The Patient

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A Thesis

in

The Department

of

English

Presented in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts in English at
Concordia University
Montreal, Quebec, Canada

February 2007

Your file Votre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-28845-0
Our file Notre référence
ISBN: 978-0-494-28845-0

Abstract

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The collection of stories brought together under the title The Patient attempts to explore the relationship between author, character, and reader through the use of different narrative techniques. Each story is preoccupied in some way with perspective; each attempts to construct a point-of-view in an effort to establish different modes of looking. "B—Street and L" can in this way be seen as the most experimental and pivotal story in the selection, for its multi-perspectival narration is actively engaged in finding different ways of looking at the same thing. Ideally, the trajectory which moves from the egocentric, first-person narration of "Birding," to the distant and ironic tone of the third-person narrator in "The Patient" speaks to this shifting perspective, highlighting in the process the writer, as he negotiates a place for himself within his work.

The central characters in these stories are withdrawn, reticent, and tentative; each resorts to a mode of speech which is in some sense a compensation for these qualities. Elevated speech gestures toward a desire to hide behind the formal properties of language, whereas the naturalized speech of some of the secondary characters reveals a willingness to engage socially. In this way, language becomes another way to construct and articulate perspective.

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Birding

On the left, I am passing the Township of Tiny. A montage of static images whirrs past, but within that second, I am able to make out many things. Posters taped to telephone poles, advertising next weekend's annual soap-box derby, a chain-link backstop with powder-white base paths, four bases, and a dirt mound. At the end of the line, a couple swings listlessly in a two-seater, and I think I see the man clasp his wife's hand, nodding solemnly to her, as the artificial petunias they've surrounded themselves with stir unnaturally in the summer breeze. There is no question; it surely is summer. Symbols like these are difficult to misinterpret. The cows are grazing in broad vistas of sun-stained grass. Children are leaning into the dirt road, offering glasses of lemonade to passers-by, and the farmers are out, tilling the land, while windmills behind and beside plod on.

Elmvale the sign says, white letters against blue. Pulling up to the town stoplight, I notice what looks like a giant hot dog encroaching onto the left side of Route 26. I pull over. The hot dog is run by a man who's decided to open up a hot dog stand and create a base of operations in the likeness of a foot-long to increase visibility. I cautiously ask

him, as he hands the wiener across the counter, why he's taken the hot dog motif so literally. Beside himself with my audacity, he utters the words 'increases visibility' through clenched teeth. Shrewd business, I think to myself, climbing back into my car.

Wyevale's Convenience is hosting a party tonight. Or, maybe this isn't a party, but there's a gathering, and I notice (while I zip past at about 100 km/hour) that the waitress is on roller skates, dressed in a black and white teddy, serving martinis on a pewter tray. As twilight yields itself up I spot a Ferris wheel about two miles off the highway, flashing small circles at first, then bigger – bigger – my pupils dilating in the rearview mirror. The Ferris wheel is seductive and casts a spell on me and now I'm jumpy and when someone flicks a cigarette out their window I swerve, half-expecting to see the butt leap off the pavement and onto my windshield, flames expanding to an unimaginable size as my car turns into a 120 km/h fireball and a satanic figure is sitting in the passenger seat.

I lick my lips and try to calm down, my hands on ten and two. But I have trouble focusing when I need to. My mind begins to wander; retraces the contours of the day. Saturday morning breakfast with my family, tennis with The Bird's brother, and a reel of domestic snapshots flit by until the image of the tennis player with the red hat and the ponytail establishes itself – the one where she is serving, calling attention to the height of her ball toss as her body leans into the green playing surface, and I picture taking her from behind, upright, her right leg bent at the knee as her foot grasps for something solid. This can safely be relegated to a sphere of personal fantasy which I feel quite comfortable in.

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The Bird has made appearances in my stories before, usually created out of old but still vibrant pieces of construction paper to save money and time. Closer in fact to a peanut, The Bird is barred for eternity from riding any roller coaster with a fifty-inch minimum. She doesn't care, though. The Bird is only ten, but she knows a few things. She knows it's more fun to pig out than to eat in moderation, even if pigging out is actively discouraged by her mother; she knows how to use 'curious' in a sentence, and while it's conceivable that other ten-year olds have a similar facility with language, I haven't met them.

The Bird lay completely inert for much of Friday evening, brooding over a stomachache, watching cartoons. She showed signs of life after dinner, when her mother and her grandmother debated about who The Bird takes after, where she gets the single eyebrow raise when she's not amused, and why she'll sit with the adults long past tea and dessert, content to talk or not talk and just be part of the action. I didn't participate in the conversation. I sat and thought about The Bird, and how blissful life is before you have to grow up and get busy and find a person who makes life something more than the tedious accumulation of idle speculations and ordinary desires. The facial expressions which corresponded with this line of thought may have explained why nobody asked me my opinion on the question of The Bird's inheritance, leaving me free to muse on one of my favorite topics: Love.

It shouldn't be so difficult – to find that is. All I really need to do is find someone who will eat with me, play tennis with me, pretend to enjoy being made love to by me, put up with my tendency toward dramatics. Then, I say to myself, then I'll...and here my reasoning often falls flat, leaving me open to other people and their well-intentioned

invitations and opinions. Martha Fishman, the insurance saleswoman friend-of-my-mother's, for example, who promises me that she knows lots of girls to set me up with, 'all doctors and dentists,' she says, and the man our family has known for so long we're obliged to call him Uncle, who thinks any able-bodied woman is a knockout. But I can't take too much of this. So instead I hold out and hope – an unproven technique, incidentally, and tell other people, when they ask me, when they say, "What are you waiting for?" And I say something to the effect of, "someone who will make my life more than the tedious accumulation of idle speculations and ordinary desires," and they make their obnoxious exchange – I just content myself with the knowledge that the majority of them are out and out loons.

This morning I played tennis with The Bird's older brother, and felt good and strong and resilient until a young woman carrying a hopper full of pink tennis balls walked onto the court beside us to give a lesson. I actually felt something inside me snap as she removed her red baseball hat, re-gathering her ponytail before serving, her body leaning in, strung tight like a harp. She was a harp to me, at once uplifting and disarmingly tragic. I made small-talk with her to allay a mounting feeling of self-recrimination, and pictured taking her from behind, upright, while she used something – anything – for support, and then I remembered that playing out these fantasies always makes me feel worse and I left the courts to grab a beer, The Bird's brother trailing behind me, dragging the top of his tennis racket along the dirt road.

After dinner we went down to the water. The Bird's brother made a fire, and we sat around with The Bird's mother and her grandmother and her aunt and her cousin. I stared long into the fire, eyelids flitting against wisps of smoke, thinking to myself that

The Bird's mother was a good woman, as she lowered herself onto the ground to help the Bird's brother with his fire. They say The Bird and her grandmother are identical, but I don't see it. Then you have The Bird's cousin. She is forty-five and she lives with her mother and they're both nice and clinical in terms of their dysfunction. Cousin, are you sure you need that much rouge? By the time I've recovered myself my marshmallow is charred and The Bird is laughing at me and whirling her fire stick, showing everyone how she can inscribe her name in the air, and I can't help thinking about what she will have to go through, what we all have to go through.

I'm back at the kitchen table when The Bird emerges from her bedroom, her feet padding along in slippers. She heaves open the refrigerator door. The Bird's short and she's not what they'd call skinny and she's brainy and she's usually congenial, though sometimes she likes to cop a little bit of an attitude, and she only really drinks peach juice and occasionally, if there's no peach, blue PowerAde. She throws like a boy and she swims like a fish and she doesn't wear shorts because she doesn't like her legs and her mother has told her it's ok and she's ten and she's growing up. "I have to head back tomorrow," I say. "Whatever," she manages, closing the fridge door with her right foot, hands full with a glass of peach and a bag of chips. "I'm doing valet at a fancy party," but she's already disappeared into a dimly lit corridor, her slippered feet padding gradually out of earshot. Goodnight, Birdie. Goodnight.

***

I woke up to see The Bird's brother lying in a bed beside me, staring up at the ceiling and counting something out on his fingers, and then I rolled over and went back to sleep until The Bird's brother shook me awake and told me I had slept long enough. I

spent most of Saturday with The Bird's brother. I watched him play in a community tennis tournament and saw the girl with the red hat and the ponytail, only she was wearing flip-flops and J. LO sunglasses. I sat in the sun too, and then drove home through Tiny, Elmvale, past the big Ferris wheel located a few miles off the highway, laughing to myself at the pony-tailed girl who spent the day at the courts abusing her authority as tournament coordinator, yelling at her staff of thirteen-year olds, fawning over parents and creating jobs that didn't need creating. Laughing, laughing, laughing. I'm still laughing when I recall an image of her brother (who she also yelled at) arriving at the courts to deliver lunch for his sister. By the time I picture her taking a particularly expressive bite of a turkey and cheese sandwich, mayonnaise dripping slowly down her fingers, her arm as she wipes her mouth with the back of her other hand, my laughter has subsided somewhat. I've got to spend less time daydreaming, I think to myself, but I know that somehow all of that is bound up in all of this.

The house is a castle and the driveway is a moat and the guests pull up in imports and lemons and imported lemons, squeezing their decadent bodies out of cars and flashing smiles that reflect and refract off their gowns and jewels into a million hideous laughs as we take the keys to their cars and tell them to enjoy the festivities. The gourmet caterers are set up in the garage, and the wait staff, men and women hired out from the Art Gallery of Ontario, are dressed in tuxedoes and they're snooty to us, the valet, for reasons I cannot fathom. They use affected accents and whisper about the guests, but this is of no consequence to me. I'm here to work.

A middle-aged Lebanese woman endowed with ample breasts and wearing a flowing purple dress of recognizably inferior quality has emerged from the garage to ask

us if the band has arrived. I'm instantly impotent at the sight of her and remark to the other valet, Poran, on how full of nurture this woman appears to be. Poran says something about callously sodomizing her and then leaving no more than forty dollars on the dresser. Sometimes I think Poran says things just to hear how they sound. Either way, she's pregnant and she's beautiful and she has one elegant wisp of gray on an otherwise immaculate crown of long jet-black hair, and tonight, she tells us, she's dancing for the bride and groom – a fertility dance – and I'm pretty sure I see her wink at Poran, who has already turned his back on both of us.

Poran works these affairs all the time and so he's a pro. He knows the right time to fawn over the big-tip guests and when to grab triangles of watermelon and cigarettes from the kitchen (which is in the garage) while the wait staff is busy plating the salmon tartar. After eating a few slices of lush, pink watermelon we smoke two menthol cigarettes each, and he tells me how he spent sixteen years on the police force in Guyana. He does not come right out with it, but Poran implies that the hosts of this party are inhospitable by comparison. Back home, he says, if he and his wife were hosting a party they would procure the best of everything, delicacies above their means, and they wouldn't eat until they knew everyone had, and it was customary and acknowledged. Here they shoveled the unused food into big garbage bags or heaped all of it together onto one tray, offering it to whoever of the wait staff was the least averse to picking from a pile of food spit out of other people's mouths. He tells me of the time he had to spend Christmas Eve guarding a diplomat's house on foot, and how his wife, the diplomat's, was British and ignorant of local custom. She didn't offer Poran so much as a cup of tea as he walked the perimeter of her home until nine the next morning. He spoke also of a

particularly uncomfortable experience which had him loading presents into the trunk of a car after a party very much like this one. The keys, he said, which he kept in his breast pocket, fell into the trunk. The car was open but the trunk button wouldn't spring it properly. Poran said he offered to sit by the car all night, the woman with the presents telling him of course not, and how she'd never expect anyone to put themselves out like that, and I sat back and wondered why Poran has it so easy and I have it so hard.

I decide to take a break from Poran. Closing my eyes, I conjure the belly dancer, her knees bare and scratching against merciless concrete, clad in nothing but purple high heels. Poran bets she's seen a lot of action in her time, a whore more or less, but I won't accept this because it encroaches on my carefully crafted fantasy of belly dancer as Gift from Indifferent Gods like the giant hot dog that encroaches onto the left side of a dirt road in a place I traveled through once. But soon my fantasy of the belly dancer is shattered. Finished with her performance, she has emerged from the house, a child affixed to her stomach with some type of new-age carrying device, her rickety mother not far behind pushing a resolute stroller. The belly dancer walks by Poran and me. She flashes us a smile, asks us if we've seen the band leave. She just wants to say goodbye and thank them she tells us, and I watch as she open mouth kisses a short Eastern European looking guy with a scruffy beard and a synthesizer in tow, feigning bravado as she walks down the street, her head held inexplicably high.

Recognizing the early hour, Poran and I take up seats on the flight of steps that lead to the front door. After what seems to me like a suitable amount of time, I turn and ask him if he's ever been unfaithful to his wife.

***

I find out late Sunday afternoon that I'm needed at another function scheduled to start in the evening. I'll be lead I'm told, in charge of placing the sign where partygoers can't miss it, responsible for laying the red carpet so nobody will get their stilettos dirty.

I get to the function early, and since the sign and the carpet and the rest of the drivers are all together in a van traveling down from Woodbridge I'm essentially out of place, standing deferentially on the curb of the driveway, hands behind my back, greeting attendees and reminding them to enjoy the festivities, while their facial muscles twist and turn, attempting, I presume, to figure out what connection a young man wearing a white button down and black slacks and sporting sunglasses – a poor device for trying to cover what looks like an exploded plum, my left eye – is doing at their eighty-two year old grandfather's third wedding reception. I admit that until Dave and John and Amir present themselves, peeling around a corner on two wheels in their juiced up Astro MiniVan and shouting to each other above the radio, I had been asking myself the same question.

Dave and John and Amir peel around a corner on two wheels in their juiced up Astro Minivan and busy themselves unloading the sign and the carpet and the numbers for the cars, talking fast, and I'm alone again but in a more tolerable way than before. Dave is older than his brother John, and Amir is Dave's friend, and has come, as Dave says, 'not for money. No, no, for fun.' Dave and John have driven valet longer than I have, but I still don't fully trust them. Half the time I have no idea what they're talking to each other about. My suspicions of Dave are furthered when he tells me that when he finds loose credit cards in other people's cars it's a good idea not to use them, to return them because otherwise you can get in trouble with the law. I'm unmoved by this piece of information. John and Amir are desperate for additional pearls.

With four hours to kill in front of this new-fangled townhouse, John decides to jump into the MiniVan and haul ass to the nearest liquor store. One of the caterers tries to get what seems to be a stiff kitchen window open, wrapping his elbow in a dish towel. I stay out front and talk to Amir about what I want to do with my life, and he tells me it's pretty hard to manage with the money you make from valet, hard to support a wife and kids and do I have a girlfriend? Don't I want to go to sleep in the same bed as a woman every night? Eventually he gets up and goes to sit with Dave, who is now obviously, I think to myself, trying to avoid contact with me, maybe because of the look of incredulity smeared across my face when he told us it wasn't a good idea to use other people's credit cards without their permission.

I'm speed-reading *A Moveable Feast* when the owner of the valet company shows up, enjoying the excessive time Hemingway devotes to street names, bookshops, and descriptions of picnic lunches with Hadley in the Paris countryside. He rolls down his window, asks me if I want to call it a night. I turn to the three guys, who say in unison, "don't worry, you want to go, you go, don't worry." Climbing into the back seat of the car, I wonder whether Dave and John and Amir will be able to keep it together. My boss doesn't seem too concerned. He and his girlfriend are playing a not so subtle game of footsy in the front seat, except they're not using their feet. I try to relax, leaning my head back, closing my eyes. A vision of The Bird at the cottage appears and I'm happy. Tired, but happy.

***

My trip back to the cottage is an easy one. Banging my bag against the screen door, I arrive to take in the glare of the sun at its apex and the eerie silence of a cottage with nobody in it. The back door, which gives onto the beach, frames myopically The Bird and her brother at the water's edge. Pulling on my bathing suit, I find myself hurrying down to meet them.

Today The Bird is up to her usual tricks, sitting in the water with her pogo-stick legs extended, letting baby waves slap her on the chin. My reverie is pierced by The Bird's brother, who hasn't noticed that I've stopped playing catch, and therefore can't really be held responsible for the football that manages to find a soft landing pad under my left eye. The Bird's teeth are crooked-straight and have the yellowing shadows of a pack-a-day addict, and she usually has a Peach moustache, or sometimes blue PowerAde, and I should probably get up and let everyone know that I'm okay, all these people on the beach watching with disbelief because I'm twenty-five and I spend my time with a ten-year old and her twelve-year old brother. They're running toward me on matchstick legs but I can't hear. I pull myself to my feet and consider grabbing an ice pack for my nerves and a cold beer for my eye, and I realize that I've become lazy and disorganized and everything is mixed up – pieces that should fit after have come before.

Aside from the pulsing red star that appears every time I close my left eye, the rest of Labor Day weekend is nice and warm and family-oriented. The Bird is now tired of the cottage, and spends mornings in her pajamas, sitting in front of the T.V complaining of boredom, while The Bird's brother simply will not stop, he must have a full day, scheduled in advance so he knows what's coming after sailing and before dinner.

I know I've come back to this place because I'm looking for something. I've been back and forth a few times now and I'm learning the landscape, anticipating the sign on the Presbyterian Church that says, 'Cheerfulness is the machinery of life,' and the crest of the lake just beyond. Being here solves nothing I think to myself as I sit down for lunch, but maybe there's nothing to solve. Maybe this is all just an exercise, a dress rehearsal for something else entirely.

I drive The Bird and her brother home, and we play counting games like, 'How Many Silos Are There In Elmvale?' I tell them candy cane silos are worth two points each and The Bird asks me if they're really called candy cane silos or if that's something I made up. I try to disguise the fact that I'm blushing because she thinks I can be creative like that and tell her I'm pretty sure I got it from someone else. After the game nobody speaks for at least the length of a set of radio songs. Eventually, I reach under the seat for my drink, looking back to find The Bird stretched out across the backseat, gazing aimlessly. I turn around. A few minutes later I'm compelled to check again; she hasn't moved. As blue sky yields itself up to the night, the thought crosses my mind, whether she knows I can't help but check on her. I need to be absolutely sure she hasn't vanished from my backseat.

A Short Getaway

"I guess we're pretty high up."

"I know. It's so cool. Isn't it so cool?"

"Do you think they see us?"

"Maybe."

"I ran up the CN Tower in sixteen minutes. That's way higher than this."

It has all been arranged. Single-motor fishing boats will pick them up from the beach. Paul will go to make sure Jessy and Noah receive appropriate treatment from the Mexicans. Noah insists his father's presence is unnecessary. He has the one-track mind of a boy with a clear and desperate set of expectations for how things should unfold. Paul has remained firm. His rationale – Noah and Jessy are still young and unsteady in the company of strangers – emerges intact, having weathered the pleas and the pouting at the dinner table.

Noah and Jessy weigh less than 250 lbs. combined, which means they will go up together.

"We should have gone on a cruise."

"Why should we have gone on a cruise?"

"Sloan's and Ben's families are."

"Would you jump off a bridge if Sloan's and Ben's families were doing it?"

"Probably… anyway, they get to wake up in a new country every morning. We have to wake up in stupid Mexico all week."

There are two heights which you can choose from. Paul has chosen the lower of the two for Jessy and Noah. At the lower height, Paul reasons, he will still control the situation, even while his children bob along five hundred feet above the Sea of Cortez. The brochure says that Para-sailors can make out gradations in colour from this height, diaphanous near the shore, a darker, denser blue in deep water. It is a unique perspective, looking down onto the bay separated from the Pacific by a string of beaded rocks and cliffs. Folding the receipt inside the brochure and tucking both into the back pocket of a pair of khaki shorts, Paul wonders whether Jessy or Noah will consider it a privilege, to hang suspended above the Baja coastline. He clicks shut his bedside lamp, and is asleep almost instantaneously.

"I'll do it for ten."

"Do what for ten?"

"Fix your clock-radio."

"Ten pesos?"

"Ten dollars, stupid. Pesos aren't worth anything."

Jessy and Noah stand by the shore, where a weather-beaten fishing boat idles in shallow water, and wait for their father, as well as two others. *Cavendish* has been inscribed on the boat's stern, gold stencil with a blunt paintbrush. The driver, Bartholomew, is

smoking his second cigarette of the morning. The sun is glazed in orange, wrapped in cellophane.

"Recibo, senor."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Recibo, por favor."

"Excuse me I…just one second, please."

"The receipt, sir."

Bartholomew nudges the throttle down and the nose of the boat gradually lifts up from the water. Waves slap at the surging prow as the boat eclipses the shadows cast by a ring of volcanic rocks. These, in turn, enfold a beach tourists refer to as "Lover's Cove." Paul makes small talk with the other parent on board, her flesh rippling out from the cut of her bathing suit. She has bought a pink cowboy hat in Cabo, from one of the street merchants lining the quay. Its tassels bounce as the boat thuds against the foam. She is holding it down with her hand. Her lips are glossy and she smells of coconut.

"I'm timing this you know."

"I know."

"Almost four minutes, so far."

"I have a timer on mine too."

"I just took a picture of my big toe."

The prow lowers into the surf as Bartholomew eases the throttle up. There are three steps at the back of the boat, lined with slick damp black felt. They lead to the landing where Bartholomew and another Mexican, Marco, buckle the boy who will go first. He has

decided to wear his headphones for his ride. The gulls are indignant, and squawk their disapproval. A great white heron divides the sky along a horizontal axis.

Not unpleasant, the warmish water accumulating around Paul's feet is cause for some concern. He leans down to bail some water, trying to keep his eye on the Para-sailor above and on Jessy and Noah as they make preparations. Noah flaps his knees anxiously as if he is about to be called upon to give an answer in class. Ascending the three steps, they come to the landing. It is white and rough and freckled, like standing on pebbles. Noah closes one eye against the sun and blocks out the hotel with his thumb. Jessy lets her body hang limp against her skin. Her braces push against her rosy cheeks. The two Mexicans, Marco and Bartholomew, busy themselves strapping Jessy and Noah into the harness, making jokes to the kids while their hands clip clips and knot knots. Both children smile at their father, but differently. Noah's skin is already dark; Jessy's is pink and swollen.

Marco hops down from the landing and begins cranking, releasing the tethered pair. The parachute expands, harnessing the wind. Noah's camera thumps against his chest during ascent. It is higher then Paul anticipated, higher than the peak of the stone-dry hills and the clay-baked valleys of the Baja Peninsula. A freighter labours across the horizon toward San Jose del Cabo. This is where the couples traveling without young children go for their short getaway, to be free from the Americans and the young families visiting Cabo San Lucas.

"We're having Japanese for dinner again."

"Oh! I love Japanese."

"The food here's terrible. Terrible."

"Your lips are purple, you know."

"They are? Why?"

The sun begins to ebb, leaving a trail in its wake. Paul leans back and cranes his neck for a better look. He has been getting up at sunrise to place towels, magazines, lotions, across a row of lounge chairs by the pool. He is sick of the food here, despite the fact that he openly praises it to his family, and to the various acquaintances also staying at the hotel. The woman with the pink cowboy hat gazes skyward – mouth slightly ajar. A piece of green gum is lodged firmly in the space between her molars and her cheek.

"Seven minutes, twenty-two seconds."

"Hey look, I think I can see Denise."

"Mum better be getting pictures of this."

"Denise, Dennnnise!!!"

"Thirty-seven, thirty-eight, thirty-nine…"

Marco begins to reel them in. Bartholomew remains at the wheel, drawing on his cigarette before stubbing it out alongside the boat, tossing it into a rusted coffee can. He removes the cushion from the back seat and pulls out a windbreaker. The sun leans toward the ocean floor. Paul rubs his hands together and kneads his thighs.

"Mucho frio senor?"

"Not too cold."

"Si."

"Si?"

"Very cold tonight, senor."

Noah jumps down from the landing and moves past his father's offer, up to the bow. Paul wraps Jessy tightly in a hotel towel. He rubs her shoulders and her arms with quick, circular motions as the sun finally sinks below the horizon, folding itself neatly into the pocket of the Pacific Ocean. He glances over his shoulder into dark water, turning expectantly toward beach.

Bartholomew kills the engine and lets the boat coast into shallow water. Marco jumps from the back of the boat into black water, jeans rolled up to his knees. He extends his hand to the woman with the pink cowboy hat, helping her out as Noah flings himself from the bow and Jessy slides her legs over the side. Paul sits for a moment, his teeth chattering slightly through buttoned-down lips. He reaches for the Mexican, Marco, grasping his palm, lit up by the lampposts which line the beachfront.

Muchos gracias, Marco, he says, heavy eyes lowered.

De nada, senor.

On the beach the merchants finish packing away beaded necklaces, mother-of-pearl earrings, sea shell bracelets, ceramic crockery with Aztec design. The sound of the Mariachi band as it plays a happy hour tango in the lobby bar can be heard beneath the swell of the waves. Noah and Jessy fling their towels onto the beach and run ahead to their room. They are already arguing over whose turn it is to hold the remote control. Stooping, Paul collects their towels. Instead of returning to his room, where his wife is just now either sleeping or else occupied with a crossword puzzle, he decides to replace the soiled towels with new ones for tomorrow.

Leaning against the counter of the cabana, Paul scans poolside. He is not so much looking for as looking out for the woman with the pink cowboy hat from this afternoon.

A few moments pass, after which a boy of no more than fourteen or fifteen returns with four towels, sliding them across the counter. Paul fishes an American dollar out of his pocket. He lingers over the towels momentarily, before plunging his face into their freshly-laundered warmth, breathing the wonderful scent of antiseptic in through his nostrils. He considers stopping by the bar for a Bloody Mary, but then thinks better of it. The tomato juice down here tastes rotten, and, because he does not have to pretend to like it anymore, he decides he'll wait until they board the plane.

B—Street and L—

Parking Lot Attendant

*

The glint cast from a steel hood ornament signals his arrival. Easing his car into the lane, Silvero tips his head ever so slightly in my direction, the corner of his mouth sandwiching a cigar, the rest of his face obscured as the sun refracts off the hood of his brand new five series BMW. The gesture is automatic; an acknowledgment, perhaps, of my strict adherence to the black-slacks-white-button-down dress code, or censure for my sunglasses, the cup of coffee perched on the ledge behind me. Come to think of it, I can't be sure whether or not he's even……

Go for yer break.

Pardon? Sorry Ted, I was just…

Yer break. Go for it.

I'm going to wait if that's okay. Go in about fifteen minutes?

Nope. I'm taking my break soon, then Jube's taking his break.

Overhearing his name, Jube abandons the train of shopping carts he's collecting and darts toward me and Ted. With his wide face and deeply-creased cheeks, Jube radiates a certain amount of energy. He has blond-highlighted bangs parted crisply down the middle, and a spring in his step that does not rule out the possibility that Jube might vault himself into a series of cart wheels at any given moment.

Drawing close, the two of them – Ted and Jube – take the opportunity to watch me as I grab my knapsack from behind the guardrail and walk in the general vicinity of the Loading Dock. Today is my first day. Ted, on the other hand, has been working here for years. In addition to his familiarity with a number of the store's customers, Ted has an almost preternatural command of the parking lot. One of the cashiers says Ted used to spend his lunch running through various parking-lot scenarios, each of which compromised in some way his access to the back rows, keeping time with a stopwatch he tucked into his shirt. Whether this is true or not, the practical advantages of his mental calculus seem obvious. Ted is getting on in years, and appears to drag his left leg a little bit – the limb describing a kind of arc that calls attention to itself.

Ted

*

If it's their first day out I don't mind lending advice, helping where I can, letting 'em know front of the store's *always* got to have buggies ready and nobody but nobody parks in Frank's – that's the store manager – space 'cept for Frank. If they're smart-asses, then they'll give me a line, something to the effect of 'sure thing, Ted. No problem, Ted.' First day out and already they're on friendly terms with me, giving ol' Ted a pat on the

back. I been here going on sixteen years! Came out in '88, from Regina, where I was serving as reg. commander for the 111th Canadian. We used to have this Sergeant up there, name escapes me for the moment, and he was fond a saying...what was it now...that he'd say...well, it was something to the effect of the only ship that's sure to sink is a partnership, which might not sound like something your commanding officer would say. His point was you need to always have some chain of command, some higher ups and some small fish. Nowadays 'round here it's like I gotta have it full out with a fella just to convince the guy to use the toilet, grab a coffee. And it sure as heck ain't a hard system to learn is what I take pains to explain. You just gotta be willing to follow a certain code of conduct when things start getting screwy – when Mrs. So-and-so, who's just come from the make-up parlor, decides to park her car diagonal across two handicap spots, leaving whatever poor sap that's out here to deal with the customer whose gonna make absolute heck when he sees two perfectly good spaces taken up by one car. The plain fact of the matter is this place attracts a certain type a clientele, the kind who don't give much thought to coughing up near eight bucks for a jug of fresh-squeezed juice, and it ain't always easy to sympathize with 'em. But you'd better, if you wanna keep your job.

Parking Lot Attendant

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Located next to Silvero's Foods, The B—Street Car Wash is a mould-coloured building with a roof of corrugated tin, which houses a family of black birds. Here the opening between the building and the roof, the one the black birds use for entry and exit,

appears to be shrinking by almost imperceptible degrees. I told Ted about it; called him over from his cigarette break, but he finds it hard to believe, this shrinking space at the northeast corner of the building where the black birds live. "Probably just your eyes playing tricks on you, son. Try taking of those sunglasses," he says, turning toward the store, tucking his calloused hands into the folds of his apron.

Ted starts work two hours earlier than I do. He says he gets up around six most days – earlier if Silvero asks him to come in and hose down the awnings or water the flower tubs outside the store's entrance – and he has a way of reminding me of this, as if a man's waking hour was somehow supposed to be an index of his character. The store itself, the store I'm to stand outside of and direct traffic for, is owned and run by the Silvero family. Old Silvero started out in this neighborhood when it was still home to Jews and Italians, before the construction booms and the urban sprawl that pushed them to the outskirts of the city. Occasionally, little details that speak to a different way of life come to the surface, but mostly these subtleties are overshadowed by other details, like the mint green Cadillac that an Orthodox customer of ours drives pell-mell and parks in a zoned-off area he believes is ordained for him.

Practically everything about this job is unremarkable, except for the blackbirds. Just a second ago one of them – I think it was the mother – perched atop the corrugated tin above the nest, her beak angled downward, fell headfirst into a tumble, a somersault, feet touching down on the eaves of the car wash, eyes trained on the space directly ahead. I take it the bird standing sentry with the slightly inflated chest and the purple-flecked plumage is father, but this, admittedly, is an assumption. In truth, I know next to nothing about the birds. I just watch when things get slow. The mother bird as she darts out from

the nook, her husband, or at least the sentry, taking flights seconds later as the two birds fly in I–formation toward the copings behind the Chanel billboard at the corner of B–Street and L–.

Parking Lot Attendant

*

Alfino nods in my general direction, his car spewing emissions that curl yellow and black as he proceeds toward the Loading Dock. He lights a cigarette and steps out of his car, standing in the damp shade of the Dock until the young driver with the Boston chin honks him, muttering to himself as he reverses in, gassing and braking with amazingly gratuitous force. Alfino is a meat packer. This means he's responsible for carving frozen meat into shapely cuts of flank, rib eye, New York, filet; the dried blood on the undershirt he's wearing is a necessary evil. So too are the series of nicks and scrapes across the backside of his elongated fingers.

He's come in to pick up some furniture that Silvero has left for him. It takes him a while to remember that the chair and ottoman set have been dropped off, and are sitting as we speak on the far side of the garbage and compost bins, covered by a blue tarp, wrapped with yellow twine. Unable to fit the chair into his trunk, Alfino shoves it into the backseat, seemingly indifferent to the integrity of its original wood finish. He doesn't seem affected by the smell in this area, which on humid days is intense enough to penetrate one's skin completely. Before leaving the lot, Alfino crosses to the car wash, to the booth where The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low smokes a cigarette and uses his free hand to dab his forehand with a handkerchief. Ted nods his head in disapproval

before leaning into the carts, generating strength from his right leg as he lowers his gaze and inhales. He looks my way from behind anywhere between eight to twelve carts, mouthing the word lunch before again lowering his gaze.

Ted

*

Wouldn't you know it too, soon as I figure to myself I know what to expect from these school kids, up comes this sort of go-getter, asking questions about the place, who's running which departments and how long different folks been around and where people are coming in from. "Just curious," he says, that type of thing, "just trying to take it all in." Doesn't like to do too much talking. Carries around one of your spiraled note-pads and scribbles from time to time. He's getting pretty good at the job too, smiling and staying on his toes and sometimes even chatting it up with some of the clientele. Fact is being on your feet for seven hours, walking the same strip a turf, executing the same actions day in and day out isn't as easy as you might think. You gotta be able to step into it when the situation calls, take charge. Gotta be willing to make some mistakes too. The only way to learn from it.

The Parking Lot Attendant

*

For what seems like hours, but may in fact only be a string of seconds elapsed from the second hand – such is the nature of work that involves the conscious decision to do anything rather than check the time – I watch tufts of black feathers as they drift down

past my shoulders. And while I assume that these feathers have fallen from the wings of one of the black birds, I also see the difficulty one might have accepting this pat conclusion, insofar as I'm able to acknowledge my relative cluelessness about this mysterious creature. But put my credentials aside for the moment, and notice this single, blue-black tuft as it descends from somewhere else down the sewer grate. I usually don't take the time to consider what's down there at all, beneath the surface. My interest in this type of phenomenon ends when I can no longer see it. Still, there comes a time when one has to decide whether returning to personal preoccupations might turn out to be less rewarding than following the course of a stray feather as it wends its way down the sewer grate, into the labyrinthine underbelly of Silvero's.

First you should know that the people who toil down here, in the warehouse under the store, are essentially the inverse to the average customer pushing blissfully their shopping carts one floor above. Down here tunnels beget tunnels, mildew drips irregularly from the corner beams, and pallid Sudanese immigrants yell at each other above top-40 radio, their aprons stippled with Dijon mustard from pre-packaged chicken breasts, the ones which, in surplus, have been given to randomly selected employees as a token of Silvero's appreciation. Here also are the Latvian women wearing hairnets, sliding forward in clogs several sizes too big, glowing with sweat and the wicked notion of accumulation.

Down here the shadows are many, peeling themselves away from stone columns, wrapping themselves around the workers, lulling them, violating their skin, their bones, ravaging quiet country sides of tenuous dream worlds that these men and women conjure whenever time begins to crawl, when fine motor skills falter, fingers become thumbs,

merchandise gets mishandled, dirtied, dropped. Aside from the lunchroom, I see little of these men and women. Usually they stick to their own. The Latvian women sit together, talking over one another's voices, and occasionally one of them will put her feet up on her neighbor's lap. As for the Sudanese, they look weary, talk little. Sometimes they go without lunch altogether, preferring to use their half hour to stare blankly, perhaps looking for a bird to watch, to pass the time.

Ted

*

I got myself up early this morning, into the store by about quarter after six or so. Hosed down Loading and redid some of the shelves as to make some room for new inventory. Took the chance to punch out early when it came. I figured I could get dinner on the stove, maybe darn those socks. I'm feelin fine too, 'cept for this ugly cough I've been lugging around with me for a couple weeks, but I reckon Frank, that's the manager, has his reasons, and I ain't in no position to question him. Just hope the place doesn't fall apart, it being Friday and all, and the store liable to be good and full with folks trying to stock up and get outta town, Friday of the July long weekend and folks wanting to get up to the lake.

I saw them too, just as I was making my way to the bus stop. Three black birds sitting like stones on the old car wash marquee. The kid had a kind of funny look on his face. I didn't mean to knock him down from his horse, telling him these birds sure as sure ain't black birds, but then I couldn't rightly say nothing either. I just corrected him is all, told him to have a good one, reached into my jacket pocket to fish out a cigarette and

made my way to the stop and the corner of B– Street. Felt his stare on my back as I turned to go, something sad and fierce like you get in the eyes of a child.

II

Brian

*

"At least here you won't have to wear that stupid hat you had to wear at your last job." These are my father's words of consolation. This is what he says to me as he drops me off this morning. My father gets pleasure from this.

"Don't forget your apron, sport," he says, making me wrestle it away from him.

'You are an absolute idiot,' I think to myself. See you for dinner.

It seems like they're going to give me a kind of utility designation around here. On Mondays and Wednesdays I'll be inside stocking shelves. The rest of the week I'll be bagging and carrying out, and once in a while I'll cover the parking lot if whats-his-face's gotta take a shit or if Ted's too busy. The old guy, he gave me a tutorial this morning: How to Cut Down on Wasted Trips to the Back of the Lot. He seems nice enough. The other guy, he looks a bit too grim for my taste. Mostly it looks like he's content to pass the time leaning against the guardrail. I stood there for fifteen minutes while he went to get a coffee, and by the time he came back I was ready to fling myself under the tires of the next MiniVan. "The young women are the worst," he tells me, "each more pregnant than the next, all fitted out in turquoise-lined lycra, and all of them thinking that their being pregnant gives them the right to leave their 4x4's double parked while they run in and load up on Probiotics." By the time he's finished explaining Ted's on my ass for leaving the front of the store empty of carts. I try to reason with him, but he won't hear it, just lowers his head and starts jamming one cart into the next, knocking a few over. And

just as it starts to get busy, at around six p.m. or so, the sky opens up and Celia the head cashier tells me to get outside and help Ted. She gives me this black and gold Silvero's poncho that makes me look like a bat or a wet fart and within minutes my socks are soaked through and I'm berating myself for being the kind of guy this kind of thing happens to.

"Could be worse," my dad says as I get into the car. "At least you're only here for the summer."

'I could easily kill you while you sleep,' I think to myself, removing my glasses, watching the rain streak across the windshield.

Ted

*

Jube hasn't shown up for work in days. Celia says he's been calling in sick. Third day in a row. In the meantime, we got this Brian fella and he's not cut out for much 'cept being told what to do, and even then. Then you got the kid over there. With the air conditioner in the lunchroom being what it is, he's taken to spending his breaks over at Receiving, standing there in this godforsaken heat, watching the big arm of the compost truck as it empties the bins, an avalanche of cucumber seeds orange skins apple cores banana peels eggshells cheese rinds and chicken bones running down the sides and into the heap. Guess he finds something pretty there among the mess. Jube'll be back though, he's no fool.

Parking Lot Attendant

*

The birds are not here, and the marquee for the car wash no longer lights up completely, the phosphorescent tubes are burnt out. It's difficult to speculate on where exactly. Maybe they've been flushed out by The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low, who occasionally power washes the outside of the car wash, the windows, and the troughs. Maybe the tin, due to the heat wave, has somehow contracted, or maybe I've just mistaken a few days of near silence and the look of a confused bird, perhaps a cousin, perched atop the corrugated tin, with their departure. In the interim, Ted's been coughing his respiratory system out into a handkerchief.

Whatever command Ted usually exercises over his facial features is all but gone before I can look away. "Go for yer break," he says, but I'm already turned toward the store. Fifteen minutes later, the parking lot has descended into absolute chaos. Brian has let one of the bigger cars park in one of the smaller spots along the front of the store, its back end sticking out into the exit lane. There is a wooden-looking man driving an eighteen-wheeler in inbound saying he's got fresh fish on blocks of ice, and he needs to get it in to our refrigerators. I get Brian to run into the store and have Celia page Ted. Then I move to inform customers attempting to circumvent the Yukon blocking outbound that there's nothing I can do, we've got to get the rig through first. Ted exits the sliding doors a few moments later, wearing a pair of sunglasses with transparent, yellow-tinted lenses, and relieves me of my duties. The look he gets on his face, mouth set, eyes trained on the space directly in front of his shoes, is a practiced one. Relaying exacting directions

to the driver, Ted is able to guide the truck through the inbound lane, swinging it left around a block of parked cars. The lady driving the Yukon manages to extract her vehicle without damaging anybody else's.

As I'm debriefing Brian on some of the tactics patrons tend to resort to, I notice Alfino emerging from the Loading Dock – a cigarette dangling from his mouth, his apron caked in dried blood, fingers tapping lethargically against each other – making his way over to The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low, who is also smoking. Silvero joins them presently. The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low dabs his forehead incessantly with his handkerchief while Silvero leans in, shorter than both men, periodically seizing one of them by the wrists. "Basically," I tell him, "it's the people who think they're entitled to park wherever they choose, the people with world views that don't extend much further than the tips of their fat pink noses," still keeping an eye on the assembly. Eventually Ted notices. Not taken aback, he nonetheless pauses to carefully register the image in his mind and leans into a train of carts, not before reaming Brian out for standing around. Brian spent an extra couple of minutes rounding carts at the back of the lot, keeping his face lowered as he passed me on the way back.

Brian

*

All I said to him was that I heard Jube got a job doing commercials. Just by way of conversation, since some days I'm paired up with Ted, covering the lot. They were talking about it in the lunchroom. Celia said she saw him riding around in the back of a jeep full of white dudes wearing wrap-around sunglasses and a jacket with a sheepskin

collar, even though it's the dead of July and a million degrees out. "Smart as a whip that Jube." That's all he can say now whenever his name comes up. "Jube's got ten times the smarts of all of ya's, with all your private schools and fancy parties," Ted says to me, while I'm trying to pull carts into the front of the store. And he won't move either, just stands there, messing with the sensor on the automatic door, watching me as I juke seven buggies into place, muttering to himself, "smart as a whip that Jube, smart as a whip."

Ted

*

I reckon I got no right to ask for nothing from Him, but the lord sure does work in mysterious ways. I know He's watching me when I'm washing my socks in the sink, polishing my boots, kneeling down at the edge of the bed like I'm supposed to. I know he sees the filth of the courtyard, the hallway that smells like urine. He sees the weak and the wretched, both of 'em congregating outside my window under the cloak of night. Sees me when I rise up, getting down to work early, cleaning the awnings, washing the stucco with soap and bucket and horsehair brush all the way from front to back before other folks' rolling out of bed. And it's the indifference is what gets me. How some folks can walk the straight and narrow all their days while others is sinning high and low. It's His indifference is what gets me wondering is all.

Like when I see Fino standing there, with that no-good and Silvero, I say to myself, "how's it that honest folks like me can't get no break in this life? Goddammit to hell, how's it things manage to fall into idle laps like they do?"

Now I'm not saying I haven't seen my share of miracles along the way. I reckon I know my own lot. And I sure as hell ain't got no right to ask or question – the good lord works and all. But when I see the three of 'em over there, talking low and secret, it just about sends shivers down my spine, seeing it with my own two eyes, knowing what I know about folks' ways. I know my own course, though, and it's a fool who longs to graze in other men's pastures. Sometimes I get to wondering is all.

Wouldn't blame a fella for it.

III

Parking Lot Attendant

*

After the third day it becomes hard to ignore. The smell of overripe fruit and salted meat drifts up the staircase and through the air ducts. Silvero is flush as he makes his way from customer to customer, assuring them that the situation is well in hand. But the work necessary to repair the burst pipes has forced Silvero to shut down the grid that controls the in-store air conditioning system, the freezers, and the meat lockers during the hottest days yet. Each night this week the boys from Receiving, with the help of some of the underground workers and the temps, have been moving expired inventory out to the garbage receptacles behind the Loading Dock, while Silvero berates everyone in demotic English, his face drawn and gaunt, large puddles under his arms and a dark streak down the back of his shirt. Late at night, the sheer emptiness of the lot makes me wonder whether or not I'm still in the same place. Nothing around save for a stray car with a dead battery, and the trailer of a truck snaking its way across the lanes, the shadow of a trucker as he descends from the driver's seat emerging under the glow of the store's orange security lights. Alfino is here. And so is The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low.

This is the last of it, men. Alfino you and Ted will take the rest of this to the side. Take it down to the edge of the lot and dump it over the side.

My legs are hurtin' me pretty good, Silvero.

The two men – Alfino and Ted – make an awkward pairing, wheeling a garbage receptacle under the moonlight. Ted is hobbling as he tries to steer the receptacle, keep it

straight. Arriving at the far side of the lot, they set the bin down to survey the dump spot. Here the glare of the security lights bisects the moon's glow, leaving the scene partially concealed, the contours indistinct, the color a blinding white.

Silvero, we can't just dump it here. Make the animals sick, and stink it up somethin' fierce. Silvero!

Alfino is drumming on the lid of the garbage can, waiting as The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low approaches slowly. Emerging first as mere silhouette, by degrees The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low's face becomes discernible, his eyes just noticeable under the wide brim of his straw sunhat. Fino grabs Ted, pinning his arms while The Man Who Wears His Hat Down Low begins to land blows, quick and fierce, to the old man's ribs. Ted's howl resonates against the faint drone of idling car engines.

Despite calling out to Ted, my voice fails to produce anything more than a whisper. Upon taking a few steps I find my vision begins to blur, sepia against a background of dull yellow, salt and pepper, snow. With my stomach rising into my chest, I'm stumbling sideways, flailing. From the pavement, I'm pretty sure I can make out the rear of Silvero's car as he exits the parking lot. I'm less sure as to why one of the Sudanese is shaking me. 'What am I doing sleeping on the ground,' I think to myself, 'and why of all people is Hamid trying to wake me up?'

Brian

*

Of course they couldn't ask Ted or the fat kid who works here because his older brother is a driver and because Iris – that's one of Silvero's daughters – thinks he looks

like John fucking Kennedy. It has to be me. I have to be the one to fill in while the parking lot attendant takes a full week to recover. He came in for the first time this morning, a still-grainy looking cut on his chin, the other two covered to varying degree by the sunglasses. He seemed a little stand-offish. I guess I would too if I fainted in front of a large percentage of my co-workers.

In the interim the pipes have been fixed, and the heat has leveled off. I couldn't pass up the opportunity, though. I had to ask. For his part, the parking lot attendant claims to remember B– Street and a wave of nausea and a sickly yellow glaze that he says made it difficult for him to focus. Most certainly he says he remembers the traffic shuffling along B– as they lifted the stretcher off the ground and transferred him into the back of the ambulance. He said he came out of the hospital several hours later with a slight concussion and three prominent facial abrasions: on the forehead, the cheek and the chin of the left side of his face. Apparently this was the side that hit the pavement first when he fainted. As for after-effects, he says he's still having a little bit of trouble establishing contours, demarcations, outlines. Still seeing things is how I'd put it, but the kid can get a little bit carried away. In any event, it's good that he's back. He's the only one patient enough to spend seven hours a day waving traffic in and out of a grocery store.

Ted

*

First thing I see when I see him is him behind a train of buggies, leaning into them and pushing the set to the front of the store. I expect he was expecting something in the way of acknowledgment from me, but I just told him it was him and me today out here and that he could just tell me when he wanted to take a break and that'd be fine by me.

Rained some this morning. Store was slow. Stood under the awning while the rain played its tune out on the cement and he told me he was heading back to his studies at the end of the month. I told him that was good. Kid like him shouldn't have to work here if he can help it. He got to asking me about my legs and I told him. "Metal plates and screws this here leg's made of." Asked me how, and since we had the time I told him.

That day started out like any other. Showed up for work early, chatted the cashiers up as they got their tills ready, rounded up loose buggies, smoked my cigarette, had my coffee with the boys in Receiving. Silvero approaches me at about quarter to ten, asks me can I do traffic for the day. "Regular guy is not here today. I know I can count on you Ted," he says, less a question than a relaying of fact.

So I spent the day in the lot, reminding the old folks who'd forgotten where they parked, guiding trucks into those tight spaces, and standing firm. And just as the day's winding down, almost nine in the p.m., all of sudden in comes a swarm of dark outlines from the south, some landing on top of the marquee, others settling down on the eaves of the car wash.

'I reckon those are starlings,' I say to myself. 'City birds are attracted to the……But I can't. Finish it.

The woman's already rolled down her window and she's screaming at the tops of her lungs, trying to explain to anyone who'll listen that she was just heeding me, I was waving her back. She was just following orders. Takes her another second before she realizes she still hasn't moved the car up one single inch. Off my feet for four months, they reconstructed these legs right here out of metal plates and screws.

When I finished telling him he nodded, looked away. "Better get the rest of these buggies up to the front 'fore Silvero comes around," I say, and the two of us got behind our trains, keeping our eyes out of the rain, letting it all wash.

IV

Parking Lot Attendant

*

I can hear the sound of rubber coming unstuck as the door slides gently open, re-grafting itself after a number of seconds. Ted has finished his shift. Making his way into the lot, he stops to light a cigarette, craning his neck towards the sun as it begins to descend from its mid-afternoon zenith. "Have a good one," he says, replacing the pack in the inside pocket of his jacket. The jacket is black leather, and looks out of keeping but suitable given the mid-august chill that comes as the sun falls toward the horizon line. Resigned, Ted turns to wave, hauling his body toward the bus stop at the corner of B– Street and L—.

Looking from Ted to the sun and then back to Ted, I can only make out an indistinct figure. For a moment Ted is incandescent, pulsing with greens and blues and tiny constellations of flickering stars. I squint after him until he is eclipsed by the car wash. 'Only two more hours,' I think to myself, pacing back in forth along the guardrail.

Brian

*

When they told me this morning that the regular hadn't shown, that I was going to have to spend the day in the lot, I almost burst into tears. Strange though. I didn't end up minding so much, being outside, in the fresh air, away from the nattering of the yuppies in the produce section talking loud into their head-sets. I think Silvero's has seen the end

of the parking lot attendant. Ted says he's got big plans to head back to school in the fall. Finish off his education. I can tell he's had it with this place anyway. He was never able to see the irony in it. Punches in, out for lunch, back in again, and once more before he leaves, talks to nobody save Ted and the occasional customer that recognizes him. Probably time for him to shove off anyway. The guy's been walking around here like he defecates strawberries 'n cream going on three months now.

Alfino

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I couldn't hear him when he first come down with the news. Told me after he was hammering on the steel door with his fist for maybe half a hour, but I couldn't hear none as because I had on headphones at the time and was churnin' ground beef with the thing and when I'm workin' like that I don't hear so good. When I slid open the door he was standing there, sweatin' somethin' fierce and breathing snot through his nose, but then he got a hold of himself and he told me he'd made a deal and he's gonna expand the store. "This is it," he tells me. "I will take the lot to the south. I buy your friend with the hat clean out and I take it over and knock it down and expand the parking lot and I want you to be the guy. My second pair of eyes," he says to me, "and knock it off with that tapping before I cut your hands off at your lousy wrists."

My uncle's a funny kind of guy. He can be very generous, to make an example of him, around Christmas time, when everybody's tight and he's givin' all the employees somethin' to help out with the tree and the turkey. This is generous. But then there's this other side of him that's expectin' that as long as he's lookin' after you you gotta be

willing to recipercate. So when he tells me he wants me to be the guy who oversees things out there, and he starts breathin' heavy through his nose again except not because he's out of breath but because he's getting ready to bear-tackle me to the ground if I says no, I start to think to myself maybe it'd be o.k. to spend some time out of doors.

"Another thing," he tells me, "this is it for Iris and for Toni." If they can't work it out between the two of them he says he's gonna up and redo his will and leave the whole thing to some family he has back home who've been greengrocers forever. Then what are Toni's kids gonna do about car payments and schooling, and how's Iris gonna be able to afford four trips a year when she doesn't have squat, and he gives me this look like he's just pulled a rabbit out of his hat.

I'll be outside full-time as soon as summer's over and he can get the bulldozers down here. You'd never know by talkin' to him, but my uncle can be a funny guy.

V

Parking Lot Attendant

*

From inside the lot I watch as the 45 bus leans toward the curb. When it pulls away, commuters move distractedly toward their respective destinations, most carrying plastic bags or else holding the hand of a child, some doing both. A man dressed in a gray suit makes for a contrast with the golden retriever he follows, the leather leash wrapped two or three times around his left hand. Passing the driveway to Silvero's, the man turns in, opening a low gate leading to a split-level, the first floor of which is occupied by a Veterinarian clinic. Holding the screen door and giving a tug on his dog's leash, he makes way for the lady I sometimes see on my lunch break, the one who's spending her summer alone in an antique shop across the street, itemizing Victorian armoires and chesterfields for the scrupulous owner who wears wire-rimmed glasses and sometimes shops here for scones and baklava.

The moment in which the 45 pulls away from the curb and into the intersection is a long one. Long enough for me to punch out and return my keycard and say a few goodbyes; long enough to spot a girl wearing a hair band and a denim jacket, smiling a conciliatory smile which appears from under either green contacts or else eyes of an indeterminate number of colours. Or perhaps the twilight is playing tricks on me, imbuing things with warmth and colour which ought not to have either. I smile. First across, then down. Reaching into my knapsack, I remove my book and lean my head back as the 45 makes its way down a gentle slope, accelerating at the bottom to climb up.

The Highboy

Age has dulled the original, red mahogany stain, and the brass handles for the drawers have not been polished for some time. This explains the fingerprints, seen during the late part of the afternoon, when the sun streaks past the window. Still, there are other things that cannot as easily be explained – the silver coins under the trim of the uppermost drawer, and the figurine, glass-cut, which John found lying on its side, stuck in between golf shirts his father couldn't stand to see thrown away. John's mother could not detect the logic in this. For her, everyday objects and items were useful in proportion to how much room they took up, how much care and upkeep they required, and she seemed to take great pleasure in tossing out anything that did not meet these criteria. Accordingly, John's father learned to take extra measures with keepsakes he did not feel comfortable leaving in her path.

But Barry Draper could do little more than stand-by and watch when the time came for the family to move out of the old house on Wimbledon Road. With all of the children assembled, Mrs. Draper announced that she would give a number of the family's possessions, so that the children might have the benefit of a head-start. Liz in particular displayed no hesitation, identifying pieces she'd be taking with the professional disinterest of an external auditor while her mother triumphantly recorded her daughter's

claims on a legal size pad of paper reserved specifically for the purpose. By all accounts, the auction seemed to come off well, aided by the timely uncovering of a box marked 'Wine Glasses,' and Natalie's decision not to get involved. Having recently completed her final year at the Sorbonne and returned from four months of traveling in parts of East Asia, the youngest Draper said she was more than willing to leave her share to her older siblings. After all, she would be making the move with her parents to the new condominium. It would be her incentive to visit Liz, she said, and she was excited by the prospect of sleeping on the old couch, under the familiar checkered quilt, in Liz's living room. For his part, John took everything from the small den off the kitchen – the candelabra-shaped lamp, the matching end-tables, each cut in the shape of an elephant, the ottoman, and the deep, high-backed, brown leather reading chair – everything needed to reproduce the room – along with a number of other items. With his last pick he claimed the highboy, prompting a vaguely curious look from his mother, who marked it down nevertheless.

In theory, the prospect of a furnished apartment did not come with any disadvantages. Yet, there were some. Under certain lights, the elephant end-tables looked grotesque, preyed upon, and John could find no human use for the card table his mother urged him to take. Then there was the promise he had made to his father to throw absolutely nothing away. Consequently, the atmosphere in John's living room was one of perpetual agitation. It was not until his second year in the apartment that John began to develop something like an appreciation for the furniture which his parents had gifted to him, particularly the highboy, which he placed in close proximity to his desk, and which he

had ample time to consider during cold, short winter days, under the dull light of the baroque lamp he kept in his bedroom.

It was upon running his hand across the highboy's freckled surface that John first took note of the locks. The discovery of six key holes, each cut to accept a key one would use to unlock an old trunk, provoked a strange heaviness in him – their existence was enough to briefly evoke the silhouettes of six doors he had never seen before. He also detected flecks of paint on the highboy's surface, which led to denser brushstrokes on its underside. Evidence, perhaps, of a fugitive hand that had made contact with the highboy prior to John's father, and a possible explanation for his mother's dislike of the piece. Then there was the discovery of the number **313,** stamped in gothic font above an area which looked painted over, hastily, in white. In this way, the highboy came to be something for John to consider when his mind wandered, something which seemed to offer a glimpse into its own murky history.

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With spring approaching, talk of the highboy surfaced once again, in the wake of a long overdue visit from John's grandmother. John decided in advance that he would wait for her out front. He wanted to help her with her things, if she'd let him. But, true to form, John's grandmother insisted on getting out of the taxi with neither her grandson's nor the driver's support. These refusals were not unexpected; they were, rather, evidence of a certain stubborn willfulness. And while her determination could be frustrating – his mother's patience was tried to its limits every time her mother-in-law attempted to lower herself into a car – John did not mind the cautious pace which accompanied his

grandmother's need to do it herself, observable in her painstakingly slow ascent up the flight of stairs leading to his apartment.

John spoke relatively little as he led her through the apartment, concentrating on his grandmother's assessments of a set of abstract paintings she found confusing, a set of chairs she recognized as once belonging to her.

The place is quite lovely, my darling. What a marvelous skylight! A definite improvement, she said, turning to John, who smiled politely, as if in confirmation.

At the doorway to his room, she paused to admire the linens.

Such bright, clean sheets, John, do you remember when I used to hang your grandfather's clothing on the line behind the old house on Munro? How his undershirts would dance like wild Indians…And the smell, when they were dry, like the soft spot on the crown of a baby's head, she said, closing her eyes. Don't you remember how Poppa would decide that the lawn needed mowing whenever I had the nice tablecloth out for drying?

In truth, John only remembered how his grandfather would come up stooped and panting after mowing, standing in the fresh-cut grass, blowing his nose into the monogrammed handkerchiefs she set out for him each morning. He realized now that this was the look of a man whose greatest wish was for someone to offer him a glass of whisky.

My mother's choice, the linens, John said, forcing a laugh, guiding his grandmother toward the kitchen.

The brickwork is exquisite in here, John. The wainscoting…And the door hinges, do you know whether they are originals?

Yes, I believe the landlord tracked them down and restored them.

Isn't that wonderful…And I see you've also taken the chest of drawers from Mom and Dad, she said in passing, lowering herself into one of two wooden chairs tucked into the kitchen table.

I thought I should, John replied, filling up two glasses of lemonade by the sink.

And why is that, my dear?

I'm not entirely sure… Anyway, I found some old stuff in it that he never got rid of, some coins, and a figurine.

They're Swiss, the coins, his grandmother said, and John was startled at her assuredness. He waited, hoping she would continue.

Your father visited once as a young man with friends of his from the university. I still remember the argument we had when he told me he would be staying on after his friends had left, to pursue an American girl, from Chicago. Of course, those aren't the words he used. But you should have heard his voice when he called, John. So melodramatic, he was. He had gotten himself so…I don't know…wrapped up, as if he had found his reason to live there. At the time, I worried whether he'd even come back. Then he made a second trip, years later, bringing back all of these… knickknacks…the coins, for us, and I remember my sister saying, Do us all a favour and keep the damned things for yourself, Barry. I have no use for such trifles. I did all I could to stifle a laugh. Your Aunt can be quite a performer, you know.

But why the second trip, John said, re-filling his glass.

Well, he absolutely insisted on returning to Switzerland. And to think, he could have gone anywhere… If my memory serves me correctly, yes, I believe he ended up hitching a ride with a group of tourists on their way to…To a commune of some sort. I must tell

you I don't know what went on there, and I don't want to. Can you imagine, John, spending your trip puttering about like that, in some godforsaken burg?

John's glance met his grandmother's as he set down his glass of lemonade. He felt obliged to look away, extending deference to his grandmother, who continued until John could find a way to steer the conversation in a new direction. He asked if she had heard about how hard going it was for Natalie since being back from school.

I told your mother, I simply cannot for the life of me imagine why she would not be snatched right up. Baffling, that a girl of such beauty, such presence of mind…

It's not as easy as that, Grandma.

Oh nonsense, John. When I was your age I had no trouble finding work. It's these young firms you see now. People simply don't recognize a pedigreed young woman when they see one.

John had never remembered hearing anything about his grandmother's working, but that didn't mean it wasn't true. Certain members of his family had a talent for half-truths and fortuitous omissions, for smokescreens and fog which would crowd out the light of fact. He wasn't sure how he felt about this.

Can you fetch my jacket for me, dear? I imagine I'll be on my way.

It's here, in the closet, John said, getting up from his seat. Do you have to leave? Can I call you a cab?

No need, John. I've told the driver to wait below.

Do taxis still offer that kind of service?

It was wonderful to see you, my dear. I am so happy for you, she said, standing up to go, placing her warm hand against his cheek.

And the highboy, John asked.

Sentimental value, dear, along with the coins he brought back from the restaurant they ate in. He had the highboy shipped the day after she left him. Sufficed to say, your father has a little bit of the pack-rat in him. Thank you again for having me, dear. Give my best to your sisters, she said, pressing John's forearm and nodding goodbye.

When he heard the door close, John returned to the kitchen table. He finished another glass of lemonade and rinsed both cups, using his thumb to remove the lipstick, which washed off easily despite its garish appearance. He could only laugh at the way his grandmother conducted herself. She had already made friends at the homecare center, and was returning now to meet some of them for an afternoon game of bridge. She had also volunteered to help reorganize the library. To everyone's surprise, she had started listening to afternoon baseball games on the radio, a hobby she had once expressed great interest in. John's father couldn't get over the phone-call he had had with her, in which he asked her how she was doing, and she had replied by citing the score which her team was losing by, as well as the late inning and the 2-2 count at the plate. He thought his father might like to know that she was in good form during their visit, but, on receiving his answering machine, John decided against leaving a message. Instead, he scribbled the date and a few notes in a notepad he kept on his desk.

*

At the end of two summers, Mrs. Draper once again assembled the family. It had taken just two years for her to realize that she was not ready for the lifestyle which came with the purchase of a condominium. She said she missed the footfalls her children made as they came down to dinner, or snuck late into the house, and while she could no longer look forward to this, it was privately agreed that her decision to move into a modest, two-bedroom home near the old one was motivated by the hope that she might soon be able to look forward to the patter of grandchildren.

As he had during the first auction, John's father spent most of the afternoon in his study. He welcomed the opportunity to remove himself for a few hours, for he was hard at work these days, sorting through boxes of his father's private correspondence he had come across while cleaning out his mother's apartment. Of this occasion, one might say that there was something different in the atmosphere, something which John felt had to do with Natalie's attitude. Where she had formerly expressed nothing more than a nostalgic fondness for some of the objects, Natalie now took with a rapacity that outstripped the sentimental value of any of the Draper's possessions. This may have had something to do with the interim period, which Natalie had spent casting about for work. After a soggy ten days of volunteering on the set of a made-for-television movie, Natalie had impulsively committed to a degree program in costume design at a local college, only to find out days before its commencement that the program would be cancelled because of a lack of interest. It was the incalculable unpredictability of the outcome that his sister had had a difficult time with, and she spent a number of miserable weeks thereafter loafing around the condo in her pajamas, watching daytime TV. with the lights turned off. Still, John was impressed at how Natalie was able to bounce back, taking a job in retail and

scaling back the number of new shoe purchases. Liz, who had recently secured her first boyfriend, likewise plundered in a manner which John found unsettling, but also impressive. He felt that his sisters' ability to focus strictly on the utility of the family's possessions was admirable, evidence of a mind-set that might be more practical than his. He took only an end-table, which he knew would end up beside the similarly-functioned card table, and a number of old photograph albums and scrap books, disappearing into the hallway before the girls could begin to claim the light fixtures.

He was surprised to find his father, standing in the front hall next to a drawing he had put up only recently. It was an idyll of a large country house, with a raggedly-dressed, red-headed boy stooping to remove the empty bottles of milk from beneath a sign on the lawn which read: For Sale. It had turned up in one of the boxes. Barry unfolded his arms, placing one around John's shoulders. He walked his son to the door and stood over him while he tied his shoes.

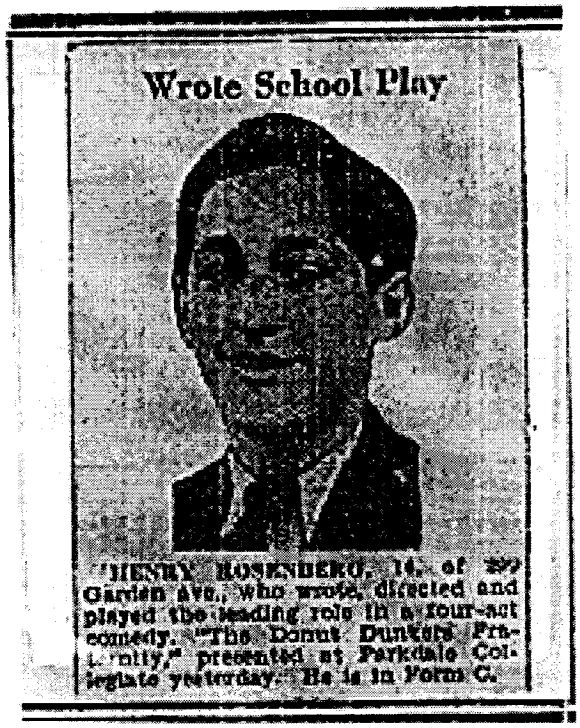
Just remember, Son, they're not placemats, his father called out from the porch. So don't eat over them. John turned and smiled.

John pulled out the scrapbooks on the subway. They contained articles and photographs his grandfather had cut out and assembled before he passed away. While he had seen the majority of the photographs, the articles detailing his grandfather's career in advertising were something new, and he was anxious to read through them. He took it for granted that his grandfather would have assembled a scrapbook which consisted mainly of photographs and articles about him. Poppa had also marked the paragraphs that pertained to him with a yellow highlighter. He figured he would flip through first, and then go back

and read the articles. But this proved too hard to do, for almost immediately he came upon two fragments too peculiar to be passed over.

YOUTHFUL ORATORS FROM FERN AVENUE

Above are shown four of the youthful winners in the recent Oratorical Contests staged at Fern Avenue School for its pupils, under the direction of the Home and School Club. 1. Henry Rosenberg, second prize winner in the Senior event; 2. Frank Banfield, who secured first place in the Senior contest; 3. Esther Harnick, second in Junior class, and 4. Dill McKerihen, first in Junior class.



Wrote School Play

HENRY ROSENBERG, 14, of 299 Garden ave., who wrote, directed and played the leading role in a four-act comedy, "The Donut Dunkers Fraternity," presented at Parkdale Collegiate yesterday. He is in Form C.

Later, John was surprised to come upon a picture which was not set behind transparencies like the others. Rather, it sat loose. Perhaps it had been thrown in at a later date, and John's first thought was whether there were others like it that might have already gone missing. Sheathed inside a cardboard frame, the diptych sat behind windows cut by hand. The first photo was of his grandfather – H.R. Draper – in black suit, tie, and overcoat, carrying his bowler by the brim, posing beside a statue of Lord Byron, a row of automobiles over his right shoulder. The second, of the same statue, and taken from a similar perspective, was of Barry Draper, dressed comfortably, smiling, and squinting slightly into the sun. His feet were hidden by red peonies in full bloom, a contrast to the withered white buds which John's grandfather stood just in front of. John removed it from the scrapbook, bringing it under the fluorescent lights of the subway car.

What could John say? He was not unaware of his father's sentimental streak. He thought of Barry's fondness for speeches and public expressions of affection, and how he never missed the chance to declare how happy he was when he was able to be together with his wife and his children in the familiar confines of home. And yet the photo was not melodramatic. That slightly overblown quality John had always associated with his father was nowhere to be seen. Rather, the picture stood on its own, a tribute and a testimony to history. Then there was the picture of Poppa. Why was he dressed so formally? Perhaps, John thought, it was the fashion to look one's best while traveling in a foreign country. But – who had taken the photograph, and was there any significance in his grandfather's choice of monuments? – these were questions he could not answer, and the absence of a plausible answer was magnified for John by the prospect that there simply might not be one. He struggled to think it through as the subway lurched and clanged around the track. Still rapt in his discoveries, John slipped the photo back into the scrapbook at his stop. It was only upon setting them down on his desk that he remembered the end-table, which he had left next to his seat. As he imagined the end-table hurtling through black space, unmoored to anything or anyone, he began to feel badly. The absurdity he had always seen behind his father's desperate attempts at preservation was giving way to a new and amorphous feeling, which John attempted to place as he began running back in the direction of the station.

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John phoned his father later that week. They talked about Natalie, and his father expressed concern over behavior he was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with before talk turned to John's grandmother.

How's she doing this week?

Oh she's something, John. Do you know she's listening to the ball games now, says all the Umps have something against our team.

She's totally right. They've lost some really close games lately, and it hasn't been because of pitching.

What did you make of the books your Pop put together?

Yah, it looks like he was really patient with it. It's so meticulous, all the articles in chronological order. Quite a project, John added, tentatively, before continuing. You know, I found something while I was flipping, a photo, actually two photos, of you and Pop standing by the same statue.

John waited, listening to his father's chest expand and then contract before speaking the words, Lord Byron, after which he continued.

I haven't seen that picture in years. It was, give me a second here, he died in Rome; they both did, but I'm talking about my father… Right, so it must have been the day I joined a walking tour with a few of the couples I had met at my hotel. I thought of the picture as soon as I saw the statue. He and your grandma went back to Rome a few times after their honeymoon. I believe the picture was taken on the last trip. Pop had a heart attack at dinner and nobody knew what to do and he rolled off his chair and hit his head on the floor and that was it.… The way your grandmother tells it, she's fucking incredible, John, she's convinced he's not even buried here, Apparently, customs regulations won't allow

you to open a body bag sent from another country… Rode with him to the hospital in the back of an ambulance, and that was the last time she saw his body. Your grandma is beyond-a-doubt sure she's going to be buried beside an empty tomb or a complete stranger.

Sounds a little far-fetched. I like the photo a lot, though. Good decision on your part. I'm not sure why she wouldn't include it with the rest of them. It was just tossed in there, could have easily fallen out.

His father continued as if uninterrupted.

I had the photo taken by an old man having his lunch in the park. We fell into a conversation, and he asked me to come take a look at his shop, which I did, briefly, before resuming the walking tour. I gave it to her thinking she might like to include it, but I don't think she was so interested. Your grandmother can be a bit stubborn. I mean you know why she hates the highboy so much, don't you? I went back to the store the next day and bought it on a whim before I left for the Rome airport. Gave it to her. She said it was a ridiculous thing to do. Brings it up every time we move, ask whether or not we're taking it with us.

But she thinks you got the highboy in Switzerland, because of some girl, John said, his head starting to spin slightly.

Don't kid yourself, son. She knows good and well where the highboy comes from. She just likes to deny it.

I guess it explains the figurine, John said, almost inaudibly.

She manages, John, she survives, and part of being a survivor is the prerogative to concoct one's personal history. He's not with us anymore, and, judging by the story she's

dreamed up about customs, he never will be. Who knows, maybe it's true, the customs thing, but I don't think that's the point.

John tried to think about this, but the inconsistencies seemed to overwhelm him.

It's just her way, his father said, as if in conclusion.

What about him? What was Pop's way?

Barry Draper paused to think about how he might answer his son. Helluva guy, your Pop. Drank like a fish. Not too bad with a paintbrush either… Anyway, how's that chair holding up?

Fine, John managed. The chair's fine.

Whatever you do take it easy with that thing. That chair's a beauty!

I know. I'll have to talk to you later, Dad.

Ok, Son. Make sure to call your mother. You know how she feels about not feeling like she's bothering you.

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Just her way, he thought to himself, hanging up the phone. John got up from the kitchen table and returned to his desk. He touched the drawers of the highboy again, feeling for the convexity which he still considered interesting, even thrilling. He wanted to make something more out of the large gash he eventually discovered on the highboy's right flank, for he could not believe that he had never noticed it. Even after his girlfriend revealed that the movers had had some trouble with the highboy on the staircase, some part of him still wanted to see the origin of the mark as obscure, open to interpretation. He denied the facts in much the same way when he found out that all of the highboys were stamped 313, such was the vendor's idiosyncratic method of tracking the pieces

that his hands had fashioned during his lifetime. Still, when the time came to pick bedroom furniture, he did not fight with his wife's polite refusal to include the highboy in the bedroom decor. After all, she had consented, despite their lack of space, when John decided he would help his father organize Henry's correspondence, which turned out to be larger and more interesting than either had expected.

Over lunch, he and Natalie decided it made sense for her to take it for the time being, rather than have it wind up at Liz's, among a clutter of store-bought furniture and Draper castaways that Natalie said gave the impression of a second-rate re-print of Renoir. She installed it at the foot of her bed, and found it pleasant to watch when the moon's soft light press against the slatted blinds of her bedroom window, for it would illumine the highboy in a checkered pattern, which hung there until the moon's arc eclipsed the window and the tartan slid to the floor.

The Patient

It had been more than six weeks since their last session when he crossed paths with Dr. Francis Henry Ellington, on the sidewalk at the northwest corner of C-- College. The intersection was busy, construction forcing cars into one lane that crawled past the gloved hand of a man wearing a yellow helmet and a gas mask. Exhaust fumes. The smell of freshly set asphalt and the din of low-fidelity traffic noises. Shuffling past the corner, a book bag slung across the front of his chest, The Patient looked up at the windows of the office buildings and apartment complexes lining the street. A late summer heat wave had turned downtown C-- into a kind of incubator, and he wondered whether the puddles of sweat collecting now along his back and under his arms would be visible once he got to school.

Other than the fact that he recognized his former patient – which The Patient did not doubt, not for one moment – it cannot for certain be claimed that the doctor thought or felt anything, for this kind of encounter was both ordinary and unavoidable in his line of work. Dr. Francis Henry Ellington had been a practicing psychoanalyst for over twenty years, and was often running into former patients. Professional discretion dictated whether he stopped and made inquiries or simply smiled tactfully and nodded. Yet, in

spite of the veneer which a good doctor develops over the course of a career, and which a good doctor comes to assume as his public face, Dr. Francis Henry Ellington was unable to suppress a look of pity, which conveyed in it an accusation:

'You, son, could not stay the course.'

As for The Patient, neither furrowed brow nor balled-up fist could disguise a mouth limned with terror and contempt, and the swell of undulating lines, which inscribed on his forehead a kind of response: 'You, Sir, have done me wrong.'

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He arrived at the Health Centre near the end of the winter term, complaining of sleep disruption, lack of appetite, and difficulty concentrating. He was assessed by a young and visibly overworked staff doctor who nonetheless dealt with The Patient in a forthright and reassuring manner. The doctor had already seen two students with similar symptoms during the course of his morning rounds. With these cases still fresh in his mind, he felt confident enough to assure The Patient that his condition was only temporary, and that he could look forward to a decrease in severity by the end of term. The doctor suggested that he do his best until then, and gave him the phone number of the mood clinic across the street from the Health Centre should his symptoms persist or grow worse.

Upon hearing the diagnosis, The Patient drew in and released a deep breath, pulling himself up from the chair and turning toward the door. He let the authority of the doctor's conviction work itself into the knots in his back.

'For why,' he thought, 'can I not admit to myself that everyone worries near the end of term? Everyone begins to speak of how much they have to do, how little time they have

to themselves. And everyone,' he continued to himself, 'finishes, and looks back on their worry as useless and largely illusory.'

"Thank you, doctor," he said, meeting the doctor's sympathetic glance, before turning his attention to his shoes.

Pausing for a moment on the sidewalk in front of the Health Centre, The Patient squinted across the street, into the dull reflection of the windows of the Ward Building. He removed and wiped his glasses with the inside of his shirt, and decided to take off his coat, for the sun was now out. He noticed too the receding lines of snow, and, out of the corner of his eye, the clusters of students in t-shirts and sunglasses leaning against the Library's concrete edifice.

'It really is a perfectly nice day,' he thought, and, with these feelings foremost in his mind, The Patient decided he would walk.

For his route home he chose a short-cut through the park. He stopped briefly in front of a fenced-in area, to watch dogs playing fetch, until a nagging forced him to withdraw.

'I know there is something I need to do today. Something I am forgetting.'

The Patient had always prided himself on his ability to recollect details. He had not been prepared for the occasional forgetting that came with the recent onset of his symptoms.

'But I've paid already' he said to himself, in answer to a question posed by an imaginary interlocutor.

Satisfying though it was to pinpoint the source of his unease, The Patient's relentless sense of obligation when it came to paying his bills on time was something he could not quite reconcile, for he was almost never late with his payments, and he had bounced a check only once in his entire life. He continued on, passing the playground, where he

stood and watched as a boy pushed his sister on the swings, and for a moment he felt the overwhelming urge to cry, no doubt the product of the good feelings he was experiencing, a result of this invigorating constitutional.

'I have really gotten myself wrapped up over nothing,' he thought, and, recognizing in this a shred of logic, The Patient decided to treat himself to a dinner of steak and fries, returning home afterward to read the newspaper before getting into bed.

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He spent the better part of April bound to his desk, breaking only to eat, sleep, and stare out of his window, and leaving the apartment to pick up groceries or visit with his upstairs neighbour, Marie. These trips were a pleasant diversion for The Patient, for he enjoyed inspecting Marie's dust-covered collection of Russian novels, and listening as Marie's cat's paws clicked lightly across the patchy kitchen linoleum. He knew very little about his neighbour, and, not knowing whether it was polite to draw attention to the red lipstick she was always getting on her teeth, or to the fact that her apartment might benefit from the opening of a window, refrained from doing so. He chose instead to see Marie as quirky, and was quick to see these quirks in a positive light. After all, it was Marie who had rushed down to The Patient's apartment in the middle of the night, plunging her cordless phone into his face and reciting the local gas company's emergency hotline, convinced that she could smell a leak. That it turned out to be a simple matter of striking a match and rekindling the pilot light he had inadvertently snuffed out while preparing a cup of tea did not make her vigilance any less appropriate, and he tried hard to keep Marie's example in mind whenever he castigated himself for treating ordinary situations like they were emergencies.

He marked the completion of the winter by spending a quiet week at home, returning to C-- to prepare for the summer term and a research position within his faculty. So completely had he succeeded in distracting himself from the circumstances of the recent school term, he managed even to enjoy the train ride back, initiating a conversation with a young woman studying to become a nurse. It was not until the tires rode up and onto the curb in front of his building that The Patient was made to acknowledge what he had done so well to forget, and he leaned forward, burying his head in his hands, to the bemusement of the driver. Scaffolding obscured the first two floors of his building, and he was concerned to see his front window, which formerly gave onto the street, covered by a large white tarp. His concern turned to visceral pangs of distress as he nudged his way through the apartment door, side-stepping a pile of bills, leaflets, and coupons for pizza. Here the wooly layer of dust and hair accreting along the windowsill, the tomatoes which he had forgotten to toss out, and the general disarray in which The Patient had left his apartment were enough to send him into self-recriminations.

'How could I have been so forgetful,' he thought to himself, upon finding a soaked copy of Kafka's *The Trial* propping up the kitchen window.

Hoping to circulate the air inside the apartment, he stepped out onto the small balcony which gave onto a side street and began to half-heartedly flip through the damaged copy. He was completely exasperated, and would have cried out if not for the presence of two women sitting in fold-out chairs on the adjacent balcony, their pants rolled up to the knee, sipping white wine and speaking to each other above the hum of the power washers at the front of the building. Across the street, a man with shirt tied round his waist swept his balcony. The Patient could not identify the flag which dangled from the gable above him.

'For all the time I've spent here,' he thought, 'I have never really taken notice of my environment. How foreign this all looks to me now.'

One of the women said something to him, but he could not make it out, and was reluctant to pursue it further.

"Oh, yes, well, thank-you. I'm going to unpack, clean up," he declared, backing into his apartment, locking the door behind him.

Finishing off the tuna sandwich he had brought from home, The Patient left his clothes in a pile on the floor, drew the shade, and snuck into bed, hoping to fall asleep quickly.

'I wonder if I closed the back door properly...Do those women have jobs, or do they just sit around all day...Maybe I should have remained at home for another week,' one thought following hard upon the next until The Patient turned onto his stomach, tucked his legs up into his chest, and tried to will himself to sleep. He woke the next morning, and for several mornings after, at 05:30, and lay dejectedly on the damp sheets beneath him.

'If I knew that the heat was going to be this unbearable, I surely would have invested in an air conditioner,' he thought.

Yet he would not get out of bed either, lying uncomfortably until he forced himself up and out. His days were no better, for even in the well-ventilated school library The Patient found it hard to conduct his research. He quickly fell behind in his summer course. Soon, he stopped attending class altogether and began to remain in his apartment over long periods, so that he could avoid as much as possible the warm weather outside. He took to placing long-distance phone calls, feverishly making travel arrangements, inviting friends down for the weekend. He equivocated with his mother and sister when

they asked about what he was doing to keep busy, and whether he was taking care of himself. He didn't admit to them that he occasionally had difficulty remembering where he had been on a given day, or what he had done.

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Dr. Francis Henry Ellington was lucky. He had one of the only offices in The Ward Building with a partial view of the downtown C-- skyline and the snow-capped mountain just beyond. Low-slung and made of granite, the architects modeled the Ward after the functional fashion of the city's downtown sector. For inhabitants, this mostly produced a view of the facade of the equally serviceable-looking building next to the one they were standing in; but Dr. Ellington had somehow managed to secure an office on the ninth floor, a height from which, by craning the neck slightly, one could indeed take in the city. From here, he operated a small and relatively successful clinic specializing in Mood Disorder and Disturbance – M.D.A.D. – and he was frequently called upon to consult with students who were not, for whatever reason, receiving adequate treatment from the University.

Dr. Ellington arrived late for his first meeting, for which he offered in compensation a good-natured apology and a damp and flaccid handshake. Not bothering to remove his coat before sitting down, he proceeded with questions concerning The Patient's medical history, glancing over periodically as he compiled his notes.

"My mother's been depressed before. My grandmother too. Recently she told me that my grandfather, when he was sixty or so, admitted himself to a hospital, for all of a sudden he no longer had the patience for shaving…And when he became thirsty he would stand and stare long into the refrigerator, trying to decide on orange or grapefruit juice until my

grandmother came by the kitchen and scolded him…And his investments, he lost badly on the stock market. Taken, you might say."

The good doctor paused, lingering over the keyboard before swiveling his chair toward The Patient, his elbows coming to rest on the glass desk in front of him.

"That's all good and fine. But maybe you can tell me a little bit about you," he said.

"Yes, I see."

And The Patient timidly began to give a description of his current circumstances, his studies, and the preoccupations and ruminations which had been taking a toll on his concentration. But he was forced to stop almost immediately upon starting, for his summary was cut off by a telephone call.

"Yes, oh yes, hello. Yes, tell them it was my absolute pleasure," Dr. Francis Henry Ellington said, cupping the receiver with his palm.

Nervous to begin with, The Patient now felt justifiably irritated. Already he had started to flap his knees back and forth violently. Now he was wiping the sweat gathering on the nape of his neck, rubbing his eyes, and pulling on the skin of his face in an attempt to rouse himself out of the onset of a mood. In an act of desperation and defiance, he forced himself into a distraction exercise, which consisted of an appraisal of the objects in the doctor's office.

'I wonder if this is his doing, or his wife's? In any case, it is certain that neither have any taste whatsoever,' he said to himself, picking in the small spaces between his front teeth with his thumb.

Indeed, it can be affirmed that Dr. Francis Henry Ellington took a measure of pride in his eclectic décor, of which he was sole procurer, beginning with the wicker chair The

Patient sat in, one from a set the doctor had custom-made upon his first trip to the Italian countryside. This chair faced Dr. Ellington's profile, for the doctor liked to conduct his preliminary sessions in front of a computer screen that backed onto a brick wall. Turning towards it gave him the opportunity to survey his impressive array of tribal masks – gifts from some of the smaller towns and villages the doctor had visited on his provincial trips, where he regularly chaired seminars designed to motivate listless youth – which he had mounted with the help of his colleague.

Four portraits hung on the wall opposite: Francis Henry and wife, his four boys, his parents' wedding reception, and one of himself, standing with his foot on the fender of a vintage Oldsmobile, arms akimbo. Next to these were his various medical degrees, each hung meticulously, and he kept a leather chair and ottoman set in the far corner for cases where the doctor was obliged to marshal the entirety of his psychic energies, which usually left him in a state of near exhaustion. At the rear, a large bay window framed the middle floors of the University's Health Center, through Venetian blinds that deflected the sun into a striped pattern on Ellington's Turkish rug.

"My apologies for the interruption," the doctor said, hanging up the phone. "Will next week at this time work for you?"

"I'd prefer sooner. I don't seem to be feeling too well, doctor."

For a moment, Dr. Ellington's genial face seemed to cloud over, but he managed to recover his manner.

"I think we'll just keep it at once a week for now. Besides, you seem to be hanging in there just fine."

And with this, the doctor got up from behind his desk and moved to the door, signaling to The Patient, who left his first meeting with Dr. Francis Henry Ellington in a sort of stupor.

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Dr. Ellington spent a not inconsiderable amount of time during subsequent sessions attempting to process The Patient's remarks, recollections, and ruminations. Here, he confidently asserted what cannot be described as anything less than an analytic turn of mind, as with austere countenance he would attempt to pass through the layers of The Patient's psyche, rocking back and forth in his leather chair, his index fingers coming to rest just inside the cavities of his nostrils. The abstracted gaze suggested something like considered analysis. Yet The Patient did not see this. He saw instead the glazed over look of a professional sifting for stone or metal deposits but coming up only with fistfuls of sand. Dr. Francis Henry Ellington's habitual lateness, the phone call interruptions, and the cheer-leader encouragement began to grate against The Patient's diminishing patience. As for the sessions themselves, they could not be considered conclusive by either party, each ending in the same perfunctory and unsatisfactory manner.

"I am afraid we're out of time," chimed Dr. Francis Henry Ellington, glancing at his wristwatch. "I've told you about the next few sessions, yes? I'll be out of town for close to a month…I can schedule you for the first week in August. How does that sound?"

His heartbeat quickened, and for a moment The Patient felt short of breath. He was not unaware of this break in the treatment, but he had hoped they would have been further along. Removing his dirtied glasses, The Patient leaned forward on the wicker chair, summoning whatever strength he had.

"But...What will I do? I understand, Doctor, you too need time to yourself, your sons," he said, gesturing limply toward the framed portrait, "but I'm at my wit's end. I am... and I don't know what I'll do," he added, childishly.

Made to hang suspended in front of his eyes, these remarks illuminated for The Patient a constellation of vaguely-defined woes. Dr. Francis Henry Ellington's face wore a darker mask against this background.

"You didn't expect to be well so soon, did you? It's simply not reasonable. If I can suggest anything, it would be to keep yourself as busy as possible. You mentioned something about tennis?"

"What about medication, doctor?"

"I see no reason for that. I'm not doctrinaire about these things – doctor, doctrinaire – I simply don't see a reason. Now if you need to take a glass of scotch at the end of the day, I certainly can't see any harm in that," he tittered, and, smiling his pleasant smile, the doctor gestured toward his office door. Here he offered his best wishes to The Patient closing the door firmly behind him, allowing the lock to clap into place.

The Patient paused at the glass doors of the Ward building before descending the staircase, removing his glasses and squinting against the sun. He continued on, stopping in the heart of an oblique shadow cast by the University Health Center, and stood absolutely still while a cool breeze met his cheek. He listened for a moment to the murmurs of the city, and tried to ignore a hunger pain which issued from the depths of his belly.

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After this, The Patient again took up phone-calling, speaking with bitterness that sometimes slipped into fits of pitiful crying. He had also begun to spend a considerable portion of each morning standing by the open refridgerator door, where he wavered between orange juice and grapefruit, waiting for somebody to tell him which to take. At night he would use mild doses of a sedative his mother had given him for emergencies, but these did not agree with his body, and he began to experience headaches, physical irritability, and a guilty paranoia which coalesced into a fractured image of Dr. Francis Henry Ellington. He turned away in disgust upon lifting his head from under the faucet, for the glass now reflected a face with which The Patient was not familiar. Even the barely perceptible drumming Marie's cat made as she pranced across the kitchen floor was enough to send The Patient into convulsions, crying and gasping and lunging out at nothing. His sleep was regularly interrupted by two men dressed in fedoras and long jackets, who would unscrew the door from its hinges and force their way into his apartment to take him away. Sometimes he would resist, swearing on his innocence, but more often The Patient allowed himself to be taken, his wearied body like a doll in nightclothes as they pushed him down into the backseat of their car. When he woke from these unsettling dreams, he would reach for his telephone, listening to its mechanical pulse while the numbers of people he could call flitted through his mind. His asserted itself often, and frequently The Patient found himself dialing the numbers of Dr. Francis Henry Ellington's office to listen to his jovial voice on the answering machine.

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With the continuing heat wave and the onset of the exam period, The Patient thought it best to return home for a brief stay.

'This way, I can at least be sure of taking regular meals,' he reasoned.

His mother and sister waited anxiously on the platform as his train pulled in. Stepping from his car, he did his best to give them a smile, but sunken cheekbones gave the lie to his attempt. The bags under his eyes and his chalky lips impressed themselves forcibly upon his sister, as he dragged his suitcase toward the parking lot.

"Here, let me," she said. "Can't you let us spoil you just this one time?"

"How was the ride, my darling? Did you meet anybody exciting," his mother asked, taking stock of her son's clothing. "Maybe you and your sister will take a trip to the plaza this week. That way you can replace those awful shoes."

"These shoes are fine, mother. They are what I'm used to. And, no, I did not meet a soul."

He spent the majority of his trip in his old bedroom, coming out to take meals or walk around the block with his sister, his arm folded inside hers, his head almost resting on her shoulder. On these occasions, he would draw her into shared memories of childhood, their old home on Chiltern Hill where they learned to ride bikes together, where during the summer they collected slugs from the damp earth, placing them inside jars, covering the top with a perforated baking sheet. But as soon as they returned from their walks his sister would take up where she left off, while he could do little more than sit in front of his textbooks, continuing to reminisce until inevitably he would hit upon a bad patch, a humiliating scene, which he would fixate upon until he was called down to dinner, until night fell and he knew he had lost another day.

'Tomorrow I will make up for today,' he would say to himself, turning out the lights in his bedroom and sliding under the covers. 'Tomorrow cannot possibly be as unproductive as today was. Everyone is entitled to a bad day,' he reiterated. 'It cannot continue anyway, for I cannot afford to lose any more time.'

***

It was hot and humid on the day The Patient returned to school. After a quiet breakfast with his mother and sister, he packed his things and left for the train station, unable to restrain the tears lining his cheeks.

"Don't worry about me. I'll be fine," he said, to which neither his mother nor his sister could bring themselves to reply.

Instead, they watched from the window as The Patient made his way down the street, closing the curtain when the window frame eclipsed from them the source of their greatest hope and greatest concern. His decision to walk to the train station turned out to be a poor one, for he was forced to shift awkwardly through the mid-morning crowd, and his worn suitcase kept bumping up against the legs of other men and women.

"Excuse me," he said to the lady with the wide-brimmed hat.

"Pardon me, my apologies," to the assembly of truant schoolchildren.

He put down his suitcase to rest after close to a half-hour of walking, leaning his body against a slightly warped street sign, removing his glasses to watch the city as it whirred by. He took note of a father carrying his daughter on his shoulders, of a homeless man curled up on the sidewalk under a sleeping bag, his head resting in the nook of his arm.

On the train back, The Patient gazed idly out the window for a while before attempting to engage the passenger seated beside him in conversation.

"You know what's funny? I've spent my whole life staring out of the windows of trains, trying in vain to make sense of things. I see now that there is no sense to things, or that you must bring your own sensibility to bear."

The reasonableness of his words, and, moreover, his ability to recognize reason at all produced something like a warm sensation in The Patient's throat and a corresponding ease of expression. He was communicating to a complete stranger.

"My sister, for one, she understands. She tells me she lives by a Goethe saying, she even wrote it down for me," and The Patient struggled to pull a folded page from his back pocket.

"Here it is: *Until one is committed there is the chance to draw back; always ineffectiveness. The moment one definitely commits oneself then providence moves too.*

This effusive behavior, uncharacteristic as it was of The Patient, was all the more troubling for the gentleman who happened to be taking tickets that day. He looked on from where he stood with some dismay while The Patient was conducting earnest conversation with a vacant seat. Steadying himself, the agent drew a cup of warmish water from the tap and reluctantly approached The Patient, who was again gazing out the window.

"Perhaps a glass of water, sir," the gentleman said.

Without waiting for a reply he set down a serviette, placed the cup, and moved quickly down the aisle. His face passed out of sight before The Patient could turn his head and express his gratitude.

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At four minutes past the hour, The Patient picked up the magazine he had been absent-mindedly flipping through. He threw the thing down at ten past, standing up as if intending to go somewhere, only to retake his seat. Eventually, Dr. Francis Henry Ellington's meaty backside pushed open the glass doors leading to reception, a cup of coffee in one hand, briefcase in the other.

"Please, please come in, sorry to have kept you...can't seem to get going anymore without one of these," and he motioned to a cup of coffee, which looked to The Patient to be close to finished.

Hanging up his coat on the rack, Dr. Ellington proceeded to open the door to his office, moving to the bay window at the rear and sending the blinds skyward with a small tug from his right arm. He then parked himself behind his desk and began to clear away files, medical journals, paper clips, Styrofoam cups, and also dry cleaning invoices, mail, a coupon which could be redeemed for another cup, and a number of personal notes and reminders (Call Roberto re: case of Pinot Grigio) to make space for the framed photograph of the inimitable Western Meadowlark, which he had just received as a token of gratitude from the Helena Institute for Mental Health, for yet another riveting lecture on dream analysis. As was his habit, he took a moment to let things settle, reclaiming ownership over the objects in his office, while The Patient waited.

"Yes, well to begin with I received your message."

The Patient's pulse quickened, he pursed his lips.

"I was having a bad day, that day. It felt like an emergency."

Dr. Francis Henry Ellington adjusted slightly the portrait of the Meadowlark before continuing.

"Frankly, you sounded miserable."

"I've had a tough time of it. You did not leave me with much, doctor."

"Well, in any case I think we probably ought to have you on something. I'll start you off on a trial and error basis," he said, hammering the keys on his keyboard with two bloated index fingers.

"I don't understand."

"I can't know for certain what dosage to prescribe until I see how you do. I've just got to hope my guess is right," he added, signing his name to the prescription and passing it across his desk.

"Now that that's settled, perhaps we can discuss how you've really been over the past four weeks."

Shifting under the stare of Dr. Francis Henry Ellington, The Patient attempted to recount the last four weeks, his reluctance to take regular meals, to go out into the heat, to visit with friends. He also spoke of drawn-out conversations with his mother and sister.

"Things haven't exactly turned out," The Patient whimpered.

Dr. Francis Henry Ellington reached down into his desk drawer and pulled out a box of tissue, handing it across the desk.

"Well," he said, flipping the pages of The Patient's file with wetted finger, "you certainly should have been on something. A shame really…but these should help," motioning to the sheet of paper which lay in The Patient's lap.

Later that night, The Patient lay in bed while his listless body attempted to adjust to the simultaneous release of V-- and G-- into his bloodstream. He sensed a slight buzzing sensation, and twice he felt as though he were going to be sick, rushing to the toilet, his

hair plastered against his forehead. When he did sleep, he found his dreamscape shrouded by a velvet curtain, and his inner eye struggled to find some way through. During the next few days, he experienced a series of contradictory sensations. At times, The Patient felt almost invisible; during others he sensed people watching him, talking about him.

'It must be transparent,' he thought to himself during these episodes, 'for look how everyone is treating me;' and later, 'why does everyone refuse to help me? Can you not see for yourselves what I am suffering through!'

During his calmer moments, he acknowledged the potential side effects of the drugs, the headaches and the nausea, the increase in sensitivity. But these windows were open for only so many hours of the day. Once closed, any attempt to think level-headedly, much less study or research, was inconceivable. The headaches became more frequent, the buzzing more distracting. For these and various other daily afflictions, The Patient cast his blame at the feet of Dr. Francis Henry Ellington.

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He woke early on the day of his exam, forcing down a bowl of cereal before retiring to his desk.

'Please, please, just leave yourself be for today. You must.'

Gathering together his scant class notes, The Patient bent from his chair to lift up a stack of books resting by the table leg, and began to read. He had not made it very far when the phone rang.

'It surely is either mother or my sister, wishing me good luck or some such nonsense. What a distraction this is, just when I was beginning to get going.'

"Yes, hello?" he snapped, and he was surprised to hear an older man's voice in response.

"Yes, this is Dr. Francis Henry Ellington."

"Oh, excuse me, doctor. I was expecting someone else."

"Yes, well, this is Dr. Francis Henry Ellington," he repeated. "I'm glad I've caught you. I've been glancing over your file." The doctor paused before continuing. "I don't know quite how to put this so I'll just get to the point. I'm afraid I can no longer treat you."

In the absence of response or sign of acknowledgment, the doctor continued.

"It seems as though you are covered by a private insurance carrier. Did you at some point during the school term opt out of your health coverage by chance?"

"That's right," The Patient managed. "I'm covered under mother's, my mother's health insurance. I don't see what –

"Well, for starters you're over the age at which most carriers cover a beneficiary's children, which means that you're not currently covered at all. I assume you are well-aware of the consequences of opting out. Now, I might be able to continue to treat you privately if you are still eligible for coverage under your mother's insurance. But this is highly unlikely. So unless you can cover the sessions from your own savings, which, from what you have told me about your financial stability, I doubt highly, I am afraid to say that I can no longer serve as your doctor."

And, as if this explanation weren't damaging enough, the doctor added "my obligation under these circumstances is to the school and to the students requiring treatment. Students, that is, with proper coverage."

"But this is a mistake. This is not professional. This is…"

"This is," the doctor interrupted, "most unfortunate. Good luck to you," he said, upon which Dr. Francis Henry Ellington promptly put down the receiver. After this, the muffled sound of a failed hang-up continued to hiss into The Patient's ear. He was not, however, all that uncomfortable with this arrangement, for his phone bill was no longer a primary concern.

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He found himself next in a room lit with fluorescent lights. An attractive black woman wearing large framed glasses sat beside him, reading from a book about high-profile murderers. Occasionally she would get up and ask permission to go, leaving her book on the chair, pages pressed against the plastic. Save for the lights and the faint sounds of a radio overhead, the room was silent. Soon, however, a young woman entered, shuffling across the floor in brown sandals and a florid nightshirt.

'What is with her? She is certainly in no hurry,' The Patient thought to himself, amused at this young woman's insouciance.

Later, a man wearing a windbreaker, jeans, and running shoes with no laces entered the room and began to offer cigarettes to those waiting, but The Patient did not acknowledge the offer. He considered whether to get the young woman who was now crying violently a tissue, but he could not bring himself to give up his seat.

He continued to wait, but not uncomfortably. For dinner, he was served a plate of roast beef with potatoes, gravy, peas, carrots, and juice. When he finished, he was granted permission to take a small turn in the corridor, stopping where a window facing east framed the edge of downtown. He stood and stared in a kind of reverie at the neon lights.

He felt the touch of a hand on his shoulder, and, removing his glasses, The Patient rubbed his eyes and proceeded to take his last look.

'It's a hideous looking building, that one,' and he pointed at the Ward Building across the street.

"They're ready to see you now. Come," said the nurse.

She offered him an outstretched hand, but The Patient refused to accept. He determined to do things himself, beginning now with the walk down the ramp and back into the waiting room, where two orderlies in heavily-starched uniforms waited beside a gurney that would take him to a bed.

"A good night's rest and then all better by tomorrow. That's what I really need."

"Yes. Well, one step at a time."