

1

The Mute Commute

Loneliness is not so bad once you consider the alternatives. Such as the loudmouthed claque at the back of this bus. All your classic noisemakers: a laughshriek rips out of one's throat like an unlubricated chainsaw.

Between me and the claque are cellphoners ("I'm on the bus... I'm on the *bus*") and headphoners, including a singer-along ("That's when I saw her, OOH! I saw her"). Intervening seats are crammed with dozers and dropoffs, some with heads hanging at painful-looking angles. A few hold open newspapers or magazines before their faces, but no pages get turned.

I am up front on one of the sideways settees prioritized for Elderly & Disabled Riders. I'm middle-aged and more or less able-bodied, but few of the E & D take this bus. Unless you count the morbidly obese, who seem to prefer facing forward.

Up here I am resting my eyes. Or trying to, despite the caterwaulers in back. Some acoustic warpage causes their clamor to scrape the length of the bus, straight into my ears.

("Cause baby I'm the MOST!" from the singer-along. And another *bra-a-a-ang* of yakkety hilarity.)

Where we are is anyone's guess. In a commuter express on the Interstate on a Wednesday morning in early February. Other than that, darkness. My watch says 7:15. Time enough for a second attempt at shuteye. But before I can try it—

—eyesnag.

By a sleeping lady across the aisle, one row away.

Young and unmorbid.

Muffled up in a navy overcoat and headscarf. Only her face on display, but that alone is worth today's fare. Even at this untimely hour, underneath fluorescence. A fair complexion with a moving expression: *nod. Nod. Nod.* Lips slightly parted. Brows slightly bent. A literal Land-of-Nodder, ticking off items in a checklisted dream. "Yes, we can take care of this; yes, we can handle that too." Self-assurance. Affirmation. Even a trace of sang-froid, in keeping with the climate and those bluish dabs upon her closed lids.

First time I've noticed her. Annoyance at not having done so before. She might've been aboard every day this week, every week this year—could my eye be slipping? It could and does along with the rest of me and everyone else as the bus suddenly BRAKES—

—Nodding Lady jolted half out of her seat, lids popping open with a single

—*OH*—

that cuts through the blather to penetrate my brain. *Zing*: just like that. Clean as a well-honed chisel.

The bus proceeds at a crawl now, toward coplights flashing through the murk to our left. Half the passengers dash over to that side, wipe-smear the windows, crane and gawk: avid for wreckage. Ghoulish bastards.

The Nodder stays put, her head unturned. Eyes going *blink—blink*—as they swivel slowly leftward. Widening, darkening, sockets hollowing with a sharp fraught

—*NO*—

Yeedge! Calm down, Lady; it's not like you caused the crash. Chalk it up to other people's lucklessness. Be glad that we're edging on past.

But her eyes remain stricken. They wander back, catch mine, are hastily averted. Her gloveless hands get a tighter grip on the purse on her lap. I take a lower gander at a visible calf: she's wearing a skirt on a morning like this, for crying out loud. Not that I don't appreciate it (that calf's got a decided curve) but think of your health, Lady.

Check out the rings on her clenched bare fingers. Probably had to pawn her gloves to bail some wastrel husband out of jail. Next it'll be that ring with the rock. No wonder she

looks a bit stir-crazy. Let those bluish eyelids close... there they go. Again with the nod-nod. Sweet dreams.

Though not for long. Wreck left behind, we resume speed; no risk of running late. Wednesday's not the best day to be late on. Or born on: children full of woe. Remember the Addams Family's daughter. And the Girl Next Door when I was a kid.

Venture another glance at the Nodding Lady.

"She has a lovely face," as the fellow said about the dame from Shalott (after she froze to death).

Clump of lights through the window beyond her. That'll be Stiffs Stadium, our cue to move into the exit lane. The Nodder's eyes pop back open, again blink twice. She raises a handkerchief to her lips, covering a yawn? an *ahem?* or to *take something out of her mouth*, wrap it in the hanky and drop it in her purse??

We head for our first stop on Figure Eight Way. The Lady pulls on a pair of mittens (let that be a lesson to me) and gathers the purse, a tote bag sporting the PBS emblem, a blue umbrella that matches her coat. She rises, strides past me, murmurs thanks to the driver and departs. I twist around, wipe-smear my own window and watch her vanish into the gloom. Feeling like a ghoulish bastard.

*

My name is H. Huffman, and I am an asthmatic artist. Some artists starve; I have trouble drawing breath on occasion.

Amid this busload of gasbags, the Nodding Lady was a whiff of fresh air. Which she took away with her, leaving me and the load to stifle down 14th Street to The Trail, then over to 8th and Jackdaw Square. End of the line.

I re-tie my scarf, reset my hat and get off. Inside one trenchcoat pocket (specially reinforced by bemused drycleaners) I take hold of an octagonal handle attached to a ¼" No. 6 straight gouge.

So no, I'm not just happy to see you.

Security is all the rage these days. Jackdaw Square's not the best place to be so soon after dawn. The streets around it are narrow and crooked, the buildings both pallid and dingy. Here are broken cobblestones, brackish puddles, malodorous doorways. Cast-iron

benches housing the homeless. A blind alley full of unemptied dumpsters.

And there are crows. Trafalgar Square has pigeons; Jackdaw Square has crows. Even in February, even at this hour. Exclaiming above. Patrolling below. Vying with the destitute for dumpster contents.

Hanging over us all is the local equivalent of fog. I call it “nox.” It was here long before security became all the rage.

At least we now have lockable gates on the loading dock, to prevent bums from bedding down on it overnight. They still sneak into the store on winter mornings to have a thaw and sample our varnish or paint thinner or gum arabic.

Check us out at Selfsame Artist Materials!

Alias: dayjob. For more than a dozen mortal years.

Enter with my key card. “GOOD morning Mr. H!!” cries the Warbler in the staff lounge. I head for my office space, a clearing I’ve gradually chopped out of the backstock jungle. High counter instead of a desk; tall stool instead of a chair. Hang up hat, coat, scarf. Unlock cabinet, collect hotpot, take it into the lounge, fill it at a sink heaped with other people’s crockery. Return hotpot to office space. Plug it in. Log onto PC, check e-mail, check phone for voicemail. Mix heated water with instant Folgers; add artificial sweetener. Stir, sip, swallow.

Face the workday.

Starting with this week’s inventory printouts, annotated by Vashti in aggressive red ballpoint. Our computer system was upgraded last fall, meaning it now works half as well; Vashti’s always recounting stock by hand and noting the grosser offages. Such as the entire airbrush department getting vaporized.

Bra-a-a-ang: this time the dock bell. Morning’s first delivery. Cold damp nox accompanies it into the stockroom. (Ghost of the lost airbrushes?) Schlitzzy appears, presenting a stack of cartons from Waning Gibbous. I nod; he offloads his handtruck at the receiving table. Portfolios, photo albums, frames. High time those new frames arrived—that one special-order clown’s been phoning daily about his ever-loving silver leaf.

“Where’s the rolling ladder?” asks Squat Kid. I shrug. The adolescents who unpack and barcode the merchandise, assist customers on the floor and ring them up at the register—

they come and they go. Seldom worth learning their names anymore. So: Squat Kid, Thin Chick, Weird Hair Girl and so forth.

Schlitzzy trundles in another batch of boxes. Migraine Novelties—I shake my head no. Definitely a Gag order. Cart it off to him. (If Johnny Cash had a beerbellied nephew with a hipster goatee, that nephew would be a dead ringer for Gagarin Campbell, Selfsame Manager. “Big Gag” we call him. As in “What’s the?”)

Migraine Novelties. Must be more of those Munch Screaming Pillows. Which are constantly being set off in the gift department: people don’t just squeeze the sample pillow, but all within reach. As though they expect to hear a variety of screams.

Back to mind comes the Nodding Lady. That waking face, those hollow-socketing eyes. What might we make of them?

I take a Bruynzeel charcoal pencil and sketch such an eye on my calendar blotter. Squarely within Wednesday the 6th. Smudge in shadows roundabout; upend the lashes to make it a lady’s gaze. Or half-gaze—add the other eye to Thursday the 7th.

Can the eyes stand by themselves? What about brows? A nose as well? And once you add a nose you might as well throw in a kisser: those slightly-parted lips, a touch of teeth. So a jaw also, with a chin. The whole like a living death mask—

“*Custwan syoo,*” announces Vashti.

“What?” I say.

“*Yerdme!*” she replies.

There is nothing mushmouthed about Vashti Rodilard. She simply brusks everything she utters, abbreviating what she doesn’t minimalize. And since she takes a drill-sergeant pleasure in handling customer complaints, I must have been asked for by name. Which can’t mean anything pleasant.

Buckle on my own living deadpan. Keep it monotone and monochrome—we’re not selling used cars here.

Quality artist materials instead. Pencils and erasers, pastels and tortillions, pens and nibs and bottled ink. Red sable, white sable, ox hair and hog bristle brushes. Canvas primed and unprimed. Paper by the sheet, the pad, the roll. On the wall to your left: matboard, foamboard, stretcher strips. On the endcap to your right: etching trays, burins, scrapers,

scribes. Off in that corner: drafting tables, folding easels, gooseneck clamp-lamps. Before us: entire fixtures devoted to acrylics, watercolors, tempera, gouache. Straight ahead: the Aisle of Oils.

And standing smack in our way is a case of mental mumps wanting me to call him “Stu.” Saphead would be more accurate—green, wet and puerile. Nox personified.

“Which paint do *you* think I should get?”

He asked the same question over the phone on Monday. Now he’s here in sappy person to hear the selfsame litany.

Winsor & Newton, consistent in body and color. Schmincke Mussini, more expensive, with added resins for better adhesion. Rembrandt and Amsterdam, the one standard, the other economy. Not forgetting good old Grumbacher—

“Yeah,” says Saphead, “but what brand do *you* think I should use?”

Customers may be always right, but that doesn’t mean they can’t meet with sudden unexpected fates. How ironic it would be if “Stu” tripped and fell into a bin of palette knives. He isn’t even an actual customer—we both know his real reason for being here. Wait for it, the threepenny catechism:

You show at Geraldine Crouching’s gallery, don’t you?

Is she looking at any new work right now?

Do you think you could show her my slides?

Don’t let the deadpan slip. Remain impassive and reply:

No comment.

No comment.

No, period.

Leaving “Stu” adrift in the Aisle of Oils.

Pay your own damned dues, Saphead. Learn for yourself that the name rhymes with “whooshing,” not “slouching.” Better ask for guidance from the crows in the square: I’m nobody’s go-between.

*

The workday wears on to its close. Eat a lunch bagel spread with creamcheese like library paste. Sort out the latest special-order requests. Accept or redirect Schlitzzy’s stacks

and batches. Where does all this stuff go? To what uses is it applied? No idea. Yet I still appreciate new art supplies, their sight and feel and smell. Plus the employee discount.

Finally 2:30 and out. I work three-quarter time, having cut my hours back to six a day when Geraldine started selling my pieces. At one point I thought I'd keep climbing this ladder till I didn't work any dayjob hours at all. But the way things have been going...

To throw off a possibly lurking "Stu," I exit Selfsame via the loading dock. Again grasping the handle of the gouge in my coat pocket. I may be shortish and slightish and middle-agedish, but I have the hands and forearms earned by years of wielding a mallet. Not a croquet mallet, either.

I follow The Trail from 8th to 12th through Chinatown (mostly Vietnamese). The Trail was originally blazed by a Sioux tribe to their riverside burial ground, which they sold to unsuperstitious white men who built a city atop it. 150 years later, this stretch of The Trail is home to noodle soup joints and karaoke bars.

Turn north on 12th toward the streets of downtown. Tiberius, Botts, Garfield, Augustus, Julius, Lincoln, Indianfield, Worming, Harrison, McKinley, Taylor, Cruncher, Danton. Recallable via the easy mnemonic *Too Bad God Almighty Just Lost Interest When He Made The City Demortuis*.

Demortuis, Nilnisi. Alias Slaughtertown. The Gristly City. Chillin' down in the GC. Through which muffled-up people hustle obliquely, blown off balance by the gritty dusty wind. Nox engulfs all, making it an effort to take another step, draw another breath. Small wonder that miasma equals my asthma.

Temporary asylum in Mina's Deli on Lincoln Avenue. Here I buy a prepackaged salad to go. Once upon a time it would've been a hot pastrami or corned beef sandwich, but these days red meat disagrees with my digestion. (As opposed to, say, library paste.)

Another symptom of being "medieval." Gray stubble; thinning hair; wearing long johns all through the winter. Plus dismissing a wild notion to hike on up to Figure Eight Way, see if the Nodding Lady might be waiting there.

No: I'm too old to be a stalker. An effective one, at least. Too frequently stopped and asked for directions. "You look like you know where you're going," they tell me. Even when I first set foot in Demortuis, a stranger in town, people would inquire where places

were I'd never heard of. Panhandlers wanting donations. Streetwalkers wanting suggestions.

Stick to Lincoln Avenue. Catch the next northbound home. Same #104 express I take in the morning; gabbleheads greet it every week with a loud archaic "*Ten-four, good buddy!!*" Afternoons its route is reversed, aiming for FISH BEND / VIA KNOTTS.

One bonus from catching the bus at 3:12 P.M. (as opposed to, say, the one at 4:42) is the absence of noisemakers. There's a smaller, more docile crowd at the stop, but its hobnob consists of endless inanities. "Running late today." "Weather sure is wet." Save your breath, people. I've got none of my own to waste. Climb aboard, take a seat, loosen scarf, tip back hat. Find kleenex and blow nose, cautiously—some grit's gotten into my postnasal drip.

We reach Figure Eight Way. Enclosing Stiffs Stadium, home of the Lucky Stiffs baseball team and the football Cutthroats. Could the Nodding Lady work in one of their front offices? Might account for her hollow sockets.

She isn't here, of course. Too damned early.

During the commute I reconsider "Living Death Mask." Wishing I could attempt a fresh sketch, but I've never mastered that knack in a moving vehicle. Got to admire women on the A.M. bus who can apply fullscale makeup, not batting an eye even when we bump and jounce. Seems like a hell of a risk; those little mascara applicators look lethal.

Can't picture the Nodder pulling such a stunt—not on public transport. Though she wouldn't need much, unlike the war horses who slap it on by the jarful. Just those bluish eyelid dabs, and... whatever else young married women use when they're already lovely. Lipstick, I suppose.

On lips slightly parted.

With a touch of teeth.

Be careful not to let her face make a *vampirish* impression. A bit pale, yes, but what Caucasian isn't in early February. No: she's not hiding behind "living death," but suddenly *aware* of it. As though some monstrous trauma might be concealed in the periphery, bent on devouring her headbobs.

(Don't look at *me*, Lady. I merely observe.)

Out the window. The Ipsissima River, running parallel to the Interstate for a few miles. Big Greedy-Gut. Belcher-forth of the nox that swamps us all. Mass consumer of levees, embankments and shores.

There's more than one way to feed off others.

Ultimately comes down to what you can make of them...

Thunka thunkity thunk. Indicating we've hit that span of pockmarked asphalt just before the Zerfall exit. I pull the cord, causing the #104 to eject me and drive away toward more northerly suburbs—Knotts, Rollinhitch, Fisherman's Bend. While I'm left with two moochers working each corner of the offramp, displaying hand-lettered appeals to drive-bys.

(Everybody thinks they're an artist.)

Walk the last mile along Mesher Road to Green Creek Lane. "Grin Crick" if you prefer: nothing particularly green about it this afternoon. The air feels drier, though. Clouds are breaking up above; it won't be overcast tonight. Colder, though. Chance of black ice tomorrow. But less threat of snow.

Wet or dry, Zerfall seems to unnerve some people. A skeleton was found in the woods by Green Creek Lane the year I came to town. They had to cordon off the creek and reroute traffic for a couple of days. No other bones turned up, nor was any identification made of the ones that had. And since then more woods have been felled to make room for more houses, built by more unsuperstitious white men.

Still plenty of cottonwoods and other poplars to be seen, with willows here and there. All barebranched at the moment, of course. You can make whistles out of willows, but the wood will split if you look at it cockeyed. Poplar's difficult to cut smoothly; it tends to "grip" tools. But no one should be *unnerved* by any of this—except in late spring maybe, when cottonwood fluff gets all the hell over everything.

George and Myrtle Wilson live at 247 Green Creek Lane. I live above their garage at 247½. We dwell not in a valley of ashes but several ash trees, which coexist peaceably with the willows and poplars. (Good for cabinetwork, too: high bending strength.)

Mr. Wilson is a master plumber nearing retirement, so we don't have the drainage problems suffered by others in lowlying Zerfall. Even so, Mrs. Wilson is out scrutinizing the bog that once was and might again be her garden.

“Oh, Mr. Huffman—I’m so glad I caught you—”

Doing what? I wonder. But she just wants to let me know that she and Mr. Wilson will be leaving tomorrow for a long weekend at “the place.” Meaning the Old McRale Place, her late parents’s former ranch, now a little timeshare on the prairie. Often used as a hunting lodge in fall and winter, then an artist’s retreat in spring and summer; either way it requires frequent hoeing-out.

Here in Zerfall I’ve rented 247½ for the past twelve years. We’re still on formal footing, the Wilsons and I: “Mr. and Mr. and Mrs.” rather than Aitch and George and Myrt. They’re agreeable enough as landlords go, neither meddlesome nor inquisitive. They like me because I pay the rent on time and don’t throw late-night parties.

Mr. Wilson built this three-truck garage with help from a contractor friend. Upstairs was the next-to-last resting place of Mrs. Wilson’s widowed mother. At the top of the stairs, engraved on the banister, is a shaky *MONA MCRALE*—done by her own hand at some possessive moment before eternity beckoned.

Now it’s my studio/apartment. I crank the thermostat high, fill a glass of water and pop my asthma controller. Got to take it on an empty stomach an hour before eating, or it won’t do its job. I was prescribed this med a few years ago after half a damn lifetime on prednisone. At my age, that poses too many side effects—hypertension, cataracts, loss of bone density. Not to mention steroid dependence: I had to be *weaned* off the stuff. With this new med I just need to time its doses right. Seldom have bad attacks these days, or resort to using my rescue inhaler.

Drug taken, I doff boots and shirt and britches and longjohns. Climb into a sweatsuit and thick wool socks. All of this is done in the big closet to the right of the landing. Beyond it’s a dining area with eating table, sideboard, three chairs. Then the kitchenette with fridge, stove, sink, small washer-dryer stack. To the left of the landing is a futon with end tables, flush against the balustrade overlooking the staircase. Three windows facing west: between the first two is a “media center” (for want of a better term) with TV, PC, VCR, CD and DVD players, printer, scanner, boombox, and self-answering telephone. Plus a stockpile of movies and music in many formats.

Atop the “media center” I keep *A Perfect Fit* and *Plue Velvet*: both decidedly in-the-round. Past the middle window, on the wall above my drafting table and taborets, hang *Frieze-Frame* and *Gatherin’ Stormin’*.

The drafting table is opposite the kitchenette. A square pillar nearby marks where a wall used to separate this side from old Mrs. McRale’s bed-and-bath. What was once her bedroom now has my workbench and toolracks, with *Artificialities* by the third window as a reminder of what I’m doing here. Materials are kept in the ex-bedroom closet.

The bathroom’s still a bathroom: no tub (Mona wasn’t limber enough to warrant one) but a large shower stall, with grabholds I find increasingly useful.

And throughout the entire studio/apartment is solitude.

It suits me. I can hear myself think.

Bothers the hell out of some people. Not just solitude *per se*, but my preferring it.

When I got my first Betamax, the shrink I was seeing in Chicago asked if it was “a means of distancing myself from Real Life.” No, I said, it was a means of watching motion pictures without commercials in the privacy of my own home. Aha! went the shrink, if I *must* watch movies instead of engaging in Real Life, why not do it surrounded by Real Live people in a theater? Because then I couldn’t hear myself think, I replied.

This shrink looked like Bob Newhart’s stunt double. That plus his being named Dr. Harvey led me to label him—not quite to his face—as the Friendly Ghost. He would begin our sessions by asking what I’d last seen and what had I thought of it, then proceed to analyze the film of the week more than the psyche in my head.

(Everybody thinks they’re a critic.)

Pause by the “media center” to select some entertainment. Last night I watched *Key Largo* again. Not just a Bogart flick, with tour-de-force performances by Edward G. Robinson and Lionel Barrymore; it also clued me in as to why cartoon wolves would go bug-eyed and howl when they saw Lauren Bacall. I didn’t used to understand her legendary appeal, hardly sensed it in *To Have and Have Not* or *How to Marry a Millionaire*. But then I saw *Key Largo*: “Oh, so THAT’S what they’ve been talking about.”

(And what exactly was THAT? The different way she wore her hair? Greater reliance on glances and stances than snappy wisecracks?)

(You got me. Ask the Friendly Ghost, if you can find him.)

Music tonight. Cool jazz. Miles Davis's *Nefertiti*. Title track, "Fall," "Hand Jive," "Madness," "Riot," "Pinocchio." Pretty much sums up the whole life cycle. Though unlike Geppetto, I favor carving little wooden girls.

Such as the current work-in-progress clamped on my bench. *The Glorious Fourth*: two nude caryatids holding an American flag aloft between them. Patriotism is also all the rage these days.

But yes, a degree of hackwork. I've been mining the Ginger & Candy lode for over a year now. Almost played out. So why not scrap it, maybe try a Baby Bacall instead? Have her invite a pack of wolfish Bogeys to put their lips together and blow.

No. I don't get that animated.

I'd like to think my reflection resembles Humphrey Bogart, but know it looks more like Buster Keaton. In his talkie phase, when the bottle started taking its toll. Then again, check out Bogart's face in *Dark Passage* when it's bandaged up after plastic surgery. Nothing visible except the unhappy eyes, nosetip, locked-down mouth: very Keatonesque. And reinforced by bits of pantomime.

Both men had the onscreen attitude that the world is full of traps and snares, so better be on your guard. Wary and ingenious. Bag of tricks kept handy. This is an outlook shared by many shortish men. I think Bogart was 5'8½", Keaton 5'6"; I myself am 5'7¼". (When asked, I round it to 5'8" for simplicity's sake.) We were all three cleancut-looking in our several youths, too, before growing "blunter-hewn" in middle age.

Well, this isn't getting any salad eaten. Better dig in before it wilts.

And no hard stuff tonight—just one beer. Dos Equis: two Xs. Double-cross.

Deliberate betrayal or duplicated sanctity? If you widen an H's crossbar, what do you get but a double-cross joined at the hip?

Which brings this morning's Nodding Lady to suggestive mind.

Really ought to take a whack at that fresh sketch.

Go over to the drafting table. (Bring the beer along.) I used to keep a file of arresting images, clipped from magazines and newspapers... here we go. Susan Sarandon has a folder to herself, dating back to *The Great Waldo Pepper*. Built as she is, braless as she goes, the

focus always shifts up to those remarkable shadowhaunted google-eyes.

Carol Kane too, she of the silent-cinema blinkers with a forlorn overlay. And let's not forget the next generation—your Winona Ryders, your Brittany Murphys. Them I can get off the Internet...

Okay (an hour later). Smudgy sockets and rampant lashes have been recreated in charcoal on 60-lb. Strathmore paper. Brows, nose, cheeks, mouth, jaw, chin. Here's looking at you, kid. Now go back to the eating table and put some damn salad in your stomach.

Yeedge. Who's responsible for the flimflam that broccoli is good for your health? Supposed to help prevent cancer, but seems more like an alternate malignancy. Like choosing to drown instead of going to the gallows.

Could be that's what's behind our Lady's woeful countenance. That stricken bewilderment you find on Pre-Raphaelite faces. The roiling hair, the turbid stare, that dame (again) from Shalott.

To get the full effect, you can't have just the face—should be a complete figure. Surrounded not by Real Live people but roughed-in slumping shapes, that might be passengers asleep on a bus. Condemned prisoners en route to a crematory. Languid zombies about to be raised from the dead. And there among them, awakened by no prince's kiss but a froggish tremor, is our mortified Lady: half sick of shadows but unable to crack the mirror and escape from this mute commute—

—back and forth I go, between the sketch on the drafting table and the salad on the eating table. Wash down a forkful of broccoli with a swig of Dos Equis and the two coagulate in my craw—

—can't swallow—

—don't believe this—

—and now I can't inhale—

—should I yell for help? with WHAT?—

—need a Screaming Pillow—

—to break this chokehold—

—*don't spew over the sketch!!*—

...if Seeing is Believing, then why am I not breathing?...

Cough it all up, bile-green purée and curdled library paste, into the toilet bowl. Like a goddamned bulimic. An abortive overdosier with a gaping deadpan rictus—
—never mind.

That's the last of it.

I should just keep my big trap shut.