



winter 2017

euphony

vol. 17, no. 1

EDITORS' FOREWORD

It's that time once again. We have compiled our favorites from the past almost-year into our Winter 2017 issue. With each successive venture into publication, we aim to incorporate as much as possible of the interesting perspectives and styles of both our staff and our contributors. As a result, variety abounds in this issue. The reader will find eerie fairy houses with dark underbellies; insightful commentaries on the interplay between dark and light; powerful expressions of grief for one's cultural and familial past and present; exigent denials of entrance; anxious calculations on loved ones' future safety; eroding relationships to friends, family, and marriage—to love itself; grapplings between oneself and fear and fantasy; fragments of 3 AM consciousness; touching reflections on death and God; and self-aware observations of academia's painful non-self-awareness. We hope that you enjoy reading these fine pieces.

As always, please visit our website, euphonyjournal.com, for exclusive online pieces and to access our past issues.

For any questions or comments, feel free to reach out to us at euphonyjournal@gmail.com. We are also active on Twitter [[@euphonyjournal](https://twitter.com/euphonyjournal)], where we post about Euphony's goings-on and interesting literary tidbits.

—The Editors

EUPHONY

VOLUME 17, NUMBER 1
WINTER 2017

Euphony is a non-profit literary journal produced biannually at the University of Chicago. We are dedicated to publishing the finest work by writers and artists both accomplished and aspiring. We publish a variety of works including poetry, fiction, drama, essays, criticism, and translations.

Visit our website, www.euphonyjournal.org, for more information.

Founded Spring 2000 by
Stephen Barbara and Matthew Deming

www.euphonyjournal.org

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SHANA AUE

THE FAIRY HOUSE

For Eric

James, my older brother Duane's best friend, disappeared the same summer that we found the fairy house in the woods. I found it with my sister Ivy. We were always finding hiding places in the woods and making up stories about them, but the fairy house was different. As soon as we saw it, we knew it was different. There was a presence there we could not explain, something dangerous and appealing. To us, this meant magic.

The fairy house is still there, for all I know. Even now, I can tell you how to find it. Go to the lot across the street from our old house—the empty lot, the one that was cleared but never built upon. Walk back, following the footpath through the tall yellow grass that grows higher than your head. When you see a thick patch of poplars on your left, stop, and turn towards them. There is a footpath here too, but it is harder to see. You will pass wildflowers—asters, black-eyed-susans. Pick a hand-full and carry them with you. When you reach the trees, look down. There is a tunnel in the underbrush. You will need to crawl on your hands and knees to get through, but this is part of the fun. It is so secret, you have to crawl. You will only crawl for a little while—a few yards, at most. When you emerge you will find yourself in a small clearing, too small even for dandelions. The ground is covered with last autumn's leaves, moldering. An adult might not even call it a clearing. To your left there is a tree stump, covered with moss and maybe mushrooms. Leave your flowers here, on the stump—they are an offering. We know to do this, as we know how to play tag or hide-and-seek; these things are not taught.

There is a long log stretching away from the stump. It is very old, and has started to collapse into the earth. Follow it. Run your hand along the surface and pieces will fall off. I loved to walk on the log after a rain; the decaying wood squished between my toes like mud.

When you get to the end of the log, turn right. There are brambles, but you are brave. Push through, and you will see it. The fairy house.

To some, it might have looked like another fallen tree, one that had grown in shallow soil and toppled in a windstorm, ripping its roots up with it as it fell. To some people, it might look as though that funny moss had just happened to grow there, draping over the wall of roots to form an overhang, a kind of roof. Those chambers all up the wall of dirt might appear to be just the natural growth of the roots, twisting in and out of each other. But I knew better. "Fairies live here," I said to Ivy.

"Allie," Ivy turned to me with wide eyes. "Fairies? Like Tinker Bell?"

"No," I said. Ivy had only read fairy tales written for little girls. The ones I

had read were not so sparkly. “Tinker Bell isn't a real fairy, she's just a cartoon. These are real. They play tricks on people. They'd... they'd turn eggs rotten while they were still in a chicken, things like that.”

Ivy frowned. We raised chickens, in a coop in the yard. “That's never happened,” she said.

“They must've just moved in,” I said. “We'll have to be careful now. Leave them presents and stuff. It's a good thing you left those flowers on that old stump in the clearing. That's probably, like, the gateway to their property. We'll have to leave things there for them.”

“And then they'll leave the chickens alone?”

“Right.”

After that, we were always finding things to leave for the fairies. Cookies, crumbled into a pocket and emptied on the stump. Scraps of cloth and string. Nails. Sometimes the things were gone the next time we visited, and sometimes they weren't. This was how we learned what the fairies liked. If anyone had asked, I would have said that I kept it going for Ivy—if it was a grown-up who asked, I would have been a great big sister, and if it was another kid my age, I would have been playing a joke. Really, though, I believed in the fairy house as much as Ivy did. More, in a way. Ivy accepted the existence of fairies without question, even if she sometimes doubted that they lived in our fallen tree. But I knew of the possibility that there were no fairies at all in the world, and I wanted them to be real.

We did not tell Duane about the fairy house. We knew, without talking about it, that he would not understand. Duane was usually in the tree house, with James, and we were not allowed in the tree house.

Duane was already a teenager when we were still children. There is a big age gap between Duane and me. Ivy and I were old enough at this time that we were allowed to walk around by ourselves, as long as we were together. If we had lived in the city, we would have needed a grown-up or Duane. Ivy and I are close in age, though at this time I was Old Enough To Know Better while Ivy was still Too Young To Understand. I was old enough to eavesdrop on adult conversations and grasp at their meaning, while Ivy was still too young to care.

James and Duane were usually in the tree house because that was where they could secretly smoke cigarettes. We knew this, but our parents did not. Now, I wonder why we did not tell on Duane. Health professionals at our school had been to my class to talk about the dangers of lung cancer. They held up a clean, new yellow sponge, which represented the lung of a non-smoker. Then they held up an old, dirty, worn-out sponge to represent the lung of a smoker. I described this demonstration to Ivy in great detail. We were both worried that Duane's lungs looked like a dirty sponge. But we did not tell; we could not tell. We knew this somehow. We were bound by some sibling code of honor, though it was a confused code because Duane was so much older. He was our brother and he was also an authority figure. We thought it best to keep silent.

Though our parents seemed convinced of Duane's innocence, in the time of the fairy house they had become suspicious of James. James had been around forever—in our country neighborhood he was the closest child of Duane's age, living only about a mile away. Ever since the boys had been old enough to ride

their bikes to each other's houses James had been there, sitting on the porch steps, wrestling with the dogs, up a tree. Until a few years ago he had been just a kid—dirty and freckled, blond hair perpetually in need of a haircut. He was a good kid, they said later, always Duane's best friend. James and Duane, Duane and James. Racing their bikes down the dirt roads, throwing up clouds of dust. Clearing trails in the woods, stealing scrap lumber for secret forts. Occasionally—very occasionally—playing with the babies. They always had dirty fingernails and sticky faces. They both lost their first tooth in the same week—Duane first, and James two days later, grinning proudly with a hole in his gums that was maybe a little too bloody and raw for the tooth to have come out in its own time. But that was how it was, how it always was.

Now the boys were sixteen, and in the past year James had changed. He was thin, and often nervous. Jittery, said Mom. He may or may not have dropped out of school; he seemed to have a lot of free time this past year, said Dad. He always wore long sleeves, even in the summer. I heard my parents say these things, and saw them nod to each other knowingly. I did not understand the connections, but I knew they were there, somewhere. One time, James' mom came over to tell us that she hadn't seen her son for two weeks. (This was not the Disappearance—it was only a small disappearance.) They had a fight and he stormed out, taking only the clothes on his back. He had not been to school. After extensive questioning of Duane—who had been acting strangely—James was found hiding in the tree house, subsisting on food and blankets brought to him by Duane. Mom and Dad, I noticed, seemed less upset by Duane's concealment of James than by the fact that it had taken James' mother two weeks to start searching for him. This seemed connected to the fact that they did not forbid James from coming over for afternoons and meals, even though they suspected him of—something. I did not know what.

I did know that things at our house were tense, and Ivy and I often escaped to the fairy house. I was always quick to point out evidence of the fairies to Ivy—dirt disturbed in places where it had been smooth before, long thin strips of bark peeled off a nearby tree, leaves that had been on the ground the day before picked up and twined in the roots of the fallen tree. And then there was the fact that sometimes—every now and then—a gift left on the tree stump would find its way back to the fairy house. A scrap of red cloth coiled around a root. A flower on the ground. At first Ivy, a keen little girl who had already guessed the truth about Santa Claus, accused me of moving the gifts when she wasn't around. But when I hooked pinkies with her and swore that I hadn't, she was forced to believe. No one knew about the fairy house except the two of us. The fairies must be moving the gifts, and the fairies must be real.

The summer passed, in the slow and fast way that summers do.

For the first few days I didn't realize that James was gone. I knew that Duane spent more time in his room, and I knew that our parents were more patient with his teenage outbursts. James hadn't been to our house for a few days, but that wasn't unusual. His mother hadn't come looking for him. But slowly I realized that a sadness had descended on our house. No one told me anything, but I knew.

Two weeks passed, and Mom was on the phone with a friend. I listened around the corner, looking for clues:

“...last time he was with Duane, but this time we know that isn't the case... Mmmm, she didn't come around here this time, went straight to the cops. I saw her at the store yesterday, she said some guys had been to her house the day before he disappeared, asking where he was. Poor kid....”

I was forced to run for it when Mom wandered out of the kitchen, the phone cord trailing behind her.

Three weeks, and Dad was talking to a neighbor out in the yard. I was behind the shed, out of sight, sitting in the dirt and straining my ears:

“He stole some shit from them, you know,” said Dad. “That's what they told Alice. Threatened her, she said, looking for money. Then the kid vanishes the next day? Everybody knows what happened.”

Dad and the neighbor wandered away before I could hear, for sure, what had happened.

A month, and the Missing Child posters went up at the post office. Two months, and Ivy and I sat at the top of the stairs when we were supposed to be in bed, listening to our parents talk to the friends who were over for dinner:

Dad: “Everyone knows who did it. But without a body, there's no case, you know? And it's not like he hadn't run away before.”

Friend: “So you don't think he ran away?”

Dad: “The kid's dead.”

Mom: “Not so loud. Duane might hear.”

Dad: “Duane knows.”

Everybody knew. We were not supposed to know, but everybody knew. We were not sure what we knew.

We had not been to the fairy house for a long time. Shortly after James disappeared, our parents had made new rules that severely limited our freedom. But after three months, when the leaves had fallen and the hours of daylight were growing shorter, they eased up. We had to be back before dark, but we were free to wander once again.

Ivy and I headed for the fairy house one brown and gray afternoon. It was not raining, but it felt like it was. In rubber boots we splashed down the footpath through the tall grass, trying to hit every puddle. The tunnel was a trough of mud, but we crawled through it anyway, heedless of our knees and elbows. We left our gift—three neon plastic beads—on the tree stump, and followed the log, which had sunk even further into the earth after the rains. We pushed through the brambles, laughing in anticipation. And then I stopped so fast that Ivy crashed right into me.

In front of me, half buried in the mud, was a thing.

It wasn't James' body. I know that's what you're thinking—that we found James' body. And wouldn't that be neat, wouldn't that tie things up nicely? Everyone can understand a body. Even Ivy, who was Too Young to Understand, could have understood a body. But no, James' body was never found. His Missing Child poster stayed on the wall in the post office for years, until one day I looked up and realized that the boy smiling out of the picture was just a kid—younger than me. No, we didn't find James' body at the fairy house. The loose ends of his story were left dangling, never to be resolved.

The thing on the ground was a thing I didn't have a name for at the time,

though surely I had seen it on some poster or in some after-school special. Today I have a name for it: it was a hypodermic needle. At the time, though I had no name for it, I knew what it was. I knew that it was why James wore long sleeves even in the summer, and that it had to do with what he had stolen, and from who, and why he had disappeared. I knew that Ivy and I were not the only ones who had used the fairy house as a secret hiding place. I knew who had moved the gifts we left for the fairies. I knew these things as I knew how to play hide-and-seek, and as I knew that we needed to leave.

Somehow, I dragged Ivy out of the woods and made her promise never to go back to the fairy house. I remember twisting her arms and wrapping her hair around my hand, wrenching her head to the side, her screaming and hitting me but relenting in the end. I don't remember what I said. The fairies are mad at us, maybe. How do you know? Ivy must have asked.

I just know.

Sometimes there was a day when the house was very quiet. Mom was working in the garden; Dad was working on the car; Duane was in the tree house or at a friend's; Ivy was playing some private little girl game. On days like this, I would tiptoe around the house, exploring. I went to my parents' room and sat on their bed. I opened Mom's jewelry box and spread her jewelry out on the smooth blanket—all the necklaces and rings and pins that I had never seen her wear. I stuck my face into my parent's closet and smelled Dad's shirts. And sometimes, I went to Duane's room and looked through his drawers. I would never have looked through Ivy's drawers—that would have been a betrayal—but Duane was so much older that he was almost like a parent. It seemed okay to look through his things.

Duane kept a journal. It looked, intentionally, like Kurt Cobain's recently published journal—a red spiral notebook with doodles all over the cover, and “If You Read, You Will Judge” scrawled in large letters across the front. It was mostly full of song lyrics, with the occasional complaint about teachers or parents or the government. Sometimes there was interesting commentary on a girl. One day, almost a year after James disappeared, I sat on Duane's unmade bed and read:

I had a dream about J. We were on a beach and I said “Where are you, man? Where did you go?” J. kinda laughed and said “Last time I was with you. You tell me where I am.” I laughed back at him, really happy all of a sudden. “I'm okay,” said J. “Don't worry about me. I'm okay. I'm free.” Then he walked off down the beach, and I could see him getting smaller and smaller. Then I woke up, and for a few seconds I felt like everything was fine.

I never went back to the fairy house, but I think about it sometimes. I think about the old log that I used to walk on sinking ever further into the ground, and about the brambles growing up until they are impenetrable. I think about the bits of red cloth that James picked up and wound around the roots; I think of them slowly rotting in the rain. I think about all the paths to the fairy house fading, and all signs that we were ever there disappearing as the forest takes the place back. All signs save one.

KRISTENE BROWN

.....
FLIP SIDE OF THE CANCER
CARE CENTER

How strange. The moon
is the ass-end of the sun.

Ships sail upside down.,
Fish swim belly up. Here

in this hummed out hollow
space, where the rain falls

sky-ward,
a dying star is no bigger

than a fly
fizzling against a window pane,

a simple soft-watt dim,
a lamp shadow. Who knew?

All the doom undone.
This is everything. Every future

moment a slow gathering
of certainty,

a magnetic reversal of the poles.
This is a universe big enough

for any kind of hope,
backwards before forwards.

How nice it is to be a girl again,
sinking to a happier home,

to be old and grow young.
I believe

the stars know there was more
than one big bang,

but only night knows the difficulty
of birthing that many blooms

of light. I'll get there again.
Let me tell you, the first moments

of remission
 feel like the afterlife.

MICHAEL BROWN JR.

TWIN BIRTHS

Rattling with the 4 train overhead
The skeletons of my kin
Closing in from the moonlight
That pinpricks their graves I can
Remember my mother's patience all those times
My cousin robbed her
Of gold things to buy glass dreams
And in that thumping
Of train on track I'm taken back to my father
Taking me to Coney Island
So sober I almost cried
As the sea squeezed my chest
No longer noticing my pacemaker
Protruding from my shirt like the hearts
Of cartoon characters struck dumb with love
And my brother taking me to museums
To teach me that there was a black world outside
Piss-soaked steps and niggas selling smoke from steps
And my mother shouting
At white doctors to do more than pray
For black babies and to give me my fucking pacemaker
motherfuckers
May God grant my mother the grace
The scene of some children
Peddling through puddles
Grants me Christ they are
So small with their laughter
Young as starlight they could bloom
By a wind or word up out this dust
Or die shadows shuffling to the sun
Descending further into the Bronx
So holy I shudder violently vomiting
On a stretch of grass so patched and bitter
Because she let that nigga in every single fucking time
He promised not to take anything but her kindness
Until the house heaved from seismic rent shudders
But blessed be the breaks
'Cause tax season came
And welfare washed away what could've been
When reparations did not come

But blessed be the breaks
'Cause I am really far from home
But this stretch I'm on now mama
It's as quiet as your lips against the incubator

HOLLY DAY

.....
DEWEY-EYED FARM GIRLS

you fuck your way across the country, peddling
Bibles and gas-station condoms

I read your letters
you can't come home right now
you can't get enough.

BARBARA DRAPER

CALCULATION

I look up the blast zone for the oil trains that rumble
and lurch through Minneapolis.

My house is outside it but my daughter's
is in the outer ring,

and the house of the babysitter of my granddaughters
is in the bulls eye.

I calculate.

In one more year Ceci will leave the sitter's for school.
Two years later Julia follows.

I think about the odds,

that stretch of track,
that time of day.

KAREN KATES

THE POET'S MAIL CARRIER

There were four of us Yale seniors in the car returning from spring break in Florida, taking turns sleeping, then driving through the night back to college. Tim, Arty, and I had been freshmen roommates who'd stayed close. We'd met Nolan because he wanted a ride to Fort Lauderdale. He was skinny and nerdy and at the wheel sometime after three a.m. on a nearly deserted stretch of highway in Virginia, when he removed his glasses for a moment to clean them on his shirt—nothing wrong with that, people told him over and over. An oil rig had been barreling our way in the other lane until its driver dozed off, allowing the tanker to jump the concrete divider, killing Arty, who'd been riding in the back seat behind Nolan. “Suddenly, the headlights came flying toward me,” Nolan told the cops, shaking terribly in the hot, humid night.

Somehow we others were not badly injured; we bled from the splintered glass of both vehicles, but the first thing we did was to drag Arty away, before the truck exploded, although we knew we'd lost him. In the emergency room while our gashes were easily sutured, we all kept crying. Even now, whenever I thought of Nolan, I considered how reasonable his judgment was, how commonplace it is to endure an instant of poor visibility: the mirror that fogs during shaving, the seconds before the brush of wipers clears a windshield of rain. It was senseless of him to leap to his death from the sixteenth floor of the Kline Biology Tower, a few days after returning to campus. He left a letter about his guilt as the driver in the collision.

This happened in 1998, a year before the Columbine shootings; school grief counseling had not yet become embedded in our culture. On the night of the accident Nolan stopped in the break-down lane to awaken Tim, whose turn it was to drive. “Oh man,” Tim confessed that he'd said. “Let me sleep a little more. I'll owe you; I'll do the morning rush hour.” After the suicide, Tim, haggard with sorrow, stated, “Now I'm responsible for two deaths.”

I was the one who'd tacked the file card about needing a fourth driver for spring break on to a bulletin board crowded with messages. As I pinned my card next to a complaint—what asshole ripped off my purple crop-top from the Dwight laundry room?—a kid I didn't know, Nolan, who'd been walking by, paused to say that he would like to do the trip.

Late in May, when the college was decorated for graduation, I was astonished to see that my index card was still on the bulletin board. So easily, I might have been delayed in posting the message because of a conference with a professor, or perhaps by stopping to speak to an acquaintance during the instant that Nolan went past; we would not have encountered each other.

Tim and I never stopped missing Arty, a dark-haired, earnest pre-med, who liked to study with his shoes off, in his black socks. His grandmother had given him a threadbare Oriental rug that he'd pace, holding a chemistry tome. Or

Jeanine, his gorgeous girlfriend would test him, strands of her long, coppery hair catching like a book mark in the pages. At his funeral I wept as the rabbi opened the heavy Torah, which reminded me of Arty and his books.

After college, Tim took a job as an investment strategist in the Bay Area, and avoided contact with me. I saw him only when he traveled to Brooklyn to speak at Arty's memorial service during the several years that the family held the gatherings. Each time he'd told a different anecdote about our friend.

At first, Arty had never danced at Yale. During parties, he stood in a corner watching contentedly, nursing a beer, until the weekend that he saw Jeanine hoofing it up in a campus musical. He learned *The Frug* so he could be in her next show, *Sweet Charity*.

Jeanine once told us that Arty was the high-scorer of the Bushwick high school bowling league. He denied it. Tim and I were able to rent an alley after midnight, and with the owner's collusion we locked Arty in; finally, he reluctantly lifted a ball. For an hour, he knocked down every pin in sight.

Shortly before he was to take a train into Manhattan for a medical school interview he noticed a tear in his suit. He tried on eleven different suits that a gang of us brought over to him, and one looked presentable. But he phoned from Grand Central Station. He was wearing mismatched shoes.

Each week he went into North Haven to mentor in a Big Brother program. Tim didn't mention the teenager who sent a thank-you package to Arty, a beautifully wrapped department store gift box. Inside were two fine grams of hashish.

I never spoke at the memorials, although I believed that Arty's death left a jagged hole in the world. He was so mild-mannered. I imagined his kids having a happy childhood, setting a good example for others by their gentleness, passing on his grace to their own children. Arty had wanted to be an oncologist; there were lives that he might have saved, or people would not forget how he comforted them. That's who we lost.

As we approached our fortieth birthdays, many college classmates became sentimental, writing to the class notes column of the alumni magazine. A submission from Tim read: I am a postal carrier in Carmel, New York. It's a calm, good life.

I lived in Bedford, in Westchester County, less than an hour away; I had no idea how long he'd been close by. When I started to leave a phone message suggesting dinner at my house with the family or perhaps getting together by ourselves, he picked up.

He asked, "How about lunch in the city next week? Maybe June 14th because Flag Day's a postal holiday."

"Is it?"

"Of course not, you moron. I need to be in Manhattan. Postal workers occasionally have to meet with their brokers or lawyers just like anyone else."

I told him that I was surprised that he hadn't contacted me.

"Yeah, let's take it a bit at a time, David."

I could see him through the window of the restaurant across the street from where I worked. He was wearing a tie and jacket, and although his hair had gone gray he didn't look too different from a decade ago, when we were together at

Arty's final memorial tribute. Tim had been considered handsome in college, but more significantly, even now when sitting alone, his expression was still open and friendly, indicative of the nice person he was. That receptive demeanor also seemed emblematic. Of we three close friends, Arty, him, and me—he was the most brilliant, incessantly open to the acquisition of knowledge.

As we shook hands it seemed to me that he did so reluctantly. A waitress set down a Caesar salad that he must have ordered, and after I sat across from him I asked for the salad too.

“You didn't tell me that you moved to my area,” I said. “Or, that you were a mail man.”

“A postal carrier. I bet you expected me to show up in uniform. I get shorts for the summer.”

He gestured at my building. “Your office is in that place? How high up?”

I replied that I was on the thirtieth floor.

“You're a man of power.”

His tone was pleasant. “I get a good view of the city.”

“A god-like view. Does it make you feel more perceptive?” He said, “Sorry. How's your family?”

“Good. Busy.”

In the old days he would have sensed that I was bluffing. My marriage wasn't shot to hell; I wouldn't say that, but how and when things changed baffled me. I had loved to kayak with my wife on the Hudson, in a park with a strip of sandy beach, close to where we live. When our daughters were small we would bring along a teenage babysitter to take them to the playground or for a hike while we went kayaking. Once, years ago, when one of us accidentally dropped a paddle, we felt a guilty delight about being stranded out in the water, unable to return to our responsibilities; the lifeguard had not yet perceived that there was a problem. My wife massaged sunscreen down my chest and then worked her fingers under my bathing suit, holding my erection in her hand. Hmm, I think I caught a thrashing fish, she said, while we saw our kids, back from wherever they'd been, hopping up and down on the shore, panicky because we were still out on the boat. A man who was standing by a grill waved to us with a spatula, and then pointed to the children. “Does he want to fry them?” my wife had asked, although we understood that he was being kind, offering to distract our girls with food. “Damn,” she continued. “The guy in the motorboat is coming. Can't we tell him to go away?”

We never lost a paddle again until just a few weeks ago, when being stuck out in the river seemed interminable—we had that little to say to each other.

Tim asked, “At your workplace up there in the clouds, how well do you get to know everyone? Do you stop and talk to the secretarial pool?”

“I guess with your job you have to say Hello, how are you? repeatedly. On hot days, the ladies probably offer you lemonade.”

I regretted that I sounded condescending; I wanted him to think that I'd been joking. Reaching across the table, I playfully punched him in the shoulder.

He said, “Watch it! You can't assault a federal employee. But you're not wrong. The small talk is fine.”

Tim removed a photograph from his shirt pocket, and handed it to me.

“This came in an envelope without a return address when I was still out West. Nolan's mother sent me a digitally aged snapshot of him.”

“Shit,” I said. “Why do you keep it?”

I looked at the photo and indeed recognized Nolan, on the cusp of middle age.

“The poor guy,” I said. “That poor, poor, fellow.”

He took the picture back, and then he tore it into four pieces, which he balled inside a napkin.

I asked him if, after all this time, the accident had influenced his—at first I wasn't sure how to phrase it—his change in lifestyle. Neither of us touched our food, and the waitress had the instinct not to hover.

He told me, “I put in my time working hellish hours as a way to forget what happened. Now you think I'm throwing away my potential, right? In the past year especially, I would go so far as to say that I'm happy.”

“I miss you.”

I considered that females were far better at this sort of conversation.

Tim lowered his voice. “I like you too, you fucker. But there are seven billion people on the planet, and you're the one I was with that night.”

“The crash was seventeen years ago,” I said. “Therapy helped me.”

“You weren't responsible for two deaths.”

“I didn't take the wheel, either.”

“Yes, you could have, but you were, slumbering like a baby. I should have woken you up.”

What he did not say was that that neither of us wore glasses that needed to be removed and cleaned in the crucial split second when the tanker swerved toward us. He or I might have floored the accelerator, bypassed the truck, and then careened across the almost deserted highway to the breakdown lane. We would have watched the explosion with its lava of steel and glass, probably powerful enough to make our car shake.

In Florida we'd booked a cheap room with two real beds, a rollaway and a cot. Before spring break Arty, Tim, and I decided that Nolan, the skinny nerd with glasses, would get laid the most. But each day, although he used the pool, he spent most of his time with a book, sprawled out in the sand on his blanket. He turned tan, then nut-brown. Nolan was the only one of us not to throw a pile of dirty towels on the bathroom floor. Nor did he complain if he awoke from the noise of a girl in my bed or Tim's. In the morning he pretended obliviousness. Hey, I always sleep like a log after my twenty laps in the water. I'm having a great time.

He was a nice kid.

Arty spent so much time on the phone talking to Jeanine that he ran up a bill greater than his share of the room.

There were hundreds of us in Fort Lauderdale, as if we were moths attracted to that hot bulb of a sun that shone the entire week we were down there. Nights were starry and bright in Lauderdale; mass volleyball games continued until 10 p.m. Once all four of us roommates decided to go out to dinner with a big group of girls we'd met at the beach. When we sat down at the restaurant, however, we were sure that they weren't the same girls, in fact there were too many of them.

We were seated on long benches, and any time several people simultaneously leaned against the table it rocked like a boat; we came close to tipping it over. All that night I imagined the cacophony of broken china, and the twenty or so of us coming up with piles of dollars and coins to pay for the damage.

One morning Tim returned to our room wearing a skirt and pink shirt that said Luv is Lauderdale in silver sequins. He couldn't find his clothes when he awoke. Maybe there had been another couple in one of the other beds and some guy took his clothes by mistake, or maybe there was a jealous boyfriend. "Whatever you say, Miss, I told him." Arty asked, "Madame, what is your rate? We might be interested."

An hour or so later Tim located me on the beach, and pointed to where Arty sat on a towel absorbed in conversation with a blonde in a purple string bikini. As we watched, she nestled closer to Arty, who wore khaki shorts and sneakers with his usual black socks. Then they both stood up, shook hands, and wished each other good luck with medical school.

The plentiful sun served as a balm on our concerns. There was sex, but also conversations about what worried us, wherever we were from: obtaining jobs, parents losing jobs or divorcing, unreliable boyfriends, girlfriends engaged to someone else out of the blue.

On the last night, some of the girls tried to count the stars, which seemed more numerous than ever—a black velvet sky crammed with silver jewels. Waves slapped the shore rhythmically, and during the final game of volleyball, Arty joined the back row and spiked the ball just out of everyone's reach, even the tallest of us, or the most agile.

After our meeting in the city I didn't expect Tim to contact me. But I couldn't see the point of being passive; I wanted to know my old, good friend again.

"It's not right," I told my wife the next morning, while she was getting breakfast together for the family. "He's dug himself into a hole of anger and grief."

I had worked late, returning home after everyone was asleep; it was my first chance to talk.

"He also insisted that he's happier recently. There's nothing wrong with being a mail carrier, David."

My wife Meghan was red-haired, and still had her freckles. I used to count them when we were naked in bed; never once did I come up with the same number. I've wondered why we rarely lingered after sex now. Were we really too busy? If I took notice that she'd aged, I thought that the faint crinkles by her eyes were pretty, emphasizing their sea-green color. But another difference in her appearance was that her lips were often set in a determination to complete the to-do list that she clicked on to the refrigerator with magnets most days, a reasonable way to keep all of us organized. One daughter performed in several theater groups, the other played on a traveling soccer team that won so frequently that it traveled farther and farther away for tournaments. Meghan went along on weekends, while I tended to stay home and catch up with the yard work.

Our life used to feel more spontaneous. The babies cried unpredictably, or when they were a little older they constantly tripped over objects that were invisible to us. Even as we soothed, we would look at each other and laugh.

When she turned her back to scramble eggs, I removed the day's agenda from the refrigerator, flipped the sheet of paper over to its blank side and clamped the magnet back on. I wrote, On Saturday night let's drive to a movie many towns away and kiss until the teenage girls sitting by us giggle.

Our own girls sauntered into the kitchen, Lily the athlete, Chloe the actress, ten and twelve. They were both fragrant from shampoo. That year, first thing in the morning, they washed their hair, then went to school with it wet, even in winter. I'd imagined icicles forming in their red pony tails as they walked outside; if they shook their heads there might be a sound like wind chimes. I loved my daughters ridiculously. Once when I drove on the Interstate at night heading up to Maine for our vacations I was flagged down by cops because I was cautious, going a bit too slowly. The flashlight waved in my face, at the children asleep in the back.

"Where's the chore list?" Chloe asked.

"Dad took it to add some suggestions of his own," my wife answered.

The sheet of paper full of fragmented declarations, Need soccer cleats, Rehearsal ends 4 had vanished from the refrigerator. As usual the girls didn't finish their breakfast, although they kissed us before leaving the house, enthusiastic about their upcoming day.

I told Meghan, "Maybe they should take the summer off—no soccer team, or performances. They could ride their bikes around town, take things a bit easier."

"Possibly, your friend Tim wants a more relaxed way of life too, after all this time."

"I may go up there to Carmel and find him."

"He doesn't want to see you."

Meghan smiled at me though, and unfolded the to-do list from her pocket.

"We'll have our movie date. How about a double bill at the Imax this weekend?" I waited a month, and then, despite Meghan's protests, I drove over to Carmel, a bucolic town, small enough that one might encounter a postal carrier on his route. As in my own community, I observed a mailman who was allowed to drive his compact white truck for about three blocks, park, and then deliver the mail without using an old-fashioned sack. From my car, I searched the village long enough to decide that my visit was a mistake, when I saw Tim in his neatly creased blue postal shirt and shorts. I pulled over to the curb and put on sun glasses, feeling ludicrous.

Tim took off in his truck. Allowing a few other cars to cut in front of me, I trailed him. He turned on to a road in the woods where houses were set far back, or not visible from the street. Again, I followed. I idled by a long driveway that led to a home that was mostly obscured by trees, and then I made a pretense of talking on my cell phone, which was unnecessary because Tim was concentrating on filling a row of mailboxes, and lifting the colored, metal flags that indicated he'd come. I slumped in my seat, but he barely glanced in my direction.

He had raised all the flags except one; he started up his truck again, and then angled on to a very narrow lane behind the empty mailbox. For a good half hour I sat in my car ashamed, before I locked it, and walked up the road, which was redolent with fallen pine needles. I felt scared that a dog would come bounding at me; I didn't have a can of mace like a mailman or, I thought, perhaps that was

only a stereotype. Eventually, I saw a weathered, brick ranch house. A beautiful woman, probably in her thirties, with long, shining black hair, picked tomatoes from a vine. She was barefoot, bare-legged, wearing Tim's uniform shirt, and, I suspected, nothing else. As she went back into the house and shut the door, I hoped she'd been too preoccupied to notice me.

Then Tim walked outside, naked.

"I have nothing to hide, Peeping Tom. Sam the Stalker."

He didn't seem mad, only exasperated in a good-natured way.

Tim said, "I can guess what you're thinking. The mail carrier has his fling while the husband's at work, and the kids are at camp. As it happens, she's not married."

"I'm thinking that I feel humiliated."

The woman appeared, wearing a yellow tank-top and cut-off jeans. She was smiling.

"Get some clothes on, Tim. David, have lunch with us."

Tim told me that her name was Jill; she was a poet on sabbatical from the college where she was a professor. "And if you're indignant because a mail carrier whom you support with your taxes seems to have neglected his job, I was off today. I covered an emergency absence a.m. shift while you, Sherlock, hovered in your car with those goddamn ugly sunglasses."

We ate in the kitchen, a ceiling fan slowly turning, flies bumping against the screens of the open windows. Lunch was sandwiches, thick, grainy bread, Havarti cheese, and the sun-warmed tomatoes she'd brought from outside. I couldn't remember when I last tasted anything so good, which I wanted to say so to Jill, but she was a writer and I knew that the sentence was hackneyed.

"You must enjoy the solitude out here for your work," I said, conscious that I was using another well-worn statement.

"I like teaching, but a break from the lunacy of faculty meetings is fantastic."

"She's already famous, with two published collections," Tim said. "Google her."

"Oh, please," she protested.

He handed me his iPhone, on which he'd pulled up her website. She was pretty in the photograph, but not as knock-down gorgeous as she actually was, sitting there at the kitchen table. Thinking about how Google and ogle sounded somewhat alike, I looked away from the picture to where there was a substantial list of reading engagements for her second book. She was also giving a lecture on the poet Sharon Olds.

I said, "We read Olds in college. I remember a poem about girls and math and a pool."

"The Only Girl at the Boy's Party.' Good for you."

Then I told Tim, "This whole thing today—I was way out of line. I'm sorry."

Jill covered my wrist with her hand. "You'll see more of us," she said. "I love him, and I wield a bit of influence."

"She's marrying me for financial security, my government pension, adjusted for inflation."

"I don't need it."

She explained that she was foolish enough to agree to sell out to an advertising

agency. One of her poems was now set to music as a cat food commercial, for which she'd received far more than her yearly salary.

I scraped my chair closer and hugged her, for the marriage, I said, not the cat food coup. On another visit, if we were alone, I would tell her how happy I was that Tim had finally allowed someone to love him, that there was a time when most people who knew him would have chosen the adjective lovable—as well as brilliant—to describe him.

He'd entered college as a ranked tennis player, but had no further interest in competitive matches. On the court, in games with friends who tried to beat him, he'd lob those Wilsons over the net as casually as if he were returning a neighbor's stray ball back across the fence.

He had a blond Dennis the Menace cowlick that he could never keep down.

Wall Street recruiters came to campus in search of him, walking past everyone else as if we were ghosts. Tim Pied Pipered the men back to us and then introduced everyone, articulating our individual strengths, so that we all obtained interviews.

A famous female mathematician visited the campus and wanted to meet with him. They spent an hour in a classroom filling a black board with numbers and cosigns. When the two of them emerged, covered with chalk dust, the woman seemed incredulous, probably about the magnitude of Tim's intellect, I'd thought. Later, he told me that she couldn't believe that there wasn't another way for the Yankees to acquire Roger Clemens without trading Dave Wells.

If the course of his life had brought him to this peaceful house, and a smart, lovely woman, I hoped that he would come to terms with the fact that the present's good fortune—like unbearable past tragedy—was sometimes a matter of chance.

Jill asked, "You have two children, David? A boy and a girl?"

"Two girls."

She raised her eyebrows at Tim.

"The younger one is so immersed in soccer that she kicks off her covers at night and goes on kicking, with perfect form. Our older daughter is all about theater, which means that my wife and I feed her lines from her scripts, help paint the sets, make sure the cast has bouquets of flowers at curtain call."

"They keep you occupied," Tim said, although I expected such a response from Jill.

"It's a daily marathon—we're winded but exhilarated."

The ever-shifting tides of children's demands. Kids don't really care about your past life, which could be an outdated suit, yellowing in a dry-cleaner's bag in your closet. Jill the poet might say that your old, flawed self was hanging in effigy.

Tim asked Jill whether he could show me her study, and when she agreed, he said, "She likes you. That space is off-limits to most guests. She writes a few lines on scraps of paper, or whatever is around when she's inspired, then thumbtacks the words on her walls."

"I met him because I was scribbling on a box of Milk Duds at the movies. He asked if I was a critic, the nut."

When we stood, he wrapped his arm around Jill's waist. She leaned into him. It occurred to me that if I hadn't followed Tim, most likely they would still be undressed.

I couldn't understand why their passion for each other should startle me. There was a time not so long ago when I was blessed with my wife's adoration. I used to think, incredulous about my good luck, that with her and the girls, I was awash with love.

The windows were open in Jill's study, and there was a breeze outside now; hundreds of tiny pieces of paper swayed like white flowers in a field. If not anchored at the center by tacks, the papers would drift through the room like dogwood petals, snowflakes, or confetti. I imagined myself cupping my hands to catch words that I might use to speak to Meaghan with a tenderness that had once been instinctive.

Tim told me, "I'm glad you were so persistent, Sam Spade. It's nice to have you here."

He shook his head. "Arty," he said, "Oh, Arty. When you walked into that restaurant in Manhattan, I almost expected to see him behind you, looking like he did, a twenty-year-old kid."

"I see him all the time, the white-coated doctor, stepping out for a sandwich. He's the one who patiently keeps his place at the end of the queue, even when other people cut in. His beard is grizzled."

"His socks are black," Tim said, and laughed.

For a few hours after leaving Fort Lauderdale, the four of us were awake and wired. Early on Tim had asked, "Hey Nolan, we can't carry a tune—what about you?"

"Not even close," he'd answered.

I don't know who started it, but we all became Ringo Starr, shouting out the song about singing out of tune and needing friends for good luck. There were four of us, so we did bad impersonations of other immortal rock quartets, Smashing Pumpkins, Screaming Trees, Alice in Chains. We sang "Oh, What a Night," hamming Frankie Vali's falsetto part. We free-associated with Led Zeppelin's black nights and not being complete without friends. Somewhere, there was an intersection with a stop light, and a cranky-faced old woman in the car next to us leaned out her window and spoke to Arty, who was driving. When we asked him if she'd told us to be less noisy, Arty insisted that she'd said, "Boys, the final word of the song is ooh not oh." As if Arty had been telling us the truth about her we yelled, "Thank you Ma'am!" giving a thumbs up before we shot away.

Night fell while I drove, and the others slept. I traversed a rural stretch of interstate that looked as dark as a lake; our car could have been a boat skimming the water, our headlights, beacons. Eventually, I decided to pull in at a rest stop. Trucks, the lights off, the drivers probably asleep, were scattered around the parking lot like boulders. I awoke Nolan, Arty, and Tim.

Afterwards, Nolan took the wheel and Tim said, "Come on, Fab Four. One more number." He began "Yesterday" using an exaggerated British accent, and we joined in discordantly about our troubles being in the past, although we weren't troubled at all. We were anticipating our futures, as the smooth highway spooled out before us.

JEFFREY H. MACLACHLAN

CLASSIFIED INFORMATION

All of my dreams end
the same way—

someone breaking down
my door as I tussle

with the deadbolt. The suspects
range from minotaurs

to aliens fleeing autopsy
videos to demon snorts fogging

up the peep hole. My good hand
presses against diamond

panels, Mythos beer bottle
chiseled into a neon dagger.

But I'm pusillanimous
and they know it. They all

chatter in alto
and want to spend

some time with me, maybe
afternoon over tea

and palaver. But I know
fairy tales when I hear them,

they wish to loll in my brain
cells after morning ascends

and gain access to secrets
hidden by labyrinths of words

that lead entrants further astray
the more they read. You'll

never discover the defile, I growl
as we volley the door

back and forth
for control of the evening.

NANCY MITCHELL

MOONLIGHT, 3 AM

Yellow lantern, light
my bitter pen, my hand

to a better pill, a two-bit
ticket to sleep: drawn

birds, quarter
curtain, no clock

DAVID NORMAN

DAYS TO WEEKS

Branford Howard was eating a tuna sandwich in the chapel at St. Luke's Hospital, watching a trail of ants crawl toward the wall. One of the ants carried a bread crumb that had fallen out of his mouth, and Branford was about to stomp on it when Reverend Drummond came in and sat next to him in the pew. "Hello, Branford."

"Hello, Reverend." Branford heard his own teeth smacking the tuna.

"Sorry about those ants. Maintenance is supposed to take care of them."

"You see them, too?"

"The ants?" The Reverend chuckled. "Of course I do, son."

"That's good." Branford had known the Reverend a long time, long before his granny got sick. He would have called the Reverend his friend, if he'd believed in such a thing. His granny didn't like the Reverend. She called him brash, inconsiderate, a bully. But at least, where others had failed, the Reverend found a way to connect with Branford, through jokes.

"Hey," the Reverend said, already trying to suppress his laughter. "Listen to this one. You'll enjoy this. What'd the detective say when he stepped on the ant?"

The Reverend preferred the kind of lame jokes Branford had heard back in grade school, and yet the way the Reverend sprung them on him, with sudden delight, it sounded like he thought they were brand new, like he'd invented them on the spot.

"No idea," Branford said, staring at his shoes.

"Dead ant," the Reverend sang, "dead ant. Dead-ant, dead-ant, DEAD-ant..."

"Pink Panther. Good one, Reverend. You got me."

"What'd the mother tomato say to her daughter when she fell behind?"

"Tomatoes don't have mothers, Reverend."

"Catch up."

Reverend Drummond smacked his fist into his palm. His eyes watered. Branford shrugged, not taking his eyes off the dark-red ants filing past the altar.

"Don't worry," the Reverend said. "Maintenance will get rid of them. One by one, hurrah. They'll caulk the holes, too. Assuming they're going down through the floor."

"Least they're not the stinging kind."

"Been up to see your grandmother today?"

"I asked Dr. Sayers how long she has left."

Reverend lowered his voice. "They can't give you a number, Branford."

"The RN said it's more likely days to weeks than months to years."

"Have courage, son." Reverend Drummond leaned back in the pew. "Whether she lives or dies, she is the Lord's."

"That's what you're supposed to say."

“It’s what I believe.”

Branford shoved the last bite of tuna sandwich into his mouth and swallowed it down. Before she’d checked herself in for her last round of chemo, his granny had fixed him seven tuna sandwiches, one for every day the treatment would keep her bedbound. She’d placed each sandwich in a Ziploc baggie and left them in the fridge for him to take to work. He’d enjoyed the first two sandwiches. Now it was day four. The bread had gone soggy. The tuna had turned into a repulsive mush. He dreaded the final sandwich. Every bite was a chore.

“We don’t have to talk,” Reverend Drummond said. “I’ll admit, I’ve been trying to figure out where they’re going myself. The ants, I mean.”

The stained-glass window behind the altar showed a picture of Jesus holding a staff in one hand, a tiny lamb cradled against his chest.

Some of the tumors the oncologist had shown Branford on the MRI were the size of bread crumbs. Others were bigger, like grapes.

From his lunch sack, Branford removed a banana. Bruised at the top, the overripe fruit had a slight feathery taste, but he ate it anyway. He didn’t know what else to do.

“Like,” Branford picked up where the Reverend had left off, “what could be so wonderful about living underground?”

“Are the ants alive, though?” The Reverend smiled. “Is it life or all work?”

Branford had never much understood people, not even his granny, who was upstairs with the tubes in her arm, a cup of ice chips on her bedside table. “The air’s dry up there.”

“That oxygen,” the Reverend replied. “Crack your lips if you aren’t careful.”

The only time his granny ever spoke to him was to order him to clean up his life, take charge of his daily affairs, yet she’d always been a reassuring presence. She made him tuna sandwiches. “They do a good job cleaning up. In the spring, when I find them in the library, I count them sometimes. They don’t bother me as much as those nasty birds in the garage.”

“Every thing counts.” Reverend Drummond sighed. The scuff marks on the toes of his leather shoes could’ve used some polish.

“Another joke?”

Reverend Drummond shook his head. “Here’s the thing: What’s an inch to an ant? Like what a mile is to us? What’s a day to a rabbit that lives eight years?”

“You like comics, Reverend? Scott Lang became an ant. He stole the Ant-Man suit to save his daughter Cassie. She had a bad heart.”

“They must experience time at a slower rate than humans.” The Reverend was quiet a moment. “Anyway, that’s what I’ve been turning over.”

Branford chewed his banana. He closed his eyes, trying to think on the Reverend’s riddle, but all he could see were the sugar ants. They weren’t Scott Lang or Hank Pym. They worked. They built cities underground. They bore their fruits into the earth. Tunneled their wares through graves, caskets. Why not? If they could get through walls, they could slip through a rotting casket. Imagine, passing through the eyehole of a human skull. What would you see?

“Sorry, Reverend. I can’t puzzle it out.”

“Nobody can, son. We stumble upon mysteries only the Lord can explain.”

“That’s all right,” Branford said. “My granny never had much taste for

stumbling.” His granny quit being a Catholic when her husband died. Branford remembered a day, he can still hear her curse, she stubbed her toe on a Bible his grandfather’d used to prop open a door.

“Oh, I see,” the Reverend said amusingly. “You come here to eat lunch.”

“The noises upstairs bother me.”

And the smells, he wanted to add. Disinfectants splashed onto the floors. Latex in the glove boxes set beside patient beds. Aloe perfume in every pump bottle of hand sanitizer. Powdered eggs slopped onto trays for toothless mouths. Most of all, the smell of the dying, their fluids escaping, withered flesh encased in white sheets you can’t avoid as you pass each room.

“And I wish they’d close the doors on the loud patients. Yesterday, it was a woman, had some kind of bowel obstruction. She went on for hours. Decent people shouldn’t have to hear a woman screaming. Vomiting, wailing. It was like on the TV shows.”

“I suppose the staff are used to the sounds by now. Maybe they don’t hear them.”

“Maybe God doesn’t hear them.” Branford apologized. He wasn’t feeling especially combative. “Sometimes words just come out. I can’t control them.”

“That’s all right. Tell me, though. What’s it your grandmother objects to about faith?”

Branford thought about this. “The confession part. The devil. Going to hell. Living your life feeling guilty and sinful and afraid. ‘Scare tactics,’ she calls it. ‘You shouldn’t have to scare someone into believing. It should be about grace and forgiveness and love.’”

“You sure hit the nail on the head, son.”

“Sorry, Reverend. I don’t see what nails have to do with it. If you’re talking Jesus, I mean, I didn’t pick up any hammer. I didn’t nail him to your cross.”

“Good one, Branford. You got me.” Reverend Drummond laughed.

Branford shivered. “They’re gonna move her soon.”

“Nobody’s giving up. Faith is hope. Don’t forget.”

Hope stinks, Branford wanted to say. Why couldn’t Dr. Sayers give him a number? He wanted a number. Even if Dr. Sayers was wrong, having a concrete figure was akin to owning a fact, wasn’t it? And owning a fact was preferable to wallowing in the stink of hope.

“Death is the Big Cheerio,” his granny used to say. “It’s always around. It’ll be floating in your bowl after everything’s gobbled up. Don’t ignore it.”

When Branford was four, his mother and grandfather both died within four months of each other. No Catholic funeral. No flowers. No last rites. Branford’s mother was a drug addict. He never knew her. He never met his father and couldn’t remember much about his grandfather, either. He only recalled a ceremony in the hill country. He and his granny and some of her friends gathered under a cedar tree that overlooked the lake where his grandfather liked to fish. They buried the ashes near the roots and set up a small pile of granite to mark the spot.

From that day on, Branford understood death’s importance. Or rather, he understood what his granny had told him about its importance. Death was the Big Cheerio.

An unpleasant discovery he made in the chapel, watching this little trail of ants, was how your sense of life accelerated as you grew older. Essence dwindled, replaced by memory.

This loss of forward time may have been what the Reverend, aside from all his stale jokes, was trying to explain. Why the days became shorter, why the seasons, the years, whole decades passed at the rate of what used to be, when you were a kid, an hour spent throwing rocks off a bridge, making paper airplanes, or riding with your granny out to the hill country to bury your grandfather under a pile of rocks. This discovery had unearthed Branford in the chapel.

He took the napkin from his lunch sack and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He'd removed his shoes, slid them off one at a time, after walking here from the bus stop. His feet no longer throbbed. Relief had come within seconds. But he worried his buttery sock odor, to say nothing of his tuna sandwich, might offend the Reverend, so he put his shoes back on.

"What's the best we should hope for, Reverend?"

"An easy death and a swift ascent into heaven."

Reverend Drummond crossed himself, stood, and placed a hand on Branford's shoulder. "The enormity of time dwindles to a husk, a hollow bolt."

This sounded like the start of another joke. "Does it happen slowly or fast?"

"I can't answer that, son. The Lord only knows."

"But people should know, right? Shouldn't your life be filling up with more meaning, expanding outward, as you reach the end?"

"Let us pray, shall we?"

In the stained-glass window, Jesus held the lamb to his chest. Mountains rose in the background, their sharp small peaks shrouded with fog. The chapel was set deep in the center of the hospital's ground floor. It had no source of natural light, no real windows. Instead, a shallow bowl had been carved into the bottom of the wall behind the altar, an enclave small enough to conceal a lamp or bulb that could cast a beam upward through the red, purple, brown, and white pieces of glass. So that they might glow as if pierced with real sunlight.

It was this hidden enclave, Branford realized, into which the ants were marching. "I'm wondering something," he said after the Reverend finished praying. His question had to do with aging, what the Bible said, if anything, about the way we experience time. But as he gazed in the pew, words failed him, and when he opened his mouth to speak, the Reverend had gone.

* * *

"Come here, boy. Tell me what you've been doing with yourself."

His granny shared a room at St. Luke's with a small thin woman who looked sicker than she did, the kind of frail person you'd expect a gust of wind to kill at any moment. His granny's bed was closer to the window than the thin woman's. The windowsill displayed his granny's lipstick tube and ivory hairbrush with the mirror on the back. He could imagine his granny having fought with the woman for this better bed and view of the parking lot, where a flock of pigeons pecked at someone's split bag of granola.

His granny had tubes in her nose and an IV in her arm. Her silver hair, slightly damp, spread river-like on the pillow beneath her head.

Before he could think how to tell her about his conversation with Reverend

Drummond, an RN swept into the room to check her vitals. “All good here.” Then a social worker arrived with a stack of papers, documents for her transfer. The social worker gave his granny a ballpoint pen and told her where to sign. His granny’s hand trembled. The pen slipped from her tenuous grip and clicked against the floor. “Where are my glasses, boy?”

It was then that Branford remembered. He’d left them on the bus. Also the Harlan Cobens he’d checked out for her. The bus had three empty seats in the back row. Preferring to sit alone, he took the middle of the three, placed his lunch on his left, the books and glasses on his right. “Must have fallen under the bed, granny.”

“You forgot them, didn’t you? You were supposed to bring them and you forgot.”

“Maybe your grandson can help you sign?” the social worker said.

“He doesn’t help, dear.” She kept her eyes on the social worker as if Branford weren’t in the room. “That’s my grandson. He’d lose his head if it weren’t glued to his shoulders.”

“I remembered the sandwich. I ate it in the chapel.”

“Doesn’t listen to me, either.”

“Well,” the social worker said, smiling. “Why don’t you get some rest?”

“Isn’t he handsome, though? You’re a nice young lady. Would you like him to take you out on a date? He’s not married. If you want, I’ll make him ask you.”

“Granny!” Branford squeezed the bedrail and lowered his eyes. The floor was starting to waterfall behind him and the heat washed into his cheeks. The social worker laughed. She was Branford’s age, maybe a spot older. The ID badge clipped to her blouse said LEANNA M. She had freckles down both cheeks and frizzy hair the color of iodine. Maybe she was Irish.

“That’s the grandson I raised,” his granny continued. “Still raising him.” She lifted her hands and held them up, palms to her face. “Folding shirts, finding socks to match—” Her voice trailed off. “Well, not for long, I guess.”

“Want me to search the floor for your glasses?” Branford pulled himself upright, relaxed his shoulders. “Or I can go buy you a new pair?”

“Wouldn’t you?” She scowled, but the teasing cut through her malice. Hers was the glancing tone of a woman who’d been griping at her grandson for years. “Wouldn’t you love to run off and leave me to die in this place? No, stay here. Help me with that pen. Guide my hand to where my name goes on the page. I’ll sign.”

Leanna had picked up the pen off the floor and slipped it into the pocket of her coat. Now she gave Branford a clean one. The privacy curtain still hung open.

The thin woman lay in bed on the other side of the room, asleep. Beside her on the table, large books were stacked in several piles, some three or four feet high. Nobody seemed to think these towers of hardbacks posed any threat to the sleeping woman.

The titles on their spines were in a foreign language. Hebrew? Yiddish? The woman lay with one knee raised beneath the sheet, a posture which turned her bed into the shape of a tent. Had Reverend Drummond stopped by to pay her a visit? Had his granny introduced them?

Leanna explained the forms that required his granny's signature. Branford took his granny's hand and placed it on the page, and as she scratched out her signature, here and there, this page and the next, Branford held his palm cupped around her small brittle fist.

This was the last time she'd put her name to a document. The last time she would ever hold a pen. For this reason he struggled to think of something meaningful to say, but the moment passed, and soon his granny was barking at him again in her usual combative tone, saying don't press so hard, don't squeeze the blood out of my fist, they've already taken enough, watch out, boy, you'll smudge the ink, let me try it again.

Wine-colored bruises covered the skin of her cold hand. Next to the lead taped to her arm, right in the crook of her elbow, he noticed a piece of cotton held down with a Band-Aid. The cotton had absorbed most of the blood, but one rust stain showed beneath, suggesting something had gone wrong. They'd had to jab her a few times to find a vein and then forgot about her wound or chose not to bother with the cleanup.

From what Branford could tell, the documents indicated a signing off. The doctors and hospital staff were saying goodbye, relinquishing all responsibility to keep her alive. Her medical team would no longer tend to the efforts of sustaining her life. No more chemo, no more radiation, no more scans. No more treatments, options, alternatives. No last-minute orders to resuscitate. No more opening up to take a peek at all the altered hardware.

"Sure this is what you want, granny?"

Out came a witchy cackle. "Too late to back out now, boy!" She nodded a few times, laughing, and then real tears fell down her cheeks. Leanna reached for a Kleenex. "I'm fine," his granny said, still nodding and crying. "Leanna, I want you to know. You're terrific. Please tell Dr. Sayers. He's terrific. Absolutely, I appreciate what y'all have done for me."

"What about me, granny?"

She waved the Kleenex at him. "Oh, buzz off!"

He asked Leanna, "What's palliative mean?"

"Hospice, boy." His granny tapped the back of his hand. It was all Branford could do not to draw away in terror. "It'll be all right. Your Uncle Stevie had hospice."

Branford clenched his teeth. She said "hospice" as if it were some kind of prize. "What kind of drugs will they give her?" he asked Leanna.

"Morphine."

"How do you know they'll give her the right amount?"

"That's what they go to school for." Leanna smiled. Branford wasn't smiling. He asked her what was going to happen, once they started the morphine. "And don't try to pass my question onto somebody else," he snapped. "Dr. Sayers didn't explain. Reverend Drummond didn't explain. Nobody's explaining it for me. I want to know right now."

Leanna pulled him aside and spoke quietly. "They'll turn off her monitors," she said. "They'll give her morphine. It'll help her not be in pain."

His granny stared out the window, either pretending or fighting not to listen.

"It could take a while," Leanna continued. "She may not be able to speak.

She'll hear you, though. That's for sure. She'll feel you any time you touch her. Stay with her as much as you like, but go home as often as you can. Rest. Your health is important. Understand?"

Branford nodded. "How will I—?"

"They'll call you if she takes a turn for the worse."

After Leanna left the room, Branford returned to his granny's bedside, sank into a chair, and let out a deep breath. His granny didn't make a sound. Tears gathered around her nose and mouth and dampened the long parallel creases across her throat.

On the other side of the room, the pillars of books framed the motionless head of the sleeping woman. Branford pressed his hands together and stuck them between his thighs. "Someone should do something about those books." His granny made no sound. "Someone should do something or they might fall. That could get you fired at the library."

What he meant wasn't simply stacking the books, but stacking them in a way to fall and crush a human skull. The willful negligence of the act.

A blade of sunlight inched across the sheet covering his granny's stomach. She'd closed her eyes. Branford did the same. He was tired now. Dead tired. The Reverend would like that one. Seated before his granny, eyes shut to the dwindling light, Branford let out a breath. Whatto do? Wait until they come get us? How long will this take?

Exhausted, and the dying part hadn't even begun.

STEPHEN POLESKIE

KLAXON'S QUESTION

Few members of the Wilbender College faculty ever frequented our local watering hole known as The Glade. One of those who did, and was even considered somewhat of a regular, was Robert Klaxon, an assistant professor in the English Department. For those of you not familiar with academic rank, being an assistant professor means that you have not yet achieved that hallowed state of having tenure, and any misstep on your part could send you packing.

Perhaps this was why Professor Klaxon had befriended our boys: John, Jim, and Tony, who kept him appraised as to which “chicks,” it was safe to “hit on.” If there was one thing that could derail a faculty member’s train from the tenure track it was a having a sexual harassment complaint filed against you.

Not ones to miss an opportunity our three lads had signed up for Klaxon’s Creative Writing class and were expecting the professor to be generous to them when final grade time came around. John, however, was actually doing quite well. Professor Klaxon had responded positively to his stories, and even suggested that John might have a future as a writer—if he brushed up on his use of grammar. John was reluctant to reveal that his grammar was so poor because his father was a high school English teacher—and no son ever aspires to be good at something that his father already excels in.

Professor Klaxon had informed the class that the well-known woman writer Betty Wellness would be giving a lecture at Wilbender on the coming Saturday evening. He had given his students the assignment of attending the lecture and then writing a 500-word paper on the talk. It was suspected that this was a regular tactic used by the English Department to make sure that all the seats were filled in the school chapel, where these literary events were held.

Lined up not unlike zoo animals, the audience crouched on the carpeted stairs. No rows of pews cluttered the interior of this postmodern house of worship, only these giant steps, too tall to walk up and down without running the risk of falling, and too hard and straight backed to serve as comfortable seats. For reasons unknown to anyone, perhaps to give a religiosity to a secular event, and despite there being numerous other halls around the campus of the same capacity with comfortable seats, readings by visiting authors were always held in this vaulted, green-stepped edifice.

The outdoor carpet covering these stairs posing as seats was the same material used on miniature golf courses. This fact had not missed the notice of the college’s golf coach. Believing that practice made perfect, the coach regularly brought his players to the chapel during the winter months to stroke their putters. The golf team had just departed, driven out by the first arrivals for this evening’s cultural event. Left behind in haste a lone golf ball covered like a lost kitten at the base of the temporarily installed lectern.

Fifteen minutes later, the audience having arrived and the department

chairperson having given his too-long and verbose introduction, the speaker began. Oblivious to the golf ball that change position every time she leaned on the lectern to turn a page, the distinguished woman writer was droning out a story about a dog biting off the nipple on her “tit.” Tit was her word.

Seated by choice in the last row, on the highest step, where he could deliver, in an undertone voice, his snide comments to anyone unfortunate enough to be in proximity, was Professor Robert Klaxon. Klaxon also taught classes in freshman writing where he was fondly known, behind his back, as Mr. K. Only recently promoted from instructor to the rank of assistant professor after having won an award for his short fiction from a prominent Pennsylvania ketchup company, Klaxon insisted everyone address him with his newly entitled honorific. Students who unthinkingly addressed him in class as Mister Klaxon were sure to find themselves in trouble. And his young friends from The Glade were careful to avoid spouting out, “Hey, Bob.”

The woman writer was speaking in such a low, but distinctly sexy voice, that Professor Klaxon had missed the detail of which of her breasts, was it the left or the right, which had had the nipple bitten off, a question that had logged itself in his consciousness, and would not go away.

Nevertheless, while this facet of Betty Wellness’s story had momentarily piqued Klaxon’s interest somewhat, he was actually sitting there with other things on his mind. There were other places he would rather be, other things that he should be doing.

It had taken Professor Klaxon several detours to get to the position he presently held in life and so was painfully aware that his biological time clock was beginning to tick more rapidly. He had yet to publish his first novel although he had six manuscripts gathering dust on his shelves. And his most recent effort, a 900-page tome about a man so afraid of death that he never went to sleep, had only yesterday been returned by the only one of the thirty-three agents he had sent it to who had been interested enough to read it. The agent had rejected it with the stock comment that: “it doesn’t fit our list.” And so Klaxon had come to the distinguished lady’s reading, not just because he had assigned it to his students, but with the hope of doing a little schmoozing.

An insomniac in bed, Professor Klaxon had to resist falling asleep in public, especially when bored, which he presently was. Fighting this urge, Klaxon turned his attention to the vaulted ceiling, from which four large wooden birds, in a minimalist style, fluttered on thin steel wire. Three birds could perhaps represent the Holy Trinity, but a fourth? Klaxon pondered the extra bird’s reason for being—perhaps a heavenly poker game. He passed. The professor’s knowledge of religious symbolism was admittedly less than his knowledge of card games.

The dog was now chewing the famous woman writer’s nipple quite vigorously, or so Klaxon thought he heard her say, mumbling through the long, aging-feminist frizzy hair that dangled around her face. Abandoning the four birds, his mind began to search for the metaphor in the munching mutt. The dog was running away, the nipple in its mouth. Klaxon studied the famous lady’s chest to see if he could determine which breast was missing its end. She was, however, too far away, and her pull-over was too thick, or her bra too padded, or perhaps a combination of all three. The question holding Klaxon’s interest had produced

a slight frisson in a lower part of his anatomy.

Those audience members seated near the front had been following the progress of the abandoned golf ball, which wandered left or right with the author's each turning of a page. An uncharacteristically expressive gesture by the recondite woman, raising her arm to show her surprise at having had her tit bit, gave the ball the impetus it needed to start down a slight grade in the floor that sloped imperceptibly toward the side exit. The golf ball was picking up speed. If the grade, put there by some maladroit concrete pourer, held for another foot the ball would be through the open side door. Many minds cheered it on, secretly wishing that they were leaving with it.

After three pages of running, the dog finally died. The audience applauded because it was the end of the story, and because the reader was a famous woman writer. In a paroxysm of fantasy, Klaxon watched the dead dog soar out of the stained glass window behind the lectern and into the darkening evening sky, the woman's nipple still firmly lodged between the lifeless mastiff's foaming jaws.

As the applause faded, the itinerant golf ball could be heard out in the hall, clanking its way down the stairs. A round of applause was awarded the Titleist for its efforts. Taking this as a second brava for her reading, Betty Wellness graciously acknowledged this gesture by holding up her hands, and announcing that she was ready to take questions. However, the famous author had not thought to install a "question starter," so several moments of awkward silence ensued.

Professor Klaxon had a question, his mind was full of questions all the time, but despite his arrogance he was a painfully shy person. He did not want to go first. Besides, he hoped to be able to talk to the famous author personally afterwards. He had met Betty Wellness once before, at a writer's conference in Savannah, and was saving his question should they meet again.

A young woman, wearing heavy-framed glasses that she must have thought made her look studious, began by asking: "How old were you when you started writing?" This pleased the famous woman writer who did not like "hard" questions. Betty was able to go on about how she had always been a creative person, making up stories long before she had been able to write them down. Professor Klaxon wondered if one of the stories she made up was the story about how young she had been when she started to make up stories.

Encouraged by the response to her first question, the same young lady bunted in a follow up: "What was the first story you published, and how old were you when you published it?" The famous lady, ignoring the part about her age, responded with the name of what perhaps was her most known story, it having been reprinted in several anthologies and writing text books. Most people were familiar with the title; there was a noticeable buzz in the audience. A woman if front of Klaxon, who he recognized from one of his summer secession classes, was heard to remark: "Oh my god! That was her very first story..."

There were a number of things other than her age that Betty Wellness chose not to discuss. A writer of extremely modest talent, but possessing above average looks, and considerable sex appeal, Betty had not been able to publish anything until she met, and then married, a well-known literary critic, who was also the fiction editor of the popular magazine her first story first appeared in. Even so, she had achieved only a minor reputation up until the day that Betty had blown

away her husband with a shotgun blast. After a lengthy trial, during which the couples sex life was revealed at length, the jury had declared the shooting an accident and acquitted her. But the trial had attracted international attention. Her picture appeared in all of the newspapers and on all the TV channels. Overnight, Betty Wellness's name became a household word. The two books of hers still in print immediately sold out, and her publisher had reprinted them along with two new titles.

"Time for one more question," the famous woman writer announced. A "lit-crit" graduate student raised her hand and was recognized.

Quoting a lengthy passage from Derrida and another from Walter Benjamin, lit-crit worked her way around to the question. The audience began to fidget. The reading had already gone overtime; they did not need this woman's egocentric preamble. "The critical question becomes, therefore," the woman pontificated, maintaining her tone of acute obliqueness, "what role should the knowledge of the author's life play in the interpretation of the written texts?"

An audible groan rose from the audience. But the famous woman writer had heard this question many times before and was ready. Not one to argue with a literary critic, some speculated that this was why she had killed her husband, the great lady quickly soft-shoed to her closing:

"A very good question... and one that I suppose has no single answer... so I suggest that you all read my books, which are for sale in the lobby and decide for yourself. Thank you all for coming."

There was another round of applause. People began to file out. Unwilling to be dismissed so lightly the lit-crit was engaged in a heated discussion with the person seated next to her. "But Walter Benjamin says..."

Carefully avoiding John, Jim, and Tony, who had attended the reading as they were required, with the additional hope of picking up chicks, Klaxon hurried down the stairs to greet the great lady. His eyes down, Klaxon, concentrated on the giant steps, not only to keep from falling, but also the keep from interrogating Betty's breasts, which from his vantage point in the rear had seemed to be as symmetrical as most.

"Hello, I'm John Klaxon. You don't remember me I am sure... but we met several years ago at a writer's conference in Savannah," Klaxon said moving in with his introduction. "You read a story about a woman shooting her husband's horse... I though it must have been some kind of metaphor."

"Yes, I remember Savannah, a lovely place. Did you read something there too?"

"Only in a workshop. I read a short chapter from my novel about a man who had become so afraid of dying that he never allowed himself to go to sleep."

"It sounds interesting... I'm sorry that I didn't get to hear you read. So what happens to the man in the end?"

"He eventually dies of exhaustion..."

"Oh! I'm so sorry to hear that."

"It's only fiction," Klaxon replied, his eyes darting a glance at the famous author's mysterious breasts. He thought that he could make out the form of a nipple, only one, through the soft wool of her pull-over.

"Did you ever publish the novel?" Betty asked. She caught Klaxon's gaze

roving the ridges of her chest, which caused her own eyes to leave his and briefly dart down to the area below his belt.

“Not yet. I have had some agents read the first chapter or so. Most of them agreed that the book was skillfully written, but not commercial enough. Perhaps you know someone....”

“Oh yes, Savannah is such a lovely place,” the famous lady interrupted, not wanting to go where John was attempting to lead the conversation. “Do you live in Savannah?”

“No, I live here. It would have been a long drive to come the 600 miles from Savannah for your reading... although I understand you came all the way from California,” Klaxon said, resisting the urge to add that he heard there were some fine literary agents living in L.A. these days.

“Yes... It took twenty-three hours... by airplane....”

“Twenty-three hours! The tail didn’t fall off, did it?”

Betty hesitated at Klaxon’s question, it was a joke she hoped. Her eyes again caught his exploring her upper torso. Professor Klaxon smiled. If only her sweater wasn’t so thick he wished.

“No, the tail was fine... the weather was bad,” Betty explained, tugging the fabric of her top loose from her body.

“I would worry about the tail falling off... there’s a lot of that going around these days... bad design of the empennage, especially on the Boeing 737.”

The famous lady writer was perplexed, unaware of Klaxon’s keen interest in airplanes, although he rarely felt safe when he was up in one.

As if on cue, the evening commuter jet passed low overhead, momentarily halting their conversation, giving off that unhealthy whining sound jet engines produce when the pilot has gotten behind on the power curve and is “dragging it in.” The tired passengers, eagerly consuming the last of the salted peanuts they had hoarded all the way from Pittsburgh, were blissfully unaware that if their airplane’s tail should fall off at this very moment, at this low altitude and over this populated area, the craft would be lucky to heave to in the cramped space of the college’s stadium, where it would doubtless explode and burn up on the artificial turf, witnessed only by the small crowd of faithful attending a woman’s lacrosse game.

The vibration from the jet’s passing freed the itinerant golf ball from a corner of the stairs where it had been languishing. The exiting literature lovers cleared a path for the white glob as it bounced toward the outside door. As the sound of the jet engines faded, both the lady author and Professor Klaxon remained staring at the vaulted ceiling; however a wayward tail assembly did not come crashing through.

“Do you teach here?” Ms. Wellness asked, searching for a new topic of conversation, apparently the talk of airplane tails falling off made her uncomfortable. She had pronounced the word “here” with a somewhat condescending tone, gesturing with her head and rolling her eyes around the room. John took advantage of the famous writer’s head turn to steal another glance at her chest, but was still unable to gauge from which breast the dog had extracted the nipple. She caught his eye movement and gave him a quick smile.

“Yes, I’ve been here at Wilbender for three years now,” Klaxon replied,

wondering if Betty was making a pass at him. The members of the audience that had gone out to the lobby to buy books were now returning. A line was forming. People behind Klaxon were inching forward, wanting their turn at the famous writer, clutching books long remaindered, that she had carted along with her, and that they had just bought for full price at the folding table near the front door. They wanted their books signed; this would make them more valuable at some future date when they were planning to sell them—or so they thought. Doubtless the books would be in excellent condition, as Klaxon could foresee no one planning to read them. Professor Klaxon was holding up the line; he should finish his futile attempt at schmoozing and leave, if schmoozing was what he was up to.

“You have all these people waiting for you... I’m holding them up. I’ll see you at the reception; we can finish our talk there. I have a question about your story that I’d like to ask you...”

“I’m looking forward to it,” the famous lady said, giving Klaxon a big smile, an act which caused him to notice for the first time that the wrinkles on her face had been photo-shopped out of the picture of her on the poster advertising the lecture.

Stepping outside, Professor Klaxon happened to run into his three student friends from The Glade, who had purposely hung around to run into him so that he would be sure to notice that they had been to the lecture.

“Hello, professor. Interesting talk....” John said.

“I had a question that I was going to ask, but was too nervous to speak up,” Tony butted in.

“I had a question too,” Klaxon revealed, “something she might have said, but I missed because I was way up in the back. I’m planning to ask her later.” Although no one wanted to know, Klaxon took the time to explain what his question was.

The lads were not sure whether they should laugh or be embarrassed.

Later that evening, John, Jim and Tony, seated at their regular table in the corner of the main room at The Glade, were surprised to see the front door pushed open. The regulars always used the side door, which opened into the bar. No one ever used the front door unless they had never been here before, or wanted to be noticed coming in. Everyone looked up. There was Professor Klaxon, with the well-known woman writer Betty Wellness tightly clutching his arm. Klaxon smiled and nodded to his students as he and Betty walked past.

“Would you look at that... what’s he doing here with her? I thought that Klaxon only went for young chicks,” Tony said.

“I think that he must be doing some schmoozing,” Jim speculated.

“Or maybe Professor Klaxon is just trying to find out the answer to his question,” Tony ventured.

“But I understood that her story was supposed to be fiction,” Jim interjected, hoping to put an end to the matter.

“And what is fiction,” John added, “but truth retold by someone else... or so I’ve read somewhere.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Tony said raising his glass.

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