. I don't know whether they were part of a reverse exodus or what. It is unlikely the wife and family were fleeing for their very lives, from oppression, famine, flood, drought, etc. I have heard about this overseas family repeatedly. Still, that is all I can recall about the family, that they lived overseas. She usually went on and on but I would always think about something else. I am easily distracted particularly if I have no interest in whatever conversation I might currently be engaged. Turned out her son could come over the next day to investigate the odor. Of course, the smell disappeared by then. Perhaps it did not disappear entirely but it had grown faint, almost indiscernible. The next morning he came into the kitchen and sniffed around much like his mother had done the day before. He poked his head over the sink, opened and closed some cabinets, eyes fishing all over.

*I don't smell anything.*

*The smell has dissipated a great deal. But yesterday it was awful.*

*I don't smell anything now.*

*Neither do I.*

*So, what, you want to move?*

*No, I don't want to move. I just moved in.*

*I don't know what to tell you. I don't smell anything.*

*I know. But it did smell like something rotten, maybe something died and crawled behind the sink. Or else it's the garbage outside.*

*Well, if you smell it again call me. If there is something in there we'll take it out. That's all I can tell you.*

*Okay. I'll let you know.*

The stench returned the next day, but I didn't want to have to talk to those people again. Didn't want them snooping around my house sniffing, telling me they don't know what to tell me. I bought some rose-scented incense and started burning that instead. I kept the windows closed and tried to suppress my sense of smell. The stench did lessen over time. Otherwise I got used to it.

It took the next few months to settle in. The weather was foul during this time. People thought it was the end, the apocalypse. Telephone lines were down, schools closed. On television they explained the difference between warnings and watches and advisories. One is worse than the next but I can't remember which is which is which. The Teardrops were frightened into stockpiling provisions. There was a run on batteries and bottled water at the store.

There are people on television and people in real life.

The landlady was omnipresent during this time. She was one of the frightened Teardrops. The landlady's name was difficult to pronounce and I have never said it out loud. Too many soft vowel sounds to tap trippingly on the tongue.

She was everywhere, on the stoop, on the sidewalk, in the hallway. When I say everywhere I mean those three places. She would sit on the stoop with a newspaper, telephone book and pen. I'd pass her on my way into the building after a walk or trip to the store or I'd see her from the window. She'd

spend an hour each day crossing off listings in the phonebook for those mentioned in the Obituaries. The way she held the pen between her ring and middle fingers reminded me of an illiterate making his mark. She would never lift her head from the phonebook, always crossing out names with a quick snap of the wrist. I think she may have grimaced while doing this, too. It took me some time to figure this all out as I didn't want to ask her directly.

She looked unwell. There was always a steady stream of people checking on her. I don't what they were checking for. Perhaps they kept her unwell deliberately so they could keep checking on her. Perhaps they had nothing else to do. On television they had reporters interviewing clerks and store managers and the average Teardrop. The Teardrops said things like:

*I don't know what's going to happen.*

*I'm just doing what they tell me to do.*

*My family comes first.*

The clerks echoed what the store managers said:

*We've had a run on bottled water and batteries.*

*We can't keep canned goods on the shelves.*

*People are scared.*

The people who took care of the landlady had been doing it for some time. They were reliable. The weather did not prevent any of them from checking on her. They brought her flowers and food, medicine, prayer cards. These people would give me sideways glances. I'd done nothing to warrant those looks, I don't think. Most of the people were younger, who I took to be her other children or maybe nieces and nephews. There was a certain resemblance, a grave countenance shared by all.

The lot between my building and the adjacent building is where they keep the garbage. The landlords are always occupied with the business of garbage. Garbage is important to

these people. What kind of garbage goes into what receptacles is of particular concern. If the proper garbage does not go into the proper receptacle the consequences can be dire. Fines have been levied. Apparently plastic waste, paper waste and all other refuse have their own specific receptacles. Colorful sheets of paper indicating which belongs where have been handed out to tenants and taped to the walls in hallways and vestibules. I have never paid much attention to these sheets of paper nor the garbage rules as a whole. I mix plastic with paper, paper with plastic, and plastic and paper with other rubbish. I have never been caught.

The landlady speaks of her desire to travel but cannot because of the garbage.

*I would like to go home, see sister in Greece, but who take care of garbage?*

*I know.*

*Did I tell you about Mary?*

*No.*

*Mary, she drinks white wine between attacks, scotch during them.*

*Who is this?*

*My daughter-in-law, Mary.*

*I see her one time. "I don't like feeling this way," she says. Her hands shake, she crying. My son, he talk baby talk to her. I think maybe she make spectacle of herself. But I say nothing.*

*That's good.*

*She drinks. Me, I don't drink. My son brings her the scotch and she holds it like it's cup of soup. My son strokes her hair while she sips. I saw this. This at my granddaughter's christening, can you believe? Everyone in the church stare at her. Terrible. I made the christening gown for my granddaughter from my mother's wedding dress. Beautiful old gown. Can you believe?*

*That must've been nice.*

I hear her late at night doing the garbage. The row of garbage cans is just a few feet from my living room window

and the window is almost always open. She hums unrecognizable tunes as she unhooks the trashcans from the chain link fence and drags each of them to the curb for the sanitation people. All of her trashcans are chained to the fence. She is fearful the other landlords will steal her cans. I think I remember her saying one of her cans had been stolen.

I never take out the garbage when she is there. I have masturbated while she's out there humming her songs, but always with the blinds drawn. I never make a sound. I'm certain she knows nothing.

The kitchen is not conducive to cooking or eating or anything associated with a normal kitchen. There is a stove directly opposite the counter, sink and cabinets. There is about two feet between the stove and counter. More than one person cannot occupy this space at the same time. The stove itself is defective. The oven and two of the four gas burners do not work. To be precise, the top right and bottom left burners are the ones that don't work. I have never mentioned this to the landlady. The landlady, I'm sure, is aware of the problem. The stove seems to have been defective long before I became the tenant. The white lettered writing indicating High, Low and Lite, on each of the burners is so faded as to be barely discernible. I have never used the oven and have only opened the oven door once to make sure there was nothing in there. I am not always looking in the oven. The poetess stuck her head in there once, but everyone knows that. I have never considered sticking my own head in the oven as gas smells awful. I don't like the smell of a gas oven but gasoline from a filling station is another story. I've always liked the way gasoline smells. Baking is not something one could do if one were inclined to bake something. Having only two working burners has hampered certain meals I've cooked. Consequently, I rely on takeout food. I often have a hard time deciding what to order. I am generally sick to death of what

I've been eating and talk myself in and out of decisions because of this.

There are three floors, each with two apartments. I know this because I have counted the mailboxes in the vestibule. 1F, 1R, 2F, 2R, 3F, 3R. If there are other apartments in this building they do not have a corresponding mailbox. Why the letters are F's and R's and not A's and B's I've no idea. I don't know if there are problems with foul odors in the other apartments. I have never been inside any. I have never been to the other floors. I imagine the second and third floors are similar to the first. Actually, I have never imagined the second or third floors at all. I have never given the other floors a single thought, other than to note there is someone in the apartment directly above mine dedicated to vacuuming. This person vacuums every morning, around 10:00. I should think this person is vacuuming some kind of throw rug. It is doubtful there is wall-to-wall carpeting. My guess is there is a family living up there and the mother stays home every day and has nothing else to do. I don't think throw rugs get that dirty although I don't know what goes on up there. There is commotion in the evening. Whether this soils the rug is anyone's guess. I try not to let it get to me. I will go into the bedroom or play loud music or even knock on the ceiling with a mop handle or the baseball bat I keep in the hallway. The commotion usually subsides when I do this. Being near the front door of the building I hear everyone come and go. I can even hear them bounding down the steps from the top floors. Their movements are predictable. The children in sneakers scurry in and out every day at the same times, the lady with the high heels clicks after them both in the mornings and afternoons. The children might be from the apartment directly above mine but certainly not the woman in high heels. I think the woman in high heels lives on the third floor, but I can't be certain. There is no way to look into her window from mine

and I never find myself on the other side of the street. You can hear each tenant open his or her mailboxes in the vestibule. Sound carries very well in this building. I don't know whether that's true of other pre-war buildings.

The apartment has a long narrow corridor, narrow bathroom, cramped kitchen and a large living room. There's hardwood flooring all over except for the bathroom and kitchen areas. The hardwood floors look weathered and many of the panels are discolored. There are several oval shaped brown stains all over in no discernible pattern. I don't recall the stains being there when I first toured the apartment. The stains are dark red, almost brown colored, but have no shape. There was a poem called *The Good Man Has No Shape* concerning Jesus or Lazarus or Mary Magdalene. Jesus saved the both of them, I think. Lazarus he either raised from the dead or restored his sight and when a bunch of them were about to let Mary Magdalene have it for whoring, Jesus stepped in with *Let he among you without sin cast the first stone*. There is no way of knowing if the congregation of stonethrowers were Teardrops or not, but there were less Teardrops then for sure. Evolution and gluttony takes time. Until I saw the stains I wasn't sure if something could be shapeless. The stains look like blood, but not the kind of blood you see from a skinned knee or pricked finger, more like the black cherry used for transfusions. I think the floor has been down since before the war when the building went up. Beige tile covers the floor in the bathroom and kitchen. The kitchen floor is always dirty. I leave a mop against one of the cupboards and a bucket under the sink. I will also use the mop handle to bang on the ceiling from time to time whenever the commotion starts.

The front door opens into a small foyer. Straight ahead is the kitchen with the dirty tiles and foul odor. To the right is the narrow corridor leading to the bedroom. A bookcase and



portable closet line the corridor wall. I inherited the portable closet from a previous tenant. The portable closet is lopsided, heavy and utilitarian. Luckily it is the same shade of brown as the bookcase.

There were no closets built into the actual apartment itself. There is no place to put anything. I don't think I had ever been in a private residence that did not have any closets. I have heard people refer to *closet space* as a selling point for houses, apartments, etc. My real estate agent failed to mention the lack of closet space before we visited and toured the apartment.

I was in the bedroom. My agent was in the living room with the landlady talking Greek. I called him over. The landlady followed him down the corridor but stayed there lingering. I asked him about the closets, trying not to sound impolite as I knew she was eavesdropping.

*Where are the closets?*

*You can have the one in the hall.*

*You didn't mention this before.*

*I didn't realize it. I apologize.*

*Not much room in it.*

*Hold on, let me ask her.*

*Is this the only closet?* (only in Greek. So, more like, Alpha Omega Zorba Sophocles Baklava, etc.).

*There is another one like that in the basement. You can bring it up with my son if you want it. It is big but there is room.*

*Maybe. That's very generous of you, thank you.*

They started speaking Greek again. Doubtless they were talking about me.

I was told I didn't need much closet space. I was a man after all.

The other closet is still in the basement I imagine. I have never been in the basement. In fact, I'm not sure how one even gains access to the basement. There is probably a door and stairwell in the back of the building. I have never seen the

back of the building or even the sides for that matter. There is nothing for me to see in either the back or sides of the building. No one has ever mentioned a backyard. If there were a backyard perhaps I'd wander back there but never down the stairwell to the basement. I do not like basements. The air in basements is always heavy and damp. As a child I had to use vaporizers, nebulizers, inhalers, etc. They were always giving me something to help with my breathing. I used to take pills even, but the pills may have been for something else. The vaporizer would keep the air moist in the bedroom and I can recall trying to fall asleep to the dull hum of the vaporizer. I'm not sure the vaporizer ever helped, though, either with my respiratory condition or as a sleep-aid. I think I would wheeze quite a bit and stay up half the night. My sister would be asleep on the other side of the room. There was never anything wrong with her breathing. She was always perfectly healthy, thin. I was always finishing her dinner for her, scraping whatever was left on her plate to mine. She never minded basements, I don't think. She has one in her own house now. Another thing is the claustrophobia. There is something unsettling about subterranean structures: basements, subways, bunkers, etc. I don't know how anyone can breathe underground or where the oxygen comes from to allow it.

This is where the flooring is sloped—right where the closet meets the entrance of the bedroom. Right outside the bedroom door there is a slight incline and then a sharp decline once inside the bedroom. Perhaps there is a flaw in the foundation. People have been known to stumble in that area, even fall down.

There is ample room for nightstands on both sides of the bed, a soft queen size that occasionally wreaks havoc. I have had the bed for years. One can turn a mattress over from time to time to keep the springs in working order. I do this. There is a knot in one side of the mattress, which is currently facing

down. The knot happens to line up with the small of my back. This particular side has been facing down for some time. It might be time for a new mattress although I do think I will hold onto the box spring, which seems to be in fine shape. There is no headboard. I have wanted a headboard but have never shopped for one. I'm not sure whether headboards serve a functional purpose or are strictly ornamental. Certainly a headboard would look nice. I have only one nightstand, which is placed between the bed and the far sidewall, but there is room on the other side for another nightstand. On the nightstand itself, is a clock radio set to a 24-hour sports talk station, a picture frame, lamp, several pens and a notepad. The only pieces of furniture in the bedroom, other than the bed and nightstand, are a chest of drawers and bamboo room divider. The room divider I have had since childhood sharing a bedroom with my sister.

I used to think about death then, as a child, up in our bedroom on opposite sides of the divider. On my side there was also a vaporizer to keep the air moist for me. That's mainly what I recall from my childhood—being preoccupied with death and wheezing. I'm sure I participated in all the requisite childhood activities, school, extra-curricular organizations, baseball and the like. I must have. One cannot abstain from those activities at that age, one must do what they tell you to do and go where they tell you to go. I am, however, unable to recall specifics. I do recall thinking a lot about death. Not so much dying but being dead forever—like a prisoner X'ing off days on his wall calendar. How I might die never concerned me. I was certain it would be some kind of insidious disease, something I've carried since birth. Otherwise, something sudden, painless. Either way.

The prayer we said each night before bedtime also triggered a certain anxiety. We would kneel at our respective beds on our respective sides of the room divided by the bamboo

divider and recite:

*Now I lay me down to sleep  
I pray the lord my soul to keep  
If I should die before I wake  
I pray the lord my soul to take*

I didn't want anyone taking my soul anywhere and I was always half expecting to wake up dead. Afterwards we would have conversations from either side of the divider.

*Are you asleep?*

*No, are you?*

*Tomorrow is the fifth anniversary of Uncle Jimmy's death.*

*Which one was Uncle Jimmy again?*

*He was mom's older brother. Big fat guy with the beard and bald head.*

*I don't remember him.*

*You were too young.*

*What did he die of?*

*He had cancer, I think.*

*How do you get cancer?*

*You can get cancer all kinds of ways. Smoking, drinking, swimming in public pools, drinking from water fountains, breathing foul, damp air, you can inherit it from your relatives.*

*No, you can't.*

*I think I'm going to die soon.*

*Why?*

*I don't know. I just feel it.*

*How are you going to die?*

*A disease probably. There might be something wrong with my heart, too, or else my blood. There is probably something wrong with my blood.*

*There is nothing wrong with your blood.*

*I am not long for this world, your grace.*

We'd talk like this whenever we discussed my demise. Otherwise, we agreed on most everything. I remember

playing tic-tac-toe on frosted windows. She would win because I let her as the older brother. I don't recall what vehicles these tic-tac-toe games took place in. They may have taken place in buses, perhaps on the way to school or else on the way home after school. I believe we attended the same schools, at least during the ages when we were likely to play tic-tac-toe on frosted windows. We'd also pretend our living room couch was a ship at sea. It was one of the first games, although I can't remember if I was good at it. To get to the adjoining vessel, which was a matching love-seat, we'd have to leap across or walk a plank of pillows laid out on the floor. The floors represented shark-infested waters. My sister would watch my every move, waiting for a toe to scrape the carpet and call out that I was dead. I do seem to recall seeing my sister roaming the hallways of some school or another and that we'd talk from either side of the divider. I'd forecast something dire and my sister would humor me for a few minutes. Then she would get tired, say goodnight and fall asleep.

Then I would try to think pleasant thoughts. What those were, I don't remember. But I'm certain I did manage to think them. I'd get up, peek around the room divider and watch my sister sleep.

This is what I'd do.

I do remember the time Goldfish died. Not Goldfish, but Goldfish. It was summer and I had probably been out playing baseball all day. I probably had a great game with a few hits, maybe a homerun, some stolen bases and a stellar defensive play or two. Otherwise I was somewhere else, perhaps getting into some kind of trouble. I never did get into any real trouble as a child. It was hard for a kid with respiratory difficulties to get into real trouble. Baseball was easier because there was a lot of standing around. They would let me play baseball but nothing else, nothing strenuous, no undo stress. When I got home and upstairs to our bedroom Goldfish was gone. I was

expecting to catch him belly up sooner or later but never gone from sight. In fact, I think I remember looking forward to finding him dead in the bowl. I'm not sure what that says about me or if it says anything at all. I would watch his breathing, his little gills moving in the water. I was always checking the bowl to make sure.

My sister was downstairs, maybe in the kitchen eating cookies or in the living room watching television, or else outside playing a game, like hopscotch or jacks.

*What happened to Goldfish?*

*He died.*

*How do you know he died?*

*I saw him. He was floating in the water sideways.*

*Are you sure he wasn't sleeping, or playing dead?*

*Goldfish don't play dead.*

*Some do.*

*He was definitely dead.*

*What did you do with him?*

*I disposed of him.*

*Down the toilet?*

*Indeed.*

My sister has always been like that.

The second time Goldfish died I was the one to find him. I scooped him out of the bowl with a little net and disposed of him much the same way I imagine my sister had done with Goldfish. There was no, Come on Goldfish, come on boy. Coaxing Goldfish to start, to turn over.

I haven't seen a goldfish since, haven't had anything that was incumbent upon me to name.

I bought the chest of drawers from a second hand furniture store not far from my apartment. Sometimes I refer to this as a chest of drawers but more often than not I call it a dresser. I needed someplace to store clothes and other items such as wristwatches, bankbooks, cigar cutters and keepsakes. I

thought of storing everything in boxes and milk crates, which I did do, for some time, but eventually I was persuaded to buy actual furniture. I don't recall who persuaded me. It was either my sister or neighbor or someone else. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. The sun was that shade of orange when it is about to die a slow horrible death. I was someplace unfamiliar, someone's home, or a bar or restaurant. Otherwise I was in my own apartment, which is to this day sometimes unfamiliar. I am often uncomfortable in my apartment. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason.

*You need some furniture in here.*

*I know.*

Generally when someone suggests something I should do I agree straight away. Argument is futile and I rarely believe in anything strongly enough to defend my position. I rarely have a position. This person said I needed objects to take up space in the apartment. Objects to deceive the eye, give the rest of the room texture or perspective, something. Otherwise there is too much room.

Too much room is no good.

I found the chest of drawers while shopping for a nightstand. I did not have to hire an agent to find one for me, although I would have preferred doing such. I do not like shopping or spending money. Of the two, shopping is more objectionable than spending money. I think I'd rather hand money out to strangers on the street than shop. There is always too much to choose from, too many options—size, style, color, dependability, whether or not it goes with the other furniture, the paint, the wallpaper, or a certain outfit or pair of shoes.

The chest of drawers is heavy, bulky. I have never called it an armoire. I don't know what the difference is between a chest of drawers, dresser and an armoire, or if there is a

difference. I should imagine an armoire would be more delicate, dainty. It certainly sounds like it would be, which would be onomatopoeic, if that is an actual word, but onomatopoeia might mean something else. I think armoires might also be taller with cabinets that open outwards instead of drawers. Nevertheless, the brown paint or finish, I'm never quite sure what to call that either, is faded and chipped in places. Stands about four feet tall and is probably three feet wide or so. Like the portable closet it is somewhat lopsided. If it were a table in a restaurant a busboy would have to slide some napkins under a leg to keep it even. The drawers themselves, all four of them, are sizable. I can store quite a bit into each drawer. I keep winter clothes, sweaters, sweatshirts, sweatpants and jeans in the bottom drawer. If I had a gun this is where I'd keep it. Guns should be kept hidden one would think, out of plain sight, underneath heavy winter clothing. This way if someone decides to shoot someone else there is ample time to reconsider—and/or for the would-be victim to flee. I have never had a gun, held a gun, fired a gun or had a gun pointed at me. I've seen the holstered guns of police officers, of course. I've walked by police officers on the street or in line at a delicatessen and have often wondered what would happen if someone should pull their gun right from their holster. It seems like it would be easy.

The third drawer contains T-shirts, shorts, swim trunks. Underwear, socks and handkerchiefs go in the second drawer along with old eyeglasses, wristwatches, bankbooks, cigar cutters and keepsakes. The top drawer I leave empty except for a folder of official documents. The last time I had to look through the folder was when I noticed the bankbook missing. This would be the bank where I had the account I used to buy the car, not the other bank where the checking account is held. There is no book for that bank. I forget why I was looking through the folder when I noticed the bankbook missing. I



have never looked through the folder without having a specific document to retrieve or reference. I may have been looking for my birth certificate, although I cannot recall why. Someone may have requested it.

I didn't have a car when I bought the chest of drawers, so I enlisted the help of an acquaintance who likewise did not own a car. We decided the best way to get the chest of drawers home would be to roll it, though this decision took some time. Neither of us was eager to roll a chest of drawers home through the streets. The deliberation never degenerated to argument as I rarely argue. I sometimes repeat myself without realizing I'm repeating myself until it is too late. Teardrops are often guilty of this, too. This is how Teardrops and I are almost kindred. No matter. We rented a hand truck from a local hardware store and rolled the hand truck from the hardware store to the furniture store. After paying for the chest of drawers we lifted it onto the hand truck and rolled it out of the store. We needed some help exiting through the twin front doors from one of the sales clerks. The sales clerk was short with small hands and feet but large breasts. She helped us through the twin front doors, her little hand guiding us along, her left breast resting on the top of the dresser. My acquaintance gestured with his eyes towards the breast resting on the top of the dresser, but I didn't acknowledge him. My acquaintance wasn't teardropped but he worked with Teardrops and this is the kind of thing they remark on all the time, breasts on dressers, etc. The chest of drawers was difficult to balance on the hand truck and difficult to maneuver around pedestrians on the street. The wheels seemed to wobble back and forth like shopping carts at supermarkets. Heat radiated off the pavement and burned our legs. Sweat was dripping down my forehead into my eyes.

We each kept one hand on the handle to steer and the other on the side of the chest of drawers.

*This is a nightmare.  
You have to keep your end straight.  
My end is straight.  
We're veering into the people.  
We look ridiculous out here.  
Can we not run anyone over please?  
The people can get out of the way.  
This thing needs a wheel alignment.  
The heat is radiating off the pavement.  
Let's go to the end of this block and then we'll rest.  
Under the canopy over there, in the shade.*

I left my acquaintance guarding the chest and ran into a delicatessen to buy bottles of water. I noticed two security cameras, one above the register and the other pointing towards the rest of the store. There might've been a blind spot in the middle of the aisle between the refrigerators and the magazine rack. I always looked for the blind spot. Two teardrop girls were having lunch with two skinny girls and they were all of them sitting in a booth on the other side of the refrigerators. The Teardrops were sitting across from the two skinny girls. The table served as a line of demarcation. The Teardrops were drinking diet colas through plastic straws and were dressed in loose fitting neutral colored business suits. The skinny girls were drinking diet colas through plastic straws and were also wearing loose fitting neutral colored business suits. The Teardrops were wearing similar shoes, utilitarian and beige, low heeled, toes safely out of sight. One of them was wearing a lot of jewelry and had had a French manicure within a day or so. Gold rings on two fingers on each hand, gold watch on left wrist and gold bracelet on the right wrist. The other had manicured hands as well, fingernails painted dark red. I didn't have time to study the skinny ones. There is nothing to read into this other than to say the Teardrops were seated closest to me. Although, it was a good thing my acquaintance was

waiting for me outside. I didn't want to hear what he might say. I made my way to the register and bought two bottles of water and a pack of chewing gum.

*What the hell happened in there?*

*Entropy and atrophy.*

*I lost twelve pounds waiting for you.*

*There was a blind spot in the middle of the aisle.*

*What do you need an armoire for anyway?*

*It's not an armoire, it's a dresser. Armoires are taller with cabinets that open outwards, instead of drawers. And my place is empty except for a bed and some crates. There is too much room.*

*Too much room is no good.*

*Hence, a dresser.*

*Some woman told you you should have an armoire.*

All along the sidewalks people were going about their day. Many were Teardrops. Most were dressed in summer wear, shorts, skirts, short-sleeved shirts, sandals. All words indicating summer wear start with an S apparently. Others were in suits, probably on their way to lunch or coming back from lunch, heading back to their offices furnished with desks and telephones. Everyone looked like they were waiting to die. At one point while catching our breath under a shade tree we saw a mouse fall from some scaffolding then scamper off behind a dumpster scaring an old man drinking a soda. Neither of us was clever enough to say anything about the mouse.

We were the only two people rolling heavy furniture through the streets. Apparently people rolling furniture through the streets is a regular occurrence in these parts. Otherwise no one ever notices anything regardless what unusual practices are taking place all around. Always caught up in their own dramas, anxious to get wherever it is they are going. Back to the office, their railroad apartments, their native lands free of drought, famine, pestilence, oppression, etc. One or the both of us had to say, Excuse me, at least a dozen times. Every two blocks or so

we would have to maneuver around a street vendor peddling peanuts, pretzels, hot dogs, ice cream, sunglasses, handbags, jewelry, handguns, etc.

We managed to roll the chest of drawers all the way to my apartment without much friction between my acquaintance and I. The operation took two hours. At one point my acquaintance began cursing me using the vilest expressions imaginable, which was part of his heritage. I did not respond to the cursing, as I was cursing myself, as well. I figured it was best to say nothing at all. My acquaintance was conceived, incubated and born without incident. Reared in traditional dysfunctional fashion by two maladjusted parents, having all the requisite trials, tribulations and triumphs of a normal male human during the back end of the twentieth century. Recently he had contracted Irritable Bowel Syndrome. At least that's what he said. He never consulted a doctor and didn't plan to. In his part of the world, the part of the world he grew up in, they often curse each other and shit blood. It is a birthright. Otherwise he was concerned with cable television and his wife. I couldn't keep it straight.

*I called them to rush over the next day but they said everyone lost cable and I would have to wait. They were going grid by grid and had to fix the outside line and then adjust the box on the TV. Now, according to my wife I was to vacuum and straighten up before the cable man got there. What do I care what the cable man sees? Whenever we get company my wife is always running around cleaning and fixing everything just so. I don't even go through the effort of arguing with her anymore. It's easier to go through the motions. When the telephone rings and I know it's her I turn on the vacuum. It works.*

*I'm sure it does.*

*You bet it does. So, the cable guy is sprawled out on the floor tinkering with the box. I'm watching him because there's nothing else to do. Plus it's always a good idea to keep an eye on these chaps. It's not like years ago.*

*It isn't.*

*I never know what to say to these people. The cable man, the oil man, plumbers. I let them work in peace and stay out of it. I like to see how they handle the silence. I've found a lot of them will talk about the weather. But I like the ones that shut up and do the job. It's like we have an understanding, the weather is the weather whether we talk about it or not.*

*You should set that to music.*

*I tell my wife I have an upset stomach, not that I have some kind of syndrome. If I did she would make an appointment for me.*

*I understand.*

*At any rate, Where was I?*

*I don't remember.*

*Oh, then the phone rings and it's my wife. I tell her the cable guy is here, which means I don't want to say anything out loud. She asks me a question or two, I don't remember what and I say, Sure, Great, That's fine. Now from my end of the conversation the cable man couldn't possibly know with whom I was talking or what it was about. Gets him thinking.*

The story had nothing to do with me and the chest of drawers hasn't moved from where we placed it that day.

I was told the bathroom had been re-done within months of my signing the lease. The tile was new, as was the toilet bowl, sink, fixtures and medicine cabinet. It did not look like the room had been painted, though. The color was a tepid yellow and you could see ancient cracks and lines on the walls. There were floral designs on some of the tiles, perhaps lilacs or irises. I'm not sure which is which, or if either is purple. When lilacs last in the bathroom bloomed. I've never liked the purple flowers on the walls but have never said anything about not liking them. The showerhead is on the wrong wall. Instead of the showerhead being parallel with the tub long ways, the way it is in every reasonable bathroom the world over, it juts out into the middle of the tub. In other words if there were no

shower curtain the water would spray directly onto the bathroom floor rather than the back of the tub. As a result the shower curtain hangs all over the person trying to shower. One cannot position one's body in that tub without the shower curtain clinging to one's skin. It is appalling.

I have had to apologize for the shower repeatedly.

Fixing it would mean reconstructing the bathroom. The plumbing would have to be ripped out, pipes re-routed, tile re-tiled, and so forth. It would take an investment in both time and money. I'm certain I could spare both the time and money as I seem to have a great deal of time on my hands and a fair amount of money as well. I'm not sure why this is. Still, I would have to call the landlady's son, the plumber. This is the son with the wife and family overseas. I don't know whether or not he put together this bathroom but it stands to reason he did which means his fixing it or attempting to fix it would probably be a disaster. And I'd rather not have anything to do with the landlady or her son. I would rather not have either of them in my apartment for any reason, snooping, sniffing, ripping out pipes, eyes fishing, telling me they don't know what to tell me.

I did try to buy a special showerhead once, one that you can install yourself. I succeeded in buying the showerhead although I have yet to install it and I am not likely to install it anytime soon. There was an essential part of the process I failed at regarding the showerhead and installation was it. Usually I don't even attempt something like installing a showerhead knowing full well the futility of such an endeavor.

I sometimes enlist help from others when it comes to such things. Otherwise, I propose the trading of favors. A man I worked with at a restaurant and I came to such an agreement once. Although I did not realize that is what I did at the time. I found this out later. So I actually didn't agree to any sort of quid pro quo agreement. I was manipulated into the

agreement, feeling obligated to reciprocate after the fact. When I did realize this, I thought of it as a retroactive Faustian bargain. Insofar as I did not like this particular man and under different circumstances would have had nothing to do with him. I did not sell my soul to him as a trade-off to become this or that. Still, I have since thought of him as Faust and have referred to him as Faust as well, even though our relationship and circumstances had absolutely nothing to do with Faust or any other related legend or myth wherein someone might bargain his soul.

I mentioned the bathroom toilet—that it runs. The sound of running water has always bothered me. It is probably the constancy of it. If you are the sort of person that finds wind chimes disturbing you are probably disturbed by the sound of running water. I made the mistake of mentioning this out loud in front of Faust.

*My toilet has been running all through the night every night for weeks.*

*Have you tried jiggling the handle?*

*I've jiggled. I've even lifted the lid and looked inside.*

*I can help you out if you want.*

*Could you?*

*Sure thing.*

*No. I think it will be fine. I don't want to put you out, it will probably fix itself on it's own.*

*Bullshit. I'll take a look at it.*

Faust was a cook and had been working at the restaurant for twenty-five years. I was a waiter at the same restaurant. I never felt qualified for the job and I was surprised when they hired me. I was always asked questions I did not have the answers to and always had to refer to someone else. Most of my colleagues didn't know anything, either. We would ask each other the questions that had been asked to us individually, staring at each other blankly. We'd guess at the answers, which seemed to work out most of the time. People would

always want to know certain measurements, if something was poisonous, etc. Faust was the one responsible for preparing the food but everyone avoided asking him questions. He would always know the answer but with it would come some profane remark. He was married to the owner's sister.

I could never stand to look at him. He had something on his left cheek, an age spot. Maybe it is called a liver spot. It may have even been a mole or perhaps a growth of some sort. I'm not sure if a mole qualifies as a growth. Melanoma may have been another possibility. At any rate there was something on his left cheek, an oval shaped brown discoloration. Part of his belly would hang out of his white open-collared shirt. He was balding, perpetually unshaven, save for an unruly grayish moustache, wrinkled, misshapen. He would harass the waitresses, fondling their breasts and buttocks.

I have trouble saying no to people. I am not sure what that means.

Faust invited himself over the next night. He was to arrive sometime after seven. I did not know what was expected of me as a host. I did not want this to turn into some kind of social occasion replete with refreshments and idle chatter. Although, I did feel obligated to offer him something. I cursed myself for feeling this sense of obligation as I went out and bought a six-pack of cheap domestic beer.

Between seven and eight Faust buzzed in. Almost everyone buzzes in although buzzing is unnecessary. The front door is always left unlocked except for the rare occasions when the landlady is not home. She is almost always home. One would think she was agoraphobic if one were inclined to think about her at all. Agoraphobes are known to wear house frocks, have dull senses of smell and linger in hallways eavesdropping on private conversations. Although they will rarely leave front doors unlocked. She might not be agoraphobic in the strictest clinical sense. She must think it safe then, since she is home, to



leave the front door unlocked at all times. I'm not sure what security measures she has to taken to ensure the safety of her tenants and the building. Perhaps she keeps a gun hidden in a chest of drawers under some heavy clothing, under the frocks.

I went through the charade of buzzing Faust in. Since my apartment is first on the first floor I went immediately to my door to let him in. He was wearing blue jeans and a camouflage fatigue top. It occurred to me I had never seen him in anything other than his white cook's uniform.

*Did you find the place okay?*

*I grew up in this neighborhood.*

*I didn't know that.*

*Got out when the moon crickets started infesting the place.*

*I know what you mean.*

*Fucking moon crickets.*

I offered him a beer and invited him to sit down in the living room. I figured it was impolite to show him directly to the bathroom like he was a hired hand.

*It's right through here, first door on the left.*

I resigned myself to conversing with him. I had no idea what the hell he was talking about vis a vis the moon crickets. I assumed he was a gardener, perhaps growing vegetables or flowers on the side of his house or else the backyard. There are several people in this neighborhood who keep a garden. Most of them are older and have nothing else to do. They grow things and wait to die. They sit on their porches overlooking their gardens. They are all of them outside watering, trimming, pruning, spraying, planting and whatever else people have to do to gardens. Faust could've been one of them wearing shorts and sandals with brown socks all knobby kneed hosing a tomato plant.

*This is a nice place.*

*Thanks.*

*How long you been living here?*

*Not long. Few months.*

*I met my wife right around the block from here.*

*I didn't know you were married.*

*Thirty-seven years now.*

*That's a long time.*

*You don't know the half.*

I didn't know the half, didn't want to know any fractions at all. I didn't know what to do with myself. I could live with a running toilet bowl.

Faust guzzled down the first beer. I wasn't drinking. I even took to standing up, leaning against a wall and folding my arms. One does not have to resort to speaking aloud, one does not have to endure the sound of one's own voice. I have been told I have an excellent voice, deep and soothing but I cannot attest to this one way or the other. My voice is at its best when I have a cold, dropping a full octave or two.

I had all the lights turned on, but not the television or radio. Other than Faust talking and the faint sound of the toilet running it was quiet. I thought maybe he would be uncomfortable drinking by himself in another man's house, lights blaring in his face with no background noise to provide sonic wallpaper, his host leaning against the doorway with arms folded.

Faust didn't mind.

He was telling some complicated story or another, or else he was telling two stories at once. Going back and forth between the two it was difficult to follow. Otherwise, I wasn't listening carefully enough or I've subsequently mixed them up. Regardless. There was something about a Greek family being asked to vacate a two-bedroom apartment they had called home for eleven years. Apparently, the landlord was a patient and reasonable man, though Faust did not give any examples of this. I'm not sure how this was relevant to the story, other than to say the landlord was not a villain. This family had grown

exponentially over the eleven years, occasionally to alarming figures. At any rate, when the family was moving out, the matriarch, a round Teardrop in her sixties, laid herself down on the living room carpet as a demonstration of civil disobedience. Her husband, in an effort to keep the theatrics to a minimum and take as much of the frayed coffee-colored rug with them, cut the carpet around his wife with a razor blade, like a chalk outline traced round a murder victim. I think that's how that story ended. The other story concerned a family, too. I'm not sure if it was the same one. Here the family decided that a baby's christening gown would be made from the grandmother's wedding dress. (There was no mention of a baby or a grandmother in the first story, I don't think.) The dress hung in some Aunt's foyer closet and she would be the one to tailor it. For the last twelve years of the grandmother's life this Aunt was the only relative who kept up with her. The grandmother's estrangement had no definitive origin, or if it did, it was something no one in the family had ever discussed. While the family could not be described as close, the grandmother's estrangement was both unique and troubling. The christening was scheduled to take place in a month in the same church where the grandmother was married. (The irony, of which, Faust did not draw attention to.) The Aunt said the alterations would take two days to finish. There was speculation the dress was in tatters, though the Aunt assured everyone in the family that the dress was in fine condition and would make a splendid christening gown for the baby. I had no idea who these people were or how Faust knew them. I figured this had to be the same family and that Faust was the patient and reasonable landlord, which made no sense, either. I didn't know what to think and in truth, didn't think too long about it.

This is around the time I started to think of the encounter as a social experiment. Sociological, anthropological, geriatricological, any number of academic disciplines could apply to this situation.

This is often the best stance to adopt, regarding almost everything. Having no stake at all in whatever may or may not transpire; whatever the end results might or might not be. This is what I try to do. Almost nothing has anything to do with me.

I call it The Approach.

I may or may not have said this before.

I don't actually call it The Approach, though. I don't call it anything. I've never named or titled this approach or whatever one might care to call it. There is a name for everything, except for the process of *finding* an apartment.

The naming of things must stop.

I was thinking of questions to ask. See how much he would reveal about himself, his wife, that family, his garden, the moon crickets. It was better that I did not like him. I could treat him as a subject, clinical.

The trouble was I couldn't think of anything and when I finally did think of a question or two I lost all enthusiasm for the experiment. All I could do was watch him drink beer and listen to the toilet bowl running. In the end I couldn't discern whether it was my failure as conductor of the experiment or Faust's failure as the subject or a combination of the two.

I reverted to my old strategy. Arms folded, leaning against the doorway standing up, nothing at all to say.

Faust asked if he could ask me a favor. I said he could but with my arms folded and leaning against the doorway, which was supposed to indicate otherwise.

*I'd like to tell the wife that I come here from time to time.*

*Why?*

*Sometimes a man needs some time alone and doesn't want to hear all kinds of shit about it.*

*So, What do I have to do?*

*Nothing. If you see her at the restaurant and she asks just go with it.*

*I can do that.*

The clock on the wall said it was 8:46, which means it was probably closer to nine. The clock has a tendency to lose time, lagging behind the actual rotation of the earth on its axis. I try to stay ahead of the lag. I always reset the clock according to either the television or radio time, which always seems to be the most accurate. I have three wristwatches, which I sometimes keep in the top dresser drawer. All three watches seem to keep good time. I will reset each watch for daylight savings time each year regardless if I have worn the watch recently or not. I remember someone advising me to always wind a watch clockwise when winding a watch or clock. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. It was nighttime. The moon looked like it had been the victim of a practical joke. I was someplace unfamiliar, someone's home, or prison. I spent a night or two in jail, what they used to call the drunk tank, but I like to call it prison. Sometimes I call it Denmark but I'm not sure why. I think I read somewhere that Denmark was a prison or was the name of a prison like Alcatraz. I am often uncomfortable when I haven't been somewhere before and I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I was picked up late one night by two officers. I'd had a few drinks. Time was I'd take a drink after work. There was nothing else to do I remember. It was a way of killing time, injuring eternity. I'd do this by going to the track, too. I'd always lose money when I went to the track but that never stopped me from going. I would play exactas and trifectas but had no real strategy for doing so. I'd study the program but would play whatever horses the other bettors played. I'd listen to their conversations at the window or in the urinals. It was my way of keeping up with the community. The horses never won but I didn't mind. I never blamed anyone for my losing money either. I think I was coming back from the track the night they

sent me to prison. I was not misbehaving or causing a disturbance, that much is certain. I'd found myself on a train platform with a crowd of Teardrops after a long night at the track. I waited for the crowd to disperse and then positioned myself next to the billboards you find on train platforms. Instead of urinating then, (I'd been holding it in for the hour long train ride) I spotted a public telephone and made my way over to it. I realized I hadn't called my neighbor in weeks. I was encouraged to use the phone more often, but this is when I was having trouble with the telephone. It took three or four attempts to dial the number. The phone rang six times before anything happened. I'd begun to recite the usual amenities when I realized that her answering machine had picked up. Flustered, I started rambling and said something I shouldn't have. I think it concerned how we played with each other, our practices, habits, etc., something disparaging. I may have called her names, too. Apparently, I hung up the phone with too much force, otherwise this particular public telephone was especially fragile. Regardless, it seemed wrong that the phone should tumble over onto the platform, ending up like a light pole leaning over at an impossible angle after having been crashed into. This is when two plainclothesmen approached me. I hadn't noticed them before and I remember congratulating one of them for blending in as well as they did. I was asked by one if I had a record, to keep my hands where he could see them. I was made to feel like a criminal. After some back and forth we struck a deal wherein I had to spend the night in prison. It was there I remember an inmate saying one should always wind a clock or watch clockwise when resetting so as not to addle the works. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of winding clockwise mentioned no other benefits. I do this when winding all of my watches and clocks, including the clock hanging on the wall in the living room. Unfortunately I haven't

been able to calculate the rate at which this clock loses time. I have tried several methods to determine this, none succeeding. For some time I was under the presumption the clock lost approximately five seconds every two minutes. Subsequent measurements did not bear this out, however. Apparently the clock loses time randomly. In fact, I was resetting the clock before Faust rang the buzzer. I wanted to know exactly how long I was to spend with Faust every step of the way.

This was taking too long regardless what the clock on the wall said.

Faust was on his third beer, halfway through my short supply. I served him the first two myself but by the third he had felt comfortable enough to fetch the beer from the refrigerator himself. He was making himself at home. I could hear the toilet running from inside the bathroom. I said something.

*You hear that?*

*Hear what?*

*The toilet running.*

*I don't hear anything.*

*It drives me crazy. It's worse at night.*

*I can't hear anything.*

*Are you sure?*

*You should try to block it out. Ignore it.*

*I'm usually no good at that kind of thing.*

*Takes practice.*

Two despicables in conversation. I wasn't sure what to do. I might've scared him off if I said the wrong thing. I couldn't tell if his drinking worked in my favor, maybe something I could take advantage of. For a second I wished I had more beer but then I realized I was wrong. The beer was a hindrance to something, an excuse to lounge around and talk about baseball or whatever.

*Did you see that game last night?*

*No. I missed it.*

*Some game. What a comeback.*

*I was in the bathroom all night.*

*I know how that goes.*

The conversation went like this for the better part of the night. He didn't mention the favor again and I tried not to think about it. Whatever it was he was doing or had in mind had nothing to do with me. I'd try to steer the talk towards the bathroom from time to time. Faust never had to go to the bathroom himself. There was probably something wrong with him, his bladder or kidneys or prostate. He looked jaundiced, although I believe in most cases jaundice occurs as a result of liver difficulties. Nevertheless, he probably had to take three pills a day just to piss once every other week. I'd bet he could only manage a pathetic trickle even then. Or maybe he was hooked up to a catheter and a plastic bag. I don't think he was holding it in. I cannot speak as to how it is for the incontinent. I should think it similar in most respects.

After Faust ran through the beer he produced a flask from his back pocket and took a swig. Thus spake Faust:

Faust: Something tedious about a bush league left-fielder with hands of stone.

Host: They never should've gotten rid of what's his name.

Faust: Something tedious about So and So's headlight nipples.

Host: I like when you sent her into the freezer last week.

Faust: Something tedious about Such and Such's blow job lips.

Host: Her husband is a plumber. He was the one who fixed the women's toilet in the restaurant.

Faust: Something tedious about laying pipe with So and So and Such and Such at the same time.

Etc.

Finally I got hungry and decided I had to eat something. I looked through the takeout menus I keep on top of the refrigerator. Choosing something off a takeout menu can cause



anxiety, paralysis even, which, in turn, has led to long periods of fasting. I am often sick of the same foods I eat over and over again. The result of which has led to a fluctuating waist size over the years. I have had to dispose of many fine pairs of trousers including my Sunday best. This night I was not wearing my Sunday best but rather a comfortable pair of loose fitting trousers. We settled on a Chinese restaurant with greased egg rolls and expedient service. Faust ordered a chicken dish, D-49, which is my favorite. I ordered the same thing but felt ridiculous doing so. I do not like to order what the preceding orderer has ordered, whether it is a drink, meal or what have you. I was surprised when he offered to pay. At first I refused but then thought better of it.

Ralph the Chinese delivery boy rang the buzzer and I went through the charade of buzzing him in. Most of Ralph's countrymen and countrywomen stayed behind. Ralph doesn't seem to speak English and doesn't know what to do with his eyes during the transaction. His eyes will fish all over the hallway or he will keep his head down, like he had something interesting to look at taped to his shoes. Faust gave me a twenty-dollar bill, which I handed to Ralph. We ate.

Then we finished eating.

Then he drained the flask dry.

Then he offered to run to the corner to pick up more beer.

Then the phone rang but I didn't answer. I sometimes will let it ring until the answering machine picks up. I'm not sure what it is about the phone. I have hung up the phone after having dialed partial numbers more times than I can count. Answering the phone has rarely been a problem, for whatever reason, when it rings, but sometimes I will let it ring anyway. When it does not ring is never a problem. When Faust was out I checked for the blinking red light. There was no message. Faust buzzed around a half-hour later and I went through the charade of buzzing him back into the building. We sat on

opposite ends of the couch and drank beer. He was sweating and kept mopping his brow with a handkerchief. The air conditioner was on, but it didn't work very well. There was a baseball game on television. Faust provided the color commentary and went to the refrigerator between each inning to fetch the beer. Somewhere around the seventh he tripped over his shoes and fell to the floor. I was in the bathroom when it happened.

Faust on ground B looking for help. Not B looking for help. B back on couch drinking beer and watching baseball and fumbling with inhalers. Faust on ground grounded. Two despicables in conversation concerning toilets and left-fielders. Beer and shoes helping Faust to ground. Faust on ground maybe bleeding. Maybe gasping for breath. Faust on ground B looking at Faust on ground. Standing over Faust. Then beer and baseball and bedtime.

Faust spent the night, I think. I'd had too much to drink myself. I can recall helping him onto the sofa. He was nearly unconscious. I didn't have extra blankets or pillows but it didn't matter apparently. The sight of him sleeping on my sofa was unsettling. I think I may've gotten sick. The beer probably had something to do with it, too. I don't like beer and can never justify drinking it after I've drunk it. I watched him sleep, monitored his breathing, which was erratic. He slept on his right side so that the growth mole tumor was pointing up. When I woke in the morning he was gone.

The toilet did not get fixed by Faust, the landlady's son or by anyone else. It stopped running on its own maybe a week or two later.

Faust has not been in my house since. But I told his wife he came over every Thursday night to watch baseball, drink beer and eat Chinese food.

The living room has in it a sofa, ceiling fan, two long narrow windows, air conditioner, radiator, coffee table

serving as a television/stereo stand, television, stereo, desk, desk chair, end table, two floor lamps, kitchen table and two chairs for the kitchen table. Ordinarily kitchen tables belong in kitchens but the kitchen in this apartment cannot accommodate a table of any size. The table I have, which I call my kitchen table regardless, is small—approximately 24” by 36”. It is tucked away in the immediate left corner of the room. I can go long stretches without eating, without sitting at the table at all. I’m not sure what that says about my metabolism let alone my habits. I get bored with food, eating the same foods over and again. Other times the change of seasons causes peculiar metabolic changes in me. When one season bleeds into the next I can lose appetite. Other times I am insatiable. There is probably something wrong with me.

The kitchen table I put together myself. I bought it new at a furniture store although I forget which. I did not want a second hand kitchen table. I was offered one by a co-worker, a waitress at the restaurant who thought Faust was a cretin. She had recently bought a new kitchen set and thought of me. I declined the offer, which she made during a conversation several of us were having. I don’t think Faust was around at the time. He was probably sweating into someone’s food or molesting one of the cashiers or else at home hiding from creditors. The waitstaff was on the lookout for a repairman named Danny who was supposed to fix the compressor. So, before the dinner rush this Danny comes in, looks around, and walks out. One of us called Faust because he knew Danny. None of us knew who this Danny was or what he looked like. I’m not sure why it fell to us to make sure this got done. I didn’t even know we had a compressor, let alone that it was broken. At any rate, this Danny came in to work on the compressor but walked out without a word, without so much as even looking at the compressor. Faust supposedly was a friend of Danny's, which is how they got his name in the first

place. We only knew him as the name *Danny*, as the guy who'd come in and fix the compressor. He was going to come in, fix the compressor, which would take an hour or so. Somehow this was our responsibility. Instead this guy Danny that none of us but Faust knew comes in, looks around, and walks out without a word. How we knew that Danny was Danny is because Faust said Danny had a crew cut, goatee and an earring and no one ever looked like that at the restaurant. Our patrons were usually Teardrops wearing Teardrop clothing and accouterments. So now we had to keep trying to reach Faust. Meanwhile the compressor was broken and it was on us to make sure it got repaired. We didn't know about Danny. We thought maybe he would come back and this time fix the compressor. But before that could happen someone had collapsed in the smoking section. There was nothing anyone could do. He was dead by the time he hit the floor. Afterwards, I was hoping someone could recommend a store or a brand name for my kitchen table, but mostly all anyone cared to talk about was the dead man. I'm sure I was thinking of something else because I can't remember what anyone said about the dead man. There's no telling what the interior monologue concerned, either. When my co-worker finally made the offer I smiled, thanked her, and said I'd think about it. Something about the gesture seemed inappropriate. I didn't have to think about it. I did not want a second hand kitchen table.

The kitchen table is the only thing I have ever assembled correctly, though it took some doing. The drawings illustrating the various pieces of the puzzle were indecipherable and the directions did not seem to follow a discernible pattern. Different size screws were difficult to distinguish from each other and seemed not to match up with the indecipherable illustrations.

The table was upside down and laid out in the middle of the

living room. I successfully fastened three of the legs into three corners of the table. The fourth wasn't working. The directions called for a cylindrical metal apparatus to be placed within a hollowed out portion of the leg. You slid this apparatus into the slot so that the hole in it is facing outwards through a hole in the leg itself. I don't know what this cylindrical metal apparatus is called. Certainly it has a name. At any rate, this thing was not fitting into its slot properly like the other three had. When it fits into its slot properly you can screw in the screw, securing the leg to the table. After realizing the screw was not fitting into the apparatus properly I would start over, turning the defective table leg upside down, allowing the apparatus to slide out. Then I would slide the apparatus back in, this time finagling it around, trying to get it to line up with the hole in the leg. Then I would try to screw in the screw again. This would not work, either. Then I would have to turn the defective leg upside down, allowing the apparatus to slide out again. Then I would slide the apparatus back in, this time maneuvering it around, trying to get it to line up with the hole in the table. Then I would try to screw in the screw again. This went on for hours. Each time I would finagle a little harder, turn the screw in at different angles, curse the screw and the defective table leg, pray to the screw gods, hammer the screw in, etc. Nothing worked. I developed blisters on my thumb and forefinger from all the screwing. I searched my apartment for the receipt, which I had remembered to keep, suspecting something like this was going to happen. I eventually found the receipt in one of the desk drawers after far too much looking elsewhere. I had no memory of having put the receipt in the desk and still can't imagine why I would do such a thing. I called the store.

By this time I was sweating from having to play rounds of hopscotch around the table in the middle of the floor looking for the receipt with small holes in my thumb and forefinger.

*Hello. I bought a table there yesterday and one of the legs is defective.  
What kind of table is it?  
Hold on. It's a Somethingorother.  
Yeah, sometimes we have trouble with those. The legs.  
You don't say.  
You can't get it all screwed in together properly, right?  
That's right. I don't want to have to disassemble the whole thing. I  
have three of the legs attached to it now.  
Just bring in the defective leg and we'll replace it.  
That'll do. Thanks.*

I brought in the leg the next day. I had to wait in a line of dissatisfied customers returning defective merchandise, about every other one a Teardrop. They have a section of the store for this sort of problem. When my number was called I had one of them search for a new leg and suggested they slide the cylindrical metal apparatus into the hollowed out portion of the leg and do the screwing themselves. After three different legs and several attempts of sliding and screwing it finally worked. I went home and fastened the leg to the table. Four sound legs, all in working order, all properly fastened to the table. I turned the table over and set it down in the immediate left corner of the living room where it has been ever since.

One feels more like a human being when one has a kitchen table to eat off of.

My neighbor grilled a tuna steak and brought it over stewing in the pots, along with the china, tablecloth, centerpiece and orchids. The transporting of these items took several trips back and forth. I helped. I did not help with the cooking, though. My kitchen was not conducive to cooking. There was a stove directly opposite the kitchen counter, sink and cabinets, but only about two feet between the stove and counter. No more than one person could occupy this space at the same time. The stove itself was defective. The oven and two of the four gas

burners did not work. I never mentioned this to the landlady, who, I'm sure, was aware of the problem. The stove seemed to have been defective long before I became the tenant. The white lettered writing indicating High, Low and Lite on each of the burners was so faded as to be barely discernible. I never used the oven and had only opened the oven door once to make sure there was nothing in there. Fortunately my neighbor liked to cook on her own. She'd watch cooking shows on television, buy cookbooks, trade recipes, all of it. She was a fine cook. I was tired of the foods I ate, which is why it was always a treat whenever my neighbor prepared a meal for the two of us. My neighbor, though, did not eat with much appetite. Even as a child she would eat very little. Apparently her brother was always finishing whatever she couldn't, scraping the food from her dish to his. My neighbor was thin but did not look unhealthy. At certain angles and in certain light she looked gaunt, but lovely. I sat across from her at the table. I stayed away from the tuna steak as I've never liked fish. The lamb chops, though, were superb—as were all the side dishes. Biscuits, corn, mashed potatoes, homemade apple sauce, etc. My neighbor cleaned her plate so there was nothing for me to finish. The two of us had what was called polite dinner conversation.

*What did you do today?*

*I had the car repaired.*

*What was wrong with it?*

*There were holes in the axle.*

*That can't be good.*

*It's one less thing.*

*I talked to a travel agent today.*

*Anything good?*

*I was thinking someplace exotic, a white sandy beach, maybe the orient or the Caribbean.*

*That sounds nice.*

We talked like this until we finished eating. I thought it went well. I was apprehensive about the whole thing, the new table, the food, the dinner conversation. There was also the faint sound of the toilet running from the bathroom and a commotion coming from the apartment directly above mine. There was someone in that apartment dedicated to vacuuming although the commotion didn't have anything to do with that. This person vacuumed every morning around 10:00. I'm certain it was some kind of throw rug, doubtful they had wall-to-wall carpeting. A family lived there and the mother stayed home every day and had nothing else to do. The commotion usually subsided shortly after I'd knock on the ceiling with the baseball bat I kept in the hallway. That night there seemed to be a struggle between two or more people. There were crashing sounds, staggered heavy footsteps, tumbling noises, etc. I did knock with the baseball bat during dinner. This interrupted the polite dinner conversation.

*I'm sorry about this.*

*What do you suppose is going on up there?*

*I don't know. If you will excuse me for a second ...*

*(Pause)*

*What is that?*

*This is a baseball bat.*

I hadn't seen my neighbor in a long time. I tried calling her regularly, twice a week, although I did mix up the days. Some weeks I called on a Monday and Friday, other weeks Wednesdays and Sundays. Anything fewer than three full days between calls and the conversation suffered. The amenities were never the problem. I was always better with the *Hello*s and *How are you*s than the rest of it. After that she'd ask what I'd been doing and the answer was always, *Nothing*. I never had anything to do and was never clever enough to make something up. I'd also say nothing because my neighbor liked hearing it, I think.



*The Hellos.*

*The How are yous?*

*So, what are you doing?*

*Nothing much.*

*That's good.*

I never considered asking her what was good about it, nor did I ask her what she might be doing. My neighbor would volunteer the information regardless.

*My grandmother is in hospital. She's having an operation; they want to see if she has lung cancer. Did I tell you that?*

*Yes.*

*I don't know what's going to happen.*

*I'm sure.*

*I'm going to visit her after I get off the phone with you.*

*Well, I shouldn't keep you then.*

I always checked to see if she was home before calling regardless what day it was. I did not want to have to leave a message. Even still, I would prepare a two or three sentence message in case she did not answer. *Good evening neighbor, I apologize again for what I've said and done and mea culpa and all that. I didn't mean any of it. I'd been drinking. I was out all night. I realize that is no excuse. But is what I've done inexcusable? The question is unfair, I suppose. It depends on how you look at it. I do hope you are well. I've been better, myself, you should know. It is taking me some time to adjust to these surroundings. It always takes me a while to get acclimated. I know I haven't called in weeks. Perhaps it's months now. I've been swamped. You know how things go this time of year. You're upset with me and you have every right. I'm not good at this. I suppose you're not surprised. You've said as much before. Listen. Have you had any trouble with moon crickets? Faust says they're infesting the place. I haven't seen any myself. But I figured you should know, in case. Faust has me bearing false witness for him. I know you wouldn't approve. You'd call it a sin, plain and simple. I can't recall if this is a mortal sin or a venial one. You would know*

*that better than I, I'm sure. I've always liked the St. Jude pendant you wear around your neck. Is that the one your mother gave you? I suppose you can characterize my failing to call a sin of omission and the bearing false witness a sin of commission. I am an equal opportunity sinner. Listen. I'm sorry about this, about everything. I will be home anytime. I have no plans. It's me. Your neighbor. You can call whenever you please. I do hope you are well. Please let's talk soon and so on. The one time I didn't prepare a message I said something I later regretted. She almost always parked her car on the street directly outside my living room window. Also, I could see into her bedroom from my kitchen window. We'd arrange times for her to undress so I could watch and masturbate. Sometimes she'd masturbate herself, but ordinarily she'd just undress and look over to my window to watch me masturbate. This is what we'd do. After dinner we walked to the park. Her gait was that of an athlete, standing perfectly erect, head up, determined. I liked to watch her walk. I liked almost everything about her. She had painted fingernails, spoke in complete sentences. Almost always grammatically correct although her vocabulary was peculiar. She referred to French fries as chips. We walked around the neighborhood first, passing the front lawns comprised of thousands of spray painted pebbles and the many fenced in gardens. We must've stopped in a store or two. It wouldn't have been like us to walk to the park without stopping. If there was a bench along the way then we probably stopped and sat on the bench. My neighbor did not like benches. She'd sit but with it would come some profane remark. This was part of her heritage. In the part of the world she grew up in they like to walk without interruption and curse those who prefer sitting on benches. We probably did more sitting on a bench than actually walking during our walk if there was a well-constructed bench along the path we were walking which I'm sure there was. This is probably not true, either. I sometimes*

forget the sequence of things or else confuse the events themselves. We would've done more walking than sitting on a bench due to my neighbor's insistence. At the park there were joggers with long legs and students reading books. I made it a point not to look at any of them so as not to upset my neighbor. She would get upset if I looked at someone other than her. I can't remember if we were sitting down when a Teardrop got out of a truck to use the public restroom. She walked the way Teardrops walk, particularly when they are on the way to use a restroom in a public park. I don't know where she was in the park before she had to go to the restroom or if she was in the park at all.

I'm wrong.

My neighbor and I had *driven* to the park. I know this because I can remember waiting for the Teardrop to walk back to her truck and then spotting my neighbor's name written on the inside of the windshield. The light was such to make this possible. It had to be dark out with the windshield back lit from a particular angle. My neighbor had written her name on the windshield one night with her pretty pedicured toe. I'd almost forgotten this. We were sitting in the car and she was drawing on the windshield with her toe while I recited a poem. I kept the signature on the windshield for months afterwards, like a tattoo. The signature was perfectly scripted, with fancy loops and lines, like calligraphy; and was only four inches from the crack, with its berserk lines going all this way and that. Afterwards she let me put her toes in my mouth. This is what we did. I massaged her feet and played with her toes and this put her to sleep. She was beautiful when she slept. I could watch her sleep for hours. I've had my own troubles sleeping now and then, but not always. For a long time I would go to bed early. Sometimes, the candle barely out, my eyes closed so quickly that I did not have time to tell myself: *I'm falling asleep*. I can sleep for ten hours when I'm of a mind to, but only in my

own bed. If I'm somewhere else I can't sleep at all. I don't know why that is, either. I have been very comfortable in certain other beds while not being able to fall asleep. Call it outsomnia. I don't recall what she said about the poem or her signature on the windshield. Doubtless it was disparaging. This is what I'd recited:

Model Boats  
Sail  
On Man-Made Lakes  
In  
Public Parks

It was the only poem I'd ever written. I scribbled it into the notebook kept on the bedside table, opposite the erection ledger. I'd been to the park every day that summer and made it a point to sit on each bench. There was one every ten feet or so around the lake, which was more of a pond than a lake. I'd get to the park in mid-afternoon, when it was most crowded. I'd bring something to read, either a newspaper or one of the novels my neighbor had recommended. Most times I wouldn't read anything, though. I'd set the paper or book next to me on the bench and watch old people feeding ducks and geese; the joggers and skaters; Teardrops with their overweight children; model boats trawling the pond, dodging birds and other boats. Most of the joggers and skaters circumnavigated the park counterclockwise. There was no rule prohibiting them from going clockwise, I don't think, but few did so. I'd make bets with myself as to which jogger or skater would complete a revolution faster. I never brought a stopwatch to see how fast they were going. Joggers don't like to be timed by strangers on benches and I didn't want any trouble. I wouldn't talk to anyone and I wouldn't sit on a bench that was occupied. There is dignity in keeping to one's self. Only once or twice did someone say something to me. A man with a limp, wearing an

ill-fitted three piece suit sat on my bench on a Thursday. He was probably in his forties and looked like he'd had this suit for years and only dusted it off for funerals, weddings and court appearances. I don't know why he was wearing his only suit that day and didn't ask, either. He looked like an Andrew. Maybe his mother called him Andy, but she would've been the only one. There were empty benches on the other side of the pond so I knew he had something on his mind. I waited for him to speak.

*Can I talk to you?*

*I don't know.*

He asked me if I was married and I said no. He went on.

*It took a long time for Katherine and I to get together. She was involved, for far too long, with this guy, a banker or something. She would tell me she owed him a chance, when he'd had plenty of chances. He would beg her to tell him she loved him. It was pathetic. I saw it for what it was. One emotional cripple clinging to another, the oldest story in the book.*

*The world is crippled by cripples.*

*And bankers, my friend.*

*They also serve who only stand and wait.*

*At any rate, we finally did get together, Katherine and me. But Katherine doesn't want to get married, have children, live like that. I tell her we can run down to Istanbul, live like royalty, have two sons, Entropy and Atrophy. Katherine says Greek names in Turkey would never fly.*

*She sounds great.*

*She is, don't get me wrong. But we've been together a while now and ... Can I talk to you?*

*I'm not sure.*

*Thing is, we haven't been going through the motions lately. Or else the motions have somehow changed.*

*What motions?*

*Motions. Katherine had a cancer scare and things are different. She*

*found a lump and had to go for all the tests.*

*That's terrible.*

*Turns out it's something they say to keep an eye on, but nothing to worry too much about.*

*That's good news.*

*They didn't say who shouldn't worry. But lately every day seems like something we haven't done before.*

*I'm sorry to hear that.*

He continued but I'd lost interest in the story by then. There was a good race between two blonde joggers and my money was on the one with the ponytail. For most of the contest it seemed as if Ponytail was toying with the other one. She'd slow down every so often to let the other catch up. I was confident when they came around the final turn. Ponytail was ahead by two lengths and on the rail. She looked to be in fine shape. Her ears were pricked up, stride consistent and steady. Down the stretch is where Ponytail ran into trouble. She got spooked by a low flying bird, veered to her right and changed leads. By the time she recovered it was too late. I think Ponytail wasn't much of a closer anyway. She wasn't responding to the whip after she straightened out. When she lost by a nose I excused myself, leaving Andrew on the bench alone. I didn't know what to make of him but I do remember making an effort to listen. He seemed surprised when I left, but not upset with me. I wished him well and told him to hang in there. He said it was good to talk to me and I thanked him for the talking to. I didn't see him again the rest of the summer, which didn't surprise me. He looked out of place, lost. He looked like he'd come to the park to make a decision about the rest of his life. I think I regretted not asking him about the suit or his limp. In some ways he reminded me of my brother-in-law, but I don't think it was my brother-in-law. My brother-in-law wouldn't be in the park that time of day. I never took my neighbor to the park and she never asked to

come along with me, either. I can't say the poem was for her, but I was anxious to recite it.

After our drive we returned to my apartment. The table was still set though most of the food had been wrapped and put into the refrigerator. We had wrapped the food before our trip to the park. Ordinarily, I would've thrown everything out but my neighbor was against that sort of waste. I've never been able to eat leftovers, but I went through the motions anyway, assuring my neighbor that I'd have lunch for tomorrow. My neighbor brewed tea and we sat at the table with the kettle set near the centerpiece. My neighbor was thin although she did have shapely hips and buttocks and a round belly. Her breasts were small and looked like they should've belonged to someone else. She'd make light of them from time to time. I never knew how to respond to that. There is no way, really, all one could do is change the subject. The post dinner conversation was riddled with awkward silences. Typically I would say something that would lead my neighbor to make certain deductions about my character, what it was I wanted; ambitions, attitudes, etc. In this case I made the mistake of mentioning the vantage point from my apartment to hers. I'd forgotten that she didn't like to acknowledge our arrangements and practices out loud. She feigned an indignation I hadn't seen before. I assured her that I'd never seen anything lurid. I added that I only looked into her apartment to see if she was home before calling. I may have said something regarding the sound of my voice on answering machines to further illustrate whatever point I was trying to make. After one awkward silence I think I asked my neighbor if the thought of being watched was appealing to her. She directed the question back at me. I answered yes. I was then admonished for being a pervert. This was also part of her heritage. Where she is from the women admonish the men for being perverts. At this point I changed the subject to Chinese

food probably. This would've been met by either silence or derision, I've forgotten the particulars. After such there was a cooling off period, followed by half-hearted acts of contrition. First she would be in the bathroom doing I don't know what. She'd be in there a long time. I'd listen for the sound of running water, cabinets opening and closing, sobbing. I never heard a thing. Then she'd come into the room barefoot and sit on the couch. She wouldn't look at me. If I were on the couch she'd stretch her legs toward me, her feet coming to rest in my lap. I'd grab onto a foot, usually the left one. The left one was always my favorite. It seemed cleaner and more expertly constructed than the right; each toe in proportion with the next, each nail the proper length. The right one would invariably have a blister or callous somewhere. This might've had something to do with evolution or her peculiar gait. She seemed to drag the right foot when walking, like someone with cerebral palsy. Maybe she had a club foot. I don't know what a club foot is but I think it has something to do with the direction the foot is pointed. But the left one was perfect. I'd start rubbing beneath the toes.

I'm mistaken, confusing this occasion with so many others.

That night she stayed in the bathroom. She said she couldn't look at me. She said she'd had enough. I decided to wait her out. I knew what she wanted. She was playing a game. I said nothing. Every so often she'd say something through the bathroom door but I wouldn't reply. I considered locking her in there, but realized there was no way of doing this. Eventually, she talked herself into coming out of the bathroom, with the provision that I'd be waiting for her naked on the couch. I agreed. She walked slowly into the living room, naked, as well, and stood against the wall opposite the couch. Part of the agreement was that I was not allowed to speak. This was not difficult for me. I usually speak only when spoken to. She stood flush against the wall, head up,



determined. I studied her figure up and down before making eye contact. Her left breast was bigger than the right, though when I say bigger I mean relatively bigger. Neither breast was big. Her knees also seemed cock-eyed, mismatched. Almost every feature was asymmetrical, eyes, ears, hair, breasts, knees, etc. I looked at her. Then I realized her eyes were on mine. I didn't look away. In fact, it felt like I couldn't. It was as if we were both in a trance. She'd mentioned she had the ability to hypnotize, that she used to hypnotize people at parties. I was always skeptical of this but this night our eyes were affixed to each other's. Time passed. Eventually we were finished. I knew we were finished when she blinked and changed expressions. I wouldn't have known otherwise. Til then her face was blank, like a cadaver's. She walked over to the couch and sat down and I followed her. I can't say I enjoyed what had transpired as I didn't understand what in fact had transpired. I didn't know how long we were like this across the room from each other. On the couch she begged me to tell her certain things. I complied. Finally we went to bed. There was a knot in one side of the mattress, which was facing down. The knot happened to line up with the small of my back when it was facing up regardless where I might've positioned myself on the bed. There had to be more than one knot, alas. This particular side had been facing down for some time, though. I considered that it might be time for a new mattress, although I would retain the box spring, which seemed to be in fine shape. There was no headboard. I'm not sure whether headboards serve a functional purpose or are strictly ornamental. My neighbor complained about the bed and the knots, which she swore was preventing her from resting comfortably. At one point she jumped out of bed and stormed off, stomping her feet. She would do this. In her part of the world the women can be petulant. I did not respond. Her behavior was taxing in many ways. I waited for an earthquake

or tornado, some natural occurrence to bring the building down around us. Nothing. Clearly, this was a test, though I wasn't sure what would constitute a passing grade. I did nothing, which has always been my way. Later she came back. No words were exchanged as she climbed into the bed. Our bodies did not touch. This is when I realized her birthday was coming up in a week or two. My neighbor didn't celebrate birthdays. She never said why, and I never asked. What we'd do is take a day trip somewhere we'd never been, masturbate for each other in a public place, and drink ourselves sick. What we've never done is have a cake with candles or sing the song. All it took was my neighbor to say, I'm not much for birthdays. I never even buy her a gift. Neither of us had mentioned her birthday so I don't know what made me think of it. Then we fell asleep, her first. I could not look at her sleep. I faced the other direction so our backs were to each other and listened to her breathing. There was a howling wind coming from her nose, almost like wheezing. It was disturbing. I tried to think about something else and she started to snore. I turned around and put my hand on her shoulder, which seemed to calm her. The snoring stopped and started several times, every time a hand on the shoulder quieted her. It took some time for me to fall asleep, though I wasn't uncomfortable, per se. Although abbreviated, the sleep I did manage was productive. It was dreamless. I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I had bad dreams. I never die in the dreams, but rather, I am always dead. In other words, my death doesn't take place in dream time. There is no collapsing to the ground, convulsing, gasping for breath. There comes the realization I'm dead in a coffin underground. There is no air, it is dark. I wake violently. I jump from the bed, knock things over, can't draw a breath. I look at the clock on the nightstand and wait for it to change. Sometimes this takes time. If it changes then I think

I'm not dead. Death has to include, if not be defined as, the absence of time. But that night there was no such dream. In the morning I woke with an erection on the right side of the bed. Whenever I slept with my neighbor I'd take the right side. It wasn't a formal arrangement, just a habit we fell into. I did not prefer one side to the other and did not attach any symbolic meaning to being on the right side, either. During this time I began to note what side of my body was facing down, instead of what side of the bed I was on. That morning I woke on my left side, though on the right side of the bed, a fact I was no longer keeping track of or was interested in. I usually woke on my left side. There didn't seem to be any external factors influencing this outcome. For whatever reason, I was most comfortable with the left side of my head on the pillow. I think I fell asleep this way most nights, as well. I've always noticed how my breathing was affected by what side of my head was on the pillow. Generally, particularly during times of illness, the opposite nostril would open and the other would close. Meaning if my left cheek was on the pillow, the right nostril would be clear and the left closed shut. Certainly there is a scientific reason for this. It probably has to do with physics, blood flow, gravity, etc. I've always had a problem with congestion. I had to forego my normal routine except for the allergy medication, which was an essential. Time was I did not have to take allergy medication. But I would be lightheaded, have headaches and dizziness and I'd be miserable so eventually I'd relent and go back on the medication. I have always had to take some kind of pill or another. I tried to hide my erection from my neighbor, which was not subsiding. I knew my neighbor would take it the wrong way. She was still sleeping. She was beautiful when she slept. I considered going into the bathroom to masturbate but reconsidered. I also had to urinate and urinating always takes priority over masturbating. It is difficult urinating with an erection. One has to take angles and

trajectories into account. I stood with my backside to the wall, three feet away from the bowl and let gravity do the rest. I'll say this—the arc, against the backdrop of the lilacs, was impressive. Like a rainbow. In the bathroom everything was rainbow rainbow rainbow. Because it looked the way it looked and my erection was still prominent afterwards I decided to masturbate right there. This is when my neighbor walked in and cursed me for being a pervert. She accused me of masturbating to the image of the star of the movie we had seen together at her mother's apartment. I'd made the mistake of commenting on the star's toes, which my neighbor objected to. She remained hostile for some time and there was no calming her. I apologized and she ignored me. Eventually she asked if she could use the shower, which I also had to apologize for. The showerhead was on the wrong wall. Instead of the showerhead being parallel with the tub long ways, the way it is in every reasonable bathroom the world over, it jutted out into the middle of the tub. As a result the shower curtain hangs all over the person trying to shower. One cannot position one's body in that tub without the shower curtain clinging to one's skin. It is appalling. She was in the shower a long time, long enough to reconsider how angry she was, I think. After the shower she suggested we have lunch with her mother so I figured everything was fine. This was the mother who had uprooted the family. People who flee have it written all over themselves, but there were no traces of anything like that on her face. She would not leave her railroad apartment for weeks at a time, often not even changing out of her house frock. Worse, she did not know what to do with her eyes during conversation. Either her eyes would fish all over the room or she'd stare at you, unblinking, long after it was appropriate to look away, and always with an expectant look on her face. I did not want to have lunch with the mother. I said something.

*I wish I could but I have work to do.*

*What work?*

*I've been swamped.*

*I'm leaving.*

She left. She got dressed and walked straight out the front door. Sometimes one has to struggle with the locks to open the door but she had no problems. She walked through that door gracefully, although I noticed a limp I hadn't seen before. It may've been due to her club foot. My neighbor was smartly dressed this particular morning. She had on slacks and a frilled blouse and an ornate black choker around her neck. She will always have some kind of accouterment tied around some part of herself. And I did like to watch her walk with that athletic gait of hers, the right foot slightly dragging behind the left.

I haven't seen my neighbor since.

The sofa is second hand from my sister. I did not want a second hand sofa but since the previous owner was my sister I made an exception. I also figured this would be an excellent opportunity to save money. I needed to curtail spending at once.

The sofa turns into a bed but I have never told this to anyone. This way there are no overnight stays, visitors, squatters, freeloaders, etc. Regardless of relation, seeing someone in your house in the morning is disconcerting. The same is true when you are a guest in someone else's house. There is always a feeling of uncertainty, not sure what you should do, where you should go, and so on. Morning routines are thrown off kilter.

My sister kept the sofa in her basement. I think we would play Monkey in the Middle in some basement or other, but I can't quite remember. We may've taken turns as to who was in the middle, being taunted with the ball. I do not like basements and have never been in the basement of my own apartment building. I'm not sure how one even gains access to

the basement. There is probably a door and stairwell in the back of the building. The air in basements is always heavy and damp and hard to breathe in. They were always giving me something to help with my breathing. I used to take pills even, though the pills may have been for something else. Perhaps all the pills have had an adverse affect on me. Whenever they've given me pills to take I take them. I wouldn't know what pills to take on my own. The sofa does have the look and feel of basement furniture. My brother-in-law helped me carry the sofa up from their basement and load it into a truck I had rented. I was not down there for too long and my breathing was unaffected. The drive back to my apartment was uneventful. The only caveat in driving a rented truck is the law prohibiting commercial vehicles to drive on certain parkways. I had to find an alternate, circuitous route both to and from my sister's house. I did this. I did miss one poorly advertised exit but was able to double back. I had arranged for an acquaintance to meet me at my place at a certain time to help me unload the musty sofa and carry it into my living room. This acquaintance had to shave twice a day to keep his face clean, including all around his neck. He dealt from the bottom of the deck when playing poker with friends and neighbors. He also practiced frottage in crowded shopping malls, bars and subways. I did not like him but what can you do. I needed someone to help me with the couch. It was difficult to maneuver through the narrow doorway leading into the living room. We had to upend the sofa and then let it fall into the room at a certain angle. This is the kind of problem movers have to deal with. I was no mover and neither was my acquaintance. I pointed this out to my acquaintance, that maybe we should get some help.

*Maybe we should get some help.*

*Sure thing, I'm easy.*

*Easy like Sunday morning coming down?*

*And the beer you had for breakfast wasn't bad so you had one more for dessert?*

*That's the one.*

*No one has ever had dessert after breakfast.*

*I know places where they'd shoot you if you even tried.*

*I don't know what that crazy cracker bastard was thinking.*

*Lift your end.*

*He's the one who landed a helicopter in one of them other famous cracker's backyards. Wanted to get himself on the radio. Wanted to do his thing on the Louisiana Hayride and the Grand Old Opry and get girls to touch his famous cracker pecker backstage after the show.*

*It won't go in this way.*

*Motherfucker was a genius.*

*What good is genius anyway?*

*It's like being boundless, having no shape, it's like the amoeba defense.*

*The good man has no shape.*

*What's that?*

*A poem about the crucifixion. I'm nailed right in.*

*You shouldn't talk that way.*

*I don't know what that means, but I understand completely.*

*Neither of us should talk that way. I didn't mean to call them crackers crackers, either.*

We maneuvered and finagled the sofa into place. The procedure took another forty-five minutes according to my wall clock, which means it was probably closer to an hour. We placed the sofa against the near wall to the left when entering the living room. It is adjacent to the kitchen table or rather would be adjacent to the table once the table was bought and assembled and placed in the aforementioned corner of the living room. When we first placed the sofa against the near wall there was no table adjacent to it. There was nothing on either side of the sofa for months. My acquaintance and I had some difficulty placing the couch down on the four stands or coasters or whatever those things screwed into the bottom

corners of the sofa so it doesn't scratch the floors are called. After which I had offered my acquaintance a beer, reward for a job well done. He declined, citing an appointment he had scheduled weeks earlier.

My acquaintance and I only saw each other when something needed doing. We rarely spoke otherwise. He'd call now and then, though I rarely called him back. He never said anything about this, nor did I. He wanted to introduce me to certain women he knew from time to time but I never responded. Then one or the other would offer a beer that would go declined more often than not. That was the nature of the relationship.

I think he is dead now.

There is a long coffee table placed against the wall directly opposite the sofa. I have always had this long coffee table, but I'm not sure where it came from. I don't think I bought it in a store and I can't recall anyone giving it to me. I have never used this long coffee table as a coffee table. The table is approximately the same length as the sofa. Getting around it would be tricky, dangerous even. Hence, I have always used this long coffee table as a television/stereo stand. I have always had it safe against some wall or another, out of the way.

I sometimes will rest compact discs, cassettes and books on it as well. Not too many books, though, as I don't read much anymore. I have gotten rid of most of my books, selling them to used bookstores. There is never anything in a book that stays with me, that I can carry around. Also, I have trouble distinguishing what's happened to me and what's something I've read. For years I had a memory of a long phone conversation with someone while masturbating until I read the same exact thing in a book. This would've been a book my neighbor had recommended. She was always recommending books. I think she did this so I would know how to behave with her, or how she wanted me to behave. The books confused me



and this is why I don't like to read books and don't want them in my house. I have also kept candleholders and other odds and ends on the table, like a whatnot shelf. I have no shelves attached to any walls in the apartment. Shelving would add something to any of the rooms but I am reluctant to hammer nails into the walls. The clock hanging in the living room, which lags behind the actual rotation of the earth, is hanging on a nail. This is the only nail I have driven into any of the walls. The wall is cracked beneath the clock, a long jagged line winding its way down the wall. The crack looks like a varicose vein. I cannot say for certain whether the nail caused this crack, though I don't recall the crack being there before.

I don't have an actual coffee table. There is space for a coffee table, directly in front of the sofa. I have always wanted an actual coffee table, something to deceive the eye, give the room texture, perspective, something. I don't drink coffee, but still.

Next to the long coffee table television/stereo stand is a desk. The stained wood desk has three drawers and is the same shade of brown as the bookcase and portable closet, both located in the hallway. This is coincidence or happenstance. There was no color coordination involved, no interior decorative forethought. I have had this desk for years. The three drawers contain picture frames, albums, folders, papers, envelopes, razors, chess set, etc. I will put almost anything in the drawers. No one drawer has a particular function or is designated to store certain items. If I come across something I think I should keep and have nowhere else to put I will put it in one of the drawers. There is no place to put anything in this apartment. Originally the desk came with a canopy or hutch. I'm not sure which is which or if there is a difference. There was a wood addition that rested on top of the desk, no screwing or attaching necessary. On this hutch I kept books and picture frames and other totchkis that couldn't fit on the

long coffee table stand. I jettisoned the hutch some time ago. The addition had outlasted its usefulness, like the human appendix. In this case I had acquired a bookcase and a nightstand. I left the hutch on the street hoping someone would take it, a sanitation officer, rummager, passerby, etc. After languishing for two weeks someone did take it, though I can't imagine what for. Without the rest of the desk a hutch seems useless.

The desk remains, unencumbered, against the wall.

This is where I have done the bulk of my work. I have not worked for a long time but when I did it was at this desk.

Time was I did important work.

To the right of the desk is an end table. This end table was part of a set that included the long coffee table. Presumably there was another end table at some point. Every living room set I have seen has had two end tables, I think. I have just the one. Generally end tables go on either end of a sofa to rest lamps upon, fishbowls, picture frames, etc. There isn't room on either end of the sofa for a table. To the left is the wall, although the sofa is not placed flush against the wall. There is a space of about twelve inches between the sofa and wall. There is nothing there to occupy this space. I'm not entirely sure why I originally placed the sofa twelve inches from the wall. There had to have been a reason. To the right of the sofa are the kitchen table and chairs. The two chairs were easy to assemble, perhaps the easiest pieces of furniture I have assembled. The end table did not require assembly. I have only the one. What became of the other is anyone's guess. The remaining end table is like an appendix as well. On it rests a lamp that has no shade and is not plugged into a socket, some stray books I should probably get rid of and miscellaneous papers.

The two long narrow windows are covered with blinds. Even when the blinds are drawn shut the light can be blinding. During the summer months I will hang dark shirts over the

blinds. I hang these dark shirts on plastic hangers. The shirts hang on the hangers and the hangers hang on the blinds. My eyes might be light sensitive but I have never visited an optometrist so I can't say for sure. I have considered shades to cover the windows but shades never want to stay down. I have ripped the flimsy fabric, plastic, whatever shades are made out of, on more than one occasion trying to keep the shades drawn. Both blinds were already hanging when I moved in. I was grateful not to have to shop for blinds.

There is a small air conditioner installed at the base of the far right window. This air conditioner was likewise installed when I moved in. The air conditioner is powerful enough to cool the living room and the rest of the apartment as well, although to fully feel the effects of the air conditioner one must be in the living room. I don't know what BTU stands for. The U might stand for Unit but that is only a guess. I use the air conditioner a lot, often leaving it on for days. Consequently my electric bill for the summer months is extreme. I always manage to pay the bills, though I don't recall having earned any money recently. Air conditioning would be a necessity under any financial circumstances or living arrangements. I can have difficulty breathing in hot and humid weather. I have always had some kind of respiratory difficulties, period, regardless of air temperature. As a child I had to use vaporizers, nebulizers, inhalers, etc. I can recall trying to fall asleep to the dull hum of the vaporizer. I think I would wheeze quite a bit and stay up half the night. My sister would be asleep on the other side of the room. She was beautiful when she slept. There was never anything wrong with her breathing. We also had an air conditioner in our room, which was located on her side of the bamboo room divider. She complained whenever I turned it on and then I'd tell her if not for the air conditioner I would probably die. I forget what she would say to this; though I'm sure it was contrite. The air conditioner in our room was very

powerful and probably had a great many BTUs. On occasion the air conditioner in my apartment makes a disagreeable noise—a shrill droning sound. I'm not sure if a shrill droning sound is a sonic possibility but the sound is disagreeable to be sure. Pressing on the control panels with some force fixes it but only for a short time.

The ceiling fan was also installed prior to my occupation. This I was not necessarily grateful for because I would not have shopped for one otherwise. The ceiling fan, along with the air conditioner and the blinds, came with the apartment. I have never used the ceiling fan. The dust was an inch thick atop the blades of the fan. Someone else's dust I wanted no part of—didn't want to scatter their dust all over my living room. Dusting someone else's dust seemed wrong. The ceiling fan is perpetually motionless and I rarely employ the light, either. In fact, two of the four bulbs have been out for as long as I can remember.

My neighbor offered to go shopping for a coffee table. She did this both over the phone and in person. Her manner of speech was the same for both although on the phone she was formal, which might've been in reaction to my phone manner.

We did shop together once, for a nightstand. I needed something for an alarm clock to rest on, along with a picture frame, lamp, several pens and a notepad. Time was I would write things down. Phone numbers, addresses, reminders, errands to run, which side of the bed I awoke on, whether or not I'd had an erection, etc. I haven't written anything in the bedside notebook since the new nightstand. I don't think I've written anything since I've stopped working. These days the bedside notebook is full of blank, unstained pages. The alarm clock is rarely set.

I was not answering the phone at the time. This will happen much like the fluctuations in waist size, appetite, etc. I sometimes have nothing to say. During these times I will not

answer the phone at all. This has led to any number of misunderstandings but what can one do. When the phone does not ring is never a problem. I believe my neighbor did call at least twice but she rarely left messages. Perhaps she did not like the sound of her voice recorded. She must've thought it too nasal, too monotonic, if that is an actual word. I liked her voice, lilting and mellifluous as it was. The phone did ring several times while I was not answering and I'm almost certain it was her. When I finally called she suggested we shop for a nightstand. This was after observing the usual amenities, which was after having partially dialed her number three times before successfully placing the call.

*Hello there.*

*I've tried calling you.*

*I'm sorry. I've been swamped.*

The usual amenities observed. Then:

*Let's go shopping for a nightstand tomorrow.*

*I don't know. I'm not sure I need one.*

*Of course you do. You need something to rest an alarm clock on, a notebook, lamp, several pens and a notepad.*

*I suppose you are right.*

The arrangements made.

I have trouble saying no to people. I'm not sure what that says.

The morning we were to shop for a nightstand started without an erection on my right side. At the time I thought nothing of it. And I still do, think nothing of it. No symbols where none intended. I didn't eat anything as I was feeling queasy. I don't think I'd had anything for dinner the night before, either. Sometimes I fast. I think of it as purification. And sometimes I'm just sick of what I'm eating. There is never anything different to eat is the problem. It is either Ralph the Chinese delivery boy or some other foreigner bringing food to my door. I'd cook but my kitchen isn't good for cooking. That morning I felt nauseous and was afraid I might throw up. But I

didn't have anything in my system to expel, so it would've been the dry heaves, which is even worse. I didn't have time to read any part of the paper. By then I was down to the sports section only. The horoscopes seemed to pander to something I wanted no part of, as did the rest of it; the gossip columns, the hard news, the crossword. No one can finish those puzzles and what kind of person spends time with that sort of thing anyway. What does it prove? As I was dressing, comfortable trousers and some kind of shirt or another, I heard two slaps of the mailbox coming from the vestibule. I sometimes forget to pay bills. I have found bills from a January, say, lying on my desk during the summer months. Services have never been cut off, though. I have never gone without gas or electric or available credit, etc. My checkbook is in disarray is the problem. I don't keep track of the checks in that ledger you are supposed to keep track of the checks in. I should never have opened the account to begin with but I do try to keep a running tab in my head. I deposit money in the account a day or two after I send a check to whomever comes calling. I send the minimum amount. Problem is I've even lost track of the running tab in my head. They send a statement every month but I never look at it. Perhaps they are upset with me. So I made it a point to be on the lookout for past due bill notices every morning when the mail arrived. I had two bills to send out that day. They'd been sealed and on my desk for weeks. After the second slap I picked them up and ran out the door to catch the androgynous mail person. The mail person was on the way to the building next door. When I caught up and handed over the letters the mail person made an acceptance speech of sorts.

*Can you take these for me?*

*Sure thing, I'm easy. That was some storm last week. Wasn't as bad as Gloria, though. Gloria was a real tempest.*

*I have something on the stove. I'm sorry. Thank you.*

I went back inside and looked for my wallet, which had been missing for a week or so. I suspected my neighbor may've taken it the night she cooked dinner. I remember seeing it that night on the end table. In fact, I remember placing my wallet on the end table after removing my trousers. This was after we agreed to face each other naked in the living room. I took off my trousers and draped them over a kitchen chair. My wallet fell out, so I picked it up and placed it on the end table so as not to forget where it was. I was always misplacing something, wallet, keys, bills, etc., which was probably due to all the medication. Then my neighbor came out of the bathroom naked and we had our evening. The next day the wallet was gone. I searched for the wallet inside my apartment for hours. I looked everywhere, places my wallet would never be. I retraced my steps of the previous day, thinking perhaps I didn't actually see my wallet on the end table that night. Perhaps I'd confused the chronology of events. I'd walked to the store the day my neighbor cooked dinner. I asked the proprietor if he had seen a wallet, looked under the display cases near the blind spot. I went home and called my neighbor.

*Hello.*

*I'm surprised to hear your voice.*

*Yes.*

*How are you?*

*Listen, I have a question to ask you.*

*Go ahead.*

*Do you remember seeing my wallet last night? I can't find it.*

*Your wallet?*

*It's gone.*

*No, I don't remember seeing it.*

*You didn't see it on the end table when you came into the living room?*

*No.*

*Are you sure?*

*No, I don't.*

*On the end table?*  
*You don't think I took it do you?*  
*No. I just thought maybe you'd seen it.*  
*I don't remember ever seeing your wallet.*  
*That's fair.*  
*Well, I hope you find it.*  
*Thanks.*  
*Are you ready to go shopping?*

There was nothing to do. I didn't want to accuse her directly and figured if she had taken it then maybe she'd return it. Maybe she'd *find* it under a couch cushion the next time she came over. My neighbor drove us to a shopping mall shortly after I'd mailed my bills. She had a classic sports car with two doors that had little legroom but good acceleration. Merging onto highways wasn't a problem. The car had a blue interior. The shade was soft, effeminate. I couldn't identify the fabric used to make the bucket seats but it was smooth and comfortable. The fabric felt like corduroy. I doubt they use corduroy to make car interiors but I wouldn't know one way or the other. The leather portions of the dashboard were also smooth and intact. There were no tears in any part of the interior. There was a stain on the passenger seat, though, the only blemish I could find. The stain was perfectly round; like it was made deliberately. But there was nothing in the middle of the stain, only the thin oval outline, maybe twice the size of a quarter. It was nearly the same color as the blue corduroy, so it was camouflaged. I had no idea what it was or what may've caused the stain. I didn't say anything about it to my neighbor, either.

My neighbor wore a pleated skirt and matching blouse and had a headband tied around her head. During the drive my neighbor suggested we take a vacation somewhere.

*We should take a vacation somewhere.*  
*That sounds good.*



*Let's go to the country.*

*We can do that.*

*Or else we can go to the beach.*

*Either way.*

The country is desolate and I don't like to be in the middle of it. Perhaps on rare occasions I'd seen part of the horizon in one particular direction, but having empty endless space surround you, to see the edge of the earth on all sides, was disconcerting. There was nothing to mark where you were in relation to anything, nothing for the eye to focus on or hold onto, no reference points, texture, perspective, something. Also, I fail to discern a difference in the fabled country air. I actually find it more difficult to breathe in the country than I do anywhere else. The best place to breathe is near the ocean, but even that can be too much at times. The only time I've enjoyed breathing is when they strapped an oxygen mask over my mouth. I don't remember when they did this but the air was pure and enjoyable. Anywhere we would go together wouldn't have air like that to breath. And I knew it was unlikely we would take a vacation to the country, the ocean or anywhere else.

We found a parking space in the underground garage and entered the mall through an elevator. The facility was crowded with shoppers going in all directions. Mostly Teardrops pushing baby strollers and old people meandering around aimlessly. There probably isn't another way to meander but nevertheless. The old people looked confused and at home at the same time. They seemed to form a community. They probably were shopping for fertilizers, vitamins and other nutrients. Many sat in the food court spooning frozen yogurt and discussing cemetery plots.

I would've purchased the first nightstand we found in the first store. While it seemed expensive I would have been satisfied. I can only say this particular nightstand seemed

expensive because I have no knowledge of the market value of nightstands. However, this particular nightstand was deemed unsuitable by my neighbor. I have forgotten why. It may have had something to do with the design or the color, which rendered the price in relation to the general market value of nightstands academic. None of the next dozen or so nightstands in the next five or six stores were suitable, either. I did not even have the opportunity to note the prices of these. My pedestrian tastes were ridiculed as was my blasé attitude and fashion sense.

*You have pedestrian tastes in everything.*

*I don't know how to respond to that.*

*That doesn't surprise me.*

(Silence)

*The world is greater than you realize.*

(Silence)

*Look at your pants.*

*What is wrong with them?*

*For starters they are tapered at the bottom.*

*What does that mean?*

*Fuck you with your pedestrian tastes and blasé attitude.*

Etc.

Eventually a nightstand was picked out. I forget which store, even the price, although I do recall a young mother with toes and legs searching for drapery close by. This woman made it a point to bend down or over every few minutes, always straightening herself up with a new swatch in hand. She would hold it up to a mock wall, consider it for several seconds and then bend back down to retrieve another. Each time she'd crouch down the meat of her legs would gather, resembling a baby's bottom. Her child I'd assumed was asleep in its stroller. My neighbor caught me looking in the direction of the drapery and admonished me for being a pervert and also for having no fashion sense. Where she comes from the women admonish

the men for being perverts and having no fashion sense. It was true I was not wearing my Sunday best. Instead I had on a pair of reliable trousers. I call this garment, trousers, although many people say pants or slacks. I'm not sure if the three are interchangeable. I tried changing the subject away from my pants and perversion and towards Chinese food. There was probably nothing wrong with this but my neighbor said nothing. I listened for tremors, looked for the walls of the store to come crashing down. No words were exchanged as we found our way to the cashiers where there was a line of people. My neighbor made it a point to stand several feet away from me so the other people in line wouldn't know we were together. One does not have to endure the sound of one's own voice so I said nothing. I was grateful to be standing in a line of people. I was also looking forward to going home, although I had no plans for when I got there. Around this time my neighbor said she wanted nothing to do with me. The last subject I had introduced was Chinese food so I was unprepared for this. I looked at her. Her eyes were big, like a cow's. I thought maybe her pupils had dilated. She looked at me, too, and it seemed like she was expecting me to say something. I don't know what she saw in my face.

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

(Silence)

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My neighbor walked out of the store. I liked to watch her walk. She made it through the electronic doors without having to break stride. More often than not one has to wait for the doors to open fully, the sensors being slow to react. My neighbor had no such problem. She went through those doors gracefully, as graceful as a woman with a club foot can go through doors. I stayed in line, not wanting to lose my place or leave the nightstand behind. Perhaps if I had it to do over again I would chase after her. Not that it would've made any difference. Then the Teardrop behind me tapped on my shoulder. I fished a credit card out of my wallet and handed it to the cashier. (I retrieved an older wallet from my desk after the other one had been stolen. The credit card was new and had been mailed to me after I'd cancelled the stolen one, I think. Otherwise, I'm thinking about something else and can't say for sure what credit card I used or where it came from.) I have had this particular credit card for many years, if it is the one I'm thinking of, though I cannot recall ever applying for the card. I just recall always having it. It is the only credit card I have ever used. I do remember filling out an application for another credit card but I cannot remember what became of

this. I'm not sure if I was denied credit or if I forgot to mail the application. I recall filling out forms but not posting the application. Though there is nothing memorable about going to the post office or posting an application for a credit card. I will always walk to the post office whenever it is I have to go, although it is not within walking distance. Anything longer than ten minutes seems beyond walking distance and the walk has to be at a leisurely pace. No strenuous arm pumping, no heavy breathing, no undo stress on the joints. The post office is two hours up the road and back. Sometimes I have nothing else to do and if the weather is nice I will walk to the post office if I have something to post. If there is nothing to post I will not walk to the post office. I may walk elsewhere if I feel like walking. Regardless, I usually stop in a store. It would not be like me to walk for two hours without stopping. If there is a bench along the way I will stop and sit on the bench to watch the joggers and readers. I rarely send anything through the postal system so I think I'd remember almost every parcel. And I cannot imagine being denied credit. I should think I have an excellent credit rating. I have always paid my lone credit card bill, if not every month, then regularly. Once or twice I may have forgotten a payment but I don't believe that would have such an adverse effect on one's rating. I'm not sure whether there are other factors in regards to one's credit rating. Someone told me once it was important to have a good rating. I forgot who said this but I was inclined to believe them. This was someone who knew a thing or two about credit cards. I can recall parts of the conversation, even the time of day. It was after midnight, two, maybe three drinks past. The sun hadn't been out for weeks. The weather was foul. Telephone lines were down, schools closed. There were warnings and watches and advisories as to what might happen next. I was someplace unfamiliar. I am often uncomfortable when I haven't been somewhere before. There were other

people in the room. They all resembled each other, but I can't say exactly how. Perhaps they had similar hairstyles, clothes, mannerisms. I didn't pay them attention, although they were studying us. They seemed like they were responsible for us in some way. I remember the person saying a good credit rating is important for when it comes time to buy a house. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of a good credit rating mentioned no other benefits. If one has no intentions of ever buying a house than a good credit rating would be less a priority. Nevertheless, I make it a point to keep up the payments. I always manage to pay the bills although I can't recall having earned any money recently. Time was I did important work. I woke up early and went to an office with desks and telephones. I had accounts, I traveled. I had co-workers, subordinates, superiors. There were meetings and lunches, conference calls and consultations. Then the idle pleasure of these days, the days I enjoy now, tomorrow and tomorrow, the petty pace, but I do still have the credit card. I handed it to the cashier after having fished it out of my wallet and opening the Velcro. Fishing the card out of my wallet was easy. I kept it safe within the first fold. The only other identification I kept in the wallet was my driver's license and social security card. I'd had the social security card in my wallet since I was a child. The signature looked funny; like it was the first thing I ever wrote in script and was using a ruler to keep the lines straight. As a schoolboy my penmanship was shoddy and I was envious of the students with good penmanship. To this day I am sometimes unable to read my own handwriting. I had trouble reading the poems in my notebook because of this. I'd written dozens of poems, most of them brilliant. Collected they are called *Poems for the Illiterate*. I don't think I will ever publish them. There is something noble in keeping to oneself. The signature on my social security card was a constant reminder of

those troubles with my handwriting. I rarely had to look at my social security card so it was more of an occasional reminder of those difficulties. I've changed wallets since then, but never the card. The first wallet I had was Velcro and beige colored. I had that particular wallet throughout school. When the sound of the Velcro ripping grew disconcerting was when I retired it. Opening the Velcro at the cashier's reminded me how much I hated that sound. It made my nipples shrink and tightened my colon. Until recently I managed to keep wallets in good shape or else the wallets I have owned are durable regardless of how one might keep them. There was a time one wallet ago when I kept an Emergency Medic Alert card tucked within an obscure fold. This wallet had something like a secret compartment. There I stored the Emergency Medic Alert card indicating I was allergic to penicillin. I did exhibit an adverse reaction once. I forget what infection the penicillin was prescribed to combat. Most probably it was for an upper respiratory infection. I think I almost died. They had to perform a tracheotomy because I'd stopped breathing. There is a small vertical scar at the base of my neck. People don't know what to think when they see it. Some feel sorry for me and I do not discourage this. Pity is underrated. I have not taken the drug since. For years I wore a bracelet but discarded that in favor of the card. The bracelet was a scarlet letter. Bracelets were for diabetics, epileptics, etc., the seriously afflicted and I was not one of those. The card was lost probably forever. There was no occasion for me to present the card to anyone, I don't think. The only times I'd ever handled the card was to transfer it from one wallet to the next. I made no effort to replace it. The body's chemistry changes over time and a substance that may've once been intolerable can prove in later years to be harmless, even beneficial, I think. Should I ever be incapacitated and in need of an antibiotic to treat a deadly infection then we'll find out. There would be no one to

apologize to if it ever came to that. I don't know how one would go about acquiring a card and I have no memory of how I came to own the one I'd lost. I can remember the bracelet being presented to me by the pediatrician who diagnosed my allergy to penicillin. A different doctor performed the tracheotomy. This doctor sang a song to calm me but I can't remember the song. The room was large and there were people holding me down. I'm not sure where my sister was during this, probably home tending to Goldfish. My driver's license is tucked within the second fold on the opposite side of the credit card and social security card. The license will be valid another four years, though the picture is an abomination. I no longer resemble the picture on my license. In it I was bearded, balding, pale and gaunt. The thing of it is I don't recall ever looking like that. I've wondered what would happen should I be pulled over by a police officer. Perhaps they would think I am an imposter. I often feel like an imposter. In my head I have practiced my getting pulled over and being suspected of a crime speech. *Is there a problem officer? I realize it doesn't look like me. I know. That person is bearded, balding, pale and gaunt. I don't recall ever looking like that. I was home in my apartment. He didn't look sick to me. I'd known him for a while. We worked together. He said he was hot. I had the air conditioner on. I don't know how many BTUs it has. I found him like that. He was bleeding from the nose and mouth and his face was swollen. There was a faint gurgling sound coming from his throat. My bathroom wasn't working properly. He said he could fix it. I was in there.* Almost nothing has anything to do with me and policemen are good at recognizing this. I call this stance The Approach. Although, this is probably not likely to happen, getting pulled over, questioned. The police rarely pay me any mind. Whenever an officer drives past or sees me on the street they never notice. They don't know. I've walked by police officers on the street or in line at a delicatessen and have



wondered what would happen if someone should lift their gun from their holster. I have never owned a gun, held a gun, fired a gun or had a gun pointed at me. If I did own a gun, I'd probably keep it in a dresser drawer. Guns should be kept hidden one would think, out of plain sight, underneath heavy winter clothing. This way if someone decides to shoot someone else there is ample time to reconsider—and/or for the would-be victim to flee. I was always on the lookout for policemen, however. While driving I always checked the rearview mirror for patrol cars. I usually depended on the rear view mirror to track the progress of vehicles driving behind me. Rarely did I consult the passenger's side mirror. On most cars the side mirrors say, *Objects may be closer than they appear*, or something like that. I have no idea why objects may be closer than they appear or vice-versa. Almost anything can be closer than it appears. The cashier swiped the card through the machine and handed me the slip. My signature is an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines. I remember someone advising me to sign my name in this particular fashion as to discourage forgery. I forgot who said this but I was inclined to believe them. This was someone who knew about forgery. I can recall parts of the conversation.

*What's the matter with you?*

*What?*

*That chicken scratch there.*

*What's wrong with it?*

*Never sign your name like that.*

*Why?*

*Start with a strict definition of the word never and work your way down.*

*I don't understand.*

*Forgers, my friend.*

The sun was out and one couldn't look at it it was so brilliant. You were liable to go blind if you did. I was somewhere outdoors. I am often uncomfortable when I

haven't been somewhere before and I am always uncomfortable outdoors. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. I remember the person saying an indecipherable configuration of berserk lines was best for signing official documents so as to discourage forgery. I'm not certain but that might be the only reason. The person who spoke of the importance of an inimitable signature mentioned no other benefits. I have employed such a signature ever since. The cashier did not inspect the signature on the credit card slip; instead she stapled it to a receipt and placed it under the cash register drawer. Some check to see if the signature on the slip matches the signature on the back of the credit card. I've been on the receiving end of many skeptical looks. I can never sign my name the same way twice so the signature on the slip will almost never match the one on the credit card. I wasn't sure if my neighbor was waiting for me in the underground garage or not. A clerk presented the nightstand to me on a dolly and I rolled it out to the underground garage thinking she might be there. This clerk had two breasts, one bigger than the other, though neither was resting on the nightstand. Though I had gotten along without a nightstand I was not filled with remorse at any time. Before I commit to a significant purchase I need time to think things through. The nightstand was another story because I needed something to rest an alarm clock on, a lamp, several pens and a notepad. The wheels of the dolly wobbled like a shopping cart at a supermarket and it was difficult to maneuver around the pedestrians. No one seemed to notice me. Apparently people rolling furniture through the mall is a regular occurrence. Otherwise no one ever notices anything. I had to say, Excuse me, a dozen times. I found my neighbor waiting where we had parked in the underground garage. This was after having trouble remembering where that was. I had to walk around the garage for some time. Everything looked the same was the problem.

The mistake was forgetting to note the section B6 was where we'd parked. My neighbor ridiculed me for getting lost and for not noting the section B6. This was part of her heritage. After that she said nothing, which was also part of her heritage. I couldn't think of anything to say, either. Sometimes I have nothing to say to people. Actually, my neighbor did say the nightstand would fit inside the car itself. My neighbor had experience with nightstands so I deferred. I defer to anyone with experience. I went through the motions, trying to insinuate, finagle and maneuver the nightstand into the car. The problem was the car had no backseat. A car with no backseat is disconcerting. My neighbor's car was a foreign two-door, one that looked like it was made for someone else. The nightstand didn't fit into the car. I suggested the trunk but was told the trunk was out of the question. My neighbor stored exercise equipment, a spare tire, jack, two large duffel bags, flares and cones in the trunk. She referred to the trunk of a car as the boot. She was not from this part of the world but that was not her fault. In her part of the world, the part of the world she grew up in, they call trunks boots. We made arrangements to tie the nightstand to the roof of the car. My neighbor bought twine and we made knots in what seemed like all the appropriate places. I was confident the box was secure. We were still within the infrastructure of mall property, I think. The box was bouncing around on the roof of the car.

*The box isn't secure.*

*I think you're right.*

*We're going to kill somebody.*

*Let's pull over.*

We pulled over. My neighbor got out of the car and attempted to re-fasten the box to the roof. I stayed inside and watched an old couple limping around a parking lot—I'm not sure which letter or number. They appeared lost. The old man struggled to carry a bag of fertilizer. The woman trailed

behind. She had an age spot on her left cheek. Maybe it is called a liver spot. I don't know what the difference is between the two or if there is a difference. Her posture was appalling, hunched over like she'd dropped a spade in the mulch and was poised to retrieve it. I was then showered with derision.

*Why are you still in the car?*

*I'm sorry.*

*What is wrong with you?*

*I'm not sure.*

*You are ... etc., etc., etc.*

This is when I suggested we call for assistance. There were probably trained personnel connected with the mall qualified to do this sort of thing. My neighbor agreed but not before adding a few words, using the vilest expressions imaginable. I asked the young man we'd found to tie the stand to the roof if he had to perform this task often and he grunted something inaudible. He kept his head down as if he were reading cue cards off his shoes. He looked like Ralph the Chinese delivery boy but I don't think it was him. The procedure took five minutes. My neighbor stood off to the side. She wanted nothing to do with this and I couldn't blame her. When he was finished I slipped him a dollar bill because that's what I think you are supposed to do. By this time my neighbor was already in the driver's seat. I took my place next to her. I was grateful to be on my way home, although I had no plans for when I got there. My neighbor turned the ignition but the engine sputtered and did not turn over. She said something like, Come on Betsy, Come on Girl. I looked in the backseat to see if anyone was there. It is almost always a feminine name for cars. Cars in this regard are like boats. I don't know whether motorcycles are namable or planes for that matter. I also don't know why it is almost always a feminine name for cars and boats. I guess it is because feminine names tend to be pleasing to the ear. Eventually Betsy turned over. I didn't want to think

about what would've happened if Betsy didn't turn over. My neighbor shifted Betsy into gear and we pulled out of the parking lot. She was looking splendid, disaffected. I turned the radio on. My neighbor did not react to this as by then she'd wanted nothing to do with me. There were two speakers located on the inside panels of the front doors, though the speaker on the passenger side door cut in and out. I settled on the third button, which was the news station. I think the announcer was going on about the fiscal shenanigans of a disreputable energy company and the disappearance of a little girl out west but I missed certain details due to the speaker cutting in and out. Then came the traffic report which warned motorists to avoid the highway we were about to turn onto. I said I knew an alternate route, which was met with skepticism. This is when it began to rain. My neighbor turned on the windshield wipers, which were useless. Worse was the horrendous squeaking. I tried to look out the windshield but it had started to fog up. This is when I noticed a crack in the lower left quadrant of the windshield. There were eight lines spread out in berserk fashion from the point of impact. The two longest lines formed a cockeyed horizon at the bottom. It almost resembled my signature but looked more like a spider web that had been hit by a small caliber bullet. On the windshield there were two stickers, one depicting the crucifixion and the other advertising the local police. The sticker depicting the crucifixion had a large brown cross pitted against a blue backdrop. There was a tiny Jesus nailed to the cross with even tinier figures at his feet. The tinier figures were indistinguishable. The crucifixion sticker was located on the upper right quadrant of the windshield. My neighbor turned on the defroster. Sometimes opening the windows can defrost the windows. I'm not sure what it depends on but it does depend on something. Perhaps air temperature or humidity. I remember playing tic-tac-toe on frosted windows

with my sister. She'd win because I let her. I don't recall what vehicles these tic-tac-toe games took place in. She'd always X in the center square and I'd make the fatal mistake not anticipating her cagey endgame strategy. I think we did attend the same schools, at least during the ages when we were likely to play tic-tac-toe on frosted windows. I've forgotten certain periods of my history. I was pointing out where to turn right or left, leading us through a maze of roads I believed was the way home. We ended up in a part of town one would rather not end up in. Driving through those neighborhoods was unsettling. My neighbor feared for her virtue, her good name. She said she saw a gang of similarly dressed teenagers tossing an infant back and forth in lieu of a ball. I told my neighbor to keep her eyes on the road, that if we hit a pedestrian to keep going. She started praying to St. Jude or St. Anthony, whoever the patron saint of precarious situations was.

*Did you see that?*

*See what?*

*There is a gang of similarly dressed teenagers tossing an infant back and forth in lieu of a ball.*

*Are you sure?*

*Where are we?*

*Someplace else.*

*They gang rape people over here. I see it on the news all the time.*

*Jesus.*

*Never take the Lord's name in vain.*

*Never say never say never say never.*

*Why am I listening to you?*

*Occasionally take the Lord's name in vain.*

*You are unreal.*

*Just don't make eye contact with anyone.*

I cursed my lousy sense of direction and was ridiculed by my neighbor. In her part of the world the people are quick to ridicule. It is part of the heritage. Although I do know from

which directions the sun rises and sets this knowledge has never been helpful to me when trying to find an address. And I can never remember which streets/avenues run north-south and which go east-west. I usually think in terms of forwards and backwards and everything looks the same to me regardless. Eventually we happened upon a recognizable street so I didn't have to say things like, Make the next right, turn left here, etc. The *Check Oil* light came on while we were stopped at a red light. They had an oilcan as the symbol for this with a drop of oil dripping from the spout. Most of the dashboardia was creative. I offered to check under the hood and was showered with derision. I opened the passenger side door and walked to the front of the car. I asked my neighbor to release the lever indicating *hood* to the left of the steering column and heard that distinctive pop when she did. I was unable to locate the lever inside the hood. Generally the second lever is located somewhere near the center of a barely opened hood. My neighbor stayed inside the car as I struggled. After five minutes I gave up and took my place in the passenger's seat. I wasn't sure if I should say something or if I was expected to. I was told to make efforts in any number of areas and this was one of them. Instead I think I may have nodded off. The sound of the rain and rhythm of the windshield wipers and the medication is what did it. I'm not sure how long I was asleep. The sleep was dreamless until my neighbor made the mistake of trying to change radio stations after a Johnny Cash song had ended. She didn't want to listen to a commercial. She could not abide commercials. Betsy, a compact foreign job, folded up like a compact foreign car smashing into a bigger one. The car we crashed into seemed unaffected. The driver of the other car was not from this country. People who flee have it written all over themselves and there were no traces of anything like that on her face. She was dressed in a suit and spoke a language I was not familiar

with. She seemed agitated and was speaking with her passenger, a similarly dressed man who was probably a colleague. They may have been related. One was sociable, hyperactive, rambunctious. The other was sedate. The lively one, the female, was always looking for attention. She'd go into kinetic frenzy whenever you'd come through the door. The male seemed as if he had been lobotomized. They probably woke early, put on their suits and drove to a building. It was probably a long drive—with no place to pull over for food, gasoline or urination. The both of them carried leather briefcases. Inside the case were papers, flow charts, pie charts, spread sheets, contracts and electronic gadgets. My neighbor got out of the car and attempted to explain herself to the victims. I couldn't hear at first. I stayed inside the car and watched a Teardrop walk across the street, which was busy with onlookers. My neighbor said her eyes were off the road only for a second.

*My eyes were off the road only for a second.*

*Accidents happen that way lady. (Said with heavy accent)*

*I'm sorry. Are you okay?*

*You stupid bitch! (First in English then in native tongue)*

The woman was right. Accidents have any number of causes—poor visibility, driver error, inclement weather, driver impairment, mechanical defects, etc., which is to say nothing of the blind spot. I am always looking for the blind spot. There is a natural adversarial relationship between accident victims and those who have caused the accident. The victims resent the causers for crashing into their cars. The causers don't like being called names. That's the nature of the relationship. I was then showered with derision.

*Why are you still in the car?*

*I'm sorry.*

*What is wrong with you?*

*I'm not sure.*



*You are ... etc., etc., etc.*

I tried to get out of the car but the passenger side door wouldn't open. It didn't matter whether the lock was up or down. The impact of the crash may have been why the door would not open. I think this is when I noticed my head was bleeding. I was not wearing the seat belt. I don't like the feeling of being tied down, strapped in. It almost certainly has something to do with childhood. The female victim was still cursing at my neighbor, all shaking fists and waving fingers. The male victim looked like he was uncomfortable in social situations. Agoraphobes are often shy accident victims who wear business suits. I climbed over the emergency brake to get out of the car through the driver's side door. I nearly lost my balance. The nightstand was lying in pieces between the cars, four large pieces and the rest reduced to kindling. I stepped around the nightstand and over to where my neighbor and the victims were. There was broken glass everywhere. It was impossible not to walk over the glass. There was no refraction, no prisms or rainbows due to the clouds. I stood next to the male victim. I asked about work. I hear people asking this all the time in regular conversation. It's a way of relating to one another.

*How's work?*

*It's good. Busy.*

*When aren't you busy?*

*Jesus, tell me about it.*

*Been anywhere recently?*

*Was down in D.C. for a few days, then up to Boston. They got me flying down to Miami in a few weeks. Might be able to play some golf.*

*I've been to the driving range twice. Only once did I hit a ball straight and far and we're talking out of two-hundred balls probably. It was pathetic. The rest were all groundouts to short and line drives down the right-field line.*

*I'm sorry?*

*Any new accounts?*

*Working with Chase mostly. Few other ones here and there.*

*Etc.*

Then the man was unconscious, bleeding from the nose and mouth. His face was swollen and there were tiny pieces of glass caught in his hair and beard. It looked decorative, like glitter. There was a faint gurgling sound coming from his throat. I shook him, thinking he might come to. I tried checking for a pulse, but I wasn't sure where to put my finger. Then I listened for breathing sounds. There weren't any, only the wind and rain, which was letting up. Someone handed me a telephone and I dialed 911. After the Hellos and How are yous I told them I needed an ambulance, that the foreign agoraphobe was unconscious. I took his left hand and gripped it like we were arm wrestling. He was wearing an Emergency Alert Bracelet. Perhaps he had to be resuscitated once. Otherwise he was one of the seriously afflicted. I kept a close eye on him in case he went into shock or convulsions. With my right hand I made a fist and pounded on his chest, knowing the ambulance would be there soon and they should find me trying something. The bracelet was conspicuous, like a scarlet letter. I think I may have said something about Chinese food. I sometimes have nothing else to say to people. This is when my neighbor asked me to retrieve her insurance card from the glove compartment. She was looking splendid, unnerved. I was still dizzy but managed to make my way back into the car through the driver's side door, climbing over the emergency brake and opening the glove box. The glove box was shallow and had no light that came on when the box was opened. Some glove boxes have a light like a refrigerator. The insurance card was under a pile of cassettes. The cassette player worked in my neighbor's car but the rewind function did not. If one needed to rewind a cassette one had to eject the cassette first, flip it over to the other side and then press the fast forward button.

Initially I had trouble locating the insurance card. I did find a notebook, though. My neighbor would write things down, but she'd never let me look at it. Time was she did important work. I saw several notebooks in her apartment but didn't know she kept one in the car, too. I never read any of her notebooks. It was too dark to read in the car anyway. The interior light didn't work. Even if the interior light did work it would've been a mistake to leave the light on. I did turn the hazards on, though. Traffic on the road behind us had come to a stop. Only the far left lane was open. The cars drove by single file and slowly— all of them rubbernecking. I didn't think my neighbor had flares otherwise she would've thought to light the flares and place them around the cars. My neighbor was remarkably poised, like she was royalty or had been to an exclusive finishing school. I'm certain she did not attend an exclusive finishing school. I would've remembered her mentioning that. On the phone she tended to be more formal. It might've been in reaction to my phone manner. Eventually I found the proof of insurance and made my way back out of the car, climbing over the emergency brake and out the driver's side door. This was after trying to vacate the car through the passenger side door, which still would not open regardless of whether the lock was up or down. The two cars were parked right in the middle of the street. The nightstand was on the ground, too, broken between the two cars. It was in pieces. The glass was also in pieces. There was no smoke or exhaust rising from the hoods of either car. I don't know if it is possible for exhaust to escape the engine itself, for the exhaust to circumvent the pipe. Then the police arrived. I don't know who called them. In my head I practiced my I don't know what happened officer speech. *I'm sorry, I don't know what happened, officer. I think I may have been asleep, yes ... the rhythm of the windshield wipers and the medication probably. My neighbor thought it would fit in the car itself but the legroom ... Yes, something to rest*

*an alarm clock on, a lamp, several pens and a notepad. No trace of anything like that was on her face.* Almost nothing has anything to do with me which makes it hard sometimes for me to make myself understood. First the police officers set up flares around both cars and then spoke to the victims. My neighbor was standing between the two cars, close to the shattered nightstand. I've forgotten how much it cost. It was expensive. I was leaning against my neighbor's car when an officer approached me. I did not like him. He was one of those characters with a dead fish handshake. No grip at all, hand bent awkwardly, limp-wristed, presenting only fingers to take hold of. There is something wrong with a man who shakes hands like this. Women shake hands this way but there is nothing wrong with it. Otherwise he was in no way delicate. His fingernails were too long for his fingers, which were thick and short. He scraped my palm with one of those long fingernails and I had to see if he'd drawn blood. There was no blood, only the lines that bisected my palm into unequal sections. The math is off there but the math is always off. One line ran across the entire length of my palm, in the middle. I always took this to mean I'd live forever. This was until my neighbor told me the lifeline was on the other hand. She took pleasure in the message and I told her to take upon a knife's point and then she cursed me. The questioning was tense and filled with awkward silences. We were probably talking for half an hour. I got the impression he had done this before. I was ready to go home, although I had no plans for when I got there. I did have to go to the bathroom, which was surprising to me. Holding it in is one of the most unique physical sensations a male human being has. I was always holding it in then. It was probably around this time the ambulance arrived. I was ushered toward the back along with the male victim who was still unconscious. I forgot to look for his shoes. Accident victims are known to come right out of their shoes, like it's a law of physics. He was

covered with a clean white sheet. The two of us were placed on gurneys and loaded in. I didn't know where they were taking us. I'd never learned where any of the hospitals were. The ambulance's acceleration was slow so the driver had to be careful when merging onto the highway. Merging onto highways can be a tricky business with an ambulance. There can be no cars traveling in the intended lane; otherwise the driver will be on the receiving end of a chorus of car horns and curses. Teardrops are usually the most demonstrative cursers. The driver insinuated himself into the middle lane and accelerated without incident. One of the paramedics asked if I was taking any medications. I think I told him about my respiratory troubles. The paramedic made a notation on his clipboard, but didn't respond otherwise. The way he held the pen, between his ring and forefinger, reminded me of an illiterate making his mark. The foreign victim was unconscious on the other gurney and the other paramedic was working on him. There were two of them. I did not ask questions or offer encouragement. Sometimes victims talk in an ambulance so that everyone can hear. I only congratulated them on how well they'd blended in. Past that I was on the sidelines. I sometimes have nothing to say to people and people are often as grateful for this as I am. I didn't know where my neighbor was, though I'd assumed she was still at the scene. She was speaking with the police officers when I was loaded in. I didn't want to leave her but had no choice. She was looking splendid, guilt ridden. I haven't seen her since. I think I miss her but I'm not sure. The ambulance driver was weaving in and out of traffic like a jockey on a thoroughbred horse. The lights were flashing and the siren was blaring but I couldn't hear it clearly from inside the ambulance. My ears were ringing. I've never been diagnosed with a hearing problem, but I've always thought there was something wrong. One of the paramedics spoke into a CB radio. He referred to vital signs, pulses, pressures, sinus

rhythms and the estimated time of arrival. I looked at my watch to note the time. This one had roman numerals on its face pitted against a blue backdrop with a thin brown leather band, which can make my wrist appear thicker than it is. My wrists look like they should belong to my neighbor. I am partial to this watch and wear it more often than the others, although, I always reset each watch for daylight savings time. I remember someone advising me to always wind a watch clockwise when winding a watch or clock. I forgot who it was that said this but I was inclined to believe them. I can recall parts of the conversation. *Always wind a watch clockwise. What's wrong with counterclockwise? The works to keep time.* The sun was obscured by a team of clouds. It was raining. I was someplace unfamiliar. I do recall being uncomfortable and I'm sure it was for this reason. The person who spoke of the importance of winding clockwise mentioned no other benefits. According to my watch we were to arrive at the hospital at 8:29 p.m. I wasn't thinking about what this hospital visit would cost or whether I was covered by insurance or not. Doubtless there was money left in the account, although I can't recall having earned any money recently. Time was I did important work. I'm not certain why I stopped. Sometimes I know the particulars when asked but I just as often forget.

